

# Tearing Apart the Autocrat's Playbook: Drivers and barriers to success of anti-backsliding mobilization

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## Abstract

Under what conditions can peaceful resistance movements 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, Taiwan and Senegal show that these movements can sometimes successfully counter democratic decline, while in other cases such as Indonesia and Bangladesh civil society was not successful in countering democratic backsliding as movements aligned with pre-existing cleavages in society and could be coopted or dismissed by the regime. To understand under what conditions these movements can counter democratic decline, I build an original dataset on resistance movements in countries that experienced democratic decline. The paper contributes to the growing literature on democratic backsliding and expands our knowledge on drivers and barriers to civil resistance success in democracies.

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\*This is a very early draft, please do not circulate without the author's consent.

Thank you for reading this draft which will be a part of my PhD dissertation on pro-democracy protests. The data collection for this and the final paper received a research grant from the department, and I will begin the data collection when I go back to Norway in December. All comments are most welcome

To explain the varieties of contentious politics is also to explain a rare, contingent outcome of contentious politics: democracy

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*Charles Tilly*

# 1 Introduction

After the world experienced a third wave of democratization that left global democracy levels at an all-time high in the early 2000s, an autocratic wave is plunging and pushing new democracies back into authoritarian tracks. Moreover, democracies once believed to be consolidated are experiencing democratic decline and some democracies have even broken down and reverted to electoral autocracies. In the current climate, pro-democratic actors are not just pushing for democratization, but battling anti-democratic forces both within and outside formal institutions. Scholars of democracy movements have previously studied the efficacy of mobilizing for democracy in the context of autocracies, and research suggests that civil resistance is more effective in promoting democracy compared to no or other forms of resistance (Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Gleditsch et al., 2022; Pinckney, 2020; Pinckney et al., 2022). However, the shift in democratic trends and the rise of pro-democracy movements in democracies raises an interesting puzzle: under what conditions do civil resistance movements succeed in countering democratic decline?

This paper aims to study movements that seek to protect democracy from anti-democratic forces within the political institutions using civil resistance, and under what conditions they succeed. I define anti-backsliding protests as public displays of non-institutional political action such as protests, strikes and demonstrations, directed at the government, where the protesters demand action that if implemented have the potential to halt democratic decline. While existing research on pro-democratic movements have studied under what conditions such movements lead to democratization, there are few studies that systematically study the role of these movements in mobilizing in democracies against democratic backsliding; a gradual decline caused by elected officials within the political regime (Bermeo, 2016). Moreover, new studies suggest that the patterns of demo-

cratic decline in democracies do not necessarily mirror the patterns of democratization processes (Bogaards, 2018). Consequently, we need to understand the role mobilized actors can play in the context of democratic decline.

Opponents of democratic backsliding protest to send a political message to several audiences. In this paper, I focus on how protest can signal information to two particular audiences: the political elites and the electorate. Protest can have what I call the 'information effect', which can halt democratic decline in two ways. Firstly, campaigns can provide new information to the political elites which in turn pushes them to check the incumbent's behaviour due to fear of electoral defeat. I argue that this is more likely when activist moderates and swing voters partake in protest as it sends a strong signal about the preferences of the medium voter. Second, protest can signal to the electorate which in democracies have the opportunity to vote the aspiring autocrat out of office. I argue that this happens when protest takes place in close proximity to the voter, when protest happens in a climate that is more favourable to the opposition, and the constellation of protesters reflect a wide range of society.

To test the propositions stated above, I collected an original dataset called the Democracy Protest Actors data (DEMOCRAT). The DEMOCRAT data maps location, goals and actors in large-scale democracy protests in 12 countries that experienced some negative variation in their democracy score from 1990-2022. This creates an event-level dataset that maps the composition of resistance, and whether the goal was to build, protect, or remove democratic institutions.

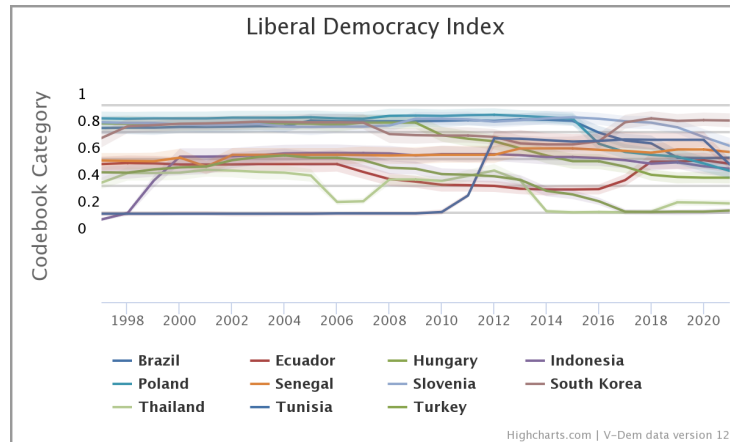
The paper is structured as follows. I start by outlining existing research on democratic decline and the role of civil society in mobilizing for democracy. Following this, I draw on the literature on movements, mass mobilization, and civil resistance to theorize when these movements should arise, and under what conditions anti-backsliding movements could counter democratic decline. I also discuss the aspect of mobilizing in a polarized context, and how this can condition the prospects of success for anti-backsliding movements. I then move on to data and methodology where I introduce the DEMOCRAT data, and present the results from the analyses. Finally, I summarize the findings and discuss the theory in light of the results.<sup>1</sup>

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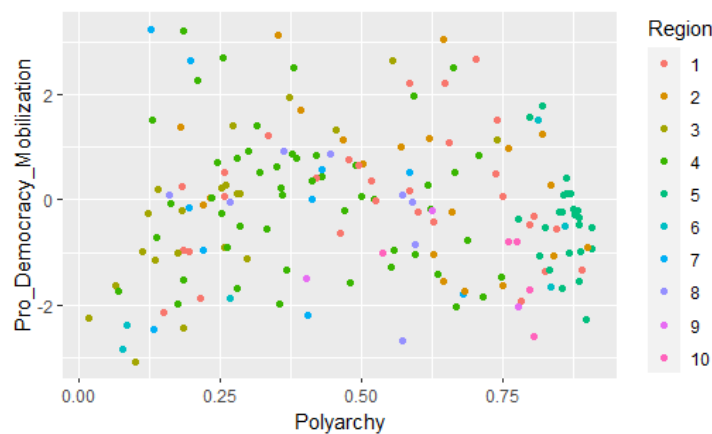
<sup>1</sup>Results and conclusions are not presented as the data collection is ongoing

## 2 Previous research

Most of the quantitative literature on how civil resistance promotes democracy has studied how pro-democracy mobilization can promote sustainable democratization. The literature on how civil resistance promotes democratization can be summarized into two main findings. Firstly, mass nonviolent resistance is more likely to bring about democratic transitions compared to violent resistance or no resistance (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994; Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Lambach et al., 2020; Pinckney, 2020). Secondly, after a transition initiated by mass nonviolent resistance has occurred, the country is less likely to experience democratic decline (Bayer et al., 2016; Kadivar, 2018; Lambach et al., 2020). However, pro-democracy protests, which can be defined as "mass public demonstrations in which the participants demand countries install or uphold open and competitive elections" (Brancati, 2014, p. 1504) also contain another subset of protest; protests against democratic backsliding.



(a)



(b)

Figures 1a and 1b presented above show two trends that call for a closer look at pro-democracy protests in the context of democratic decline. Figure 1a<sup>2</sup> visualize the development in liberal democracy scores across eleven country cases that had all survived Samuel Huntington’s famous two-turnover test, making them consolidated democracies with extreme low risks of experiencing democratic breakdown. In the past decade, several previously consolidated democracies began to experience democratic decline. Simultaneously, as visualized in figure 1b using data on levels of pro-democracy mobilization by Hellmeier and Bernhard (2022), pro-democracy protests are not taking place in non-democratic states. Pro-democracy actors are taking to the streets to mobilize for democracy across all regions in a variety of institutional contexts. In previously consolidated democracies such as

The nature of democratic backsliding has changed from open-ended coups to more covert forms of subversion (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018) driven primarily by elected officials within political institutions (Diamond, 2021). I follow Haggard and Kaufman (2021) in their definition of democratic backsliding: “Democratic backsliding is the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments” (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 27). Following this definition, the movements studied in this paper are mobilized actors that protest or demonstrate in large numbers to prevent the subversion of democratic institutions and norms, and their demands are directed at the government. Examples of such movements include the Candlelight protests against former president Park Geun-hye in Korea, and the Tunisian National Salvation Front’s protests against president Kais Saied after the constitutional changes allowing him to further control executive power.

There is a growing body of literature on how opposition can successfully counter democratic decline, and potential perils to mobilization. Mass protests against corruption pushed the parliamentary to impeach Park Geun-hye in South Korea, and contributed to Rafael Correa’s decision to not run for re-election despite having successfully removed constitutional checks on term limits in Ecuador (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). In Indonesia in the early 2010s, civil society resistance against political elites driving democratic decline retarded democratic decline (Mietzner, 2021). In Malawi, the Forum for the Defence of the Constitution mobilized against attempts to change the

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<sup>2</sup>Data on liberal democracy scores sourced from Coppedge et al. (2022)

constitution which would change access to executive power (Rakner, 2021), and the Y'en a marre youth movement in Senegal was particularly important in the successful mobilization of tens of thousands of people that protested former president Abdoulaye Wade's attempt to bypass constitutional checks on term limits (Wienkoop, 2022). In Taiwan in 2014, an estimated 500 000 people took to the streets to protest against government's decision to sign a service-trade agreement with mainland China, which critics argued would restrict democratic rights such as freedom of speech (Croissant & Kim, n.d.).

When civil society is allowed space to operate freely, it is possible to organize counter-mobilization against aspiring autocrats (Bermeo, 2016). Civil society can serve as diagonal accountability for democratically elected politicians who try to subvert democracy (Lührmann, 2021). Laebens and Lührmann (2021) found that parliamentary and judicial oversight, pressures from civil society and the media, and competition between parties and within parties played a key role in stopping further democratic erosion in Benin, Ecuador and South Korea.

However, there are several questions left open when it comes to anti-backsliding movements. Brancati (2014) find that pro-democracy campaigns are not significantly more likely to occur when democracy is on the decline, and we know little about who joins protests against democratic decline when they occur. Furthermore, when they do occur they are not always successful. Lorch (2021) argues that in weakly institutionalized democracies civil society organizations may fail to prevent democratic decline if they are easily captured by political elites. Moreover, a way for incumbents to remove institutional checks and balances on executive power is to subtly censor and harass media and restrict civil society (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2018). In Indonesia, incumbents have capitalized on polarization to justify increased illiberal measures which reduced resources available to civil society activists organizing protests (Mietzner, 2021). Hellmeier and Bernhard (2022) contributes to the role of civil society in promoting democracy by distinguishing between pro-democracy and pro-autocracy campaigns. They find that while pro-democracy movements improve democracy, pro-autocracy mobilization lowers the democracy scores of countries.

Few studies are published on how movements respond to these more subtle forms of democratic subversion, how this shapes their composition and consequently their opportunity to serve as

diagonal accountability for aspiring autocrats. Furthermore, existing datasets on protest either lack the temporal scope to study the current trends in pro-democracy movements or have a too high noise-to-signal ratio to study the efficacy of this particular subset of democracy protests. This article pushes our theoretical understanding of when movements succeed in countering democratic decline as well as contributes to the empirical literature on protests. In the next section, I theorize under what conditions pro-democracy movements are likely to succeed in this new context of democratic decline.

### **3 Theory**

Anti-backsliding protests ultimately seek to halt democratic decline, but democracy movements can have a variety of goals and interests. In this paper, I focus on two particular pathways protests can stop the erosion of democracy by elected incumbents while acknowledging that protests can also have a positive impact on a wider array of outcomes that over time could also be important for curbing democratic decline such as feelings of efficacy and cognitive liberation (McAdam et al., 2001; Wallace et al., 2014). I focus the potential of protest to signal information that can be observed and contribute to a shift in behaviour of two particular audiences: the political elites and the electorate.

#### **3.1 The Information Effect**

Why and how can protest check aspiring autocrats? Building on Kuran (1991)’s and Lohmann (1993)’s work on signalling models, I argue that anti-backsliding protest is effective when it signals new information about widespread dissatisfaction with the political status quo. I label this the information effect. The information effect can influence the outcome of protest in two ways. Firstly, protest can signal new information to the regimes pillars of support which incentivizes key supporters to check the incumbent’s behaviour or increase the incumbent’s fear of electoral backlash. Secondly, protest can signal new information to the electorate about democratic violations and potential for opposition against electoral autocrats. Pro-democracy advocates can signal their

dissatisfaction with the political status quo through a visible form of political action; protest.

### **3.1.1 Targeting pillars of support**

In all states, the regime relies on the support of a set of key supporters to stay in power (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2011), and in democracies politicians can be significantly affected by preceding protest activity (Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2012). When protest occurs, we assume that political elites take a cue from the movement (Lohmann, 1993) to assess the potential costs of continued protest and either choose to continue to support the regime or defect (DeNardo, 2014). Chenoweth et al. (2022) argue that even small or medium-sized movements can be successful if they target the regime's pillars of support, and in particular if they target the least loyal supporters of the regime. They can succeed at this if they either directly deter the incumbent who by observing the protest fear electoral backlash and consequently changes their policy, or if the movement compels political elites to defy the incumbent (Croissant & Haynes, 2021).

I argue that the participation of some types of groups are more likely to signal meaningful information to the regime than others. The importance of the types of actors that participate in dissent is well documented in the literature on episodes of democratization. Pinckney et al. (2022) find that participation from everyday organizations in dissent increased the prospects of democratic transition. In non-democratic settings, the participation from civil society organizations that otherwise do not compete for political power sends a strong signal about the size and preferences of the opposition. This information is especially meaningful in non-democracies where individuals who oppose the political status quo normally engage in preference falsification (Kuran, 1991). In democracies experiencing democratic decline, political elites have more aggregate information about the private preferences of the electorate compared to non-democracies because of polling of voters and elections. Under such conditions, the decision for when they should continue to back the incumbent is determined by the degree to which they can be certain that the regime enjoys the support of the necessary majority to stay in power.

What kind of political action can provide information on whether the regime enjoys the support of the necessary majority? Lohmann (1993) argue that some activists will always take political



action and protest the regime, some will never oppose the regime, and some will only oppose the regime given their perception of the degree to which the regime realizes their individual bliss point for desired policy. Those who only under some conditions will oppose the regime are called activist moderates. Protest participation by activist moderates can provide information on the preferences of the median voter in a majoritarian setting. I argue that participation from groups that traditionally represent the median voter should be especially informative for political elites. If the number of participation by groups that normally represent the interest of the median voter increases, the leader and their supporters might infer that they would be better off shifting policy to avoid electoral backlash (Lohmann, 1993). Following this, I state the following hypothesis:

$H_1$ : Participation from activist moderates increases prospects of movement success

### **3.1.2 Targeting the electorate**

However, protests are not only observed by the regime and its key supporters. Even in the case of large protests, the majority of the population do not participate, but are rather observants of the dynamics unfolding between the protesters and the regime. In democracies, the individual voter observes the protest and then chooses to abstain from voting, to vote for the incumbent, or to support the opposition. Protests have the potential to shift the discourse and move the median masses toward an alignment with the movement's goals (Wasow, 2020). There are some studies that find support for how protest can shift voting patterns. Gillion and Soule (2018) find that protests that express liberal issues lead to a greater share of vote for Democrats in the two-party vote, while protests on conservative issues lead to a higher share of the votes for Republicans. In another study, Jonathan Pinckney finds that the Women's March following Donald Trump's inauguration as president of the United States led to a significant increase of Democratic vote share in the 2018 election (Pinckney, 2019). Protests serve as agenda seeding (Wasow, 2020) that allow the opposition to draw attention to violations against democratic norms and increase the salience of democracy protection.

There are several conditions that make it more likely that protest can signal information to

the electorate. One condition is the spatial dimension of protest as the proximity to protest conditions the likelihood that the information will reach the intended audience. Anti-backsliding protests should be more likely to shift the preferences of the voter if they take place in close proximity to the voter. In a study on support for LGBT+ rights, Ayoub et al. (2021) find that support increased locally after Pride, but this effect was bounded and did not diffuse nationally to areas that did not experience marches. In another study on the effect of urban riots on electoral behaviour, Leon-Ablan and John (2022) found that physical proximity to riots increased electoral turnout. Just as protest has the potential to set the agenda for politicians observing it (Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2012), it could also make democratic backsliding a more salient issue for voters. Democratic attitudes among voters tend to be fairly stable (Bartells, 2023), and in the context of democratic decline protests can reinforce the importance of democracy and induce dissonance for voters that support the incumbent. I therefore argue that the proximity of protests could affect the vote share of the incumbent, and present the following hypothesis:

$H_2$ : Districts that experienced protest were more likely to see an increased vote share against the incumbent in the next election.

However, as Lohmann (1993) argues some actors will always oppose the current status quo, and in democracies where protests can take place there might be saturation effects considering the likelihood that merely observing a protest will change attitudes. It could be that the probability of attitude shifts is contingent on other features of the protest. In particular, in contexts of democratic decline where issues may be polarized (Graham & Svolik, 2020), a convincing signal that might shift preferences could be protests that transcend existing partitions in society. I argue that protests that are comprised of a diverse set of groups which represent a variety of interests in society send a strong signal in particular in the context of democratic decline. Diverse protest coalitions increase the mobilization base for movements, and make them more difficult to dismiss (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Moreover, some scholars argue that one enabling factor for democratic backsliding is an erosion of the shared understanding of facts between citizens and representatives (Jee et al., 2021). In such a climate, a diverse coalition against the incumbent can

increase the probability that the protest observers will deem claims of threats to democracy as more legitimate.

$H_3$ : Diverse protests increase prospects of incumbent electoral defeat

Furthermore, several countries experiencing democratic decline also suffer high levels of affective polarization (Svolik, 2019). Voters with high levels of distrust towards political opponents are more motivated to distinguish themselves from their political opponents. A consequence of this dynamic is that they are more likely to adopt political positions that differ from their opponents and align with their preferred political party (Druckman et al., 2021). In such a context, it could be hard for movements to appeal to the electorate if they are perceived as unrepresentative of the interests of the majority. Following my previous discussion on activist moderates (Lohmann, 1993), I argue that participation by groups that normally represent the interests of the median voter should be more likely to shift voting patterns as these movements may be perceived as having less "extreme" preferences and be more representative of the median voter. If protests consists of groups without former political affiliations, they may hold more legitimacy as they cannot be accused of representing a political opponent, and thus be more likely to *shift* voting behaviour.

$H_4$ : Participation by activist moderates is correlated with a higher vote share against the incumbent in the next election.

## 4 Data

To test the hypotheses presented above, I introduce a new dataset on protests in countries experiencing democratic decline called the Democracy Protest Actor dataset (DEMOCRAT), from which I present both descriptive patterns and regression models to test the hypotheses. The most commonly used datasets to study the efficacy of protests lack either a temporal scope that covers the current period of democratic decline, information on the goal of the protesters, data on the location of protest, or information on the composition of protest which I argue are key dimensions for studying the conditions under which civil resistance movements can succeed in countering democratic decline. Without the opportunity to disentangle temporal and spatial dimensions from

the features of the protest itself, it is hard separate the different conditions that might explain patterns of protest efficacy. Below I present a table on existing datasets where I map relevant features of the data. Of existing datasets, ICEWS and GDELT offer the most promising coverage of the types of events this paper aims to study; anti-backsliding protests in the current wave of autocratization. However, both datasets have a high noise-to-signal ratio and require further coding efforts to narrow the scope of observations to the protests of interest and to cover all features of protest relevant to test the theory presented above.

Table 1: Dataset overview

Name	Temporal coverage	Spatial Coverage	Unit of analysis	Inclusion criteria	Location	Target	Tactics	Actor	Size	Goal	Potential outcomes to measure movement success	Cover pro-democracy protest
NAVCO 1.3	1900-2019	All countries (almost)	Campaign	>1000 participants, At least 1 identified organization, Maximalist	Most disaggregated: Country	Yes	Yes	Some information	No	Yes	Success (0.1) Limited (0.1) Failure (0.1)	Medium
NAVCO 2.1	1945-2013	All countries (almost)	Campaign-year	>1000 participants, At least 1 identified organization, Maximalist	Most disaggregated: Country	Yes	Yes	Some information	Yes	Yes	Success (0.1) Progress (1-5)	Medium
NAVCO 3	1990-2012	26 countries	Country-day	>1000 participants, At least 1 identified organization, Maximalist	Most disaggregated: City name	Yes	Yes	Some information	Yes	Yes	Some on economic impact	Medium
SCAD	1990-2018	Africa and Latin America	Events	Unclear Reported protest: "public demonstration in which the participants do not engage in violence, though violence may be used against them".	Yes	Yes	Limited	Some information	Yes	Yes	No	Medium
ACLED	Vary for each country	All countries (almost)	Events	Can be directed against several entities Does not include self-harm, parliamentary action, public displays of flags or prayers unless accompanied by demonstration any protest event where the protest targets the government, and where it involves at least 50 people	Yes	Yes	By default, additional information provided	Some information	No	Issue note	Has a sub-event type called agreement, could be linked	Extensive
MMD	1990-2020	All countries (almost)	Protest-country-year	a public gathering of at least 25 people with an expressed political motivation either opposing or supporting a a) central, regional or local government, or b) other non-governmental institution where information on date and location was available	Most disaggregated: City name	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	State response	Limited
MMAD	2003-2019	Autocracies	Event report AND events		Yes	Yes, in text variable	Limited (ordinal viol variable)	Yes, in text variable	Yes, in text variable	Yes	No	Extensive
ICEWS	1995-2021	All countries (almost)	Events, with info on how to aggregate	CAMEO	Yes (but needs fixing)	Yes	No	Limited	No	No	No	Extreme
GDELT 2.0	2015-2022	All countries (almost)	Events, with info on how to aggregate	CAMEO	Yes	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
USD	1960-2014	All capitals and major urban centers	Events, month, year	Unclear	Yes	Yes, in text variable	Yes	Limited	Yes	Some information from issue note	No	Medium

To test the theory presented above, the DEMOCRAT project samples protest events where non-state actors make claims against the government from ICEWS<sup>3</sup>. The events are collected from x<sup>4</sup> countries that experienced mobilization against incumbents trying to subvert democratic institutions. All events take place between 1995-2021. These country cases are selected because they vary across important dimensions that can explain variation in democracy, and they all experience some negative variation in their democracy score during the period of interest. However, whether each country experienced severe democratic decline and a subsequent democratic breakdown varies.

The DEMOCRAT data contains disaggregated information on protest that call for democratization, protests that call for the protection of democratic institutions, and protests that demand removal of democratic institutions. To collect information on protest demands, groups that participated in the event, if the events spurred further political action, and if the protest was accommodated, we conducted systematic searches to find and download newswires related to the protest using FACTIVA. These newswires were used to code types of democracy protests and actors participating in the event. The data are strings of text coded on a sentence level for two purposes. This ensured retraceability which provides an opportunity to check reliability and assess concept validity. After compilation, I have an event-level dataset with information on the composition of groups that participated in the event and whether the protest was successful.

## 4.1 Dependent variables

Note to the reader: I have not started collecting data on the DV yet, but what I would need preferably is municipality/district-level data for the countries I decide to code, and data on concessions to test H1. Some data is available out there on national elections from for instance the REIGN dataset, national election databases, vote share from the V-Party dataset etc, but would love to hear any suggestions you might have! If this proves difficult, my other solution is to test the effect of these movements on sub-dimensions of democracy that I consider particularly important for countries experiencing democratic decline such as free and independent media, associational

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<sup>3</sup>I am currently working on filtering ICEWS down to a manageable number of events that research assistants then will collect data for

<sup>4</sup>Cases I want to code: South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Turkey, Hungary, Poland/Slovenia, Brazil, Senegal, Tunisia, Ecuador, Venezuela

freedom, and judicial independence as these are often the first institutions attacked by incumbents driving democratic decline. In future work, I also hope I can use the data to study other trends as well such as protection of LGBT+ and other minority group rights, polarization and other form of political mobilization.

## **4.2 Independent variables**

To capture the participation of activist moderates, I source information on participation from everyday civil society organizations from the DEMOCRAT data. Using information on the participation of groups that had no political affiliation, I construct a new variable measuring the number of non-politically affiliated groups that participated in the event. Note to reader: I am not sure if this will capture what I want to capture, I'll talk more about this in the seminar.

To capture the diversity of protest coalitions, I source information on the number of types of groups participating in the event. I apply the number of types of organizations as a proxy for movement diversity.

Finally, to test how proximity of protest affect the outcomes I source data on location of the protest. Note to reader: ICEWS has the location data for each event which is one of the reasons I want to use ICEWS as a starting point, but sometimes the coding of location is very messy and in the middle of the ocean. Depending on how prevalent this issue is when the coding of goals and actors is done, cleaning the location codes might have to be added to the coding efforts. I will probably not train RAs to do that but outsource it to a company as it would not require any training, just identifying the cases that clearly makes no sense and recode the location to the city.

## **5 Results**

## **6 Discussion**

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