

# Non-Violence and Democratization

Can popular uprisings in autocracies promote political change and democratization? And do violent and non-violent uprisings have different consequences for the subsequent political outcomes? In this policy brief we summarize what recent research can tell us about how large-scale popular mobilization can undermine autocratic rule, and the prospects for subsequent transitions to democracy. While all dissent can bring down rulers, non-violent dissent is much more likely to bring about subsequent transitions to democracy, especially under favorable international contexts. We detail the plausible mechanisms whereby non-violent dissent promotes transition to democracy whereas violence is more likely to lead to new autocracies.

## Brief Points

- All dissent can bring down autocratic rulers, but violent dissent is more likely to lead to a new autocratic ruler
- Non-violent dissent is more likely to be followed by transitions to democracy
- The types of actors that are more likely to use non-violent tactics tend to go together with features that promote democracy
- Non-violent dissent tends to involve broader coalitions and pluralism while violent dissent tends to concentrate power
- Democratization is also facilitated by the international context, and is more likely after non-violent dissent when neighboring countries are democratic

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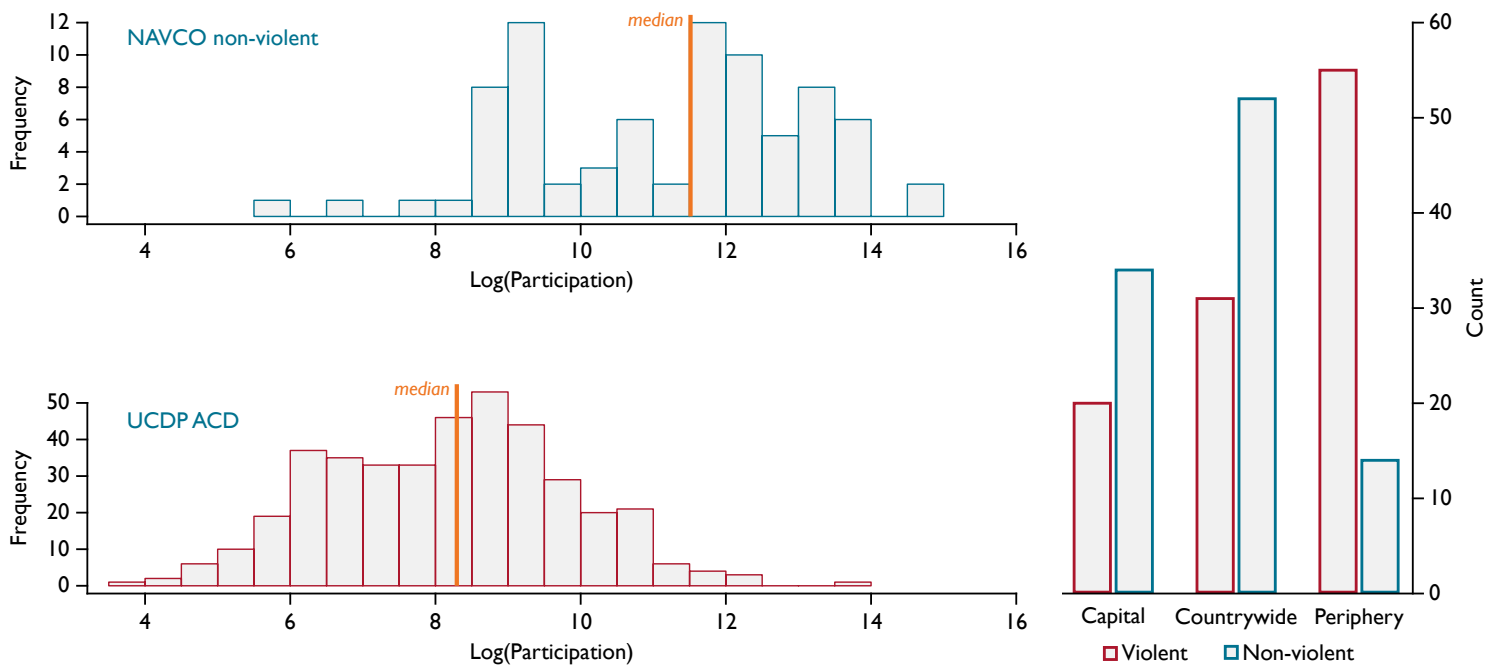


Figure 1: Logged participation in non-violent (top left) and violent conflicts (bottom left), with medians indicated by orange lines, and conflict location by primary method (right). The number of participants is generally higher in the non-violent than the violent conflicts. While violent challenges are particularly likely in the periphery, non-violent challenges tend to be either in the capital and major cities or countrywide (see Dahl et al., 2016, for details).

### Non-Violence, Violence, and Democratization

Much of the optimism generated by the initial events of the Arab Spring has now given way to a pervasive pessimism. In Syria or Libya, efforts to oust dictators resulted in extensive violence and subsequent political turmoil. On the surface, these developments seem to support the initial skeptics who feared that popular protest could succeed in bringing down dictators, but most likely would give way to new dictatorships rather than democracy, as in the 1979 Iranian revolution where the fall of the Shah led to a very different yet still autocratic Islamic Republic. Although Tunisia did see a transition to democracy following the non-violent demonstrations that toppled Ben Ali, the aspirations of real political reform after the ousting of Mubarak in Egypt were first quashed by the less than open elections, and then seemingly conclusively ended by the military coup against president Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, following renewed anti-government demonstrations. Beyond the most salient recent cases, what do we know from more general patterns and trends?

All governments are ultimately dependent on

at least implicit popular compliance in order to rule and maintain control (see Sharp, 1973). Maintaining control and implementing policy is ultimately impossible if a sufficient number of people refuse to comply with or obey the government's authority. The destabilizing effects of popular dissent on leaders are often exacerbated by elite opportunism, as many government supporters are likely to abandon a sinking ship and move against an unpopular ruler that is facing challenges. In addition, elements in the police and military may refuse to follow orders or to use force against popular dissent or upheaval. This makes it clear how popular dissent can potentially undermine rulers, although it does not follow directly from this that dissent should bring about democracy, or that the mode of dissent itself should be of any importance if all dissent is threatening to rulers. We detail below a number of reasons for which non-violent dissent is much more likely to help bring about democracy.

First, dissent varies dramatically in size and impact. In practice, non-violent dissent is only feasible when groups can mobilize large numbers, whereas violent dissent can be feasible with a small number of militants. Common data sources, shown more systematically in the left

panels in Figure 1, demonstrate that non-violent dissent in practice tends to involve much larger numbers of active participants than violent conflict. The median size of non-violent campaigns is 100,000, while the average civil war is only about 4000, and terrorist groups tend to be smaller still (see Dahl et al., 2016). Although large-scale non-violent dissent can be very difficult to organize, it has greater potential power through potential large numbers, due to the low barriers to participation and decreasing risks to individual participants as the campaign grows (e.g., DeNardo, 1985).

Second, whereas violent dissent tends to be confined to periphery or covert action, non-violent dissent tends to take place in urban areas, close to the center of government power. The right panel in Figure 1 demonstrates the systematic differences in location for violent and non-violent dissent, based on data discussed in Dahl et al. (2016). This difference in location may arise due to differences in the aims and social bases that dissident movements recruit from. For example, dissent that seeks to topple the government and can recruit large numbers in cities are likely to have a comparative advantage in non-violent coercion, while an ethnically distinct separatist

movement may be unable to mobilize outside the group's homeland and see violence as its best option. Our main concern here is how urban locations combined with large numbers of active participants translate into greater costs of dissent for the government. Techniques such as strikes and tax boycotts have often had a much bigger impact on a government than isolated bombings and small military challenges. For example, the dictator Ne Win in Burma was able to withstand ethnic insurgencies in the periphery for over 25 years, but withdrew from power when faced with large-scale civil disobedience in 1988.

Third, non-violent tactics focusing on more general claims such as democratization are often more difficult for leaders to repress than violent movements espousing narrow sectarian claims. The use of violence tends to alienate potential sympathizers and prevent identification with the movement and its participants among individuals in the security apparatus, but the military and police are often reluctant to follow orders to use force against large-scale non-violent mobilization. For example, the efforts to use the military to crack down on protest after the 1991 coup in the Soviet Union largely failed, as soldiers and commanders refused to comply with government orders.

Finally, whereas all kinds of dissent can be destabilizing to a regime to different degrees, the mode of dissent also influences the prospects for democratization in the aftermath. Non-violent dissent is usually less hierarchical than violent movements, and tends to lead to a dispersion of power among many actors and increase the incentives for pluralist cooperation in ways that favor democracy. In those cases where violent dissent has been successful in toppling leaders, it has in practice usually produced either a concentration of power around the new leadership, or a highly unstable dispersion of the means of coercion among many actors willing to use force, as seen in the case of Libya where the central government has largely disintegrated amidst violence by rival factions.

In Rivera & Gleditsch (2013), we provide a more formal statistical analysis of the effects of dissent on democracy, and we demonstrate results that are consistent with the claims above (see also Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). We find that, on average, the odds of a transition from autocracy to democracy in a country increases by a factor above 5 in the presence of a non-violent campaign. By contrast, violent campaigns have no discernable

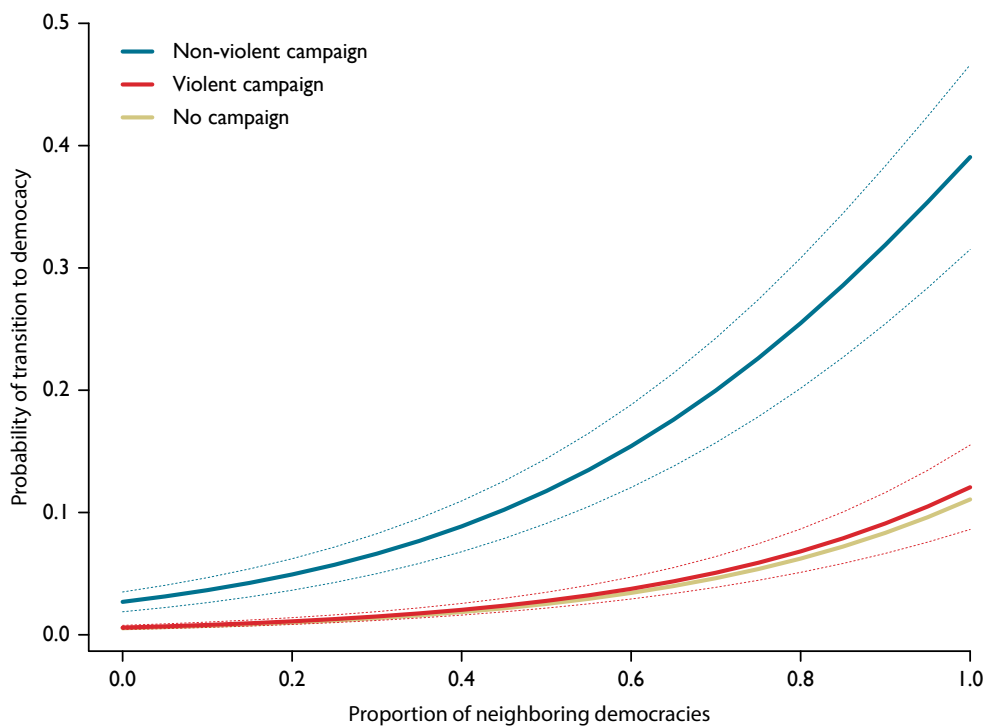


Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of transition to democracy by campaign type and proportion of neighboring democracies with confidence intervals, based on Rivera & Gleditsch (2016).

impact on transitions to democracy, but make transitions to new autocracies more likely.

We also consider the possible role of international factors in democratization that provide some insights to explain the scale of the challenge to democratization in the Arab Spring. Following Gleditsch & Ward (2006), we know that democracy and transitions to democracy are much more common when neighboring states are democratic. Rivera & Gleditsch (2013) show that non-violent campaigns are more likely to result in transitions to democracy when neighboring states are democratic. Figure 2 displays the predicted likelihood of democratic transitions based on our results given the type of dissent and the proportion of neighboring democracies. Although a more democratic neighborhood makes transition to democracy somewhat more likely when we have violent dissent, the expected impact is much lower than for non-violent uprisings. Although these relationships are obviously probabilistic rather than deterministic, they underscore the major challenges to democratization faced after the Arab Spring, where at the time of the uprisings at best only Israel, Lebanon, and Turkey could be considered to be democracies or have democratic traditions in the region.

### The Future of Non-Violence and Democratization

The challenges to the Arab Spring and the extensive violence in the region have given way to widespread pessimism. More generally, the pressures for political reform in autocracies have often led to governments responding with rigged and fraudulent elections to maintain their hold on power, rather than genuine democratic competition and transitions. However, we believe that the outlook for the future of non-violent dissent and democratization still provides room for more optimism.

First, we know that there is an increase in the number of non-violent uprisings, and that there has been a decrease in the number of violent civil wars (see Figure 3). The decline in violent conflict has received a great deal of attention (e.g., Pinker, 2011), and some argue that progress in greater ethnic inclusion and better conflict management have decreased the motives and facilitating factors that have often promoted violent conflict in the past (see Cederman et al., 2013; Cederman et al., 2016). The increase in non-violent uprisings suggests that actors in many autocracies retain clear political grievances, but that the opportunity structures that dissidents

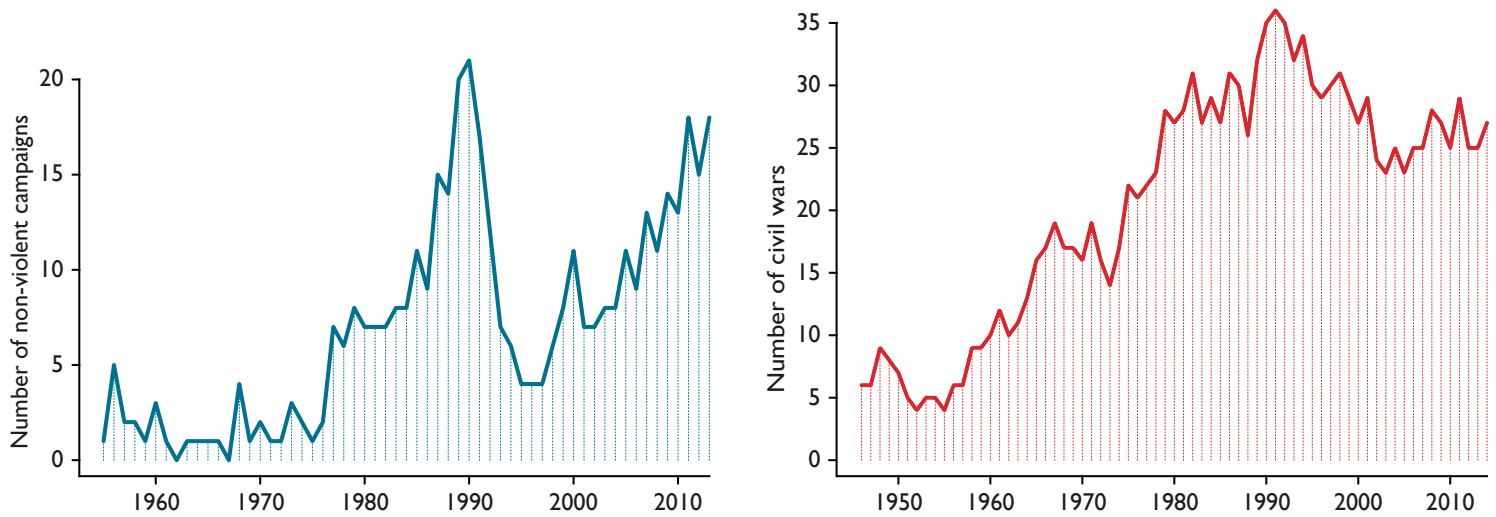


Figure 3: Non-violent campaigns from major episodes of non-violent contention data (left, Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2015) and civil wars from the Uppsala/PRIO armed conflict data (right, Gleditsch et al. 2002).

face make non-violent tactics a more promising alternative than the use of violence. Fraudulent elections, for example, have often motivated non-violent mobilizations after the Cold War.

Second, just as democracy tends to diffuse, so do non-violent uprisings (see Gleditsch & Rivera, 2016). Although the grievances from autocratic rule and political exclusion are constant, events and changes in other countries can help foster mobilization through providing focal points and emulation of tactics that have been successful elsewhere, as seen in both the 1989 revolutions and in the Arab Spring.

Third, as shown by the efforts to topple Milošević in Serbia, initial failures can still leave important legacies, and inspire future attempts that try to improve on previous efforts and eventually see success. Although transitions to democracy remain difficult and non-violent efforts often do not succeed, we are likely to see increased pressure for reform. In the short run, many autocracies survived the Arab Spring, but they have also been

forced to offer concessions that were previously unthinkable, with more people than ever mobilized (see Lynch, 2014). As such, the long-term effects of the Arab Spring remain more open. ■

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### THE PROJECT

The project 'Effective Non-Violence? Resistance Strategies and Political Outcomes', supported by the Research Council of Norway, examines conditions that foster the use of non-violent as opposed to violent tactics, focusing on specific actors and organizations, constituencies, and the state, and collecting new data on claims and tactics in territorial and governmental disputes.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.