

Mobilization for and Against Democracy

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Abstract

This review examines the expanding body of scholarship on contentious mobilization and its dual role in shaping democratization and democratic decline. It synthesizes research on the conditions under which mass mobilization contributes to democratic transitions, deepening, and consolidation, as well as when it facilitates authoritarian resurgence and democratic backsliding. The review covers key debates on tactics, class composition, organizational infrastructure, ideological framing, and regime type. It also analyzes the evolving role of civil society, digital media, and participatory institutions in both enabling and constraining democratic outcomes. While much of the earlier literature emphasized the democratizing potential of collective action, recent studies reveal a more ambivalent picture in which mass mobilization can bolster authoritarian incumbents or lead to fragmented political settlements. The essay concludes by outlining key directions for future research, including attention to discursive contestation, and the organizational strategies of both pro- and anti-democratic movements.

Mobilization for and Against Democracy

Scholars have long debated the role of mass mobilization in processes of democratization and dedemocratization. Over the past several decades, this debate has evolved alongside new waves of democratization and autocratization, examining diverse patterns and dynamics of mobilization and its short- and long-term effects on democratic prospects. These discussions engage with political sociology and comparative politics scholarship on the emergence and trajectory of political regimes, as well as with the literature on social movements and contentious politics. This essay provides a comprehensive review of the scholarship on mobilization for and against democracy.

The review is divided into two main parts. The first part examines the debate over contentious mobilization and its effects on democratization. It explores key dimensions of mobilization—such as organizational structures, coalitions, diffusion, tactics, and discourses—and considers the long-term consequences of collective action for democratic consolidation and deepening, particularly in the post-transition period. While earlier literature emphasized the democratizing potential of mass mobilization, recent research has highlighted a more ambivalent reality: under certain conditions, mobilization can also contribute to democratic backsliding and the consolidation of authoritarian rule. This review thus addresses both how collective action enables democratization and how it may, at times, undermine it.

The second part shifts focus to the mobilizing strategies of authoritarian regimes and autocratic leaders, both within formal democracies and in authoritarian contexts. It examines the key issues around which state-sponsored mobilization is organized and analyzes the underlying drivers that sustain these efforts.

Before reviewing the literature, it is important to clarify the key concepts of democracy, democratization, and autocracy. There has been significant debate over how to define these terms. Democracy can be conceptualized in either binary or continuous terms. A binary definition identifies a set of minimal conditions that a regime must fulfill to be classified as democratic. These typically include universal suffrage, the right to run for office, fair and free elections, and the freedoms of speech and assembly. When these conditions are met, a regime qualifies as an electoral democracy. Liberal democracy requires additional institutional guarantees, such as judicial independence and checks and balances, to protect minority rights from majoritarian overreach. In contrast, **autocracy** refers to regimes where rulers exercise power without effective constraints, and where electoral competition and political pluralism are either absent or tightly controlled. Autocratic regimes may range from outright dictatorships to more hybrid forms that hold elections without enabling meaningful opposition or accountability. The absence of institutionalized mechanisms for popular input and elite contestation is a defining feature of autocratic rule.

Democratization refers to the process through which political regimes move toward greater democratic inclusion and institutionalization. In this framework, democratic transition marks the achievement of the minimal conditions for electoral democracy. Democratic consolidation occurs when all major political actors come to accept democratic rules as the legitimate framework for political competition. Going beyond these minimal criteria, democratic deepening refers to processes that expand meaningful citizen participation in collective decision-making beyond elections and representative mechanisms—what some refer to as democratic depth .

Mobilization for Democracy

Historical Background and Debates

For decades, scholars have debated and analyzed the role of mobilization in democratization. Barrington Moore's (1966) seminal work emphasized that the path to parliamentary democracy often involved bourgeois revolutions, drawing on comparative case studies of Britain, the French Revolution, and the American Civil War. According to this political economy model, democratic institutions emerged where the balance of power favored the bourgeoisie over the landed elite. However, this perspective primarily focused on the structural drivers of these revolutions, placing less emphasis on the mobilization processes that occurred during democratic revolutions.

Scholarly interest in popular mobilization and democratization grew with the onset of the third wave of democracy in the mid-1970s, which began in Southern Europe and later spread to South America. In contrast to the political economy approach that focused on the conditions before democratic revolutions, the new scholarly attention focused on political elite interaction during democratic transitions, defined as the time between breakdown in authoritarian regimes and establishment of democratic institutions, often signified by a constituting election. Transitionology literature in the 1980s. Transitionologists emphasized the role of political elites in initiating and managing transitions, identifying key divisions between hardliners and soft-liners within authoritarian regimes and moderates and radicals within opposition movements. The success of democratic transitions, they argued, depended on negotiations and cooperation among these four groups. Pact-based transitions were particularly praised for ensuring the stability of emerging political regimes. While this literature acknowledged the critical role of civil society mobilization in supporting transitions after elite splits and negotiations, transitionologists warned that mass mobilization could threaten these processes. Excessive pressure from mass movements, they cautioned, might alienate pivotal elites and lead them to undermine the transition (Huntington 1984; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Reflecting their pessimism about contentious mobilization, these studies largely overlooked the processes and dynamics of mobilization itself.

Recent scholarship continues to emphasize the role of incumbent elites in achieving stable democratization. Miller (2021) argues that lasting, high-quality democracies often result from "electoral continuity," where strong ruling parties democratize, anticipating electoral dominance. This process involves minimal concessions from elites, reducing their incentive to stage coups and creating a stable environment for democratic institutions to gradually take root. Similarly, Riedl et al. (2020) describe "authoritarian-led democratization," and Slater and Wong (2022) call it "democratization through strength." These transitions involve authoritarian elites democratizing without losing power, with incremental reforms under pressure eventually solidifying and making democratization stable.

As the wave of democratization expanded into Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1980s and 1990s, the earlier pessimism surrounding mass mobilization was challenged. A new wave of scholarship came to light, shedding light on the leading role played by mass mobilization in eroding authoritarian regimes and propelling democratic transitions. This scholarship emphasized that mass mobilization not only did not harm the transition processes, but rather, it significantly enhanced their chances of success, even in transitions initially described as elite-driven by transitionologists (Bermeo 1997; Bratton and Van de Walle 1992, 1997; Collier 1999; Wood 2001, 2003).

While earlier analyses were largely reliant on single or comparative case studies, the availability of cross-national data on protests and civic campaigns led to a series of quantitative

analyses. These studies documented the positive impact of protest mobilization on democratic transitions. Utilizing various data sources on protests and democracy indices, these studies revealed that the likelihood of a successful democratic transition significantly increased during periods of high rates of mass mobilization, in comparison to times of relative calm (Alemán and Yang 2011; Kadivar and Caren 2016; Teorell 2010).

So, why has mass mobilization emerged as a driving force for democratization? For one, within the context of authoritarian regimes, mass mobilization serves as a potent revealer of critical information regarding the public's grievances and their aspirations for the form of government they desire. Authoritarian regimes, often employing censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech, endeavor to portray their rule as legitimate and widely supported. They attempt to signal to potential dissidents and disgruntled citizens that their discontent is isolated, and that others will not join in voicing their grievances. Episodes of mass mobilization, however, send signals to the public, the incumbents, and the opposition that discontent is widespread in society and that citizens are willing to take action to press for their demands (Kuran 1991, 1995).

Mass mobilization also escalates the costs of repression, which is another linchpin of authoritarian survival, alongside censorship. Despite their restrictions on public participation, authoritarian regimes frequently claim to represent the people and work in their interest (Frantz 2018; Kendall-Taylor, Lindstaedt, and Frantz 2020). However, when confronted with mobilized protests, this rhetoric is undermined, and the repression of protestors further diminishes their claims of legitimacy and representation.

Furthermore, mass mobilization can create schisms within the incumbent elite, as authoritarian leaders may differ in their views on whether to employ repression or make concessions. These internal divisions further erode support for the authoritarian regime and encourage defection within the ruling coalition, which is yet another pillar of authoritarian strength and stability.

Tactics

More recent scholarship have paid particular attention to the actors, tactics, and organizations involved in mobilization episodes that contribute to democratizing outcomes. In terms of tactics, a significant distinction is made between violent and nonviolent tactics (Nepstad 2011; Schock 2005). Scholars of nonviolent resistance argue that nonviolent campaigns, in general, have a higher chance of success and an even greater chance of promoting democracy. This is due to the fact that nonviolent tactics necessitate the participation of a large number of individuals and are accessible to a broader cross-section of the population. Crackdowns on nonviolent protestors are also costlier for governments, and nonviolent resistance often has a better chance of garnering support and solidarity from third parties and international audiences (Celestino and Gleditsch 2013; Chenoweth 2021; Chenoweth and Stephan 2012; Stephan and Chenoweth 2008).

In recent years, subsequent analyses have prompted a reevaluation of whether the distinction between violence and nonviolence or, more accurately, armed and unarmed tactics, remains a valid framework. It has become apparent that civilians often resort to violent yet unarmed tactics, such as scuffling with the police, throwing objects, or causing property damage. An examination of unarmed violence in the context of democratization suggests that these tactics are relatively common during democratic transitions. There is evidence to suggest that such tactics do not undermine the progress of democratic transitions but can, under certain conditions, enhance the likelihood of successful democratization outcomes (Kadivar and Ketchley 2018). Additionally, research highlights disparities in the accessibility and effectiveness of nonviolent tactics for ethnic majorities and minorities, with excluded ethnic groups being labeled as violent even when employing nonviolent methods (Manekin

and Mitts 2022). Furthermore, an experimental study in the context of Hong Kong reveals that while respondents view violent tactics as morally unacceptable, they hesitate to publicly condemn them, indicating that movements can maintain cohesion even when employing nonviolent yet forceful strategies (Yuen 2023).

This area continues to be ripe for further research in the future. We have gained insights into the different consequences of armed versus unarmed tactics, but questions remain regarding the varying effects of unarmed violent tactics compared to peaceful protest tactics. This includes their short-term and long-term impacts, their influence on the internal dynamics of movements, and their interactions with governments and third parties.

Organizations

Scholars have also delved into the types of organizations that have played pivotal roles in pro-democracy mobilization episodes. Foremost among these are workers' unions, which have been extensively highlighted in studies of democratizing episodes rooted in the political economy tradition. Labor unions, as among the largest civil society organizations, maintain direct connections with the everyday needs and demands of ordinary citizens. They possess a familiarity with conflict and compromise, two facets of politics. Workers' unions have had to employ both contentious tactics, like strikes, and accommodative tactics, such as negotiations, at different times. These skills are crucial for the democratic opposition during mobilization episodes. Comparative historical analysis and time-series statistical analyses have documented the positive role of trade unions in democratization processes (Collier 1999; Dahlum, Knutsen, and Wig 2019; Kadivar 2022; Lee 2012; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Usmani 2018).

However, key questions remain regarding the effectiveness of labor unions as vehicles for democratic mobilization, particularly in the Global South. A significant challenge in these regions is the prevalence of informal labor, which often falls outside the scope of unionized labor, limiting the organizational power of unions compared to their counterparts in the Global North. Additionally, even in cases where organized labor has demonstrated organizational effectiveness, their commitment to democracy is not guaranteed. While unions have frequently supported democratization, there are notable instances, such as in Tunisia, where they have remained passive or even complicit in authoritarian resurgence. This raises the critical question: what factors determine whether workers' unions support, oppose, or remain neutral in the context of democracy mobilization?

While much attention has focused on the challenges unions face in countries with large informal sectors, comparative historical research shows that industrial unions have nonetheless played central roles in democratic transitions. In Brazil and South Africa, labor movements helped build broad pro-democracy coalitions that linked demands for political rights to social justice. In Poland and South Korea, strong industrial unions provided the organizational infrastructure and strategic leadership necessary to sustain opposition to authoritarian regimes (Ekiert and Kubik 1999; Lee 2016; Seidman 1994). These cases underscore the importance of examining how labor movements build cross-class alliances and frame democratization as both a political and economic transformation.

In addition to labor unions, professional associations have been found to play constructive roles in democratizing episodes, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Communities of faith have also proven to be significant agents in mobilizing pro-democracy movements (Pinckney, Butcher, and Braithwaite 2022). However, for communities of faith to assume a pro-democracy role, they must have developed a theology compatible with democracy and have achieved financial and institutional

independence from the state (Philpott 2007; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011). A comparative historical analysis of democratic revolutions in southeast Asia also show such revolutions have emerged and succeeded in country where they have been supported by the communal elite- a group of local elite possessing nationalist and religious credentials (Slater 2009). Comparative historical analyses demonstrate the prominent role played by political parties in organizing pro-democracy campaigns (Haggard and Kaufman 2016), although the democratic commitment of political parties has been questioned in other studies (Pinckney et al. 2022). Similar questions can be raised about the actions or inaction of major social organizations within a country during mobilization episodes. Understanding why certain organizations align themselves with democracy movements while others remain silent or side with the state is of great importance.

Finally, university campuses have been always a hotbed for protest movements, especially pro-democracy mobilization. When authoritarian regimes suppress organizations of civil society, university campuses can emerge as a free space or indigenous organization for mobilization. The structure of campuses often facilitates coordination. Students have time and motivation to mobilize, and they often promotes values of democracy and human rights (Dahlum and Wig 2021). Furthermore, when students participate in a campaign the campaigns tend to stay nonviolent (Dahlum 2018).

Social Groups and Democratization

The role of social class in democratization has been a central focus of debate, reflecting the deep embedding of organizations within broader social structures. Barrington Moore's (1966) early scholarship posited the bourgeoisie as the primary driver of democratization. In contrast, later comparative historical analyses by Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) identified the working class as the most consistent force behind democratization, particularly in Europe and Latin America—a finding corroborated by subsequent comparative and cross-national studies (Dahlum et al. 2019; Usmani 2018).

During the third wave of democratization, some scholars emphasized the middle class's significant role in advancing democracy (Huntington 1993). Others examined the contributions of intellectuals and the educated class, particularly in early 20th-century democratization waves and transitions from communist rule in Eastern Europe (Kurzman 2008; Kurzman and Leahey 2004). Similarly, students have served as key actors in opposition movements over the past several decades, frequently framing their protests around themes of democracy and human rights (Dahlum 2018; Dahlum and Wig 2021).

Survey data from recent revolutions in Ukraine, Egypt, and Tunisia revealed that individuals from middle class backgrounds participated at higher rates than other groups (Beissinger 2022). Additionally, intra-class differences within the middle class have been explored. A study of democracy protests in Russia found that middle-class individuals employed by the state were less likely to participate in anti-regime protests compared to those in the private sector. This disparity is attributed to the incentives and penalties the state offers its employees (Rosenfeld 2017).

Other studies have examined the role of women in mobilization and democratic transitions, highlighting their impact on post-transition political landscapes. Research indicates that transitions driven by contentious mobilization tend to result in higher representation for women in government. Additionally, when women actively participate in pro-democracy coalitions, the policies of the new regime are more likely to be favorable toward gender equality (Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna 2012; Viterna and Fallon 2008). A comparative analysis of Arab Spring uprisings underscores this dynamic, showing that the active presence of women in the Tunisian revolution played a crucial role

in its success, distinguishing it from other uprisings in the region. Women's involvement not only strengthened democratic demands but also contributed to more inclusive and durable democratic outcomes (Mako and Moghadam 2021). Research on the Egyptian uprising similarly shows how women's engagement in the 2011 revolution expanded democratic imaginaries and transformed political subjectivities, even as post-revolutionary developments failed to institutionalize gender-inclusive reforms (Allam 2018).

Building on these findings, another analysis suggests that democratic transitions rooted in unarmed mobilization are more likely to foster inclusive democracies that better represent marginalized groups. Specifically, when women, ethnically marginalized communities, and excluded social classes play a significant role in mobilization, the resulting democratic regime is more likely to reflect greater inclusivity along gender, ethnic, and class lines (Bogati et al. 2024).

Beyond analyzing the role of specific social groups, scholars have also examined multi-sectoral coalitions in anti-authoritarian campaigns. Cross-national research suggests that movements composed of broad-based coalitions—spanning different classes and social sectors—have had a higher likelihood of toppling authoritarian regimes and leading to either short-term or long-term democratization (Dahlum 2023).

Mobilization in Repressive Contexts

In repressive authoritarian regimes, mobilization often occurs without relying on traditional organizational structures. Activists in such contexts employ alternative mechanisms to compensate for the lack of formal organizations. One strategy is social appropriation, which involves repurposing organizations not originally intended for contentious mobilization, such as labor unions, communities of faith, or professional associations, for mobilizational purposes (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Another strategy is leveraging focal points—temporal contexts that naturally stimulate collective action even without direct communication. Events like Friday prayers, religious or national holidays, or funerals can serve as focal points, facilitating mobilization when conventional organizational resources are unavailable (Ketchley and Barrie 2019; Opp and Gern 1993).

Mobilization can also generate its own organizational structures, with ongoing contention fostering increasingly sophisticated forms of organization. New vehicles of organization may emerge that bypass established relationships, creating fresh social ties and unique forms of sociability. Activists often rely on micro-solidarities, utilizing technology, spontaneity, and transnational influences to sustain their efforts. Grassroots coordination units, functioning as trust networks, covertly connect neighborhood activists and provide a foundation for collective action. However, the challenges of repression frequently compel activists to disengage from existing networks. At the same time, contention can transform social dynamics, fostering cooperation and mutual respect among advocates of peaceful revolution (Pearlman 2021).

Digital Media

While traditional organizations such as unions and professional associations have historically structured mobilization, recent decades have seen activists increasingly turn to digital media to coordinate collective action across space and time. Digital media has introduced new capabilities and vulnerabilities to pro-democracy mobilization. With the aid of digital media, like-minded individuals can connect without needing to be in the same physical location. Organizing tasks that were traditionally carried out by conventional social movement organizations, such as coordination, communication, and logistical preparations, can now be executed by a small group of activists

located in different places. The affordances of social media have enabled activists to quickly mobilize large waves of pro-democracy supporters in a short timeframe (Clarke and Koçak 2018; Earl and Kimport 2011; Kadivar 2022; Tufekci 2017). This phenomenon is particularly evident in what Mark Beissinger (2022) terms "urban-civic revolutions." In these revolutions, people employ civic tactics to gather large crowds in public spaces, uniting against despotic and corrupt autocratic governments. Prime examples of such uprisings include the Arab Spring and the revolutions in former Soviet republics, such as the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine.

While activists have demonstrated their ability to rapidly mobilize masses through social media, they have often faltered in maintaining coalitions and establishing consensus within the movement regarding strategy, leadership, and discourse. The nature of digital media tends to elevate individuals to de facto leadership positions, as those who can produce popular content on digital platforms take center stage. However, the skills required to craft engaging online posts differ from those necessary for effective social movement leadership. As studies of leadership and strategic capacity demonstrate, effective leadership demands diversity, familiarity with various forms of contention, the ability to bridge divides and unite different factions within a movement, a strategic vision, and the capacity to lead concrete actions on the ground (Ganz 2004, 2010; Kadivar 2022; Tufekci 2017).

The coalitions formed during urban-civic revolutions, often described as "negative coalitions," have proven to be fragile, primarily built on opposition to incumbent governments rather than consensus on substantive issues (Beissinger 2013). Consequently, once these revolutions succeed in ousting incumbent leaders, they often descend into bitter disputes and disagreements about what should come next. These movements, which heavily rely on digital media, find their fragility exacerbated by certain features of digital platforms. Inflammatory and polarized posts tend to receive the most attention on digital media, while attempts to adopt a middle ground are met with online attacks and abuse from both sides (Beissinger 2017; Tufekci 2017).

Nevertheless, digital media is not ill-suited for the tasks of organizing and building coalitions. It is still a valuable tool for these purposes. However, communication for the purpose of organizing and coalition-building may need to take place through private conversations between activists that remain hidden from public view (Han 2014). Future research has the potential to shed more light on how digital media can be effectively employed for creating leadership and organizational capabilities and for uniting coalitions.

Another evolving dynamic in the relationship between digital media and mobilization is the increasing use of digital connectivity by political regimes as a tool for social and political control. Advances in communication technologies have often acted as double-edged swords. While these technologies empower activists and dissidents to overcome coordination challenges in innovative ways, they simultaneously enable incumbent governments to develop and deploy new methods of surveillance and control (Weidmann and Rød 2019).

Scholars have explored how activists adapt their use of digital media for coordination in response to evolving state surveillance and repression. Initially, digital media was employed to share information about the time and location of protests, but governments quickly leveraged this same information for more effective crackdowns. A study of the Sudanese revolution illustrates a tactical innovation in response to this dynamic: local activists organized simultaneous protests adjacent to the main protest sites. This strategy diverted state repression away from central demonstrations or safeguarded smaller protests from crackdowns concentrated at primary locations (Hassan 2024).

Elections

Elections have proven to be a significant catalyst for democracy mobilization (Trejo 2014). During election periods, there is a heightened sharing of information, and emotions run high. A specific form of democracy mobilization has emerged in response to fraudulent elections, which are a common feature in electoral authoritarian regimes. Electoral authoritarian regimes are a subtype of non-democratic regimes that conduct elections that fall short of the standards for being free and fair. These regimes often manipulate rules in their favor, utilize state resources for electoral advantage, curtail freedom of speech and assembly to undermine their opponents, and resort to electoral fraud if deemed necessary (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2013). In such regimes, election periods provide a window of opportunity that facilitates mobilization against the incumbent authorities. During elections, a wealth of information is disseminated, often signaling the extent of government corruption and widespread grievances in society. This influx of information, coupled with heightened emotional states, paves the way for mobilization when voters become incensed over alleged electoral fraud (Beaulieu 2014; Kadivar 2017; Kuntz and Thompson 2009; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015).

The Economic Context of Mobilization

The economic context also plays a pivotal role in shaping the prospects for democracy mobilization. A cross-national analysis of democracy protests indicates that democracy mobilization is more likely to occur during economic downturns rather than during periods of economic prosperity. When citizens are content with the state of the economy, they are less inclined to participate in democracy mobilization. Furthermore, even during economic downturns, democracy mobilization is more likely when citizens hold the government responsible for the economic challenges they face. Additionally, during election periods, citizens are more prone to attribute economic poor performance to the government, further increasing the likelihood of democracy mobilization (Brancati 2016).

Another important aspect of the economic context of mobilization is the effects of revenues from natural resources. The rentier state theory posits that the presence of significant oil revenues can hinder the prospects of democracy in these nations. This is because oil-rich states have less reliance on taxing their citizens, opting instead to utilize oil revenues to expand welfare programs, establish clientelist networks, and develop strong repressive apparatuses (Ross 2001, 2012). Empirical research has demonstrated that oil-producing countries tend to have lower rates of protest mobilization (Kadivar and Caren 2016; Smith 2004). However, it's noteworthy that democracy mobilization has still emerged in some oil-rich states like Indonesia and Nigeria. To advance our understanding, future research should delve into how activists have managed to mobilize in these oil-rich contexts despite the challenges and limitations outlined by existing literature.

Democratic Diffusion

Democracy mobilization has often occurred in waves, with instances clustered in both time and geographic proximity (Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Gleditsch and Rivera 2015; Weyland 2010, 2014). The success of mobilization in one place has inspired people in other areas to mobilize against autocratic leaders for democracy. When such mobilization leads to the removal of incumbent elites and democratic breakthroughs, the demonstration effect is even more pronounced (Kadivar and Caren 2016). This power of example has enabled democracy mobilization in contexts that might not have initially seemed favorable for such action (Beissinger 2007). However, its impact varies from country to country, with nations having a rich tradition of democracy mobilization being less influenced by demonstration effects, while it has a stronger effect on countries with a weaker history of mobilization (Braithwaite, Braithwaite, and Kucik 2015). Nevertheless, this perspective on the diffusion of democracy mobilization faces challenges from

some scholars, who argue that these protests are primarily driven by domestic processes and are often unaffected by similar actions in other countries in terms of diffusion (Brancati and Lucardi 2019).

Long-term Effects of Mobilization

Alongside the short-term effects of contention in the context of democratization, several studies have delved into the long-term consequences of mobilization on democratic consolidation and growth. These studies propose that transitions rooted in bottom-up mobilization tend to yield more enduring democracies (Bethke and Pinckney 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Lambach et al. 2020; della Porta 2016). One analysis, in particular, argues that the longer the duration of unarmed mobilization leading to democratization, the higher the likelihood that the resultant democracy will not only persist but also thrive. The extended duration of mobilization necessitates the development of an organizational infrastructure and the forging of coalitions. An integral aspect of this organizational and mobilization effort involves the cultivation and promotion of civic leadership that can play a crucial role during the phases of democratic transition and consolidation. These pro-democracy organizations also contribute to the vibrancy and pluralism of civil society in the post-transition period. Contentious methods of making claims during the struggle phase also serve as inspiration for citizens in the post-transition period, encouraging them to employ such methods to hold the new democratic leadership accountable and safeguard democratic institutions (Kadivar 2018, 2022). An examination of protests in Africa reveals that when citizens perceive voting as an ineffective means of expressing their grievances, they have turned to protest tactics to voice their dissatisfaction with worsening economic conditions (Harris and Hern 2019).

Beyond contributing to democratic durability and consolidation, activism and mobilization have also played a central role in deepening democracy. Democratic depth refers to processes through which citizens participate in collective decision-making beyond elections and the formal mechanisms of representative politics. In this regard, the mobilization of civil society actors has been crucial for establishing institutions that enable bottom-up participation and for expanding the boundaries of democratic inclusion (Fishman 2016, 2019; Fung and Wright 2003; Heller 2019). One of the key institutional innovations that emerged from these efforts is participatory democracy, which has developed as a response to the limits of representative institutions—particularly in contexts where electoral systems are captured by elites or distorted by clientelism.

Across much of the Global South, popular movements and civil society organizations have demanded new channels for ongoing citizen participation. These demands have led to the institutionalization of participatory budgeting, local councils, and deliberative planning forums, allowing marginalized groups to influence public policy and resource allocation. Unlike technocratic or consultative models, participatory institutions that have had the greatest impact are often rooted in prior mobilization and supported by dense networks of association that can articulate collective demands and ensure accountability. While these initiatives vary in effectiveness, research shows they are most likely to democratize governance when civil society is autonomous, political parties are responsive, and state bureaucracies are open to reform (Avritzer 2002; Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva 2011; Wampler 2015). In these cases, participation not only enhances state accountability and redistribution but also contributes to the formation of active, empowered citizens.

Recent research on civil society in the Global South highlights three key dimensions of its role in democratization: enhancing associational capabilities, nurturing civic identities, and promoting organizational autonomy. Civil society provides spaces for marginalized actors to develop political agency, fosters solidarity-based identities that cultivate democratic norms, and influences

whether movements emphasize broad, inclusive interests or narrower, exclusive ones. Two critical conditions support these processes: a strong rights-based culture that challenges existing hierarchies and the development of horizontal ties among civil society actors before the formation of political parties (Heller 2022).

Empirical research further suggests that democracies emerging from extended periods of unarmed mobilization are more likely to institutionalize participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democratic practices. Brazil serves as an illustrative case: movements that resisted military dictatorship later spearheaded policies that expanded citizen participation beyond electoral processes. Additionally, the entry of democracy activists into state bureaucracy played a crucial role in resisting attempts at democratic backsliding (Avritzer 2006; Bradlow and Kadivar 2023; Gianpaolo Baiocchi 2003; Kadivar, Usmani, and Bradlow 2020). These findings underscore the long-term impact of mobilization in shaping not only democratic transitions but also the depth and resilience of democratic governance.

Sociological research has particularly documented how activists have used the emerging institutional openings within democratic regimes to expand practices of citizenship. In the Global South, civil society has functioned not only as a space of resistance but also as a key arena for building political agency and inclusive participation. Marginalized actors, including women and racialized communities, have used legal institutions, informal associations, and self-help groups to claim rights and contest dominant power structures. These associational spaces help generate new forms of citizenship and foster solidaristic identities through practices of mutual recognition and collective claim-making. The democratic impact of civil society depends in part on its autonomy and its ability to build horizontal alliances and generate shared norms of inclusion (Fraser 2021; Paschel 2018; Roychowdhury 2020; Sanyal 2014).

Building on this understanding of civil society, recent research has emphasized how class-based mobilization—particularly among workers—has shaped both the trajectory and substance of democratization. Informal and precarious workers, especially women, have advanced political claims around dignity and livelihood, often organizing outside the bounds of traditional labor unions. In contexts like Brazil and South Africa, labor movements embedded in broader social struggles helped push authoritarian regimes toward democratic openings. Historical and comparative research highlights how coalitions between workers, rural laborers, and oppositional parties have been central to both democratic transitions and the formation of more participatory and redistributive institutions (Agarwala 2013; Desai 2002; Sandbrook et al. 2007; Seidman 1994).

Extending the link between mobilization and democratic substance, a growing body of scholarship shows how developmental outcomes—especially in health, welfare, and urban governance—are shaped by contentious politics. Social movements and professional networks have played key roles in expanding access to public services and institutionalizing pro-poor policies, often through strategic alliances with reformist bureaucrats. In Brazil, the health movement was instrumental in reshaping municipal governance and embedding universal healthcare commitments into the state. In South Africa and Brazil, urban movements have directly influenced how state institutions are built and restructured, often pushing for participatory planning, redistributive urban policies, and more inclusive governance frameworks. In Indian urban slums, informal leaders and neighborhood associations have been central to negotiating access to basic services, illustrating how state responsiveness is shaped by local power structures. These studies show that inclusive development outcomes often emerge not from technocratic reform alone but from political struggles rooted in local mobilization (Auerbach 2019; Bradlow 2024; Gibson 2019; Harris 2017).

Discourses of Mobilization

Another pertinent aspect of mobilization and democratization concerns the ideological and discursive content of contentious episodes. Several cross-national studies that highlight the positive effects of mobilization for democracy often do not consider the depth of democratic commitment within these episodes. This issue has gained prominence in recent years, as in various cases, actors who initially championed democracy did not maintain their commitment to democratic causes over the long term.

For instance, in Egypt, activists who initially played a pivotal role in toppling Mubarak later organized protests against democratically elected President Muhammad Morsi, with the hope that the military would intervene and remove Morsi from power. Subsequently, a coup followed these protests, putting an end to Egypt's brief democratic experiment. In his comprehensive analysis of revolutionary episodes in the 20th and 21st centuries, Mark Beissinger (2022) suggests that many of these revolutionary episodes against authoritarian regimes might be more accurately described as anti-autocracy mobilizations rather than pro-democracy movements, as democratic commitments in these episodes are often weak. Another analysis of democracy protests also indicate that in most cases participants do not share a through philosophical understanding of democracy, rather they are demanding the change of an incumbent leader or a higher standard of leaving (Brancati 2016).

A case study of the Tunisian uprising further complicates this picture, showing that democratic content does not always define initial mobilization. Instead, as new social actors with a stronger commitment to democracy join the movement, democratic ideals can emerge over time (Barrie 2023). These findings suggest that mobilization's impact on democratization depends not only on mass participation but also on the ideological and discursive evolution of movements.

A recent study on the theme of democratic commitment has employed new indicators from the V-Dem dataset that distinguish between mobilizations for democracy and autocracy. Similar to other data in the V-Dem dataset, this information is based on coding by numerous experts from various countries. Cross-national analysis of this data confirms that mobilization for democracy has indeed had positive effects on democratic transitions and enhancements (Hellmeier and Bernhard 2023).

Mobilization and Democratic Decline

As several studies and historical cases illustrate, mobilization for democracy does not always advance democratization and, under certain conditions, can contribute to democratic breakdown or backsliding (Bermeo 2016). An influential analysis of civil resistance and democratization suggests that maximalist demands—such as denying electoral outcomes or demanding the immediate resignation of elected governments—can distort civil resistance campaigns and undermine democratic transitions. This approach argues that the relationship between mass mobilization and democratization depends on the degree of maximalism involved. High mobilization with low maximalism tends to support democratic breakthroughs, while high maximalism, especially when combined with high mobilization, often leads to fragmented, unstable political systems. In extreme cases, such dynamics can accelerate the transition to autocratic rule (Pinckney 2020).

By contrast, other scholars argue that the problem lies not in excessive demands, but in the absence of a radical democratic vision and the constriction of revolutionary horizons within neoliberal frameworks. Asef Bayat (2017) contends that the Arab uprisings represented “revolutions without revolutionaries”—mass mobilizations that lacked ideological direction, organizational

infrastructure, and a transformative political project. In this view, the failure of these revolutions stems not from overreach, but from their reformist limits, as they failed to challenge deeper structures of inequality and authoritarianism. Similarly, Atef Said (2023) highlights how the Egyptian revolution was symbolically and politically “squared”—reduced to a confined space (Tahrir) and narrow procedural goals, while more expansive demands for social justice and participatory democracy were sidelined. For these scholars, the tragedy of the uprisings lies in their demobilization and depoliticization, not in their maximalism. They suggest that it was precisely the absence of sustained, organized, and visionary mobilization that allowed counterrevolutionary forces to reclaim power.

On the other hand, there are studies that caution against the potential negative role of civil society and mobilization in the context of democratization. A classic study of the democratic collapse in the Weimar Republic documents the active role of civil society organizations in the rise of Fascism in interwar Germany. This occurred because political parties, which constitute the political society, failed to represent the societal demands of civic organizations, which were later co-opted and directed by the Nazis (Berman 1997b, 1997a). Similarly, analyses of Fascism in Italy and Spain also articulate that Fascism in both societies had its roots in strong civic organizations with anti-democratic ideologies (Riley 2005, 2010).

Recent uprisings have also been the subject of studies that highlight negative effects on mobilization. For instance, an analysis of the protests in post-Mubarak Egypt indicates that these protests had detrimental effects on the perception of democracy among residents in protesting districts (Ketchley and El-Rayyes 2020). Another analysis reveals that respondents from these districts voted in higher numbers for the main candidate of the former regime in the 2012 elections (El-Mallakh 2020). These studies demonstrate that when pro-democracy mobilization lacks organization and strategy, it can backfire and lead citizens to turn against democratic values. Consequently, many Egyptians became more concerned about order and security, prompting them to vote for the candidate of the previous authoritarian regime, which promised to restore stability and order.

Contentious collective action within democracies is often associated with democratic advancement, yet recent research has shown that protest can also serve authoritarian trajectories, either deliberately or inadvertently. In countries such as Brazil, India, and Ukraine, antipartisan protest waves have destabilized party systems, delegitimized representative institutions, and opened the door to authoritarian populists who position themselves as alternatives to the discredited political establishment. In Brazil, mass protests between 2013 and 2016 began as broad-based demands for better public services and accountability, but gradually became dominated by anti-PT sentiment, eventually aligning with conservative and anti-democratic actors. Despite rejecting formal political affiliation, these movements played a pivotal role in delegitimizing the political left, paving the way for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the eventual rise of Jair Bolsonaro (Bradlow and Gold 2025). These examples illustrate how protest—while often framed as democratic engagement—can function as a vehicle for elite realignment and political projects that erode democratic norms.

While the broader literature on populism has focused predominantly on electoral dynamics and voter realignment, several studies within this tradition also shed light on non-electoral mobilization that supports authoritarian outcomes. Research on Brazil, Argentina, and the Philippines has shown how conservative civil society networks, evangelical churches, and digitally coordinated movements have engaged in contentious action that delegitimizes liberal democracy and promotes exclusionary governance (McKenna 2020; Gold and Peña 2021; Curato 2017). These

findings suggest that democratic backsliding is often not only top-down but also driven by grassroots mobilization, shaped by civil society actors and moral populist discourse.

Mobilization for Autocracy

Although nondemocratic regimes have been mobilizing their supporters throughout the 20th century, it's only recently that social scientists have started to pay particular attention to this form of mobilization. Unlike democracies, most autocratic regimes don't typically originate from mass mobilization campaigns. However, in a parallel to democracies that emerge from contentious politics, authoritarian regimes that have their roots in mass mobilization have proven to be some of the most enduring autocracies worldwide. The key distinction here is that democracies that emerge from unarmed contention tend to be the most durable, whereas authoritarian regimes born out of violent episodes of mass mobilization tend to exhibit greater resilience. This is because these transformative episodes of violent mobilization often suppress civil society, provide the groundwork for the establishment of robust repressive apparatuses, and set the stage for the emergence of mass-based ruling parties (Lachapelle et al. 2020; Levitsky and Way 2022).

Beyond the constitution-altering effects of mass mobilization for autocracies, many authoritarian regimes also mobilize their supporters for various purposes. Before the end of the Cold War, it was primarily communist regimes, as well as totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes in general, that exhibited high mobilization capacities. In contrast, authoritarian regimes tended to favor maintaining public spaces in a state of quietude and typically kept levels of mass mobilization low. Nonetheless, contemporary authoritarian leaders have progressively come to view the masses as an advantageous resource for bolstering their grip on power and improving their chances of survival (Linz 1964, 2000; Linz and Stepan 1996). Their interest in controlling the streets goes beyond mere repression; they actively seek to rally their own supporters (Robertson 2011).

The third wave of authoritarianism during the mid-1990s brought about significant changes in the strategies and characteristics of authoritarian governments (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Modern authoritarian regimes have devised novel tactics, including the regular holding of elections (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2013), the establishment of authoritarian institutions (Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007), and the creation of mass organizations (Brownlee 2007; Handlin 2016). These methods serve to create the illusion of accountability, with minimal substantive change.

One of the strategies embraced by autocrats involves mobilizing the masses through rallies, public gatherings, and campaigns, all aimed at garnering support for state interests and agendas. Autocrats employ this approach for multiple objectives, including responding to threats from anti-government movements (Ekiert, Perry, and Yan 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019; Ketchley 2017), intimidating the opposition to deter future challenges (Beissinger 2020; Hemment 2015), gathering support for electoral competition against opposition parties (Handlin 2020), advancing their developmental projects (Looney 2020; Ning and Palmer 2020), signaling support for territorial and geostrategic interests beyond their borders (Greene and Robertson 2020), and reinforcing their foreign and security policy signaling strategies (Weiss 2014). Given the recent surge in democratic erosion and the ascent of incumbents with authoritarian inclinations within electoral democracies, pro-government mobilization tactics have become increasingly prevalent within institutional democracies (Cunningham and Owens 2020; Kydd 2021). The storming of Capitol Hill in the United States by President Trump's supporters, in an attempt to overturn his electoral defeat, serves as a poignant example of pro-government mobilization in eroded democracies.

Scholars have primarily focused on the threat posed by anti-government mobilization to elucidate variations in the extent of pro-government mobilization. Through a cross-national time-series analysis, Hellmeier and Weidmann (2020) observed a substantial upsurge in pro-government rallies during significant episodes of domestic opposition mobilization. They argue that pro-government mobilization enables autocrats to signal their strength and counterbalance opposition efforts against the regime when confronted with direct challenges. Similarly, an event-history analysis of protest mobilization in Egypt from 2011 to 2013 revealed that the intensity of pro-government demonstrations increased following opposition protests (Anderson and Cammett 2020).

The perceived threat of opposition is not the sole driver of state-led mobilization. In hybrid regimes, factional politics and elite competition can also fuel social mobilization. A subnational analysis of labor mobilization in Russia demonstrates that these protests were primarily driven by competition between regional and national elites over resources. Regional elites strategically leveraged labor protests to strengthen their bargaining position against national elites (Robertson 2007, 2011). This suggests that beyond repression and regime consolidation, intra-elite struggles can also shape patterns of state-backed mobilization.

Another examination of autocratic mobilization, using subnational variation in the case of Iran, argues that autocratic governments don't merely mobilize their supporters in a reactionary manner to counter threats from opposition protests. Instead, they establish organizational infrastructure to sustain authoritarian mobilization, even during periods when the opposition is not actively protesting. Scholarship on social movements has posited that in the absence of social movement organizations to provide logistical support and coordinate collective action, contenders often rely on indigenous organizations. Indigenous organizations are associations that exist for purposes other than mobilization but can be repurposed by contenders for contentious collective action. Examples of indigenous organizations include places of worship and university campuses. In the case of Iran, in addition to using repression to preempt the threat of mass mobilization, the government has also infiltrated mosques and universities to create pro-government associations, utilizing them for pro-government mobilization. Consequently, districts in Iran with higher concentrations of mosques and university students tend to exhibit higher levels of pro-government mobilization. While this article sheds light on the organizational infrastructure of pro-government mobilization in Iran, future research could explore the organizational underpinnings of autocratic mobilization in other countries (Khani and Kadivar 2023).

Another cross-national analysis investigates the outcomes of autocratic mobilization using new data from V-Dem. This analysis reveals that autocratic mobilization under authoritarian regimes reduces the likelihood of democratic transitions, while authoritarian mobilization under democracies heightens the risk of democratic breakdown (Hellmeier and Bernhard 2023).

While pro-government mobilization has primarily been examined in autocratic regimes, it is increasingly occurring within democracies, particularly in contexts of democratic backsliding. Democratic leaders facing political crises—such as Donald Trump's 2021 Capitol Hill rally or Modi's Hindu nationalist mobilization in India—have used mass mobilization to consolidate power and weaken democratic norms. Comparative studies should explore how state-backed mobilization differs across regime types and its role in accelerating democratic erosion.

Directions for Future Research

The review highlights several promising avenues for future research in the field of mobilization for and against democracy. One critical area for exploration is the tactics of mobilization, with a particular focus on understanding the consequences of unarmed violence and

its interactions with peaceful strategies. Scholars can delve into the short-term and long-term effects of such tactics on movement cohesion, public perception, interactions with governments and repressive forces, and subsequent levels of violence within societies.

Another significant area of inquiry revolves around the role of various social organizations in democracy mobilization. While existing literature has shed light on the positive contributions of organizations like worker unions, professional associations, faith communities, ethnonationalist groups, and political parties, there remains a need to investigate the conditions under which these organizations support or oppose democracy. Understanding why organizations may shift their stance over time, from supporting democracy to enabling democratic backsliding or breakdown, is a pertinent question. Additionally, researchers can explore how authoritarian regimes and leaders build or co-opt organizations to advance antidemocratic mobilization.

Given the current global challenges to democratic discourse, studying the democratic vision of different mobilizations becomes crucial. Exploring differences in democratic discourses between successful and defeated democracy mobilizations, as well as analyzing how opponents of democracy articulate their views within antidemocratic discourse, offers valuable insights. Examining the rhetorical and discursive strategies used to convey values like popular sovereignty within authoritarian contexts is also a pertinent area of investigation.

The composition of alliances supporting or opposing democracy mobilization is another area ripe for research. Understanding the challenges of building democratic alliances in the 21st century, particularly in multiethnic societies, can shed light on effective strategies for uniting diverse groups in broad multisectoral coalitions. Nativism, often employed by the far right in antidemocratic mobilization, presents a unique challenge. Researchers can explore how democracy advocates can facilitate defection within antidemocratic alliances without succumbing to nativist narratives.

Another important avenue for future research concerns how we make sense of variation across subnational findings and move toward a more systematic understanding of mobilization's democratic or antidemocratic consequences. Rather than treating subnational comparison as a new solution, scholars should take stock of the accumulated body of subnational, small-n, and experimental research and interrogate the sources of divergence across these studies. This calls for multi-level research designs that systematically compare subnational episodes of contention—either across time within the same country or across similar spatial units in different national contexts. For example, researchers could investigate why certain cities or provinces emerge as centers of democratic contention while others enable authoritarian consolidation, tracing how these dynamics relate to local variations in mobilizing structures, state capacity, or elite alignments. Such designs would allow scholars to identify recurring patterns of conjunction and contingency across cases while also discerning the structural and institutional logics that aggregate up from subnational arenas. As O'Donnell (1993) argued in his work on “brown areas” in Latin America, democratization is often territorially uneven. Recognizing and theorizing this unevenness is essential not only for understanding how democracy unfolds within national borders but also for building comparative insights across contexts.

This review has demonstrated that collective mobilization is a central force shaping both democratic openings and authoritarian entrenchment. Far from having a uniformly positive or negative effect, its impact is contingent on the nature of its demands, organizational foundations, class composition, and interaction with political institutions. Mobilization has been shown to enable transitions to democracy, deepen participatory practices, and empower marginalized groups—but it has also contributed to democratic backsliding when channeled toward maximalist, exclusionary, or

authoritarian ends. The literature increasingly recognizes that both pro- and anti-democratic mobilizations can be mass-based, well-organized, and capable of shaping political regimes in lasting ways. Understanding these divergent pathways requires continued attention to variation in tactics, coalition dynamics, ideological content, and state response. Future research should deepen the study of how contentious politics is conditioned by social structure and spatial inequality, and explore how movement actors navigate the tensions between reformist inclusion and transformative rupture. As democratic institutions face mounting challenges globally, clarifying the ambivalent political consequences of mobilization is not only an analytical task but a pressing political one.

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