

Universities and Pro-government Mobilization in Autocratic Regimes

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Abstract

Universities are widely viewed as hotbeds of dissent and anti-government protest. This study complements and complicates this understanding by showing that, in autocratic regimes, universities also function as vehicles of pro-government mobilization. Authoritarian governments cultivate regime-affiliated student organizations and align incentives—particularly through public-sector career opportunities—to organize and sustain state-led participation on campuses. We show this argument through a mixed-methods approach. First, we conduct the first cross-national, subnational analysis of pro-government mobilization across 93 autocratic regimes from 2003 to 2019, using grid-cell and country-level data. Areas with more universities consistently experience higher levels of pro-government mobilization, a relationship that remains robust across alternative model specifications. Second, comparative case studies of China, Russia, and Iran illustrate the mechanisms through which autocratic regimes cultivate campus-based mobilization. Our findings highlight the often-overlooked mobilizational role of universities in authoritarian contexts, adding a new dimension to research that has primarily portrayed campuses as sites of dissent.

Introduction

On December 6, 2011, approximately 5,000 people gathered in Manezhnaya and Triumfalnaya Squares to support Vladimir Putin. Participants, including students from universities such as Moscow State University and St. Petersburg State University, wore Putin-themed T-shirts to express their support for their leader (Schwartz 2011). This pro-Putin rally highlights a broader phenomenon in authoritarian regimes: the strategic use of universities and their students as instruments of state-led mobilization.

Existing scholarship has long emphasized the liberalizing power of education. Studies show that higher education fosters civic engagement, critical thinking, and pro-democratic values (Acemoglu et al. 2005; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Accordingly, universities are viewed as incubators of dissent: they nurture dense social networks, heighten political awareness, and supply organizational resources for collective action (Dahlum and Wig 2017, 2020; Zhang and Zhao 2018; Zhao 1998). From this perspective, university campuses appear as engines of opposition and hubs of dissent.

Yet universities are also key sites of state power. Research on the reciprocal relationship between civil society and the state shows that states not only repress but also penetrate, shape, and mobilize civil society to sustain their authority (Forrat 2024; Gramsci 1971; Klein and Lee 2018; Riley and Fernández 2015). Case-based scholarship shows that autocratic regimes routinely extend political oversight into universities, reshaping governance and student organizations to channel campus life toward regime priorities (Forrat 2016, 2024; Perry 2020). One manifestation of this dynamic is pro-government mobilization—state-orchestrated rallies and campaigns designed to promote government agendas (Ekiert, Perry, and Yan 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020; Perry and Wolf 2024). This raises a central question: Can universities—traditionally regarded as centers of opposition—also function as vehicles of pro-government mobilization in autocratic regimes?

Building on resource-mobilization theory (Ganz 2009; Lu and Tao 2017; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Walker and Martin 2018), we extend its logic from non-state actors to state actors, arguing that universities provide autocrats with dense organizational structures, symbolic prestige, and material resources that can be leveraged to cultivate participation and bolster regime support. We propose that autocratic states pursue pro-government mobilization on campuses through two mechanisms. First, they forge new student organizations or co-opt existing ones, turning parts of the student associational landscape into channels for pro-state movements. Second, they deploy educational, material, and political incentives—alongside potential sanctions—to encourage participation in regime-aligned activities while discouraging dissent. Together, these mechanisms enable states to effectively promote and coordinate pro-government activities on campuses.

To demonstrate this argument, we adopt a mixed-methods approach. First, we run a cross-national analysis of 93 autocratic regimes from 2003 to 2019. Using a grid-cell-year design with fixed effects, we examine the spatial relationship between university density and pro-government mobilization. The results show that grid cells with a higher number of universities are associated with increased state-led mobilizations within a given country-year. Importantly, this pattern holds consistently across alternative country-year specifications, highlighting the robustness of the relationship.

Second, to move from broad patterns to specific practices, we complement the large-N analysis with case studies of three authoritarian states: China, Russia, and Iran. These cases allow us to investigate more closely the mechanisms through which autocratic regimes manage university life and mobilize support on campuses. We selected them based on residual analysis of our statistical models, identifying countries in which the presence of universities accounts for the largest unexplained share of pro-government mobilization (Gerring 2017; Seawright and Gerring 2022). This makes them well-suited to examining how autocratic governments seek to use higher-education

institutions to facilitate state-led mobilization. Despite their differences in ideology, history, and regime type, all three countries adopt similar strategies: forming or co-opting regime-aligned student organizations, implementing hierarchical surveillance, and offering privileged career pathways that link educated youth to the state.

Theorizing universities as infrastructures of mobilization complements common understandings of both higher education and authoritarianism (Lerch, Bromley, and Meyer 2022; Lerch, Frank, and Schofer 2024; Schofer, Lerch, and Meyer 2022). Institutions traditionally known for encouraging civic engagement and dissent (van Dyke 2003; Polletta 1999; Snow and Soule 2009; Soule 1997; Van Dyke 1998) can also be targeted by autocratic regimes as channels for cultivating political support. Our analysis focuses on this latter dynamic, showing how campuses provide organizational and symbolic resources that states can harness to promote pro-government mobilization.

Universities as Engines of Civic and Democratic Mobilization

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a rapid expansion of mass education, marked by unprecedented investment in higher education. Global college enrollment rose sharply, particularly in the industrialized North, increasing from roughly 20 students per 10,000 people in 1950 to 160 per 10,000 in 2000 (Schofer and Meyer 2005). As universities have grown in size and reach, scholars have increasingly examined the link between education and political engagement (Acemoglu et al. 2005; Perrin and Gillis 2019).

Across disciplines, research consistently links education to civic and political participation. Schooling is understood to cultivate the cognitive skills, sense of efficacy, and normative commitments essential for democratic engagement. Citizens with higher levels of education tend to demonstrate stronger critical reasoning, greater political awareness, and deeper attachment to

democratic norms and collective action (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Willeck and Mendelberg 2022). Modernization theory also suggests that education raises aspirations for political inclusion and equips individuals with the skills necessary to organize and engage in collective actions (Glover et al. 2021; Madoda et al. 2024). Cross-national (Castelló-Climent 2008; Hoskins, Janmaat, and Villalba 2012) and case studies (Janmaat 2018; Janmaat and Piattoeva 2007; Scott 2022) collectively confirm that higher education fosters civic-minded individuals and reinforces democratic participation.

While education generally promotes civic participation, universities stand out as its key political arena. As a core element of the “liberal” view of education, universities are praised not only for fostering scientific and economic advancements but also for their historical role in nurturing political engagement (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Valero and Van Reenen 2019). Students are often portrayed as “agents of change” and universities as the “most important source of dissidents” (Gould 1995:19). In the United States, for example, students were central to major 20th-century movements, including the civil rights sit-ins (Andrews and Biggs 2016), the Freedom Summer campaign (McAdam 1986), the Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley (Draper 1965), and the anti-Vietnam War and women’s rights movements (Buechler 1990). This legacy of activism continues today, with student involvement in movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the DREAMer movement, and #BlackLivesMatter (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017). This dynamic extends beyond North America, where student protests act as catalysts for political change across various political and regional contexts, including China (Perry and Xiaojun 2020), Latin America (Bidegain and Von Bülow 2021), former Soviet countries (Murtazashvili 2012; Schatz and Maltseva 2012), and Africa (Rukato 2020).

The long history of campus activism shows how university environments promote collective action through social, organizational, and cultural features. Campuses create dense informal networks—built through peer interactions, friendships, residence halls, and classroom ties—that

spread information, organize protests, and maintain collective identities (Staniland 2014; Wickens 2008). These networks support the diffusion of tactics (Diani and McAdam 2003; Kitts 2000; Wang and Soule 2016), foster coalition building across groups (van Dyke 2003; Enriquez 2014), and sustain engagement beyond campus boundaries (Hadden and Tarrow 2008; Meyer and Whittier 1994). In this way, students often act as “bridge actors,” linking campus debates to broader mobilization and extending the reach of collective action (Kim and Pfaff 2012).

Complementing these informal ties, universities also provide formal organizational structures such as student associations, leadership pathways, and established coordination mechanisms. These institutions furnish essential resources for recruitment, strategic planning, and continuity (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008; Van Dyke 1998), transforming episodic demonstrations into durable movements (Davis et al. 2005; Ganz 2009; McCarthy 2013; Snow and Soule 2009; Walker and Martin 2018). Campus architecture, including quads, plazas, and other communal spaces, further reinforces both networks and organizations, making universities “ecologically beneficial for recruitment, mobilization, and coalition building” (Earl et al. 2017; Zhao 2001).

Finally, universities serve as hubs of political socialization, exposing students to diverse ideas and deliberative practices. Immersion in these environments often fosters intellectuals capable of critiquing and challenging those in power (Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Inglehart and Welzel 2005), voicing grievances, and organizing collective action (Dahlum and Wig 2017, 2020). These factors are further strengthened by students’ youth, mobility, and independence, which increase their openness to activism and make campuses ideal for ongoing political engagement (Briggs 2017; Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011; Goldstone 2002; Munson 2010).

Building upon this scholarship, cross-national research consistently portrays universities as engines of dissent and democratic mobilization (Bessant, Mesinas, and Pickard 2021; Dahlum and

Wig 2017, 2020). Yet this liberal narrative captures only part of their political role. Because universities concentrate educated elites, material resources, and dense organizations, they also attract regimes intent on containing or redirecting mobilization. To neutralize the threat of autonomous student activism, authoritarian governments tend to rely on both coercion and co-optation, silencing protests while steering student groups toward state-led mobilization. How do autocratic regimes cultivate pro-government mobilization within universities—spaces historically known for generating dissent?

Universities as Infrastructures of Authoritarian Mobilization

Scholars have long debated the key factors behind the resilience and longevity of authoritarian regimes. Existing literature points to institutional design (Gandhi 2008), controlled elections (Schedler 2013), coercion and repression (Bellin 2004), regime origins (Levitsky and Way 2022; Slater 2010), historical origins (Slater and Wong 2022), oil revenues (Ross 2012), and international alignments (Levitsky and Way 2010). Complementing these explanations, sociological approaches emphasize *infrastructural power*—the state’s capacity to penetrate and organize civil society rather than merely repress it (Klein and Lee 2018; Mann 1984). From this perspective, durable authoritarianism depends not only on silencing opposition but also on actively mobilizing citizens to reproduce regime legitimacy.

Contemporary autocracies increasingly rely on this dual strategy. Earlier scholarship often described authoritarian rule as primarily demobilizing (Linz 2000), but since the post–Cold War era, analysts have observed a shift toward state-led mobilization as a central tool of governance. These campaigns, “actively promoted, overtly or covertly, by elements of the state itself” (Perry and Wolf 2024), are designed to signal unity, display popular consent, and preempt opposition (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020). Hellmeier and Bernhard (2023) substantiate the effectiveness of these strategies by

showing that higher levels of state-sponsored mobilization are associated with a lower probability of democratic transitions from authoritarianism.

Beyond this overall effect, pro-government mobilization serves further regime functions such as countering opposition protests (Handlin 2016), advancing developmental projects (Palmer and Ning 2020), reinforcing foreign policy strategies (Weiss 2013), signaling territorial interests (Greene and Robertson 2020), suppressing democratic movements in neighboring states (Yuen 2021) and managing potential domestic backlash during periods of war and conflict (Paula and Scholz 2025). Thus, these patterns show that autocratic regimes survive not only through repression but also through the routinization of participation.

Our contribution is to show that universities form a central infrastructure for the project of orchestrated participation. Following Gramsci (1971), civil society can become an extension of the state's hegemonic apparatus rather than its antagonist. Education, because it links ideology, elite formation, and material rewards, provides fertile ground for channeling student activity into state-led projects. Building on Klein and Lee's (2019) view of the bidirectional relationship between state and civil society, we argue that autocratic governments use universities to encourage participation and discipline emerging elites. These efforts do not necessarily eliminate dissent, but they allow regimes to embed mobilizational practices within academic spaces and to cultivate segments of politically reliable students alongside ongoing contestation.

Our argument also extends insights from the resource mobilization tradition in social movement theory. Classic work emphasizes that movements emerge not simply from shared grievances but from the capacity to mobilize resources, including organizational networks, leadership, and material support (Andrews and Biggs 2016; Ganz 2009; Polletta 1999; Walker and Martin 2018). Within this framework, universities have long served as hubs of resources for opposition movements by providing dense social ties, skilled organizers, and logistical infrastructure

(Diani and McAdam 2003; Kitts 2000).

We argue that authoritarian regimes have adapted the resource mobilization approach to use campuses as venues for pro-regime mobilization, alongside existing sites of contention. Through mechanisms of institutional capture and incentive alignment, states *appropriate* the organizational and material capacities that often sustain contentious politics toward regime-supportive ends. In this way, our framework extends resource mobilization theory beyond its conventional focus on nonstate actors, positioning the state as a resourceful mobilizer, capable of generating, allocating, and constraining resources to secure participation and manufacture consent. Under authoritarian rule, the state emerges not as an external constraint or passive backdrop but as the principal entrepreneur of mobilization, actively orchestrating the organizational foundations of collective action (Ekiert et al. 2020). Accordingly, we argue that this process unfolds through two primary mechanisms.

Institutional Control

A central pathway through which autocratic regimes promote pro-government support on campuses is administrative takeover. In many autocracies, universities were established or reorganized as elite-training institutions tied to state-building projects, which gave regimes structural leverage over campus governance (Connelly and Grüttner 2005). Building on this foundation, autocratic governments appoint loyal rectors and deans, restructure governance, and regulate curricula, hiring, and campus programming to secure ideological alignment (Cantoni et al. 2017; Yan 2014). Administrative control can generate quiescence by producing a depoliticized and closely monitored environment (Paglayan 2022), yet it becomes mobilizationally significant when it shapes the organizational infrastructure available to student groups.

University administrations handle budgets, register student organizations, assign event spaces, and oversee campus communication channels, thereby significantly influencing which groups

can establish an institutional presence (Yan 2014). In practice, oppositional associations are often denied recognition, funding, or facilities, while regime-aligned groups gain preferential access to organizational resources. This selective allocation of infrastructure not only suppresses independent activism by depriving dissenting students of the material means to mobilize but also creates conditions that allow pro-regime organizations to expand and thrive.

Building on this administrative foundation, autocracies cultivate pro-regime student organizations through three interconnected strategies. First, they draw on longstanding traditions of youth wings, patriotic unions, and mass organizations that historically linked universities to state political projects, providing ready-made templates and legitimacy for loyalist groups (Lee 2020). Second, they co-opt existing student movements, redirecting their networks, leadership, and symbolic capital toward regime-aligned goals (Hemment 2020). Third, when these resources prove insufficient or oppositional, regimes establish new associations explicitly designed for ideological training, peer monitoring, and mobilization (Tsimonis 2018).

These three strategies parallel the organizational repertoires used by anti-regime activists under autocratic rule. Dissidents frequently appropriate existing structures, such as trade unions, professional associations, and places of worship, seeking to transform them into vehicles for civic activism. At other times, they carve out semi-autonomous spaces within co-opted institutions, subverting and repurposing them against the regime. When neither of these tactics proves viable, they establish new organizations from scratch to sustain mobilization and collective identity. In this way, both state-led and oppositional actors draw on analogous organizational logics, each seeking to exploit, reconfigure, or construct institutional spaces for political action under constraint (Bishara 2020; Fishman 1990; Kadivar 2022; Pinckney, Butcher, and Braithwaite 2022; Tilly and Tarrow 2015).

These organizations convert campus social capital into political capital for the state. They

channel student energy into regime-sanctioned causes, monitor sentiment, and cultivate loyal cadres. As “boundary organizations,” they blur the distinction between autonomous student life and state political machinery, embedding regime influence within everyday campus routines (Felde 2025; Wang and Soule 2016). Their privileged access to budgets, facilities, and official recognition stabilizes them as reliable mobilizing partners while disadvantaging oppositional groups. Many also serve as micro-surveillance and ideological-production nodes, advancing narratives of national duty, patriotism, and service (Jiang 2021; Sanina 2018). For example, in Belarus, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) operates on university campuses to mobilize pro-regime student support while actively discouraging and penalizing opposition activities (Nizhnikau and Silvan 2022). Similarly, the Turkish government has asserted control over higher education by establishing state-loyal institutions to generate grassroots support, disseminate official ideology, and train future cadres for the ruling AKP Party (Alemdaroğlu 2022). Through these forms of “organized spontaneity,” autocratic states aim to shape campus life into a setting for surveillance, ideological reinforcement, and mobilizational activity.

Incentive Alignment

Autocratic regimes encourage student involvement by linking participation in government-approved activities to tangible rewards and career advantages. Incentives such as scholarships, stipends, leadership initiatives, and preferential access to public-sector jobs turn support for pro-regime mobilization into a rational choice, both politically and economically (Albertus 2015; Ansell and Samuels 2014). In Kazakhstan, for example, state-funded programs and scholarships channel participants directly into government service (Hanson and Sokhey 2021), linking educational advancement to political loyalty.

These incentives function as early recruitment filters, identifying loyal students and

channeling them into bureaucratic and ideological pipelines. In many autocracies, public-sector employment remains one of the main routes to middle-class stability (Croke et al. 2016; Onsman and Cameron 2014), which makes participation in regime-aligned activities a pathway to secure futures. Existing studies on Russia and other former Soviet states show that public-sector employees, because of their dependence on the state, are generally less critical, less willing to challenge the government, and less likely to join protests (Rosenfeld 2017, 2020).

The benefits of participation also generate selective mobility. Students active in state-aligned organizations gain privileged access to internships, employment, housing, and scholarships (Liu 2024), while those who remain unaffiliated encounter subtle pressures to conform. These dynamics create a campus environment in which political loyalty carries instrumental value, shaping cohorts whose prospects and identities are closely tied to state power. As a result, universities become embedded within the state's mobilizational apparatus, serving as sites where infrastructural power is enacted. Campuses provide not only ideologically reliable recruits but also organizational density, communication channels, and symbolic prestige. In this sense, universities function not simply as controlled institutions but as productive infrastructures that contribute to legitimacy and help sustain authoritarian stability.

Scholars have recently examined the relationship between education and pro-government mobilization through both cross-national and subnational analyses. Tetteh and Edgell (2024), in their study of autocratic regimes from 1950 to 2019, find that widespread schooling correlates positively with support for authoritarian governments. We build on this research by specifically examining how universities support the state-led mobilizations. Subnational evidence from Iran further supports this emerging pattern: districts with larger student populations show significantly higher rates of pro-government mobilization (Khani and Kadivar 2024). Building on this finding, our study investigates whether this relationship holds at the cross-national level. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Locations with more universities tend to have a higher likelihood of state-led mobilizations.

Data and Design

Descriptive Evidence

We begin our empirical analysis by presenting descriptive evidence on patterns of pro-regime mobilization across autocratic regimes. This exploratory phase shows temporal trends in the frequency and composition of mobilization events. To conduct a systematic analysis, we draw on the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database (MMAD), which provides detailed subnational data on both pro- and anti-regime mobilization in autocratic contexts between 2003 and 2019. The latest version (version 4) covers pro-government mobilization across 93 autocratic countries during this period. Importantly, MMAD is the only dataset that systematically includes georeferenced records of pro-government events in autocratic regimes, making it the most comprehensive resource for studying authoritarian mobilization (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020; Weidmann and Rød 2019).

Our analytical approach follows a structured sequence. First, we identified events in which students were explicitly noted as participants. Next, we categorized each event using Ekiert et al.'s (2020) typology, which includes six mobilization types: defensive/reactive, spoiler/proactive, control enhancement, signaling, infrastructural development, and geostrategic advancement³. Using MMAD event IDs, we distinguished student-participatory events from those without student involvement.

³ Ekiert et al (2020) identify six distinct forms of state-led mobilization in autocratic contexts, each serving a specific strategic function. *Defensive mobilization* is reactive in nature, deployed to counter opposition protests and reinforce regime legitimacy and public support. In contrast, *spoiler mobilization* is a proactive strategy aimed at intimidating opposition forces and preempting the transnational diffusion of dissent. *Control enhancement mobilization* seeks to reinforce central authority over local actors and manage intra-regime factionalism. *Signaling mobilization* allows regimes to express disapproval of political developments abroad, often advancing broader diplomatic or ideological agendas. *Infrastructural development mobilization* involves campaign-style initiatives to fulfill development objectives that surpass the reach of routine bureaucratic implementation. Finally, *geostrategic mobilization* extends beyond national borders to assert territorial claims, undermine adversaries, and advance overarching strategic interests on the global stage.

Lastly, we analyzed temporal variation in mobilization frequency across weekdays and weekends,⁴ based on the MMAD event date.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of pro-government mobilization by mobilization type and weekday. The left panel shows that student involvement is predominantly concentrated in proactive mobilization events (approximately 53%). This suggests that universities function as strategic hubs for preemptive regime action to neutralize dissent before it materializes. In contrast, events without student participation exhibit a more diverse distribution: 33% proactive, 28% reactive, and 22% local/regional, suggesting that regimes rely on a broader array of mobilization strategies beyond university contexts, potentially leveraging alternative institutional platforms.

The right panel displays the distribution of pro-government mobilization events on weekdays. Student-involved mobilization peaks midweek, particularly on Tuesdays and Wednesdays (17–18%), aligning closely with academic calendars and highlighting the logistical utility of campus infrastructure, such as student organizations. By contrast, non-student mobilization peaks on Saturdays (19–20%) and is more evenly distributed throughout the week, suggesting a different mobilization logic for engaging broader, non-campus-based segments of society.

To further investigate the role of universities in pro-government mobilization, we assess whether their effects vary across different subtypes of authoritarian regimes. We interact our grid-cell-level measure of university presence with a country-level regime classification derived from Geddes et al. (2014), as updated by Li and Wright (2023). Our models show that personalist regimes have the highest positive correlation between university presence and pro-government mobilization. This is followed by revolutionary, militaristic party-based regimes, while monarchies are the weakest link. For a visual overview of the model coefficients, see Figure A1 in the Appendix.

⁴ We also control for weekend effects, particularly in countries such as Iran and other Muslim-majority nations where weekends may differ from the standard Saturday-Sunday pattern.

Research Design

To empirically test our hypothesis, we conduct a cross-national analysis of 93 autocratic regimes from 2003 to 2019 using two designs: one at the grid-cell level and another at the country level. Our primary methodological approach is conducted at the grid-cell level, and we also present secondary-level analysis at the country level to ensure consistency of our results.

For our primary analysis, we use the PRIO-GRID data structure, which divides the world's terrestrial areas into 50×50 km quadratic grid cells. This method has gained increasing recognition among scholars studying contentious politics, particularly in the study of anti-government protests (Basedau and Roy 2020; Dahlum and Wig 2020; Dorward and Fox 2022; Koren, Bagozzi, and Benson 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to apply this data structure to instances of pro-government mobilization.

Each grid cell in the PRIO-GRID framework is uniquely assigned to a single country for every calendar year, forming a two-dimensional spatial matrix of non-overlapping units (Figure 2 illustrates the PRIO-GRID data structure). This framework ensures consistency across both space and time, as cell boundaries remain fixed and uniform in size regardless of geopolitical changes (Tollefsen, Strand, and Buhaug 2012; Vestby et al. 2022). Such spatial stability enables robust, comparable analyses of pro-government mobilization across areas with varying university densities.

For the secondary design, we shift toward a cross-national design, aggregating variables at the country level to provide a complementary analytical framework that captures broader national patterns of pro-government mobilization. This country-level approach enables us to examine how aggregate university density across national territories correlates with the overall frequency of pro-government events, while controlling for country-specific institutional, economic, and political characteristics that may influence mobilization dynamics. This dual-level analytical strategy enhances the external validity of our results, providing confidence that the relationship between university

presence and pro-government mobilization is robust across different units of analysis and spatial aggregations.

We complement our quantitative analysis with qualitative case studies of China, Russia, and Iran to show the mechanisms linking universities and pro-government mobilization, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. For China and Russia, our analysis relies primarily on secondary literature, while for Iran, we include original primary data, including firsthand evidence from local sources and our own experiences as university students in Iran. This mixed-methods approach allows us to both identify broad empirical patterns and uncover the concrete institutional and social processes through which autocratic regimes mobilize support on university campuses.

Dependent Variable

To capture instances of pro-government mobilization across autocratic regimes at the grid level, we used georeferenced event data from the MMAD. To integrate the MMAD data with our grid-cell framework, we used the PRIO-GRID package in R (Tollefsen et al. 2012) to assign and map each pro-government mobilization event to its corresponding grid cell. This mapping ensured precise spatial alignment with the PRIO-GRID structure. After linking the events to their respective grid cells, we aggregated the yearly counts of pro-government mobilizations for each cell. To address potential skewness and capture the temporal dynamics of the events, we applied a log transformation and introduced a one-year lag ($t-1$). The transformed values were then used as the dependent variable in our models.

For our country-level analysis, we aggregated pro-government mobilization events from MMAD by country to generate annual counts of pro-government activities. To ensure methodological consistency with our grid-cell approach, we applied the same log transformation to address the right skew in event counts. We also included a one-year temporal lag ($t-1$) to account for potential delayed effects of university presence on mobilization patterns.

Independent Variables

Universities

To operationalize our key independent variable of interest, the number of universities in authoritarian countries, we draw on data from www.4ICU.org. This dataset catalogs over 13,800 officially recognized universities and colleges across more than 200 countries. This global directory provides detailed institutional attributes, including geographic location, founding year, and accreditation status, enabling precise spatial mapping of university presence across our PRIO-GRID cells. To ensure comprehensive coverage of university data, we employed web scraping to systematically collect information for each university.

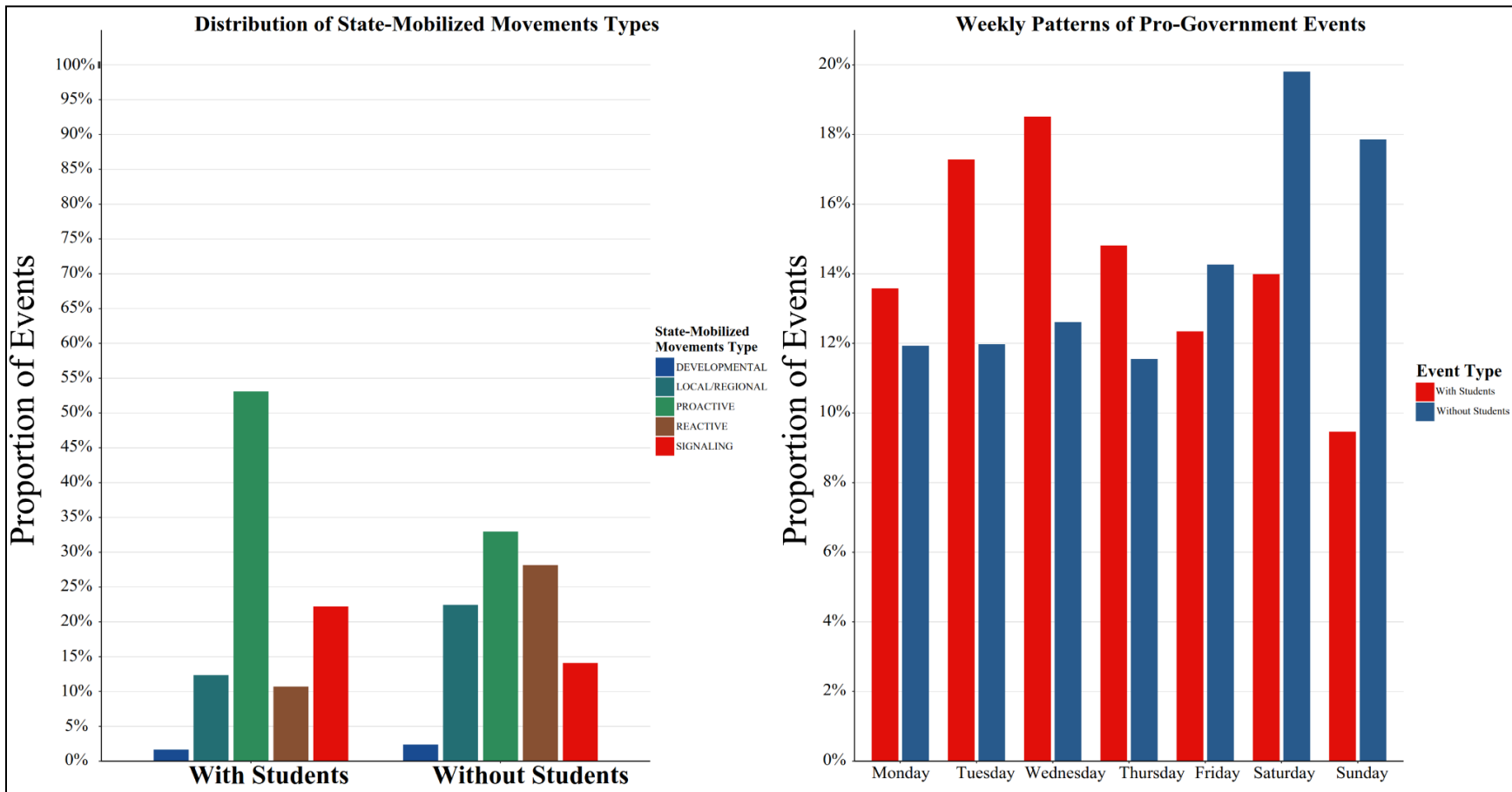


Figure 1 shows the distribution of five types of state-mobilized movements (SMMs), disaggregated by whether events involved student participation, expressed as a proportion of total events. The left panel shows the relative prevalence of these movement types across events with and without student involvement, highlighting distinct patterns in the deployment of students in state-led mobilization efforts. Meanwhile, the right panel depicts the weekly temporal distribution of pro-government events, showing their occurrence from Monday to Sunday.

For the grid-cell analysis, we geolocated each university using the Python package *geopy* (Esmukov 2022) to obtain latitude and longitude coordinates. These coordinates were then matched to their respective 50×50 km PRIO-GRID cells, enabling accurate integration into our analytical framework. To account for skewness in the distribution of universities across cells, we applied a logarithmic transformation to the counts of universities per cell. This transformed value serves as the primary independent variable in our statistical models (see Figure 3 for global distribution across autocratic regimes).

For our country-level analysis, we aggregated all geolocated universities within each country to generate counts of university presence. To ensure methodological consistency with our grid-cell approach, we applied the same logarithmic transformation to address cross-national variation and facilitate meaningful comparison.

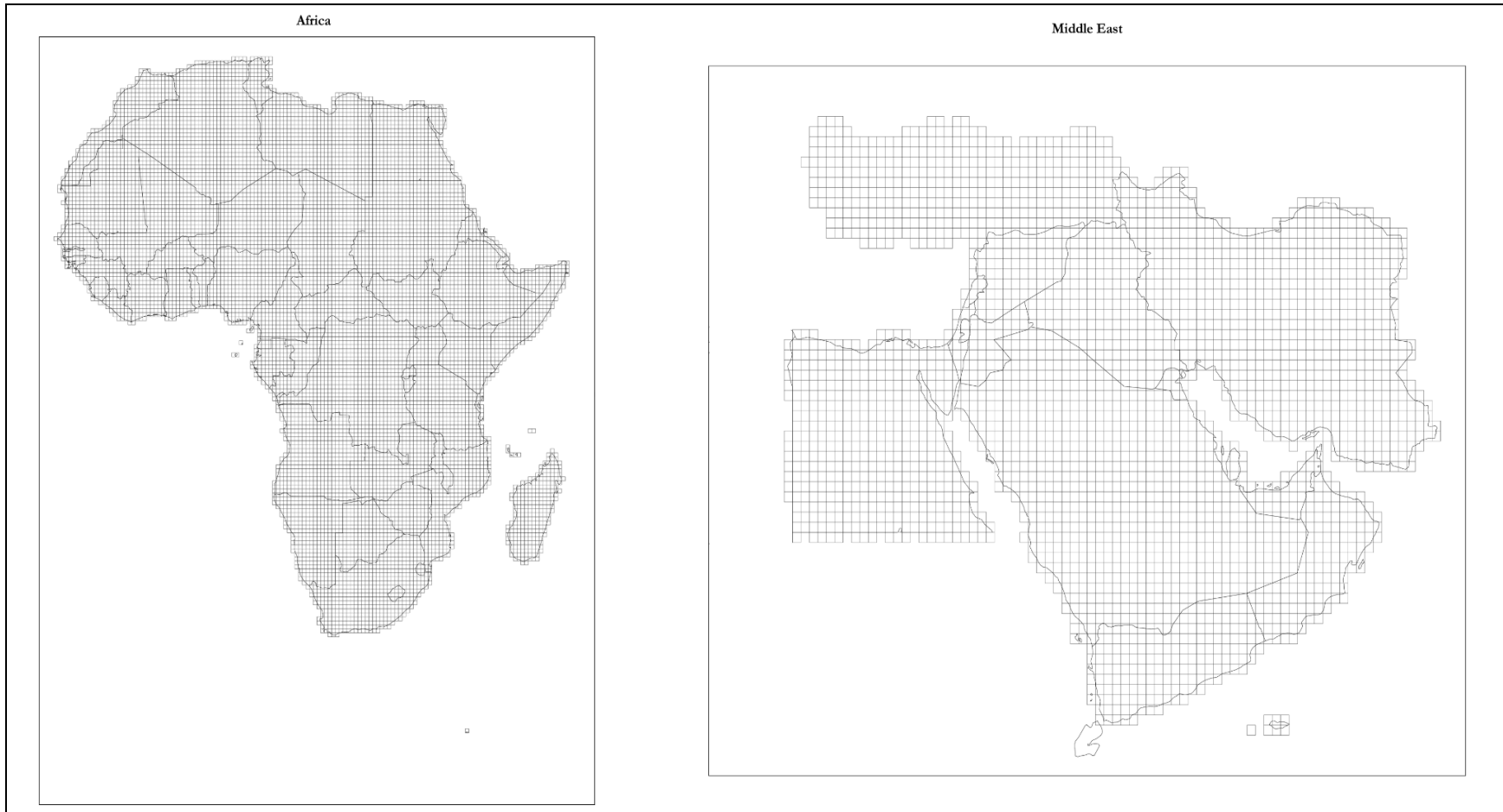


Figure 2 shows the PRIO-GRID data structure for Africa (left panel) and the Middle East (right panel). PRIO-GRID divides terrestrial areas into 50×50 km quadratic grid cells. Each map shows the grid-cell structure overlaid on continental outlines, with country borders.

Control Variables

We supplemented our grid-cell analysis with data on anti-government protests from the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Dataset (MMAD). Applying the same spatial methodology used for pro-government mobilization, we georeferenced protest events and mapped them to PRIO-GRID cells. We then included the log-transformed count of anti-government protests as a control variable to account for potential confounding effects originating from oppositional mobilization.

To further mitigate concerns about omitted variable bias, we introduced a set of grid-level control variables capturing key economic and demographic characteristics: Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, life expectancy at birth, average infant mortality, night-time luminosity, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) (Nordhaus 2006). As Barrett (2013) argues, economic factors can significantly impact the likelihood of mobilization.

In addition to economic indicators, we control for grid-level population (log-transformed), as larger and more densely populated areas are more conducive to nonviolent mobilization (Butcher and Svensson 2016). We also account for the largest excluded group within a grid, capturing the mobilization potential of politically marginalized communities (Gleditsch et al. 2021). Given the urban concentration of collective action and the typical location of universities in urban environments, we incorporate controls for urban presence travel time (in minutes) to the nearest urban center.

To address spatial dependencies and resource-based drivers of mobilization, we include additional static covariates: distance to the capital and distance to the nearest border (Tollefsen et al. 2012). These measures account for geographic and extractive factors that may influence protest dynamics.

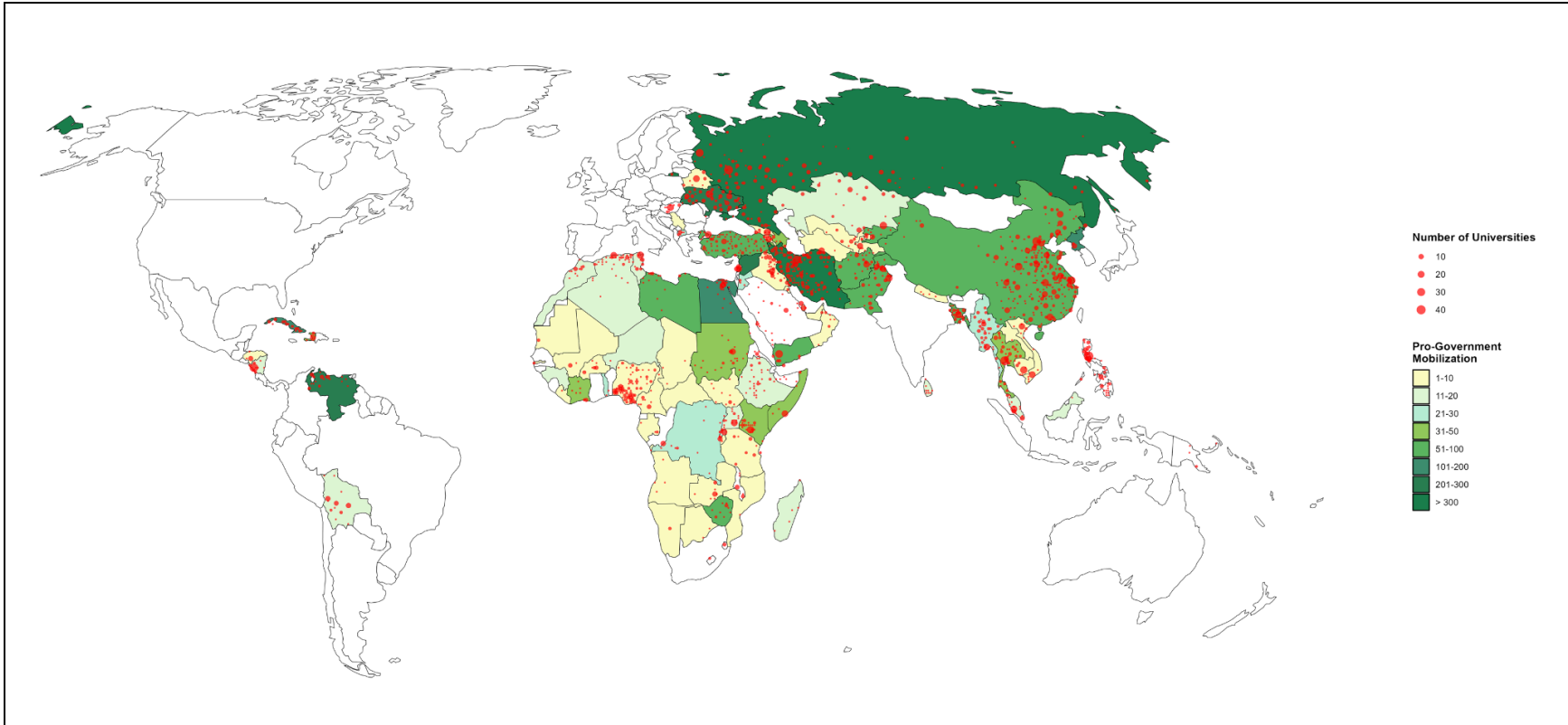


Figure 3 shows the global distribution of universities and pro-government mobilization levels across countries from 2003 to 2019. Red dots of varying sizes represent the number of universities. At the same time, the intensity of pro-government mobilization is depicted through a color gradient from light yellow (low mobilization) to dark green (high mobilization), showing variations in educational institutions and political engagement across different regions.

Finally, to capture spatial and temporal dependencies in mobilization patterns, we introduce a temporal lag for anti-government protests from the previous year ($t-1$). This approach allows us to capture potential spillover effects and the temporal dynamics that may influence the occurrence of pro-government mobilization events. Moreover, we include spatial lags for pro-government mobilization and anti-government protest events to construct a weighted measure of ongoing collective action in neighboring places (Weidmann and Ward 2010).

To calculate the spatial lags, we used a k-nearest neighbor approach based on the geographical coordinates of universities. We first identified which universities were closest to each other using their longitude and latitude coordinates. This proximity information was then transformed into a standardized weight matrix, in which the influence of neighboring universities was normalized so that the sum of weights at each location equals 1. This standardization ensures the spatial lag represents a weighted average of events in neighboring universities. We calculated weighted averages of pro-government and anti-government mobilization occurring at nearby universities using these spatial weights (Cook, Hays, and Jr. 2023). This method captures the geographic clustering of events and potential diffusion patterns between spatially proximate campuses, allowing us to account for regional spillover effects in our analysis. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables at the grid-cell level.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables (Grid-cell level)

Variable	Mean	SD	SD _w	SD _b	Min	Max	P5	P95	N	Grid Cells
Pro-government mobilization	0.004	0.180	0.150	0.099	0.000	34.000	0.000	0.000	579,785	34,105
Anti-government protest	0.032	0.892	0.694	0.561	0.000	198.000	0.000	0.000	579,785	34,105
Pro-government mobilization Spatial Lag	0.004	0.180	0.149	0.100	0.000	34.000	0.000	0.000	579,785	34,105
Anti-government Spatial Lag	0.033	0.909	0.707	0.571	0.000	198.000	0.000	0.000	579,785	34,105
Universities	0.099	0.955	0.111	0.948	0.000	46.000	0.000	0.000	579,785	34,105
Tertiary gross enrollment ratio	46.146	30.115	7.992	29.020	0.436	115.042	3.193	84.584	528,887	32,787
Expected Years of Schooling (Ages 6+)	12.161	3.149	0.907	3.054	0.340	18.850	5.780	15.420	484,209	30,609
Mean Years of Schooling (Ages 25+)	8.208	3.448	0.476	3.419	0.300	15.450	1.810	11.860	484,209	30,609
Gross National Income per capita	15.167	12.152	2.909	11.786	0.420	114.214	1.000	38.648	484,209	30,609
Gross Cell Product (log)	0.087	0.222	0.003	0.252	0.000	3.547	0.000	0.454	229,498	31,978
Night Lights	0.062	0.044	0.014	0.042	0.032	0.957	0.033	0.123	422,531	33,634
Cell Population (log)	8.519	3.156	0.068	3.155	0.000	16.800	3.328	13.087	579,683	34,099
Excluded Groups (discriminated or powerless)	0.412	0.575	0.127	0.584	0.000	6.000	0.000	1.000	397,126	29,420
Average Infant Mortality	549.291	437.047	0.000	418.429	0.000	2,464.000	148.007	1,395.000	468,657	33,935
Urban Area	0.161	0.864	0.045	0.877	0.000	56.540	0.000	0.760	455,649	32,851
Life Expectancy at Birth	66.698	6.509	2.541	6.024	40.210	86.330	52.780	75.160	484,209	30,609
Mountainous Terrain	0.250	0.365	0.000	0.374	0.000	1.000	0.000	1.000	462,177	33,395
Distance to Border	215.672	229.553	9.426	229.362	0.003	1,204.635	6.164	717.454	579,785	34,105
Distance to Capital	1,775.246	1,762.316	26.053	1,762.148	3.703	7,117.111	151.084	5,643.667	579,785	34,105
Travel Time to Major City	1,074.368	1,490.865	0.000	1,488.165	9.014	30,032.620	111.232	3,519.179	401,964	33,656
Longitude	64.292	52.570	0.000	52.570	-179.750	179.750	-7.250	147.250	579,785	34,105
Latitude	35.620	25.883	0.000	25.883	-30.250	77.750	-13.750	70.250	579,785	34,105

Notes: SD = Standard Deviation; SD_w = Within-Grid-Cell Standard Deviation; SD_b = Between-Grid-Cell Standard Deviation; Min = Minimum; Max = Maximum; P5 = 5th percentile; P95 = 95th percentile. N represents total grid-cell-year observations.

For our country-level analysis, we included control variables capturing macroeconomic, demographic, and geopolitical factors to address omitted-variable bias. Specifically, we included GDP per capita and population size to reflect broader economic conditions, which may shape mobilization dynamics (McCulloch et al. 2021). We also accounted for the urban population share, given the urban concentration of universities. Data for these variables were sourced from the World Development Indicators (WDI) (World Bank 2020). Finally, we included oil rents as a percentage of GDP, as measured by the World Bank (World Bank 2020), to capture resource wealth. The existing literature suggests that resource wealth can enable autocrats to increase public employment (Filatova et al. 2021), offer citizens incentives (Magaloni 2006), and invest in infrastructure (Karl 2004), each of which may affect mobilization. To address skewness and temporal dependencies, we applied a log transformation and a lagged ($t-1$) transformation to all relevant variables, ensuring methodological alignment with our grid-cell approach. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the country-level variables.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables (Country level)

Variable	Mean	SD	SD _w	SD _b	Min	Max	N	Countries
Pro-government mobilization	2.132	8.622	7.456	4.353	0.000	191.000	1,581	93
Anti-government protest	16.630	44.989	35.804	27.381	0.000	507.000	1,581	93
Universities	36.586	85.898	5.973	86.128	0.000	724.000	1,581	93
Tertiary Gross Enrollment Ratio (%)	23.628	21.742	7.237	21.123	0.436	115.042	1,301	84
GDP Per Capita	11,376	18,705	4,497	18,207	436	156,000	1,399	88
Oil Rent as % of GDP	7.372	13.538	4.794	12.791	0.000	66.685	1,530	92
Population	4.16×10^7	1.43×10^8	5.85×10^6	1.43×10^8	7.49×10^5	1.41×10^9	1,547	92
Urban Population (%)	49.473	22.662	2.525	22.650	8.908	100.000	1,547	92

Regression Models and Results

Methods

Following our research design, we used two primary modeling strategies: one at the grid-cell level and one at the country level. First, we conduct linear regression analyses to compare variations in pro-government mobilization across grid-cells with varying levels of university presence.

Accordingly, we run fixed-effects models at the grid-cell level, incorporating nonparametric time trends within countries. This specification allows us to account for country-specific temporal dynamics while minimizing potential bias from unobserved heterogeneity (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Huntington-Klein 2022). We also include year dummy variables in all our regression models to address the limitations of fixed effects models, which focus exclusively on within-country variation.

Second, we also estimated country-level linear regression models with fixed effects to complement our grid-cell results. This approach enables us to assess whether the subnational patterns persist at the national level. To maintain methodological consistency, we included year dummies and applied logarithmic transformations and a one-year lag ($t-1$) to all key variables.

Results

Table 3 displays results from our grid-cell models. Across all eight models, the coefficient for university is consistently positive and statistically significant, showing a robust association between the presence of universities and pro-government mobilization in autocratic regimes. In the baseline model (Model 1), a one standard deviation increase in universities is associated with a 0.24 standard deviation increase in pro-government mobilization, representing approximately 24% of the typical variation in pro-government mobilization across grid cells. In this context, the difference between a grid cell with no universities and one with a single university represents a meaningful shift in observed pro-government mobilization, with university-containing cells exhibiting higher mobilization levels than those in cells without universities. The pattern of association remains consistent across different model specifications, including baseline models (Models 1–3), models with extensive controls (Models 4–6), and alternative models using various clustering methods (Models 7–8).

The progressive introduction of control variables from Models 1 through 6 shows the stability of this association. Models 2 and 3 address temporal and spatial dependence by including lagged and spatial variables. Even with these additions, the university coefficient remains significant, though the standardized effect decreases to 0.07 standard deviations, approximately 7% of the typical variation in the outcome variable, as we account for prior mobilization patterns. This reduction reflects the importance of controlling for temporal dependencies rather than any weakness in the underlying association. Models 4–6 build on this foundation with an extensive set of socioeconomic controls, including cell population, GDP per capita, tertiary enrollment rates, life expectancy, infant mortality, urbanization, infrastructure, ethnic composition, and economic development. The standardized effect increases to 0.12-0.14 standard deviations (representing 12-14% of typical outcome variation) once we control for these factors, suggesting that the

university-mobilization association persists independent of general development levels.

In our most saturated specification (Model 6), a one-standard-deviation increase in universities corresponds to a 0.14-standard-deviation increase in pro-government mobilization, with university presence associated with mobilization levels that increase by approximately 14% of the outcome's typical variation. This stability in effect size across specifications highlights the consistency of the university-mobilization relationship.

Beyond the university variable, other patterns in the models support our theoretical framework. The lagged anti-government mobilization variable consistently shows a positive and significant association with pro-government mobilization. The coefficients range from 0.030 to 0.132 across specifications, showing that areas experiencing anti-government activity in the previous year also tend to experience an increase in pro-government mobilization in the subsequent year. Furthermore, the positive and significant pro-government spatial lag in most models shows that these events cluster geographically.

Models 7 and 8 further test the robustness of our results under different analytical assumptions. These models shift from grid-cell to country-level clustering for standard errors, accounting for the possibility that unobserved national-level factors may correlate with mobilization patterns across the entire country. The university coefficient remains nearly identical (0.025 in both models, representing a 0.12 standard deviation effect, approximately 12% of typical outcome variation) and highly significant, confirming the consistency of this association. This shows that the relationship is not an artifact of a specific statistical choice but a stable pattern that persists across different modeling approaches. Even after accounting for geographic accessibility and remoteness, which are themselves correlated with mobilization patterns, the university association remains substantively meaningful (approximately 12% of typical outcome variation) and statistically robust.

Table 3. Correlates of Pro-government Mobilization (Grid-cell level)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
	<i>Pro-government mobilization (log)</i>							
Universities (log)	0.0500*** (0.0103)	0.0195*** (0.0032)	0.0454*** (0.0107)	0.0245*** (0.0043)	0.0280*** (0.0084)	0.0280*** (0.0084)	0.0254*** (0.0061)	0.0253*** (0.0062)
Anti-government (log)		0.1316*** (0.0182)	0.0532*** (0.0076)	0.0963*** (0.0168)	0.0301* (0.0138)	0.0301* (0.0138)	0.0929*** (0.0136)	0.0937*** (0.0135)
Pro-Gov spatial lag		0.0046+ (0.0028)	0.0053+ (0.0032)	0.0216* (0.0092)	0.0215* (0.0087)	0.0215* (0.0087)	0.0297*** (0.0082)	0.0315*** (0.0083)
Anti-government spatial lag		0.0001 (0.0004)	0.0007 (0.0005)	-0.0007 (0.0011)	0.0013 (0.0014)	0.0013 (0.0014)	-0.0009 (0.0018)	-0.0011 (0.0018)
Tertiary gross enrollment ratio (log) (lag)				0.0091 (0.0058)	0.0039 (0.0053)	0.0039 (0.0053)	0.0023+ (0.0013)	0.0010* (0.0005)
Cell population (log) (lag)				-0.0008* (0.0003)	-0.0045 (0.0038)	-0.0045 (0.0038)	-0.0007 (0.0004)	-0.0005+ (0.0003)
Gross National Income per capita (log) (lag)				-0.0016 (0.0021)	-0.0038 (0.0074)	-0.0038 (0.0074)	0.0008 (0.0013)	-0.0010 (0.0007)
Expected years of schooling for children aged 6 (lag)				0.0003 (0.0003)	-0.0004 (0.0005)	-0.0004 (0.0005)	-0.0007* (0.0003)	-0.0003 (0.0002)
Mean years of schooling for population aged 25+ (lag)				0.0013* (0.0006)	-0.0003 (0.0016)	-0.0003 (0.0016)	0.0002 (0.0004)	0.0003 (0.0003)
Life expectancy at birth (lag)				-0.0003*** (0.0001)	-0.0000 (0.0001)	-0.0000 (0.0001)	-0.0002 (0.0001)	0.0000 (0.0001)
Average infant mortality (lag)				-0.0000* (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)
Urban area				0.0065* (0.0026)	0.0191 (0.0163)	0.0191 (0.0163)	0.0066 (0.0041)	0.0061 (0.0039)
Night lights (lag)				0.0569* (0.0287)	0.0165 (0.0951)	0.0165 (0.0951)	0.0595 (0.0686)	0.0723 (0.0696)
Excluded groups (discriminated or powerless) (lag)				-0.0004 (0.0005)	-0.0005 (0.0010)	-0.0005 (0.0010)	-0.0002 (0.0008)	0.0001 (0.0007)
Gross cell product (PPP) (log) (lag)				0.0024 (0.0052)	0.1413 (0.0935)	0.1413 (0.0935)	0.0019 (0.0061)	-0.0034 (0.0067)
Distance to border (log)							0.0001 (0.0003)	0.0004 (0.0004)
Distance to capital (log)							-0.0018* (0.0008)	-0.0013* (0.0006)
The average travel time in minutes to the nearest major city							0.0018** (0.0006)	0.0014** (0.0005)
Mountainous terrain							-0.0003 (0.0013)	0.0002 (0.0012)
Longitude							0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)
Latitude							-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0000 (0.0000)
Constant	-0.0003 (0.0004)	0.1127*** (0.0336)	-0.0011* (0.0004)	0.0247 (0.0152)	0.0315 (0.0366)	0.0315 (0.0366)	0.0111 (0.0123)	-0.0023 (0.0093)
Fixed effects								
Country × year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Lagged Dependent Variable (LDV)		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Grid-cell	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Country (no year-interaction)								✓
Year (no country-interaction)								✓
Covariates								
Time-varying				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Static								✓
Clustering								
Cell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Country							✓	✓
N	580000	546000	546000	162000	162000	162000	162000	162000
Log likelihood	1070000	941000	1010000	257000	277000	277000	254000	253000
R2	0.0472	0.1801	0.0601	0.1850	0.0676	0.0676	0.1494	0.1442

Note: Standard errors clustered on grid-cells (models 1–6,8) and countries (models 7,8). Standard Errors in parentheses. OLS = ordinary least squares.

Results from our country-year level models support and strengthen the findings of our grid-cell analysis. Across all five models presented in Table 4, the coefficient for university presence remains consistently positive and statistically significant, ranging from 0.297 to 1.721. Model 1 establishes the baseline relationship using only year-fixed effects, yielding a coefficient of 0.607 for university presence, which translates to a 0.31 standard deviation increase in pro-government mobilization (approximately 31% of typical outcome variation). Model 2 adds country-fixed effects along with year controls, showing a substantially stronger relationship with a coefficient of 1.721 (a 0.87 standard deviation effect, or roughly 87% of typical variation).

Models 3 through 5 test whether this association persists under more stringent conditions. Model 3 introduces year-fixed effects alongside controls for population, urbanization, GDP, oil rents, and tertiary enrollment rates. The university coefficient decreases to 0.297 (a 0.15 standard deviation, approximately 15% of typical variation) but remains statistically significant. This reduction is expected given the extensive controls, yet its continued significance suggests that universities function as mobilization platforms beyond what general socioeconomic factors would predict.

Model 4 represents our most rigorous specification, combining country-fixed effects with the full control set. Under these conditions, the university coefficient is 1.388 (a 0.71 standard deviation, representing 71% of the typical variation). This specification controls simultaneously for time-invariant country characteristics, temporal trends, and socioeconomic development, yet the strong positive association persists.

Table 4. Correlates of Pro-government Mobilization (Country level)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	<i>Pro-government mobilization (log)</i>				
Universities (log)	0.607*** (0.13)	1.721** (0.57)	0.297* (0.12)	1.388** (0.47)	0.297* (0.12)
Anti-government (log) (lag)			0.278*** (0.03)	0.222*** (0.04)	0.278*** (0.03)
Population (log) (lag)			0.108 (0.11)	-0.960 (1.05)	0.108 (0.11)
Urban Population (%) (lag)			0.011 (0.01)	0.015 (0.06)	0.011 (0.01)
GDP (log) (lag)			-0.533* (0.22)	0.380 (0.43)	-0.533* (0.22)
Oil Rent GDP (log) (lag)			0.038 (0.04)	-0.058 (0.09)	0.038 (0.04)
Tertiary gross enrollment ratio (log) (lag)			0.341* (0.14)	0.517+ (0.30)	0.341* (0.14)
Constant	-4.826*** (0.37)	-7.502*** (1.37)	-2.401 (2.42)	3.943 (16.53)	-2.401 (2.42)
Fixed effects					
Country		✓		✓	
Year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Clustering					
Country	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1581	1581	1203	1203	1203
Log Likelihood	-3708.308	-3416.847	-2697.456	-2560.601	-2697.456
R-squared	0.108	0.035	0.270	0.096	0.270
<i>Note:</i> Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by country + p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001					

Robustness checks

To ensure the robustness of our results, we subject our findings to a series of alternative models and tests. First, we examine the assumption of parallel trends to explore further the association between pro-government mobilization and universities identified in our study models. We investigate potential anticipation effects by regressing our outcome variable on the presence of universities, while controlling for university leads. As shown in Figure A2 (Appendix), there is no evidence of such effects; pro-government mobilization does not rise before a university is established.

Second, we test the sensitivity of our estimates to alternative constructions of pre-trends in

mobilization activity. Since mobilization at time t may be influenced by long-term dynamics affecting university presence, we re-estimate our models with varying lag structures beyond the conventional $t-1$ lag. Figure A3 (Appendix) shows that the university coefficient remains stable across these specifications, suggesting that earlier mobilization dynamics are not driving our results.

Third, we leverage the exogenous timing of academic semesters, an institutional feature unlikely to be influenced by mobilization dynamics. If universities shape mobilization patterns, we should observe increased activity during academic semesters in university-affiliated locations compared to non-university areas. Drawing on monthly academic calendar data from 93 countries in our MMAD sample, we compared mobilization patterns between the two grid-cell categories. To mitigate potential confounding factors, such as national holidays, we incorporated year- and country-fixed effects alongside country-specific linear time trends. As shown in Figure A4 (Appendix), we find a significant increase in mobilization during academic semesters in university areas, with no comparable effect in non-university grid cells.

Fourth, we address potential reporting bias in media-based data such as MMAD (Dahlum and Wig 2020). Pro-government mobilization events are more likely to be reported in urban, affluent, and densely populated areas with robust infrastructure, raising concerns about the accuracy of estimates. To test for this, we applied Weidmann's (2016) diagnostic test, which assesses whether coefficients vary with event size. If reporting bias were present, relationships should weaken as event size increases, since larger events are more consistently reported. As displayed in Figure A5 (Appendix), we find no such attenuation, suggesting reporting bias is unlikely to be a major issue.

Fifth, we assess sensitivity to model specification by estimating negative binomial, Poisson, logit, and probit regressions for count and binary outcomes. Although technical constraints limited the inclusion of country-year interactions and grid-cell fixed effects, our core results remain robust across all estimation strategies (Tables A1–A2, Appendix).

Sixth, we account for the high frequency of zeros in our dependent variable by estimating zero-inflated negative binomial models, which distinguish between structural zeros (locations where mobilization is systematically absent) and incidental zeros (random non-occurrence) (Zuur et al. 2009). Our findings remain consistent across these models (Table A3, Appendix).

Seventh, we restrict the sample to grid cells with populations over 100,000 (per 50×50 km) to address concerns about the concentration of universities in urban areas. This restriction ensures comparability by focusing on urban regions while still capturing variation in university presence. Although the sample size is smaller, the results remain consistent (Table A4, Appendix).

Finally, we subject our country-level models to a series of robustness checks. First, we estimate fixed-effects negative binomial models to control for time-invariant country-specific factors and re-estimate the models using raw counts of universities rather than their natural logs to ensure the findings are not an artifact of the transformation (Appendix A5). Second, given the high frequency of zero-protest years in the data, we use zero-inflated negative binomial models, which are better suited to count data with many zeros (Appendix A6). Across these varied specifications, our primary findings remain robust.

Pro-government Mobilization and Universities in China, Russia, and Iran

The previous analysis identified a positive association between the presence of universities and pro-government mobilization in autocratic regimes. This section turns to a qualitative examination of three country cases to explain the mechanisms through which authoritarian governments mobilize support on university campuses. While statistical analysis is valuable for detecting empirical associations, qualitative methods are better suited to uncovering the mechanisms underlying those patterns (Goertz and Mahoney 2012; Ragin 1992).

We chose our cases based on the results of our quantitative models. Specifically, we ran two

versions of the model predicting pro-government mobilization: one that included our main explanatory variable, the number of universities at the country level, and one that excluded it. For each model, we calculated residuals and then determined the difference in residuals between the two models. We then ranked these differences to identify cases in which including universities most significantly improved the model's fit (Gerring 2017). In other words, these are the countries where the presence of universities appears to account for the largest share of otherwise unexplained pro-government mobilization.

China, Russia, and Iran emerged as the three cases with the largest residual differences. These are the “paradigmatic cases” in which the association between university presence and pro-government mobilization is particularly strong. Such cases are particularly valuable for generating and refining hypotheses, making them ideal for our goal of uncovering the mechanisms through which autocratic regimes mobilize support on university campuses (Ruffa 2020; Seawright and Gerring 2022). This method guided our selection of China, Russia, and Iran—three autocratic regimes with the strongest observed link between universities and state-led mobilization. These cases vary in regime structure and historical trajectories. China represents a closed one-party system, whereas Iran and Russia are electoral authoritarian regimes. In Russia, elections for top state offices occur but fail to meet democratic norms; in Iran, electoral competition is restricted to select institutions (Geddes et al. 2014).

Despite these differences, we observe similar mechanisms at work: institutional control over universities, the formation of state-sponsored student organizations, and the use of public employment incentives to encourage participation. However, the structure of each regime influences the specific arrangement of these mechanisms. To ensure that our case studies are comparable, we organize each one around three key dimensions: (1) a brief history of campus activism and

pro-government mobilization, (2) strategies for institutional control and organizational development, and (3) the structure of incentives used to promote participation.

China

A Brief History of campus activism and pro-government mobilization in China

The Chinese state's strategy of attempting to use universities for pro-government mobilization is rooted in a century-long effort to manage and redirect student activism, beginning with the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Emerging in the aftermath of the Qing dynasty's collapse and during the fragile early years of the Republic, the movement began as a protest against the Versailles Treaty's transfer of Chinese territories to Japan but quickly evolved into a nationwide campaign for national renewal and cultural reform. It marked the birth of modern Chinese nationalism and the rise of the intelligentsia as a political force. The movement's success led to the formation of the National Student Association, which by the mid-1920s had become recognized as "one of the most influential voices of public opinion in China" (Israel 1968).

Subsequent student movements reinforced this pattern of political engagement. The May 13th Movement of 1925, triggered when British-led police opened fire on Shanghai students protesting imperial abuses, became a major anti-imperialist uprising linking students with workers and merchants. A decade later, the December Ninth Movement of 1935 mobilized thousands of students in Beijing and other cities to protest Japanese encroachment in North China, positioning student activism as a central force in China's nationalist resistance (Perry 2014).

Following the Communist victory in 1949, the new regime sought to harness rather than suppress this activist tradition. Mao Zedong, himself shaped by May Fourth ideals, redefined student activism as a "second front" of the revolution—an extension of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s ideological struggle rather than an autonomous civic force. This transformation became

evident during the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1957, when initially open criticism of the Party was swiftly met with counter-mobilization by loyalist students, many affiliated with the Communist Youth League (CYL), who attacked intellectuals and defended Mao's leadership. The state thus reframed revolutionary activism as a form of fidelity to the regime, foreshadowing later forms of state-orchestrated mobilization.

This dynamic reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when Mao transformed universities into battlefields of ideological struggle. Students organized into Red Guard units, encouraged to challenge authority in the name of revolutionary purity but ultimately directed by Mao's personal authority. The campaign's performative and affective dimensions were symbolized by the infamous “mango cult,” which began when Mao distributed mangoes to workers at Tsinghua University—a gesture that became a nationwide ritual of devotion. During this period, universities ceased to be autonomous centers of learning and instead became instruments of mass mobilization and political spectacle (Perry and Xiaojun 2020).

The Chinese student movement reached a pivotal turning point with the 1989 Tiananmen Movement, when student-led demonstrations calling for political reform, transparency, and accountability briefly fostered independent organizations before being brutally suppressed by the state. The crackdown not only dismantled the movement but also triggered a reform of campus governance, as the regime interpreted the uprising as a systemic failure requiring stronger ideological oversight and institutional control to prevent future unrest (Zhao 2000, 2001).

In the decades following Tiananmen, the Chinese government pursued a dual strategy of marketization and expansion of higher education. Massive enrollment growth in the 1990s and 2000s eroded the elite status and collective identity that had historically empowered student activism. At the same time, the absence of political openings ensured that campuses remained tightly controlled environments. These structural changes help explain the relative calm of university

students in the post-1989 period. When student mobilization has occurred, it has typically echoed official narratives rather than challenged the regime. The post-Tiananmen era thus marked a shift from repression alone to a more sophisticated approach: diluting students' political weight through mass expansion while channeling their activism into state-sanctioned nationalism (Wright 2010).

Under Xi Jinping, the regime has shifted toward “participation,” reasserting direct CCP control through grassroots party branches and launching campaigns against “Western values” (Doyon and Tsimonis 2022; Fu and Distelhorst 2018). Although the ruling party authority is now deeply entrenched within campus institutions, students nevertheless proved to be critical drivers of the “White Paper Movement”, which spread to 51 universities nationwide during its core period in late November and early December 2022. The movement was catalyzed by the symbolic act of a single student at the Communication University of China in Nanjing, who held a blank sheet of paper satirizing regime censorship. This action quickly mobilized hundreds of students across the country (Chan 2023).

Strategies For Institutional Control And Organizational Development

Building on more than a century of student activism, the Chinese state has constructed a university ecosystem explicitly designed to prevent a recurrence of the 1989 Tiananmen Movement by preempting dissent and promoting state-led mobilization (Yan 2014). At the core of this system is a centralized administrative hierarchy: the Ministry of Education appoints Party Secretaries to lead University Party Committees, which hold ultimate authority over institutional governance and ensure alignment with Party priorities (Han and Xu 2019). This formal administrative structure cultivates “educated acquiescence” and establishes a clear command hierarchy extending from the central government to individual campuses (Perry 2014).

This formal hierarchy is reinforced by a dense network of ground-level organizations and

personnel that extend Party oversight into students' daily lives. The Communist Youth League (CYL) serves as the primary “transmission belt,” supervising student unions, controlling the finances of all student societies, and approving their activities to prevent the emergence of independent organizations (Tsimonis 2021). Complementing this organizational control, political guidance counselors (*fudaoyuan*) are assigned to convene political meetings and recruit new Party members (Yan 2014).

Having learned that suppression alone cannot extinguish student activism, the regime increasingly relies on cooptation as a second line of defense. Rather than shutting down mobilization entirely, it redirects student energy into projects that reinforce state authority. Project Hope (*Ximang Gongcheng*) demonstrates this strategy. Launched in 1989 through a collaboration between the China Youth Development Foundation and CYL, the program was initially designed to expand access to rural education and provide support to children at risk of dropping out. Over time, however, it has evolved into a channel for student volunteerism, steering activism toward community service and away from oppositional politics (Perry 2015). In this way, the program reduces pressure on state welfare systems while shaping student identities around loyalty to the existing order.

The Structure Of Incentives Used To Promote Participation

While surveillance and hierarchical governance establish the control infrastructure, maintaining regime-supportive mobilization requires more than coercion; it also relies on incentives that financially motivate loyalty. The campus control system ties political compliance directly to career advancement, ensuring that participation is not only safe but advantageous. In China's highly competitive job market, CCP membership can serve as a means of securing desirable positions in government and state-owned enterprises. Unsurprisingly, students who aspire to Party-state careers display greater compliance, reduced support for demonstrations, and stronger inclination toward

state-sponsored mobilization (Carter, Carter, and Schick 2024; Lin, Sun, and Yang 2015).

Surveys confirm that today's university students in China seek to join the Chinese Communist Party primarily for pragmatic career advancement, rather than a deep-seated commitment to state ideology (Dickson 2014; Guo 2005). The CCP leverages this pragmatism by strategically recruiting “excellent students”, top academic performers and campus leaders, while prioritizing the co-optation of emerging white-collar elites to ensure that key social strata remain aligned with the regime (Angiolillo 2023). Institutional mechanisms then reinforce and formalize this incentive structure. The student cadre channels civil services in the CYL or student union into elite opportunities, including expedited CCP admission, advantages in the civil service exam, and preferential access to graduate programs (Doyon 2023; Huang et al. 2021).

In conclusion, the century-long trajectory of Chinese campus activism shows that despite the Party and state’s progressive consolidation of ideological authority and mobilizing instruments, students have persistently demonstrated resilience, challenging power and reigniting collective dissent across generations.

Russia

A Brief History of campus activism and pro-government mobilization in Russia

The history of university students in Russia is a narrative of revolutionary fervor, state co-optation, and persistent struggle for identity and influence. From the student body of the Tsarist era, who saw themselves as “heralds of revolution,” to the bureaucratized student unions of the post-Soviet period and the state-mobilized youth movements of the Putin era, the university campus has remained a key site of contention.

Russian student activism has a long history rooted in opposition, beginning with the 1899 nationwide strike—which mobilized roughly 25,000 students—and reaching a critical moment

during the Revolution of 1905, when universities opened their doors to workers for mass meetings and converted lecture halls into “revolutionary tribunals” (Morrissey 1998:99). The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 fundamentally altered the institutional landscape of higher education. The previously autonomous and often oppositional student body (*studenchestvo*) was dismantled as the new regime sought to institutionalize universities as extensions of the Communist Party and the planned economy.

In this system, the Soviet university was conceived as an “antithesis” to Western models—organized under a militaristic “one-man management principle,” governed by party-appointed rectors, and structured around standardized curricula with mandatory Marxism-Leninism (Connelly and Grüttner 2005). Across the Soviet era, student activism did not disappear but operated under tight constraints: it was suppressed, regulated, or funneled into sanctioned organizational channels, with only limited openings during Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization and Gorbachev’s *perestroika* (Chankseliani 2022; Kuraev 2016; Tromly 2013).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 briefly revived traditions of opposition. Facing severe underfunding, rectors and students occasionally acted in solidarity, threatening mass protests to pressure the government. Yet the defining feature of the 1990s was not political revolution, but the privatization of higher education. Institutions became more independent, and the central student issue shifted to socio-economic concerns, particularly the rising cost of fees. The Law on Education (1992) established the legal foundation for institutional autonomy, legalizing cost-sharing and allowing public institutions to charge tuition to students who fell short of state-supported quotas. By the late 1990s, most fee-paying students were enrolled in public institutions. As a result, the protests of this era were driven less by anti-regime agendas than by the unaffordability of higher education (Bain 1999, 2001).

The political landscape shifted following the “Color Revolutions” in Georgia (2003) and

Ukraine (2004). Viewing independent youth activism as an existential threat, the Putin administration launched a “preventive counter-revolution” that redirected student mobilization into state-sanctioned channels (Hemment 2015). Accordingly, the state moved to discipline university administrations. Beginning in the mid-2000s, major support programs for leading universities, such as the federal universities initiative and the “5-100” global competitiveness project, changed their financial models. Once reliant on tuition fees, these institutions became heavily dependent on state funding, giving the Kremlin leverage to erode rector solidarity and autonomy. This financial leverage came with an implicit political deal: generous funding in exchange for preventing anti-regime student mobilization on campus (Forrat 2019).

While the state adopted a top-down approach to tame anti-regime student activism, student mobilization has persisted. The controversial education reforms of the 2010s sparked new waves of protest, most remarkably the week-long occupation of the Russian State University of Trade and Economics (RGTEU) in 2012 (Luhn 2013). The regime was subsequently destabilized when a new generation of students, many born between 2000 and 2006 and never having lived in the Soviet Union, began to mobilize. Their politicization often occurred gradually through new media platforms such as YouTube rather than through traditional agents of socialization (Erpyleva 2024).

A turning point came on 26 March 2017, when Alexei Navalny released a documentary alleging that Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev was involved in corruption. The film helped ignite an unprecedented wave of youth mobilization. Subsequently, anti-corruption protests erupted in more than one hundred towns and cities across Russia, with university students forming the backbone of the campaign. The regime responded with a strategy of “depoliticization,” exerting pressure on university officials and parents to dissuade students from participation. Anticipating unrest, the government used a wide array of measures to suppress student activism. On the eve of the demonstrations, officials organized lectures and “informal conversations” with students, while

pressuring them to attend state-sponsored events or stay home (Forrat 2024; Lavrinenko 2021).

On the evening of February 24, 2022, a large anti-war protest took place on Pushkinskaya Square in Moscow, where demonstrators opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine were met with arrests, and similar protests erupted across the country in the days that followed, drawing widespread international coverage. As repression against anti-war protesters escalated through arrests, censorship, and excessive force, pro-government rallies were staged across Russia, most prominently at Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium (Mamaev 2024; Paula and Scholz 2025), where Putin addressed tens of thousands of attendees, many reportedly bused in under threat of job loss.

Strategies For Institutional Control and Organizational Development

Building on the long history of student activism, both Soviet and post-Soviet regimes developed mechanisms that simultaneously suppressed autonomous mobilization and cultivated regime-supportive activism. In the Soviet era, independent student organizations of the Tsarist period were replaced by a dual system of state-sanctioned representation: the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (*Komsomol*) and the Professional Student Union (*profsoyuz*).

The Komsomol was the sole legitimate political organization for young people and a prerequisite for educational and career advancement. Within universities, it served as the primary vehicle for ideological indoctrination, ensuring support for the ruling party and channeling student participation into regime-approved activities. Operating in tandem, the *profsoyuz* distributed welfare benefits such as scholarships and dormitory placements, further binding students to state structures (Chirikov and Gruzdev 2014). In doing so, the Komsomol established a durable blueprint for state-managed youth participation that would shape later pro-regime initiatives.

In the post-Soviet period, the Kremlin adapted these mechanisms to Russia's emerging patronal system. Centralized university governance became a key tool: the Putin administration

systematically replaced competitive rector elections with presidential appointments, creating vertically integrated command structures that tied campuses directly to the Kremlin (Douglass 2021). Alongside these top-down controls, the Kremlin invested in mass youth organizations to channel activism into regime-supportive forms. The most prominent was the Nashi Movement, a state-funded youth movement founded in 2005 to protect Russia from “liberals,” “fascists,” and Western influence, while training a new generation of loyal students. At its peak in 2007–08, Nashi claimed over 300,000 members and staged rallies, annual summer camps at Lake Seliger, and large-scale recruitment drives that extended Kremlin influence onto campuses. Nashi’s structure and tactics reflected its top-down design. It employed sophisticated “political technologies,” ranging from mass rallies and patriotic marches to confrontational “street technologies” that physically opposed opposition protests (Hemment 2015; Horvath 2013).

However, Nashi failed to achieve lasting societal impact. For most academic youth, the movement never established legitimacy; many university students were “politically disengaged and cynical about politics” and regarded the organization as crude (Hemment 2015:92). Recognizing this reputational failure, the regime shifted its strategy after 2012 to contain student activism through new initiatives. First, the Kremlin promoted cradle-to-career patriotic organizations such as Movement of the First (*Dvizhenie Pervykh*), established in 2022 and explicitly likened to the old Soviet Pioneers, and Young Army (*Iunarmia*), created in 2016 as a nationwide military-patriotic youth movement (van Brugen 2022). At the same time, the regime invested heavily in “quality of life” opportunities for young people, renovating parks and creating nightspots where they could gather, play, drink, and socialize, rather than challenging the Kremlin (Dubrovskiy 2025).

The Structure Of Incentives Used To Promote Participation

In the Soviet era, the Komsomol institutionalized student membership as a prerequisite for educational and professional advancement. Non-participation often meant exclusion from higher education and access to desirable careers, while active engagement in ideological study groups and “voluntary” labor campaigns (*subbotniki*) provided a direct route into the ruling elite (*nomenklatura*). This allows Komsomol to function as a gatekeeping mechanism that binds educational opportunity, career mobility, and political conformity into a single structure of pro-regime mobilization (Zakem, Saunders, and Antoun 2015).

In the post-Soviet period, Nashi became central to the state’s “administrative resource” (Hale 2010). As Mickiewicz (2014) observes, many students were acutely aware of the career risks associated with participating in protest and therefore avoided high-risk activism. Capitalizing on this reluctance, the promise of a social lift (*sotsialnyi lif*) offered ambitious students a fast track to success in exchange for loyalty: commissars who proved effective at mobilizing their peers were rewarded with prestigious internships in ministries and state corporations (Hemment 2015; Krivonos 2015). For the most successful, the movement functioned as a direct “escalator” into formal politics, with prominent leaders placed on United Russia’s party lists and even securing seats in the State Duma (Atwal and Bacon 2012). For example, Robert Shlegel, a former commissar and vice-chair of the Committee on Youth Affairs, along with Sergei Belokonev, an ideologue who previously led the “Nashi Elections” branch, were two Nashi members who joined the Duma.

However, after the fall of Nashi (2012–2022), the state focused on expanding the public sector to maintain authoritarian stability. Putting youth on the government payroll created a dependency among the expanding “state middle class” (*budzhetniki*), who were significantly less likely to mobilize against the regime than their private-sector counterparts (Rosenfeld 2020). These incentives are now formalized within the education system to ensure that participation is less about

ideological conviction and more about navigating a structure in which state-approved activity is the primary path to professional viability.

In sum, student activism in Russia mirrors a hybrid political landscape in which anti-government voices persist but operate under constraints, while pro-government mobilization is actively cultivated and dominates the public sphere. Student groups critical of the regime face repression, surveillance, and institutional barriers that limit their ability to organize. At the same time, universities and state-affiliated organizations channel resources into patriotic programming, youth movements, and officially sanctioned demonstrations that align with Kremlin priorities. The result is not the total elimination of dissent, but rather a managed coexistence in which oppositional activism survives at the margins, while the overwhelming weight of university-based mobilization serves state objectives and reinforces regime legitimacy.

Iran

While our analysis of China and Russia relies primarily on secondary sources, the case of Iran draws on two sets of original data that allow a more in-depth examination of pro-government mobilization on university campuses. First, both authors studied in Iran and were directly engaged in campus political life. We draw on these experiences to explain the mechanisms of co-optation, infiltration, and contestation of student activism in Iran. Second, we use computational methods to collect original data from government-aligned student news agencies. This dataset provides a rich account of mobilization activities across Iranian universities in recent years, complementing our qualitative observations with institutionally grounded evidence.

A Brief History of campus activism and pro-government mobilization in Iran

The Iranian student movement developed in tandem with the rise of modern higher education under the Pahlavi state. After the establishment of the University of Tehran in 1934, campuses quickly became central arenas of political activism, particularly during the openings of the 1940s and early 1950s. Marxist and nationalist groups, especially those connected to the Tudeh Party and the oil nationalization movement under Mohammad Mossadegh, dominated the scene, while smaller Islamic Associations (*Anjoman-hā-ye Eslāmi*) also emerged as religious-intellectual circles seeking to articulate a modern Islamic political identity in competition with Marxist and secular currents. The CIA-backed coup of 1953 placed universities under military control, yet student resistance continued, especially after security forces killed three students during protests against U.S. influence on December 7, 1953, an event later commemorated as “Student Day.” In the decades that followed, universities remained a hub of opposition despite surveillance and periodic crackdowns, and this persistent activism culminated in broad student participation in the revolutionary mobilization that ultimately toppled the Pahlavi regime in 1979 (Matin-Asgari 2002; Nasrabadi and Matin-asgari 2018; Yazdi 2004).

After the fall of the Pahlavi regime, campuses became contested political arenas where revolutionary factions, including Islamists, leftists, nationalists, and others, established offices, recruited members, and held lectures and public gatherings. This pluralistic moment, however, proved short-lived. As competition intensified, particularly between Islamist forces and various leftist groups, the new regime moved swiftly to eliminate rivals and assert ideological control over universities (Abrahamian 1982; Arjomand 2009).

This effort resulted in the Cultural Revolution (*Enghelab-e Farhangi*) (1980–1983), during which universities were shut down, leftist organizations were violently suppressed, thousands of students and activists were arrested, and large numbers of faculty viewed as ideologically

incompatible were dismissed. These closures temporarily ended the brief period of independent student activism that had flourished after the revolution. When campuses reopened, the state had restructured higher education to assert stronger political control, primarily through efforts to “Islamicize” curricula and administration. Although student activism later re-emerged, particularly in the 1990s, the Cultural Revolution established a long-term pattern of state intervention, episodic purges, and ongoing repression of dissident students that continues to shape university life in the Islamic Republic (Razavi 2009).

Prior to the revolution, the Islamic Students Association existed as small religious-nationalist student groups under the Pahlavi monarchy. During the revolution, Islamists took control of these associations, transforming and expanding them as rival political groups were forcibly dissolved. In the first decade of the Islamic Republic, the Islamic Associations became the sole semi-independent venue for student political activity. Their disparate campus branches were consolidated under a new umbrella organization, the Office for Consolidating Unity (OCU) (*Daftar-e Tabkimi-e Vahdat*), an effort designed both to standardize ideological work on campuses and to strengthen Islamist influence (Rivetti 2020).

After the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the political landscape shifted. The OCU and many Islamic Associations gradually aligned with the left faction of the Islamic Republic, which in the 1990s evolved into the reformist movement. These groups played a significant role in mobilizing support for Mohammad Khatami, whose 1997 presidential victory ushered in a period of relative political opening. During this era, Islamic Associations initially remained close allies of reformists, but they grew increasingly critical as reformist politicians failed to defend students who came under renewed repression (Mashayekhi 2001; Rivetti and Cavatorta 2013).

In the early 2000s, Islamic Associations undertook internal organizational reforms that further democratized their structure, primarily by allowing all students, regardless of affiliation, to

vote in leadership elections. This shift strengthened their liberal orientation and transformed many associations into quasi-student parliaments, creating tensions between their Islamic identity and the increasingly pluralist reality of campus politics. One of the authors, then an elected member of the Islamic Association of the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran, recalls debates during a university-wide assembly in which the organization considered revising its 1980s charter to reflect more liberal student views. Opponents warned that these reforms might threaten access to office space and university funding, showing how universities kept control over student politics by tying resources to organizational compliance.

As Islamic Associations charted a more independent course, they became targets of growing repression. Their national umbrella organization was effectively dismantled, weakening the cohesion of reformist student politics and limiting their capacity to challenge the state (Mohammadi 2007). Parallel to the erosion of independent organizations, the conservative faction began building its own campus networks in the late 1980s. These groups operated without democratic input from the student body and maintained strong institutional ties to the security apparatus.

Despite continued repression, student activism remained active. University students significantly contributed to the 2009 Green Movement by protesting alleged electoral fraud. The government's response, characterized by widespread surveillance, arrests, expulsions, and imprisonments, once again swept through campuses. A limited opening occurred under President Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021), allowing for a modest revival of student organizing. Most recently, students and universities were central to the 2022 protests after Mahsa (*Jina*) Amini's death, acting as significant resistance hubs against mandatory hijab and, more broadly, against the Islamic Republic.

Strategies For Institutional Control and Organizational Development

The Iranian higher education system mainly falls into two categories. One is public universities, which are fully financed, administered, and supervised by the government, and usually uphold the

highest academic standards. The other is private, tuition-based institutions, which do not receive direct government funding but are still under government regulation and are owned and run by the state elite (Mehralizadeh 2005).

Within this framework, the appointment of university presidents follows a two-tiered process: the relevant government minister, such as the Minister of Science, may suggest a candidate, but final approval rests with the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR) (*Shura-ye Ali-ye Enqelab-e Farhangi*), the highest ideological policy body of the state⁵. The result is a system of cascading authority, in which the SCCR-approved president appoints their own ideologically vetted leadership team, creating a homogeneous management structure dedicated to ensuring the university operates in complete alignment with the political principles of the Islamic Republic (Hamdhaidari, Agahi, and Papzan 2008).

As discussed in the previous section, the tightening of administrative control over universities was accompanied by the expansion of regime-affiliated student organizations. Since the 1990s, these groups have become the primary vehicles of pro-government mobilization on campuses (Golkar 2010, 2013). The most prominent among them are the Student Basij (*Basij-e Daneshjuyi*), Society of Students (*Jame' e-ye Eslami-ye Daneshjuyan*), Union of Independent Islamic Student Associations (*Etebadiye-ye Anjomanhā-ye Mostaqel-e Daneshjuyi*), and the Student Justice-Seeking Movement (*Jonbesh-e Edalatkhāh-e Daneshjuyi*). These organizations were strategically assigned tasks to advance the Islamic Republic's ideological and political agenda across campuses. Their objectives included promoting Islamic values, cultivating an intellectual environment supportive of "Islamic science," and contributing to the broader project of Islamicizing universities (Khorramshad 2005; Taghizadeh 2013).

⁵ The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR) is a policymaking body in Iran that oversees cultural, educational, and ideological affairs. Established during the early years of the Islamic Republic, it functions as a conservative-dominated institution whose decisions can only be overruled by the Supreme Leader. The President of Iran serves as its chair, and the council plays a central role in shaping universities, curricula, and broader cultural policy.

To advance these aims, regime-affiliated organizations recruited, educated, and organized volunteer students while cultivating a culture of sacrifice and martyrdom inspired by the role models of the Islamic Revolution and the memory of the Iran-Iraq War. Their influence extended beyond university campuses, as they encouraged and actively participated in pro-government mobilization across society, including at national commemorations such as the Anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. The state's reach through these organizations was not confined to public universities, where government control was most pervasive. Private and tuition-based institutions were also required to host parallel associations of the same kind, ensuring that surveillance, indoctrination, and mobilization permeated the entire higher education system.

The Nature of University Pro-government Mobilization in Iran

In light of the historical and political context of university–state relations in Iran, we present original event-level data on pro-government mobilization facilitated through academic institutions. To capture these dynamics, we draw on the Student News Network (SNN), a domestic news agency specializing in university-related issues and events, and compile a dataset spanning 2008–2016. For this period and subject matter, SNN provides systematic coverage, making it a reliable source for analyzing student activities and university-linked mobilization.

Using computational methods, we scraped the SNN website to extract details on the dates, locations, types, and participants of student activities from over 2 million entries. Following Kurer et al. (2019), we categorized petitions and statements as collective actions and analyzed them alongside rallies, marches, and other public demonstrations. This approach enabled the capture of both traditional and less visible forms of mobilization. After filtering university-related entries, we conducted a manual review and, in the final step, examined each event's content to identify the specific types of pro-government mobilization it represented.

Figure 4 provides an overview of university-based pro-government mobilization in Iran between 2008 and 2016. The prominence of rallies highlights the strategic use of campuses as staging grounds for regime-supportive action: student-led events frequently condemned anti-government protests, promoted state narratives of economic and social justice, and invoked national unity in response to perceived external threats or domestic challenges. Statements and petitions, typically initiated or coordinated by regime-aligned student associations, reinforced these efforts by encouraging participation in pro-government activities, denouncing dissent, and reaffirming the state's ideological values.

Our data show additional forms of university-based pro-government mobilization in Iran. Commemoration events are organized to honor the sacrifices of soldiers who lost their lives during the Iran-Iraq War, and these ceremonies function as instruments of the regime. They not only preserve the memory of the fallen but also reinforce a narrative of martyrdom disseminated and supported by the state (Elling 2009). In some instances, these practices extend beyond symbolic ritual, as university grounds have been used as burial sites for martyrs, thereby inscribing the regime's ideological narrative onto the physical landscape of academic institutions.

Other forms of mobilization are embedded in everyday campus life. Regime-affiliated representatives typically organize debates to uphold government viewpoints while systematically marginalizing oppositional perspectives. Seminars disseminate government policies and promote state-approved research. Exhibitions and festivals highlight regime achievements and celebrate Islamic and revolutionary values, while religious and cultural gatherings emphasize rituals and prayers that reinforce the integration of religion and state.

Finally, volunteer work projects, often undertaken by students from regime-affiliated associations, involve traveling to deprived regions to build houses, schools, and mosques. Framed as

civic duties, these initiatives align with state objectives, enhancing the regime's image as a benefactor to underprivileged communities and further solidifying its influence within society.

Figure 4. University-Based Pro-Government Mobilization in Iran, 2008-2016.

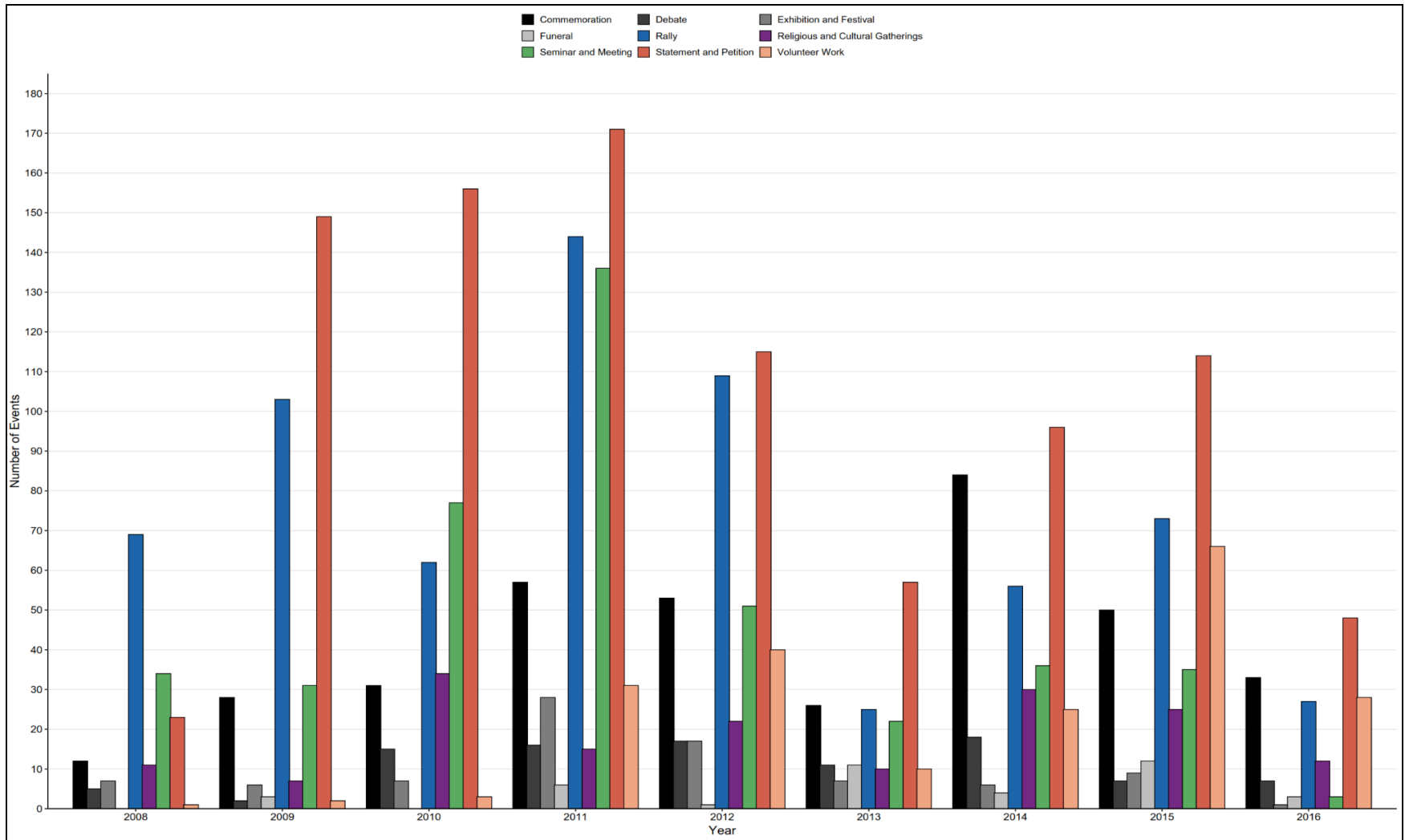


Figure 4 displays Iran's University-Based Pro-Government Mobilization (2008–2016), showing counts of ten event types, especially statements, petitions, rallies, and seminars shaping campus efforts.

The Structure Of Incentives Used To Promote Participation

Through their integration into campus life, regime-affiliated student associations evolved into incubators of political loyalty, gradually channeling successive cohorts into the state apparatus and reinforcing continuity across factions of the Islamic Republic. During the reformist period of the late 1990s and early 2000s, these networks helped elevate several figures who later occupied influential government roles, including a Deputy Speaker of Parliament⁶, a Vice President⁷, a Minister of Energy⁸, a Deputy Minister of Interior⁹, a member of the 6th Parliament¹⁰, and a Tehran City Council¹¹ member who later became Deputy for Coordination and Follow-up in the Office of the President.

Over time, however, as reformist student organizations were suppressed, regime-affiliated associations became dominated by the conservative faction. By offering targeted incentives, grants, and privileged access to networks of power, these organizations have consistently funneled loyalists into key state positions, reinforcing conservative dominance across political generations. Prime examples of individuals who have risen to prominent positions after leading these regime-affiliated student organizations include the current mayor of Tehran¹², the former Minister of Roads and

⁶ Mohammad-Reza Khatami is a former student activist who later became Deputy Speaker of Parliament. He is a founding member of the reformist Islamic Iran Participation Front, which became one of the most influential reformist parties in the late 1990s.

⁷ Masoumeh Ebtekar is a former student activist who went on to serve as Vice President. She first gained international attention as the spokesperson for the students during the 1979 U.S. Embassy takeover, later came to her building a career as an environmental scientist and reformist politician.

⁸ Habibollah Bitaraf is a former student activist who became Minister of Energy.

⁹ Mostafa Tajzadeh is a former student activist who later served as Deputy Minister of Interior. A senior figure in the Islamic Iran Participation Front, he became a prominent reformist voice.

¹⁰ Fatemeh Haghigatjoo is a student activist in the Islamic Association at Tarbiat Modares University and member of the Office for Strengthening Unity (OSU); she later served in the 6th Parliament (2000–2004) as part of the Islamic Participation Front.

¹¹ Majid Farahani is a former student activist who later became a Tehran City Council member and, since 2024, serves as Deputy for Coordination and Follow-up in the Office of the President. Before entering municipal politics, he led the youth wing of the Islamic Iran Participation Front.

¹² Alireza Zakani is the current mayor of Tehran and has also been an aide to the President of Iran on matters related to the management of social damages in Tehran City since 2023. Previously, he served as the head of the Student Basij and Commander of the paramilitary Basij University Organization from 1998 to 2002.

Urban Development¹³, and the former Minister of Education ¹⁴ (Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani 2018). Although the complete list of such official figures is not publicly available, these examples highlight the strategic significance of student associations in facilitating the occupation of high-profile positions within the state apparatus.

Overall, student activism in Iran reflects a mixed political environment in which dissenting voices continue to exist but face tight restrictions. Simultaneously, government-backed mobilization is encouraged and dominates university settings. This results in a situation in which dissent is not entirely eradicated but is kept on the sidelines, while dominant university activism supports state objectives and reinforces regime legitimacy.

Conclusion

For decades, the liberal view of higher education has portrayed universities as engines of civic engagement, critical thinking, and democratic mobilization (Acemoglu et al. 2005; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). This perspective is supported by cross-national research showing that campuses often function as sites of dissent where dense social networks and organizational resources facilitate political contention (Dahlum and Wig 2017, 2020). Drawing on scholarship on state–society relations (Gramsci 1971; Klein and Lee 2018), authoritarian governance (Forrat 2024; Riley and Fernández 2015), universities under autocracy (Connelly and Grüttner 2005; Golkar 2013; Wang 2018), and state-led mobilization (Ekiert et al. 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020), this study complements and complicates this view by arguing that universities in autocratic regimes can also function as sites of pro-government mobilization.

¹³ Mehrdad Bazrpash is a former Minister of Roads and Urban Development from 2022 to 2024. Earlier in his career, Bazrpash was the head of the Student Basij organization at Sharif University and he went on to become the leader of a “young counselors” group, which played a key role in organizing districts in Tehran in preparation for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidential candidacy.

¹⁴ Alireza Ali Ahmadi is the current CEO of the National Iranian Tanker Company. He previously served as the Minister of Education from 2008 to 2009. He has also collaborated with the Student Basij and the University Professors' Basij to contribute to the establishment of the University Professors' Basij nationwide.

We tested this argument with the first cross-national, subnational analysis of universities and pro-government mobilization across 93 autocratic regimes from 2003 to 2019. Using a grid-cell-year design with fixed effects, we examined the relationship between university density and state-led mobilization. The results consistently show that grid cells with more universities are associated with increased pro-government mobilization within a given country-year. At the country level, countries with more universities experience higher frequencies of pro-government events. These patterns remain robust across alternative model specifications.

To further probe the mechanisms underlying these patterns, we selected three paradigmatic cases—China, Russia, and Iran—and used residual analysis to identify countries in which the presence of universities accounts for the largest share of unexplained pro-government mobilization (Gerring 2017; Seawright and Gerring 2022). Despite differences in ideology, institutional design, and political history, all three regimes rely on comparable strategies to cultivate support on campuses: forming or co-opting student organizations aligned with the regime, and linking political loyalty to career opportunities. In China, pathways of public employment and Party advancement reinforce incentives for participation; in Russia, proxy youth movements offer rapid channels into political office; and in Iran, multiple pro-state student groups function as pipelines into government administration.

This article makes the following contributions. First, it reconceptualizes universities as dual-use political infrastructures—institutions that, while historically associated with dissent (van Dyke 2003; Polletta 1999; Snow and Soule 2009; Soule 1997; Van Dyke 1998), can also be used by autocratic regimes to mobilize support. Our analysis focuses on this latter dynamic, highlighting how universities become resources for state-led mobilization without denying their simultaneous potential for opposition (Dahlum and Wig 2020; Tetteh and Edgell 2024). Second, it advances the study of state-led mobilization by showing how higher education serves as an organizationally dense hub for

recruitment and coordination in regime support, extending resource mobilization theory beyond its conventional focus on nonstate actors (Andrews and Biggs 2016; Ganz 2009; Lu and Tao 2017). Finally, using the first cross-national, subnational analysis of universities and pro-government mobilization across 93 autocracies, and residual-based case selection, the article integrates large-N inference with case-studies process tracing.

The strength of our findings does not preclude the need for careful reflection on two interpretive limitations. First, while our quantitative analysis identifies a consistent association between university presence and pro-government mobilization, statistical correlations alone cannot fully adjudicate causal mechanisms. The coherence of our results across methods, together with case-based evidence from our own qualitative analysis and from studies documenting university-centered mobilization in Kazakhstan (Hanson and Sokhey 2021), China (Perry 2020), and Turkey (Alemdaroğlu 2022), helps reinforce the plausibility of the mechanisms we identify.

Second, our use of paradigmatic case selection—focusing on countries where universities account for the largest unexplained share of pro-government mobilization—privileges mechanism identification but necessarily limits variation. While this strategy is well-suited to theory development (Ruffa 2020; Seawright and Gerring 2022), future research should broaden the empirical domain to include negative cases in which universities are not associated with pro-government mobilization and deviant cases in which mobilization emerges through different pathways. Such extensions would clarify the boundary conditions of our argument and refine our understanding of when and how universities become targets of authoritarian mobilization.

This study opens several research directions. Scholars can examine when and why campuses tilt toward dissent rather than state-led mobilization during moments of crisis, repression, and opening. The mechanisms invite micro-level investigation into how students interpret, negotiate, resist, or strategically use regime-affiliated organizations. Comparative research can investigate how

different authoritarian regime types mobilize higher education for elite formation and mass mobilization. Finally, transnational research could examine how models of university governance and political control diffuse across authoritarian regimes, reframing higher education as a key arena in the global contest over knowledge, power, and political order.

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Appendix

Figure A1 shows that the relationship between universities and pro-government mobilization varies systematically across autocratic regimes. Personalistic regimes exhibit the strongest positive relationship between university presence and pro-government mobilization, reflecting their centralized authority structures and emphasis on personal loyalty. In these regimes, leaders systematically transform universities into instruments for disseminating ideology and consolidating public support while cultivating a base of loyal students (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Linz 2000). Revolutionary regimes similarly demonstrate a robust positive association between universities and mobilization efforts. These regimes convert higher education institutions into ideological incubators where students undergo systematic socialization into revolutionary values and are mobilized to advance regime objectives (Connelly and Grüttner 2005; Lachapelle et al. 2020). This pattern is well-documented in Iran, where universities historically were central institutions for reinforcing revolutionary ideology and aligning student activism with state interests (Golkar 2010, 2013).

In contrast, military regimes exhibit a weaker relationship between universities and pro-government mobilization compared to personalistic and revolutionary regimes. This pattern aligns with their governance approach, emphasizing coercion and surveillance over participatory engagement. Unlike personalistic and revolutionary regimes, military governments view universities as potential sources of opposition. Consequently, they focus on implementing strict censorship measures and suppressing student activism rather than harnessing universities for mobilization purposes (Nery 2015; Perlmutter 1980).

Party-based regimes demonstrate a moderate positive association between universities and pro-government mobilization, reflecting their systematic approach to integrating societal actors into state structures. These regimes utilize universities as recruitment and training grounds for party cadres, with student organizations deliberately aligned with party ideologies. The Soviet Union's Komsomol exemplifies this approach, functioning as a pipeline for Communist Party membership while ensuring ideological conformity within higher education (Forrat 2016; Nikolayenko 2023).

Finally, monarchies exhibit the weakest relationship between universities and pro-government mobilization, consistent with their reliance on traditional sources of legitimacy. These regimes typically emphasize vocational and professional training in universities rather than political mobilization (Frantz 2018; Gerring et al. 2021). Instead of leveraging universities, monarchic regimes often channel state-led mobilization through religious institutions and tribal networks. Saudi Arabia shows this pattern, where higher education remains subordinate to traditional governance mechanisms (Lily and Essa 2014).

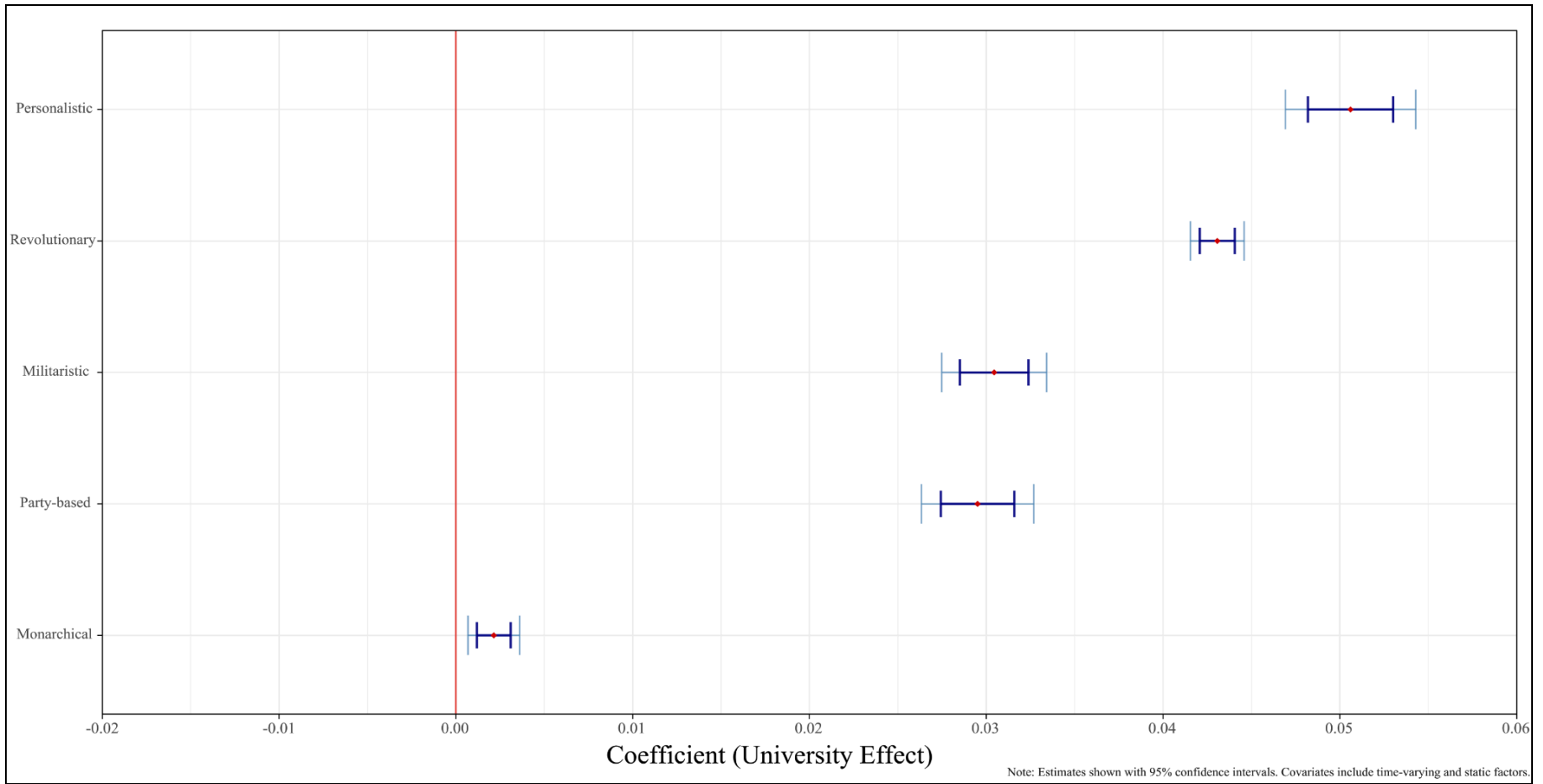


Figure A1 displays coefficient estimates for university effects across five regime types, with points indicating the estimated coefficients and horizontal lines showing 95% confidence intervals.

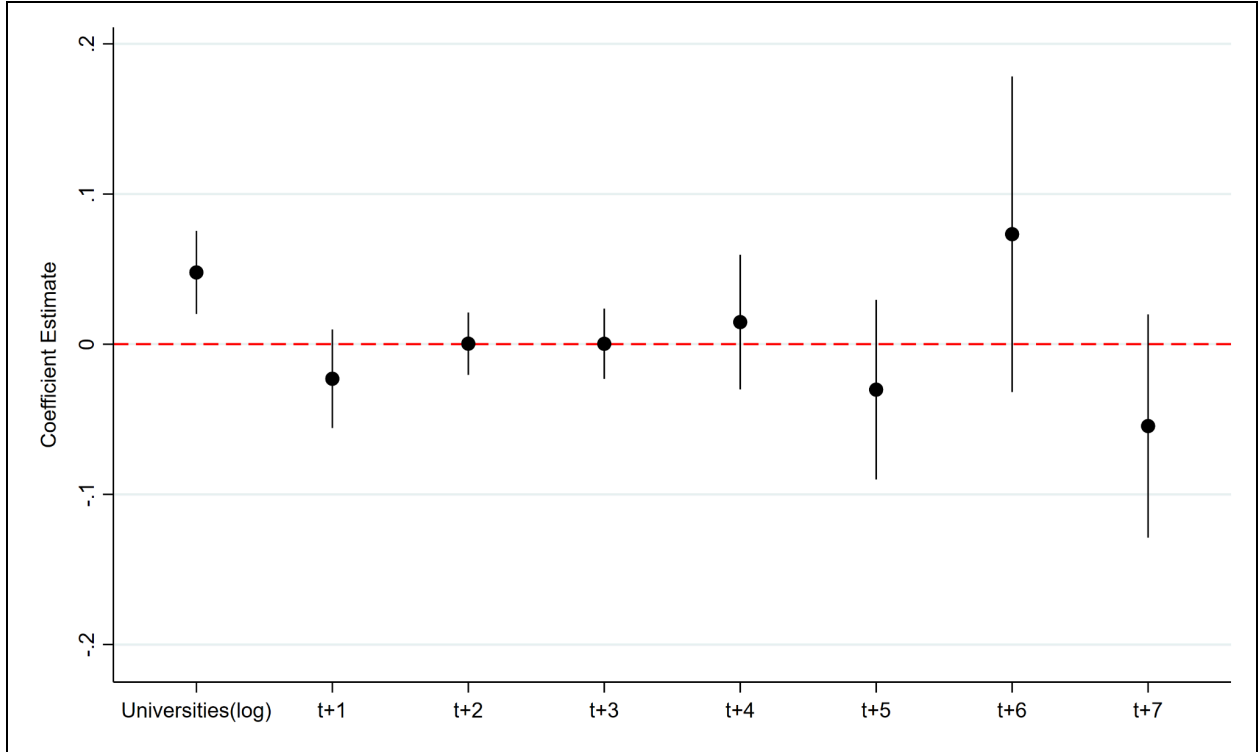


Figure A2. This figure tests for pre-trends by examining different leads of universities (log). The x-axis displays the current period and seven future time points (t+1 to t+7), while the y-axis shows coefficient estimates. Black dots represent point estimates, with vertical lines indicating 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed line at $y=0$ represents no effect. For a valid causal interpretation, we expect to see no significant effect for future periods, which is largely true here, as most confidence intervals cross zero.

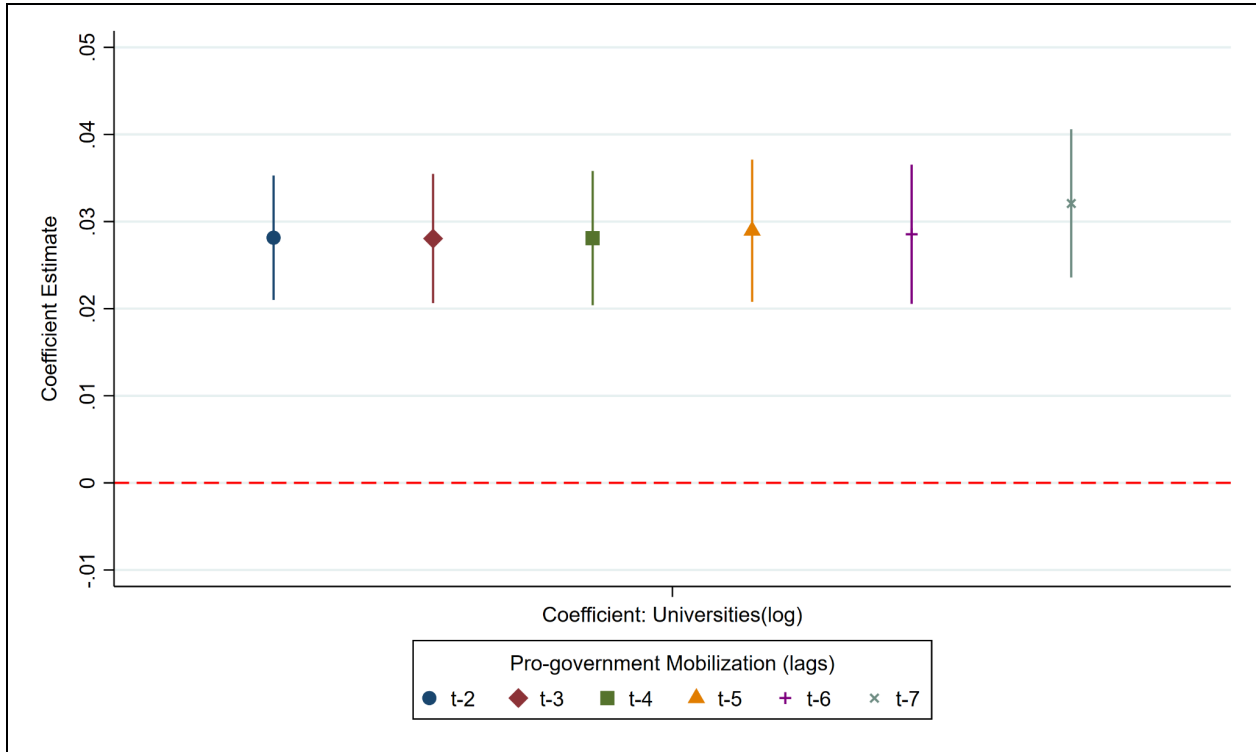


Figure A3. This figure shows the robustness of the relationship between universities (log) and pro-government mobilization by displaying coefficient estimates across models based on different dependent variable lags. The graph shows six point estimates, each representing the university's (log) coefficient when controlling for pro-government mobilization from t-2 to t-7. All estimates are positive, statistically significant (as confidence intervals do not cross the zero line), and relatively stable. This consistency across different lag specifications supports the strength and reliability of the main findings, suggesting that the positive effect of universities on pro-government mobilization is not sensitive to particular temporal patterns of past mobilization. The stability of these estimates across various historical time frames reinforces the causal interpretation of the relationship between universities and pro-government activity, indicating that the effect persists regardless of how far back the model accounts for previous mobilization events.

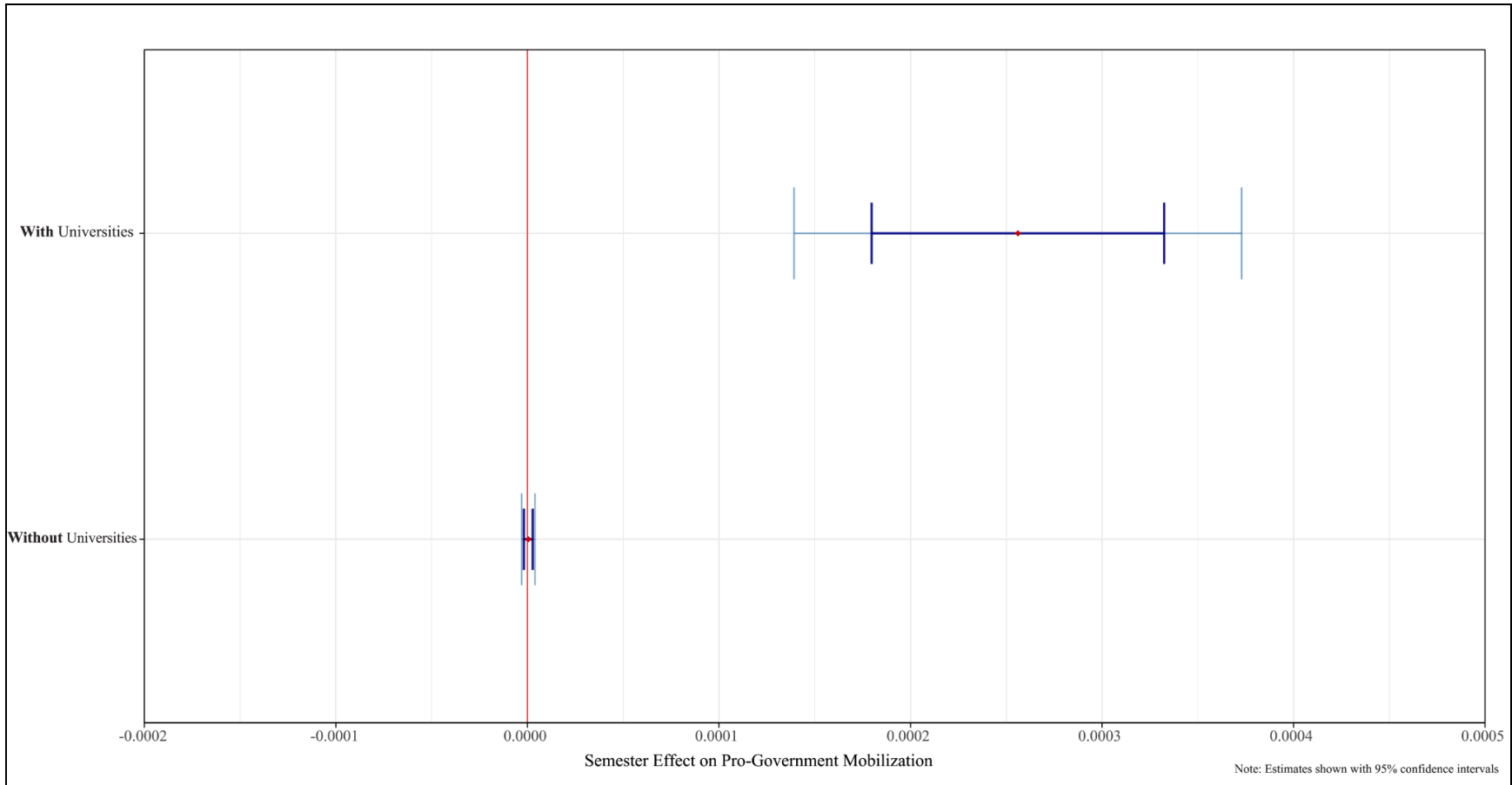


Figure A4 presents the semester coefficients for university and non-university cells (semester = 1) from a model incorporating cell-, year-, and country-month linear terms. The results indicate that protest activity is higher during the academic semester in university-affiliated cells but not in areas without universities. While it is difficult to entirely rule out the possibility that other factors correlate with semester months across different countries (ideally, we would include country-month fixed effects, but the data does not support this), the observed pattern aligns with the argument that universities influence pro-government mobilization. Although not definitive proof, this finding is additional evidence reinforcing the interpretation of the university pro-government mobilization link within autocracies. Academic semester months are coded based on the academic calendar listed by the respective country's education department. Semester months are defined as months in which classes are in session for the majority of days.

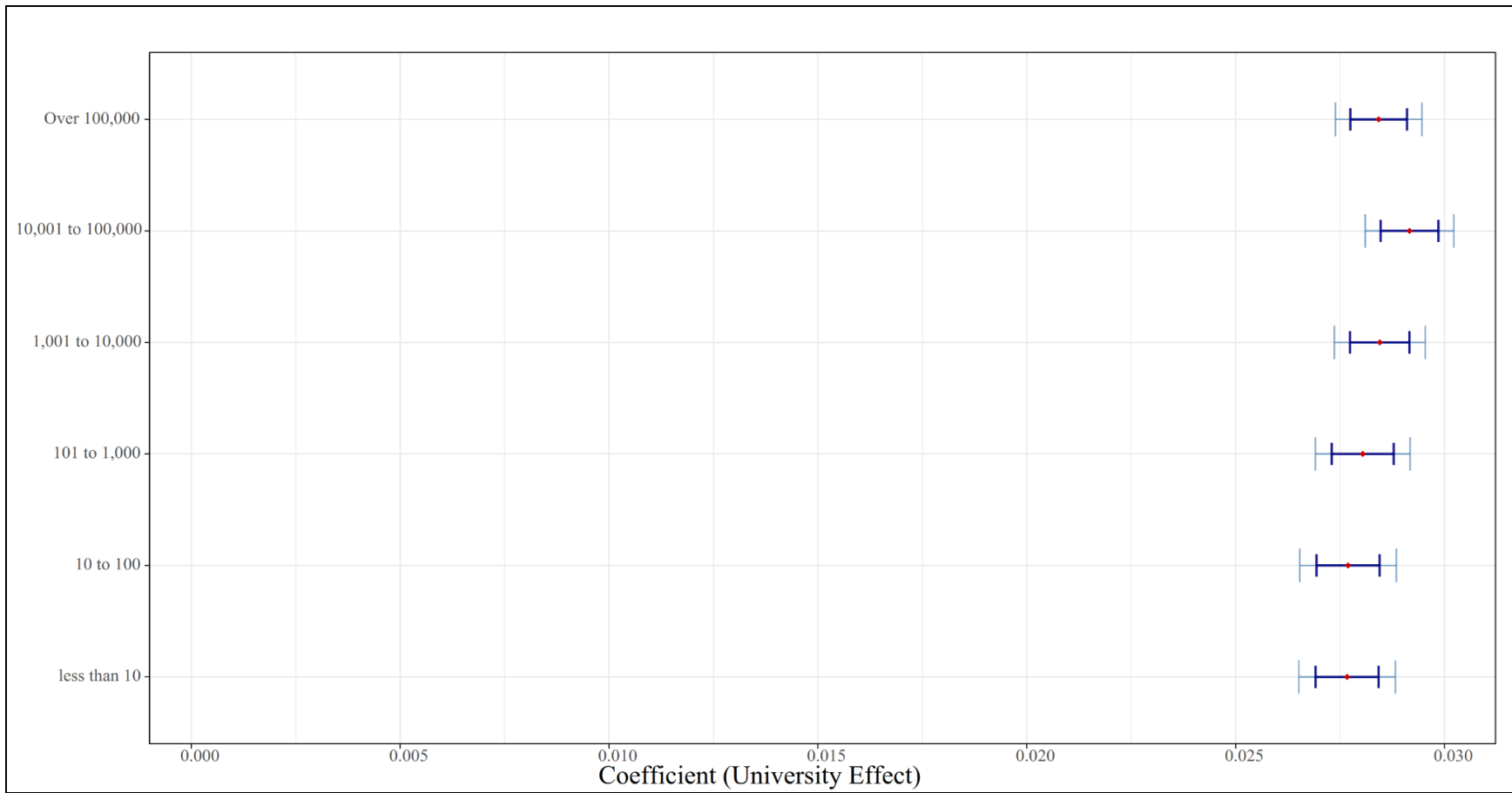


Figure A5 shows that the coefficients do not exhibit a consistent attenuation when transitioning from events with the lowest levels of participation to those with slightly higher levels. Instead, the coefficients remain stable across different participant brackets, suggesting that potential biases in news coverage—particularly the overrepresentation of highly populated locations—do not pose a significant concern in the documentation of pro-government mobilization across autocratic regimes as recorded by MMAD.

	<i>Pro-government mobilization (count)</i>			
	NB1	NB2	Poisson1	Poisson2
Universities	0.044*	0.041*	0.218*	0.190
	(2.16)	(2.00)	(2.15)	(1.92)
Cell population (log) (lag)	0.211	0.219	-2.567	-2.431
	(1.57)	(1.60)	(-0.72)	(-0.71)
Gross National Income per capita (log) (lag)	0.992***	1.035***	2.124*	2.055*
	(3.76)	(3.89)	(2.46)	(2.35)
Expected years of schooling for children aged 6 (lag)	-0.076	-0.068	-0.160*	-0.149
	(-1.48)	(-1.33)	(-2.02)	(-1.91)
Mean years of schooling for population aged 25+ (lag)	0.018	0.034	-0.424*	-0.320
	(0.25)	(0.45)	(-2.30)	(-1.67)
Life expectancy at birth (lag)	-0.010	-0.012	-0.047	-0.037
	(-0.49)	(-0.57)	(-1.32)	(-0.91)
Average infant mortality (lag)	0.001	0.001		-0.018
	(1.67)	(1.50)		(-1.18)
Urban area	-0.034	-0.042	-0.336	-0.321
	(-0.80)	(-0.98)	(-1.72)	(-1.68)
Night lights (lag)	3.493*	3.050*	1.904	2.876
	(2.53)	(2.14)	(0.57)	(0.85)
Excluded groups (discriminated or powerless) (lag)	-0.410	-0.358	0.166	0.139
	(-1.60)	(-1.37)	(0.36)	(0.31)
Gross cell product (PPP) (log) (lag)	-1.052***	-1.110***	8.521	8.232
	(-3.36)	(-3.48)	(0.93)	(0.91)
Anti-government protest (lag)		0.010**		0.005*
		(2.88)		(1.99)
Pro-Gov spatial lag		0.942***		1.021**
		(5.56)		(2.86)
Anti-government spatial lag		-0.096***		-0.076
		(-4.66)		(-0.52)
Constant	-7.120**	-7.086**		
	(-3.12)	(-3.07)		
N	4,367	4,367	4,367	4,367
Log likelihood	-1,293.035	-1,266.076	-1,620.093	-1,575.024

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. T-statistics in parentheses.
NB1: Fixed effects negative binomial regression models.
Poisson: Fixed effects Poisson regression models.
Models include country and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the country level.

Table A1. This table presents the results of four regression models examining the determinants of pro-government mobilization (count). The models include two Negative Binomial (NB) and two Poisson specifications. Across all models, Universities (log) show a consistently positive and significant effect on mobilization. Overall, the table provides a comprehensive view of factors influencing pro-government mobilization, highlighting consistent patterns and model-specific variations.

	<i>Pro-government mobilization (binary)</i>	
	Logit	Probit
Universities (log)	1.046*** (7.97)	0.493*** (8.61)
Anti-government protest (lag)	0.803*** (7.77)	0.422*** (9.27)
Pro-Gov spatial lag	0.411* (2.55)	0.199** (2.82)
Anti-government spatial lag	-0.015 (-0.39)	-0.001 (-0.08)
Cell population (log) (lag)	0.432*** (5.04)	0.147*** (4.43)
Gross National Income per capita (log) (lag)	0.865* (1.99)	0.315 (1.95)
Expected years of schooling for children aged 6 (lag)	0.055 (0.92)	0.014 (0.65)
Mean years of schooling for population aged 25+ (lag)	-0.094 (-1.10)	-0.032 (-1.04)
Life expectancy at birth (lag)	0.037 (1.55)	0.014 (1.59)
Average infant mortality (lag)	-0.000 (-0.09)	-0.000 (-0.15)
Urban area	-0.029 (-0.58)	0.001 (0.04)
Night lights (lag)	3.364** (2.99)	1.804*** (3.58)
Excluded groups (discriminated or powerless) (lag)	0.290 (1.60)	0.126 (1.95)
Gross cell product (PPP) (log) (lag)	-0.869** (-3.06)	-0.397** (-3.21)
Distance to border (log)	-0.084 (-1.31)	-0.027 (-1.09)
Distance to capital (log)	0.017 (0.19)	0.010 (0.27)
Average travel time to nearest major city	-1.092*** (-6.39)	-0.397*** (-6.11)
Mountainous terrain	0.394 (1.66)	0.124 (1.35)
Longitude	0.005 (0.32)	-0.002 (-0.25)
Latitude	-0.035 (-1.54)	-0.014 (-1.57)
Constant	-12.229*** (-3.86)	-4.962*** (-3.99)
N	143,000	143,000
Log Likelihood	-1,891.153	-1,856.610

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. T-statistics in parentheses.
Models include country and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the country level.
Geographic and resource variables included to control for spatial heterogeneity.

Table A2. This table is the full analysis of pro-government mobilization using logit and probit models with a binary dependent variable. Universities (log) and anti-government activity (log) show strong positive associations ($p < 0.001$) in both models, suggesting that areas with more universities and those experiencing anti-government actions are more likely to see pro-government mobilization. The consistency of results across both logit and probit models, along with their good fit (as indicated by Log Likelihood values), strengthens the reliability of our main findings.

	Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial 1	Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial 2
	<i>Pro-government mobilization (count)</i>	
Universities (log)	0.213*** (8.48)	0.154*** (5.90)
Anti-government protest (lag)		0.125*** (3.89)
Anti-government spatial lag		-0.036 (-1.34)
Pro-Gov spatial lag	1.033*** (4.35)	1.099*** (4.81)
Cell population (log) (lag)	0.073 (0.95)	0.087 (1.14)
Gross National Income per capita (log) (lag)	-0.560** (-2.66)	-0.476* (-2.29)
Expected years of schooling for children aged 6 (lag)	0.087 (1.59)	0.055 (1.02)
Mean years of schooling for population aged 25+ (lag)	0.005 (0.08)	0.024 (0.34)
Life expectancy at birth (lag)	-0.024 (-1.21)	-0.013 (-0.69)
Average infant mortality (lag)	0.000 (0.08)	0.000 (0.39)
Urban area	0.080 (1.66)	0.077 (1.52)
Night lights (lag)	4.689*** (4.34)	4.920*** (4.59)
Excluded groups (discriminated or powerless) (lag)	0.143 (1.10)	0.195 (1.51)
Gross cell product (PPP) (log) (lag)	-0.608* (-2.34)	-0.749** (-2.65)
Constant	-4.106* (-2.43)	-5.112** (-3.10)
Inflate		
Cell population (log) (lag)	-0.605*** (-5.32)	-0.605*** (-5.19)
Gross National Income per capita (log) (lag)	-0.029 (-0.09)	0.048 (0.16)
Expected years of schooling for children aged 6 (lag)	0.399*** (4.12)	0.381*** (3.83)
Mean years of schooling for population aged 25+ (lag)	-0.287** (-2.75)	-0.276* (-2.55)
Life expectancy at birth (lag)	-0.103** (-3.03)	-0.097** (-2.79)
Average infant mortality (lag)	0.001 (0.86)	0.001 (1.08)
Urban area	-2.939*** (-3.50)	-3.228*** (-4.17)
Night lights (lag)	-40.587*** (-4.30)	-40.146*** (-4.15)
Excluded groups (discriminated or powerless) (lag)	-0.148 (-0.54)	-0.069 (-0.25)
Gross cell product (PPP) (log) (lag)	2.786** (2.98)	2.619** (2.72)
Constant	16.230*** (6.83)	15.671*** (6.53)
Inalpha	2.360*** (14.73)	2.335*** (14.56)
N	184,000	184,000
Log likelihood	-2780.749	-2756.469
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. T-statistics in parentheses. Models include year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the country level.		

Table A3. This table presents results from two Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial regression models examining factors associated with pro-government mobilization (count). The models account for excess zeros in the dependent variable. Key findings include a significant positive relationship between universities (log) and pro-government mobilization in both models. Model 2 introduces additional variables, showing a strong positive association between anti-government activity (log) and pro-government mobilization. The inflation part of the models indicates that higher cell populations and urban areas significantly reduce the likelihood of zero counts.

	Model 1	Model 2
	<i>Pro-government mobilization (log)</i>	
Universities (log)	0.038** (0.01)	0.019* (0.01)
Anti-government protest (lag)	0.036+ (0.02)	0.093*** (0.02)
Pro-Gov spatial lag	0.007 (0.01)	0.032** (0.01)
Anti-government spatial lag	0.002 (0.00)	-0.001 (0.00)
Tertiary gross enrollment ratio (log) (lag)	-0.189+ (0.11)	0.010+ (0.01)
Cell population (log) (lag)	-0.015 (0.06)	-0.012** (0.00)
Gross National Income per capita (log) (lag)	-0.023 (0.04)	-0.006 (0.01)
Expected years of schooling for children aged 6 (lag)	-0.000 (0.00)	-0.001 (0.00)
Mean years of schooling for population aged 25+ (lag)	-0.003 (0.01)	0.002 (0.00)
Life expectancy at birth (lag)	0.000 (0.00)	-0.001 (0.00)
Average infant mortality (lag)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (0.00)
Urban area	0.060 (0.04)	0.019** (0.01)
Night lights (lag)	0.075 (0.15)	0.083 (0.08)
Excluded groups (discriminated or powerless) (lag)	0.011 (0.01)	0.002 (0.00)
Gross cell product (PPP) (log) (lag)	0.197 (0.33)	0.009 (0.01)
Distance to border (log)		-0.001 (0.00)
Distance to capital (log)		-0.005* (0.00)
Average travel time to nearest major city		0.003 (0.00)
Mountainous terrain		-0.000 (0.00)
Longitude		0.000 (0.00)
Latitude		-0.000 (0.00)
Constant	0.494 (0.74)	0.179* (0.08)
Fixed effects		
Country	✓	✓
Year	✓	✓
Covariates		
Time-varying	✓	✓
Static	✓	✓
Clustering		
Grid-cell	✓	✓
N	23,565	23,565
Log likelihood	21,573.868	17,321.230
R2	0.154	0.211

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Sample restricted to grid cells with population > 200,000 residents.
⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A4. This table presents results from two models that focus on highly populated grid cells with more than 1,000,000 inhabitants as a proxy for urbanization, given that universities are predominantly located in urban areas. To further refine the analysis, we restrict the sample to grid cells with over 100,000 inhabitants (per 50×50 km) and re-estimate the models. This approach aims to enhance comparability by analyzing cities relative to other cities while allowing for variation in the number of universities. Importantly, we continue to control for population density to account for differences in city size beyond the specified threshold. As noted earlier, there is considerable variation in the number of universities across urban locations. While this restriction significantly reduces the sample size (see below), it provides a more balanced comparison of grid cells by ensuring that university effects are assessed within a relatively homogeneous urban context.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	<i>Pro-government mobilization (count)</i>			
Universities (log)	0.294*** (0.06)	0.316* (0.13)		
Universities (count)			0.003*** (0.00)	0.003** (0.00)
Anti-government protest (lag)		0.006*** (0.00)		0.005*** (0.00)
Population (log)		-0.129 (0.12)		-0.096 (0.10)
Urban Population (%)		0.020** (0.01)		0.017* (0.01)
GDP (log)		-0.514** (0.18)		-0.438* (0.17)
Oil Rent GDP (log)		0.099** (0.04)		0.101** (0.04)
Tertiary gross enrollment ratio (log)		0.013 (0.15)		0.106 (0.15)
Constant	-2.684*** (0.30)	2.842 (2.43)	-1.990*** (0.24)	2.339 (2.17)
Fixed effects				
Country	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1377	978	1377	978
Log Likelihood	-1540.355	-1028.677	-1539.098	-1027.787
<i>Note:</i> Standard errors in parentheses. All models use fixed-effects negative binomial estimation. + p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001				

Table A5 presents results from country-level fixed-effects negative binomial models, further testing the robustness of our main findings. The models assess the relationship between the number of universities and the count of pro-government mobilization events. Models 1 and 2 use the natural log of universities, while Models 3 and 4 use the raw count of universities to ensure the result is not an artifact of the variable's functional form. Furthermore, Models 2 and 4 include a comprehensive set of control variables, such as lagged anti-government protest, GDP, and population. The positive and statistically significant coefficient for both university measures across all specifications confirms that a higher number of universities is consistently associated with more pro-government mobilization at the country level.

	Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial 1	Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial 2
	<i>Pro-government mobilization (count)</i>	
Universities (log)	0.585*** (0.08)	0.441** (0.15)
Population (log)		0.184 (0.16)
Urban Population (%)		0.003 (0.01)
GDP (log)		-1.052*** (0.20)
Oil Rent GDP (log)		0.033 (0.05)
Tertiary gross enrollment ratio (log)		1.005*** (0.17)
Constant	-0.755* (0.35)	2.418 (2.99)
Inflate		
Population (log)	-1.089** (0.34)	-0.125 (0.34)
Urban Population (%)		-0.028 (0.02)
GDP (log)		-0.133 (0.76)
Oil Rent GDP (log)		-0.470+ (0.25)
Tertiary gross enrollment ratio (log)		1.131 (0.75)
Constant	16.481*** (4.98)	-1.655 (6.03)
Inalpha		
	1.611*** (0.21)	1.524*** (0.22)
N	1,547	1,203
Log likelihood	-1961.792	-1488.414
+ p<0.10; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Standard errors in parentheses.		

Table A6 further assesses the robustness of our findings using Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial (ZINB) models. This statistical approach is particularly well-suited for our analysis because the dependent variable, pro-government mobilization, is a count with a large number of zero observations (i.e., country-years with no protests). The ZINB model simultaneously estimates two components: a negative binomial model that predicts the count of events and a logit model that predicts the probability of having an excess of zero counts. The table presents two specifications. Model 1 shows the relationship between universities and pro-government mobilization, while Model 2 includes the full set of control variables. This shows that even after accounting for the high frequency of zero-protest years, a greater number of universities is associated with a higher count of pro-government mobilization events.