

# Midway evaluation prospectus

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# 1 Introduction

What is the role of mobilized ordinary citizens in building and protecting democracy? Take Poland for example, where collective action organized by the labour movement was central to the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. Often considered a success story of both democratic and capitalist transformation, Poland is now one of several previously consolidated democracies in Central and Eastern Europe that experience democratic decline. Under the so-called rule-of-law crisis, the ruling party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) has introduced laws that undermine democratic principles. This erosion of democracy under a legal façade has spurred a wave of protests and the formation of new civil society organizations such as the Komitet Obrony Demokracji (Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD)). KOD, which intentionally refers to the KOR (Workers' Defense Committee) and draws on decade long symbols of civil resistance in Poland (Karolewski, 2016), as well as other NGOs in Poland, have formed national and transnational coalitions for democratic defense (Moroska-Bonkiewicz & Domagala, 2023). Still, despite sustained pro-democracy mobilization and after almost a decade of democratic decline, PiS remains in power and Polish democracy is on the verge of breakdown.

The case of Poland is neither unique nor rare. In fact, the democratic advances during the third wave of democratisation have stagnated and reversed, and the world is now back to similar democracy levels as in 1986 (Wiebrecht et al., 2023). A wave of democratisation followed by an autocratic wave seemed to be the general pattern for states in the 20th century (Huntington, 1991; Strand et al., n.d.), but there is one thing which I argue sets the current period apart from previous autocratic waves which complicates the opportunity for pro-democracy advocates and calls for new research on pro-democracy mobilization. In the past, pro-democracy protests primarily occurred in autocracies or weakly institutionalized democracies (Brancati, 2016) and it is precisely from this empirical context we draw inferences about the efficacy of democracy movements. However, today, pro-democracy mobilization occurs in autocracies, hybrid regimes, and in previously consolidated democracies. There is a heterogeneity in the universe of cases across different time periods that not only calls for a clarification of scope conditions for previous research on pro-democracy mobilization. It also calls for new theories and empirical studies on pro-democracy movements in highly institutionalized regimes. What does concepts such as pro-democracy and movement success mean across different institutional contexts? What are the mechanisms that explain the outcomes of pro-democracy movements in previously consolidated democracies experiencing democratic decline? I argue that to understand when and how pro-democracy movements can promote and protect democracy using civil resistance, we need need to synthesize theories on how structural conditions shape mobilization opportunities with new research on the contingent role of actors in shaping the outcomes of these movements and theorize how pro-democracy advocates can succeed with different challenges in heterogeneous institutional settings.

The overarching research question of this dissertation is: *What are the drivers and barriers to pro-democracy movements success' across different institutional contexts?*

The thesis I advance through four independent articles is that while collective action organized by civil society-based movements have and continue to play an important role in the promotion and protection democracy, the efficacy of such movements is both highly context-dependent and dependent on the contingent choices of movement organizers. Theoretically, the thesis makes three contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, I move beyond testing how structural conditions predict the occurrence of pro-democracy movements, and theorize how they can shape features of pro-democracy protests and their likelihood for success. Secondly, by adding the institutional

context as an environmental parameter to existing theories that link civil resistance and democracy, I theorize how this changes the mechanisms that can explain when movements are more likely to promote or protect democracy. Finally, I develop a new typology for anti-backsliding protests; a unique and relatively new subset of pro-democracy protests. Anti-backsliding protests, defined as public displays of non-institutional political action such as protests, noncooperation, strikes, and demonstrations, directed at the government, where the protesters demand or display support for action that have the potential to halt democratic decline, are one way civil society can serve as the final line of defense for ailing democracies (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). In paper 3 and 4, I explore the conditions that make these movements likely to halt democratic decline.

The dissertation also makes three empirical contributions to the literature on pro-democracy mobilization. In article one, we provide a disaggregated approach to testing the relationship between oil and anti-state dissent, revealing that the relationship between natural resource wealth, contention, and democracy is more complicated and at times in opposition to existing narratives in the literature on oil and democracy. In article two, I provide new testing of the most common predictors of civil resistance success and show that some factors are highly sensitive to the institutional context of the country. In the final two articles, I present and apply the new DEMOCRAT dataset on protests in six episodes of democratic backsliding and show how features of pro-democracy mobilization can explain why some countries manage to curb democratic decline while others experience democratic breakdown.

## 2 Research papers

### 2.1 Paper 1: The Mobilization Curse? How oil wealth affects the composition of resistance episodes Status: Submitted

How does oil shape anti-state dissent? Building on previous research linking oil wealth to dissent, we argue that oil wealth depresses the participation of trade unions and civil society organizations in protest movements, while increasing the participation of armed groups, but only for very oil rich countries where the regime has sufficient means to repress or buy off dissidents. Using fine-grained data on the organizational composition of resistance campaigns in Africa from 1990-2014, we explore variations in the composition of resistance episodes in oil-wealthy, oil-moderate, and oil-poor countries. Our findings suggest that oil wealth indeed hollows out the civil society component of resistance movements, forcing dissidents to rely on more extreme and violent tactics. However, these findings only apply to states with high oil and gas wealth *per capita*. Countries with low per capita oil wealth but high oil dependency in terms of GDP may have more contentious civil societies and new oil discoveries appear to *increase* dissent by existing groups rather than depress dissent. Our findings highlight the importance of a disaggregated approach to unpack the mechanisms explaining the lack of democracy in oil rich countries, and the different challenges pro-democracy advocates face depending on the nature of the state's source of income.

## **2.2 Paper 2: Same Means, Different ends? Civil resistance effectiveness across different institutions**

**Status: Rerunning empirics**

Do electoral institutions condition the effectiveness of civil resistance? After global levels of democracy peaked in the early 2000s, the world is experiencing a “third wave of autocratization”, and pro-democracy protests are taking place in different institutional contexts with a higher frequency than ever before. Simultaneously, the effectiveness of civil resistance is declining globally, which raises the urgent question of when pro-democracy protests are likely to succeed. In this paper, I ask if electoral institutions condition the likelihood of protest accommodation. If civil resistance works because it signals new information about the size and preferences to the regime and its supporters, we need to take into account the existing institutions that inform the regime, the elites, and the population about the population’s private preferences. I argue that electoral institutions condition the revelation potential of larger protests, which is the ratio between the expected size of the opposition and the realized protest size. The protest revelation potential is the amount of new information about the opposition that can be revealed through protest and has the potential to change status quo. A lower revelation potential makes it less likely that a protest will be accommodated by the political elites. I test the propositions using global times-series cross-sectional data on pro-democracy movements and regime types. The results are mixed, showing that levels of democracy condition the effect of protest size, but both the effects of protest size and democratic institutions on movement success are highly contingent on other factors. The study is important for activists and scholars alike, as it improves our understanding of how civil resistance works and if and when it can be an effective weapon against leaders with autocratic aspirations.

## **2.3 Paper 3: Tearing Apart the Autocrat’s Playbook: Drivers and Barriers to Anti-Backsliding Protest Success**

**Status: Data collection ongoing, codebook attached**

Under what conditions can peaceful resistance provide a remedy for democratic backsliding? Global levels of democracy are back to 1989 levels and are still declining. Simultaneously, anti-backsliding movements are on the rise in autocratizing countries, and civil society is often highlighted as the last line of defense when institutions fail to prevent democratic decline. Examples from countries like South Korea and Ecuador show that these movements can sometimes successfully counter democratic backsliding, while in other cases such as Hungary and Tunisia the opposition failed to halt the decline and democracy broke down. To understand under what conditions mobilized actors can counter democratic backsliding, I build an original dataset called the DEMOCRAT data on protests in six countries that experienced an episode of democratic backsliding but vary on whether decline was reversed, stagnated, or if democracy broke down. The DEMOCRAT data sources protest events from ICEWS, and I add information on protest goals and actor composition. From the dataset I source information on features of anti-backsliding protests to understand how actor composition, goals, and spatial dynamics affect the probability of activating horizontal and vertical accountability mechanisms. The paper contributes to the growing literature on democratic backsliding and expands our knowledge on drivers and barriers to civil resistance success in democracies.

## 2.4 Paper 4: The Polarization Trap

**Status: Idea stage**

Does mobilizing against democratic backsliding sometimes have negative unintended consequences? Studies suggest that when nonviolent movements mobilize over polarizing issues it can trigger pro-regime counter-mobilization (Sombatpoonsiri, 2023). While pro-democracy mobilization on average seems to lead to better democratic outcomes, recent studies on the darker side of mobilization (**Dahlum et al**; Hellmeier & Bernhard, 2023) find that higher levels of authoritarian mobilization has a negative effect on democracy. The question I explore in this paper is whether protests against democratic backsliding can have negative unintended consequences for democracy by triggering pro-regime mobilization. The contribution of the paper is threefold. Firstly, using new data from the DEMOCRAT project on protest days in six countries experiencing democratic backsliding I source day-level information on protest themes to explore the frames pro-democracy advocates mobilize under in the context of democratic decline. Secondly, leveraging the variance in democratic outcomes across the six cases I explore if there are significant differences in protest issues between cases where democratic backsliding was curbed and democracy restored, and cases where democracy broke down or continued to decline. Finally, by combining information on mobilization frames and protester affiliation to the regime I test if certain issues are more likely to trigger pro-regime mobilization.

## 3 Summary of the progress so far

Below is a summary of the progress on other key elements of my PhD contract as well as data collection projects.

### 3.1 Teaching obligations: 1 year

I have completed my teaching obligations to the department. I have taught in SOS1002: Research Methods in the Social Sciences, POL2014: Specialization in Political Science: Comparative Politics, supervised bachelor students in comparative politics and one master student to completion, and graded exams. The remaining hours of my teaching obligations equalling three full months are deducted from the research stay at UCL due to NTNU's incentive arrangement to promote research stays abroad for its doctoral candidates.

### 3.2 PhD courses

The coursework, all approved by the SU faculty and equalling 30 ECTS, will be completed within the upcoming months. A table overview on this is included in the appendix. The coursework, especially the theory courses, was delayed during the pandemic due to course cancellations and rescheduling. I took a course on philosophy of science equalling 10 ECTS at NTNU to give me a language and framework to identify and challenge ontological and epistemological issues in the study of democracy and civil resistance. To improve my understanding of the comparative logic and causal inference, I attended the Empirical Implications of Theoretical Models (EITM), a two-week summer school on formal models, probability models, maximum likelihood, Bayesian inference, and experimental- and quasi-experimental designs. To better understand the spatial dynamics of protest and how to account for that in empirical tests, I attended a course on digital mapping for the humanities and social sciences at NTNU. Finally, the two theory courses will provide me with

a better substantial knowledge of the literature on democratic backsliding and regime transitions, as well as improve my theoretical framework for analysing shifts to and from democracy.

### 3.3 Anatomy of Resistance Campaigns

My PhD position is an RSO-position on the Anatomy of Resistance Campaigns<sup>1</sup> (ARC) project led by PI Charles Butcher which maps the organizational composition of anti-state dissent in Africa and Central America from 1990-2017. In the project I collected the data for Tunisia, Cameroon, Togo, and Ghana, and I also participated in weekly meetings, inter-coder reliability tests, and organized code days. I will be a co-author on the data release paper of this project, but this paper will not be included in my dissertation.

### 3.4 DEMOCRAT project

When I started working on paper 3, I realized that the type of protest data I needed to study my research question was not readily available in the literature. The data which best fit my typology of an anti-backsliding protest<sup>2</sup> either lacked the spatio-temporal coverage to study the cases of interest; democracies experiencing democratic backsliding in the 21st century, had a too high noise-to-signal ratio or lacked information on key variables to capture my theoretical mechanisms. To fill this empirical gap, I applied together with Charles for a Småforsk-stipend to cover the costs of hiring a research assistant that could help me collect the necessary data. This data collection project is called the Democracy Protest Actors (DEMOCRAT)<sup>3</sup> dataset, and the data collection for the six country cases<sup>4</sup> is expected to be completed by autumn 2023.

### 3.5 Research stay at University College London (UCL)

I spent a semester as a visiting researcher at the Department of Political Science at UCL. During the stay I presented articles from my dissertation to their Conflict and Change research group and in the PhD student seminars, and we also had a seminar on the DEMOCRAT data in their Conflict Analysis Lab (COALA). I combined my research stay in London with visits to other UK based institutions, including a workshop on conflict dynamics at Oxford University, the Conflict Research Society conference at Queens University, Belfast, and I also presented paper 2 for the HEROEs group at Essex University.

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<sup>1</sup>NRC number: 300458

<sup>2</sup>For instance the data on 310 ‘democracy protests’ that occurred from 1989 to 2011 compiled by Brancati (2016)

<sup>3</sup>Codebook circulated as attachment for any who might be interested

<sup>4</sup>South Korea (2007-2016), Ecuador (2006-2016), Hungary (2009-2015), Tunisia (2020-2022), Poland (2015-2022), and Brazil 2015-2022

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## 4 Appendix

### 4.1 Coursework

Table 1: Course overview

Course Name	Credits	Status
Philosophy of Science for the Social Sciences (NTNU)	10	Completed
Empirical Implications of Theoretical Models (UiO)	5	Completed
Digital Mapping for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NTNU)	5	Completed
Political regimes: Developments, Typologies and Consequences (PRIO)	5	Ongoing
Reading Course on Democratic Backsliding (NTNU)	5	Ongoing