

## Mass Mobilization and Incumbent-led Regime Changes

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mass mobilization increases the likelihood of incumbent-led regime transitions.
- Nonviolent mass movements are linked to incumbent-led regime transitions of different kinds, especially liberalizing transitions that lead to a more democratic regime.
- Violent mass movements are more likely to precede incumbent-led transitions that do not lead to a more democratic regime, such as self-coups.

### Mass Protests and Different Kinds of Political Change

Mass protests and opposition movements are often seen as powerful engines of political change. They can result in revolutions, or might spur military coups. However, the impact of mass mobilizations on democratization, more specifically, may depend heavily on the nature of the mobilization.

Studies have shown that mass movements that mainly rely on nonviolent tactics increase the chances of democratization (Celestino & Gleditsch 2013; Chenoweth & Stephan 2011; Pinckney 2020). Some of this relationship could be explained by mass mobilization directly resulting in democratizing revolutions, as the nonviolent revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 or in Tunisia in 2011.

However, new research shows that mass protests influence regime change not only by directly overthrowing regimes through revolutions, but by reshaping elite incentives, and thus leading to a different type of regime transition.

### Mass Mobilization and Incumbent-Led Transitions

More specifically, new research (Djuve & Knutsen 2025) highlights how mass opposition movements and protests often bring about regime transitions that are, at least in part, steered by incumbent regime elites.<sup>1</sup> In other words, mass protests may lead those who already occupy the highest positions of power to change the political system “from within”. This can be done in different ways, for example through self-coups by the sitting leader or through incumbents negotiating a transition with pro-democracy opposition actors, and such processes can lead to both democratizing and autocratizing changes.

Djuve and Knutsen report a strong and clear relationship between mass protests and the probability of experiencing an incumbent-led regime transition. According to their results, the probability of experiencing such a regime change in a given year increases from less than 2 percent

to between 3 and 5 percent if the country experienced mass mobilization the year before.

This relationship is important, not least because incumbent-led transitions are among the most frequent types of regime change. According to the Historical Regimes Data (HRD), embedded in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, such transitions made up about 35% of all observed regime changes across the world between 1789 and 2019 (Djuve & Knutsen 2025).

**FIGURE 1. PROBABILITY OF INCUMBENT-LED REGIME TRANSITION WITH AND WITHOUT MASS MOBILIZATION CAMPAIGN**

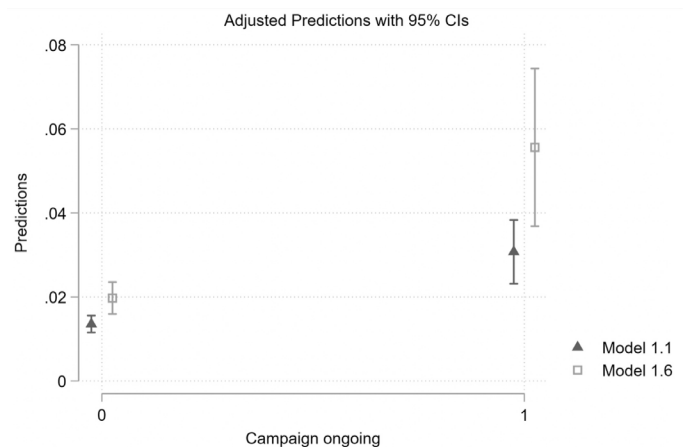


Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of experiencing an incumbent-led regime transition in a given year that is not preceded by mass mobilization campaign (0) or that is preceded by such a campaign (1) in the year before. Note that a predicted probability of, say, .02 on the y-axis means that there is a 2% chance of an incumbent-led regime transition occurring that year. The predicted probabilities come from a statistical model with few control variables (Model 1.1; marked by dark triangle) and another model with several controls (Model 1.6; marked by hollow square).<sup>2</sup> Source: Djuve & Knutsen (2025).

Djuve and Knutsen point to two very different mechanisms that may contribute to this strong relationship. First, mass mobilization of the opposition may exert decisive pressure on ruling elites, prompting them to negotiate with the opposition or to make concessions as a preventive measure by reforming the regime from within, hoping to avert a

<sup>1</sup> These findings are based on analyses of opposition mass movements and regime changes in 173 countries from 1900 to 2019.

<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Model 1.1 controls for level of electoral democracy, GDP per capita, population size, independent statehood, regime age, year-fixed effects and country-fixed effects. Model 1.6 expands on Model 1.1. by also controlling for GDP per capita growth, impartial state administration, urbanization, natural resource dependence, and size of the opposition campaign.

full-scale revolution. Second, mass mobilization of the opposition may, at other times, actually strengthen incumbents, giving them a “window of opportunity” to reshape the regime in their favor – for example by establishing a new regime that concentrates more power in the hands of the incumbent leader.

While both mechanisms increase the likelihood of a regime change orchestrated by the incumbent leadership, the exact nature of the transition is likely to differ. The first mechanism may lead to a democratizing transition, whilst the second could trigger an autocratizing self-coup. Which of the two mechanisms is triggered by mass mobilization could depend on several factors, in particular whether the mobilization is violent or non-violent.

### **The Different Effects of Violent vs. Nonviolent Mass Mobilization**

The relationship between mass protests movements and regime change, and in particular changes towards more democratic regimes, has recently received much scholarly attention. One key finding is that protest movements that employ nonviolent resistance strategies are more likely to achieve their goals or to lead to democratization (Celestino & Gleditsch 2013; Chenoweth 2020; Chenoweth & Stephan 2011; Pinckney 2020).

Djuve and Knutsen (2025) extend these insights by studying how movements’ use of violence relates to different types of incumbent-led regime transitions. They argue that nonviolent movements – which tend to attract large crowds and create fractures and divided responses within the regime’s elites – should especially increase the likelihood of regime transitions that are simultaneously incumbent-led and democratizing. When large swaths of society mobilize in nonviolent protests, elites may try to preempt a full-scale revolution by liberalizing the regime in a controlled manner (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006). This mechanism explains why democratization often occurs without full regime collapse, through negotiated reforms rather than revolutions.

Violent mass mobilization may, however, have a very different effect, according to Djuve and Knutsen (2025). They are likely to precede non-democratizing transitions such as self-coups. This is because violent mass mobilization can provide incumbents with increased support in reaction to the violence, unify regime elites against violent opposition groups, and serve to justify repression or power concentration, often with public acquiescence. Incumbent leaders can take advantage of this window of opportunity and change the regime into one where they hold even more power than in the previous regime.

Djuve and Knutsen find clear evidence that the use of violence in opposition mass protests is important for shaping the type of incumbent-led transitions that are more likely to follow the protests. While nonviolent mass mobilization is associated with both democratizing and non-democratizing incumbent-led transitions, violent mass mobilization tends to precede only non-democratizing ones.

While the latter findings are not as robust, there are nevertheless indications that violent mobilizations are used by elites as an opportunity to steer the regime in a more authoritarian direction. In contrast, violent mobilizations do not increase the likelihood of democratic transformations by incumbent leaders.

### **Conclusion**

Mass mobilization can shape political outcomes in different ways, including by influencing prospects of regime change. Yet, whether mass mobilization is conducive to democratization or autocratization, depends on the nature of mass mobilization as well as how incumbents interpret and respond to societal pressure.

Specifically, while nonviolent mobilization is related to incumbent-led regime changes, including incumbents changing the regime in a more democratic direction, violent mobilization is only linked to non-democratizing regime changes such as self-coups.

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Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) is a unique approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 11 staff. The project includes a worldwide team with 5 Principal Investigators, 22 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and more than 4,000 Country Experts. The V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.



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