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Editorial: Pro-democracy movements in a comparative perspective

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Pro-democracy movements in a comparative perspective

1. Introduction

How does political activism in autocracies emerge? Why do political activists engage in social movements or civil society organizations and fight against dictatorship and for political change despite the high personal risk? And what are the long-term outcomes of such collective behavior? These questions are not new. But given the prominence of pro-democracy activists in Belarus, Sudan, Iran and elsewhere and the harsh reactions of incumbent regimes that frequently catch international attention, they are more important than ever. Two recent trends underscore the relevance of studying pro-democracy movements from a comparative perspective. Data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project suggest that the size and frequency of mass mobilization for democracy have risen steadily during the 2000s until the global COVID-19 pandemic temporarily slowed down pro-democracy movements (Figure 1, left panel). At the same time, authoritarian governments have shown less respect for human rights since the mid-2010s, making civic engagement more difficult (Figure 1, right panel). In a world that is ever more interconnected, it is essential that we understand the various expressions of pro-democracy movements, the impact they have across different contexts and how autocrats respond.

This Research Topic contributes to existing scholarly work that investigates political activism in autocracies from different disciplinary angles. Studying the emergence and endurance of political activism and social movements, scholars from sociology and political science focus on political opportunities such as regime structures, socio-economic context, and external support, as well as pre-existing social networks, previous protest experience, and existing communication channels to explain political activism. Anthropologists and ethnologists investigate political activism as a socio-cultural practice that is strongly rooted in local contexts while also being mobile beyond national borders. Researchers in the field of political psychology prefer to highlight personality traits, values, attitudes, and self-attributed personality characteristics to study individual activism. At the interface of these different disciplines, research on civil resistance and non-violent action has become its own field of study, placing primarily emphasis on skills and strategies (such as training or mobilization tactics) as factors of success for political activism.

The contributions in this Research Topic shed new light on the conditions under which political activism emerges and upon the effects of non-state, non-violent civil engagement on political change. It does so by bringing in conceptual clarity and studying so far understudied cases and developments both from a small-n and large-n comparative perspective.

2. Conceptualization

When going through all contributions, it immediately becomes apparent that there is still conceptual variation when political activism in authoritarian regimes is studied: is it civil society or social movements that social scientists should be interested in when studying political activism? With regard to the level of organization capacity, authors in this Research Topic such as [Nasibov](#) or [Stefes and Paturyan](#) clearly differentiate between social movements and civil society organizations (CSOs), while others such as [Pinckney and Chin](#) combine both concepts through the label transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs).

To enhance conceptual clarity, [Nasibov](#) disentangles from a theoretical perspective the troubled relations between civil society and social movements within authoritarian regimes. Building on the appropriation of Durkheim's differentiation between mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity, [Nasibov](#) distinguishes two types of solidarity: associative solidarity and action and collective solidarity and action. Civil society is proposed to emerge from associative solidarities (and their actions), while social movements build on collective solidarities (and their actions). Furthermore, associative and collective actions are identified to be progressive and transgressive, respectively. Finally, [Nasibov](#) hypothesizes on the relationship between civil society and pro-democracy movements within authoritarian regimes and their mutual absorption capacity.

3. Emergence

From the early days of the study of collective behavior onwards, social scientists have studied the factors that explain the emergence of political activism. Despite intensive coverage, however, there are still cases unstudied in the literature. [Ulas](#), therefore, analyzes the dynamics of social movements in the unrecognized states of North Cyprus, Abkhazia, and Taiwan. Like through a looking glass, the effects of domestic political-economic factors on movement emergence can be studied in these cases, as other well-known variables such as international diplomatic relations, NGO activity or multinational company pressures are more restricted due to these states lacking official diplomatic capacity. Comparing these cases, [Ulas](#) explains how non-violent, pro-democracy movements unfold under the authoritarian-leaning settings of unrecognized states with minimal international interaction or oversight.

Likewise examining domestic political factors as main causes, [Shahini](#) investigates the Albanian Student Movement of December 1990 from a historical-sociological and comparative perspective. The author explains the role of the movement during the country's democratic transition, highlighting the contribution of the university, the academic staff, and the student organizations and argues that structural opportunities provided by changes introduced in higher education during the historical sequence of late Socialism became beneficial for movement success.

4. Outcomes

As an alternative to those perspectives that argue that democratization is a project driven from the top down by political elites, this Research Topic shows that likewise successfully, civil society organizations can advance democracy from the bottom up. Three contributions substantiate this claim with empirical evidence.

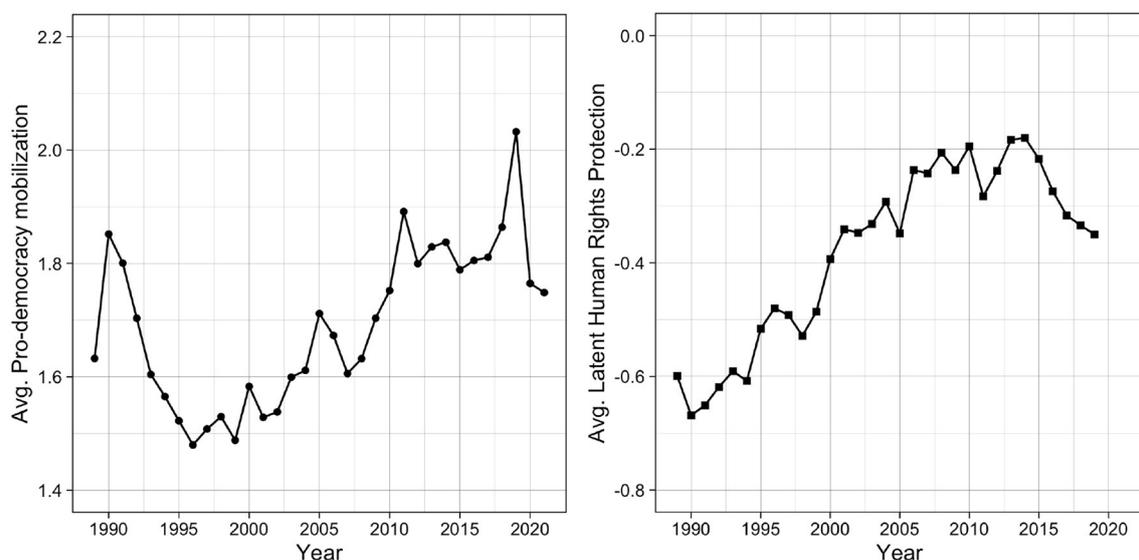


FIGURE 1

Average levels of pro-democracy mobilization (scale from 0 to 4) from V-Dem ([Coppedge et al., 2022](#), left) and average latent human rights protection scores from [Fariss et al. \(2020, v4, right\)](#) in electoral and closed autocracies.

While [Stefes and Paturyan](#) investigate the contribution of CSOs in Georgia and Armenia, [Zunes](#) studies small-scale activism in Brazil, South Korea and Kenya. [Pinckney and Chin](#), meanwhile, investigate transnational social movement organizations' (TSMOs) impact on democratization from a large-n perspective. All three studies find positive effects of organized political activism on levels of democracy.

[Stefes and Paturyan](#) examine the contribution of CSOs in Georgia and Armenia to the emergence of mass protests in 2003 and 2018 respectively, and analyze how civil society activists engaged with reform-oriented governments once the semi-autocratic leaders had been toppled. They find that the way civil society engaged the new rulers differed considerably. Whereas, in Georgia, many former civil society leaders were absorbed into the new government, Armenian civil society has kept its distance from the new political leadership. The authors argue that three conditions explain differences in engagement with the new governments: CSOs' pre-revolutionary cooperation with the political opposition, Western governments' support for civil society before and after the political transitions, and the degree to which CSOs represent and are rooted in the general public. As a consequence, Georgia's post-revolutionary regime lacked the checks and balances that CSOs usually provide, allowing it to sacrifice democratization on the altar of modernization. In Armenia, in contrast, CSOs have maintained a critical stance and continued to hold the government accountable.

[Zunes](#) brings to light the contribution of civil insurrections against dictatorships below the level of mass uprisings. Non-violent struggles of minor scope have, though not toppling regimes, nevertheless succeeded in forcing a series of legal, constitutional and institutional reforms over a period of several years that eventually evolved into a liberal democratic order. [Zunes](#) studies three cases empirically, Brazil, South Korea and Kenya—and explains how civil society activists were able to force, over time, autocratic governments to agree to substantive democratic reforms. Hence, democratization can also be advanced from the bottom-up, even in the absence of revolutionary change, [Zunes](#) concludes.

From a large-n perspective, [Pinckney and Chin](#) investigate whether and how transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) promote the international diffusion of democracy. The authors theorize that TSMOs empower and connect civil societies and thus promote democracy from the bottom up. Leveraging a new dataset on TSMOs and data on the dimensions of democracy from the Varieties of Democracy project over the 1953–2013 period, [Pinckney and Chin](#) find that TSMOs promote cross-border democratic diffusion. TSMOs are strongest at diffusing participatory democracy. TSMOs also contribute to the diffusion of electoral democracy indirectly by promoting the diffusion of freedom of association and freedom of expression rather than elections.

5. Conclusions

The contributions to this Research Topic propose original research on so far understudied cases and factors explaining the emergence and outcomes of political activism in authoritarian regimes. They particularly focus on the factors that drive civil engagement and the interaction of activists with incumbent regimes. All contributions attribute only a minor role, if any, to external actors for the empowerment of pro-democracy movements. It seems that in the selected cases, international or regional organizations, foreign democratic states and their agencies, international NGOs, or

activists in other countries do not play a substantial role in driving the emergence of political activism or influencing the outcomes toward pro-democratic political change. Following [Pinckney and Chin](#), it is foremost the transnational social movements themselves that diffuse democratic ideas. It is instructive that all contributors use middle- and large-n comparisons to deepen our understanding of political activism in authoritarian regimes. The Research Topic illustrates how the application of diverse methodological approaches such as large-n, small-n and single-case studies generates new insights into pro-democracy movements. Still, we find the distinction between explicitly pro-democracy movements that advocate a specific political program (and might not conceive of themselves as strictly oppositional) and movements that oppose a particular authoritarian or hybrid regime or political leader, without articulating a coherent political alternative, understudied and we suggest that more research attention be dedicated to this topic in the future. Moreover, more research on reactionary movements and their role in hindering democratization is needed. And finally, more can still be done to better understand and capture the role of leadership for the emergence, endurance and outcomes of pro-democracy movements.

Author contributions

SG initiated and coordinated writing this editorial while all editors contributed to it. All editors approved the submitted version of the editorial. All editors jointly compiled this Research Topic and oversaw the review process.

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