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Only a Moment in Time? The Changing Effectiveness of Mass Mobilization on Transitions to Democracy

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Abstract

Mass mobilization is widely regarded as a key driver of democratic change, yet concerns about its declining impact are growing. We examine how the effectiveness of mobilization in prompting democratic transitions has varied over the period 1900–2019 using formal statistical models. The results reveal pronounced temporal heterogeneity: mobilization has a positive and significant effect on democratic transitions from the early 1980s to the mid-2010s, but no detectable impact before or after. Leader turnover and coup attempts have been more likely to follow mobilization up to the Arab Spring, yet the increasing impact of mobilization after the 1980s is unique to democratization. Trends in commonly cited structural conditions for

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

democracy do not align with the observed variation in mobilization's effectiveness. These findings challenge assumptions of time-invariant effects and highlight the importance of accounting for temporal variation in processes of democratization and political change.

Keywords
mass mobilization, democratization, democratic transitions, timevarying effects, political change

Introduction

A substantial body of research finds that mass mobilization can destabilize dictatorships and promote democratic change (see, e.g., Bayer et al., 2016; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Kadivar, 2018; Kim & Kroeger, 2019; Rivera Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013).[1] These findings have fostered optimism about mass mobilization as a pathway to democracy. However, recent research suggests mass mobilization has become less effective in achieving political objectives in recent decades. Chenoweth (2020, p. 75) reports that the success rate of nonviolent mobilization declined to only 34% after 2010, compared to over 65% in the 1990s (see also Chenoweth et al., 2022). The Arab Spring uprisings likewise fell short of initial expectations; many rulers remained in power, and political change often resulted in authoritarian restoration and intensified repression rather than democracy or reform (see Sadiki, 2015). Similarly, the color revolutions inspired by the fall of Slobodan Milošević in Yugoslavia are widely viewed as having failed to produce sustained democratization (see Mitchell, 2022). Yet the claims of a temporal decline in the effectiveness of mobilization rest largely on descriptive patterns and smoothed trends, and do not adequately account for uncertainty or potential confounding factors.

We reassess the evidence for changing effectiveness of mass mobilization on democratic transitions using formal statistical tests of temporal model heterogeneity and a time-varying coefficient model (see Hastie et al., 2009; Hastie & Tibshirani, 1993). We extend the analysis to 1900–2019, and draw on new and more detailed information on mass mobilization from the Opposition Movements and Groups (OMG) dataset (see Dahl et al., 2025). We evaluate not only the alleged recent decline in effectiveness, but also variation across earlier periods. This approach allows us to examine whether the relationship between mass mobilization and democratic transitions is stable or a

historically confined association, shaped by conditions specific to certain periods.

We find that the positive effect of mass mobilization on democratic transitions in the aggregate masks considerable variation over time. A clear positive and significant association emerges in the early 1980s, peaks in the late 1990s, and declines thereafter, with no discernible effect in the post-Arab Spring period. The recent decline is therefore not historically unprecedented; rather it is the period from the early 1980s to the early 2010s that stands out as a remarkable moment in time, where mass mobilization frequently preceded democratic transitions. We also show that temporal heterogeneity is more pronounced for mass mobilization than for other commonly cited predictors of democratic transitions, and the observed changes cannot simply be attributed to changing regime stability or waves of transitions.

Our key results are robust across alternative measures, outcomes, and model specifications. Counterfactual simulations further indicate that these temporal patterns cannot be attributed to a small number of mobilization episodes or democratic transitions, as a substantial share of cases would need to change to overturn the trends. The findings extend to broader measures of democratic change beyond transitions. They also do not depend on restrictive coding criteria for mobilization or the exclusion of campaigns involving violence.

Complementary analyses of leadership turnover show that although mass mobilization was associated with an increased likelihood of leadership removal for most of the 20th century, this relationship attenuates and becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero after 2010. The waning of a discernible effect of mobilization in removing autocratic rulers from the Arab Spring marks a sharper break from historical patterns than the decline observed for democratic transitions. We observe similar changes over time for the effect of mass mobilization on coup attempts, although the positive effect of mobilization on coups declines earlier in the 1990s. This suggests that rulers appear to be less sensitive to elite defection or losing power when faced with mobilization after the Arab Spring, but whereas mobilization historically has promoted autocratic leader changes the positive impact of transitions to democracy is confined to a brief moment in time from the early 1980s up to the 2010s.

Existing research focusing on the aggregate appears to capture a historically confined "golden age" where mass mobilization preceded democratic transitions rather than a stable general relationship. This raises questions about why mass mobilization appears particularly effective in promoting democracy during this period but not before or in the current period, as well why autocracies seem less vulnerable to mass mobilization after the Arab

Spring. We further show that changes over time in the effectiveness of mobilization on transitions to democracy do not align with observable differences in the location where mobilization occurs, movement characteristics, or resort to repression. Our analysis demonstrates systematic patterns of changes in the effectiveness of mobilization on transitions to democracy over time and sets clear empirical targets for a new research agenda on changes in mobilization and democracy over time. We argue that it is unlikely that any single feature can directly account for the observed differences over time, and more compelling explanations may focus on the relationship between movements and the incentives of rulers and elites to support reform, as well as shifts in the international environment that shape the prospects for democratization following mobilization.

Mass Mobilization and Democratization

A wealth of studies emphasize how mass mobilization can challenge authoritarian rule and help foster democratization.[2] Our aim is not to provide an exhaustive review but to highlight the core mechanisms through which mobilization can promote democratic change and to draw attention to both the implicit assumption in prior research that these mechanisms are stable and the limited consideration of how they may vary over time.

Much of the literature is empirical in orientation and focuses on estimating the effects of mass mobilization. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) and Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) show that nonviolent campaigns are almost twice as likely as violent campaigns to achieve their stated objectives, including the overthrow of dictators and democratization. Subsequent research consistently finds that mass mobilization increases the likelihood of democratic transitions, and these results appear to be robust across data sources, model specifications, and research designs (see, e.g., Hellmeier & Bernhard, 2023; Kim & Kroeger, 2019; Rivera Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013; Ulfelder, 2005).[3]

Several mechanisms link mass mobilization to democratic change. Mass mobilization can unseat autocrats and create openings for democratic reform, competitive elections, and institutional change. Competitive elections and democratic institutions may be more likely after nonviolent mobilization for several reasons. Because such campaigns tend to generate broad coalitions, there are fewer opportunities for any single actor to monopolize power, and more incentives for cooperation. Under these conditions, democracy and competitive elections can become a rational compromise and preferable to costly factional conflict (see, e.g., Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Kim & Kroeger, 2019; Przeworski, 1988; Rivera Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013).

Mobilization may also induce reforms short of immediate regime change. Large-scale protest and revolutionary risk often precede regime-led liberalization (see, e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Dahl & Gleditsch, 2023; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006). Incumbents may accommodate to try to reduce support for mobilization or prevent escalation. Democratic reforms and competitive elections can further provide embattled rulers with an attractive exit option, especially since leaders deposed through coups or revolutions frequently face severe punishment (Miller, 2021).

Mobilization can also expose and exacerbate divisions within ruling coalitions, increasing incentives for elite defection, and making political change more likely (see, e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001; Dahl & Gleditsch, 2023; Djuve & Knutsen, 2025; Geddes, 1991; Kim & Kroeger, 2019; Miller, 2021; Przeworski, 1991; Thyne & Powell, 2016). Elites anticipating change may attempt to reposition themselves as reformers (see, e.g., Pakulski et al., 1996; Río, 2022). Many former autocratic elites have successfully navigated transitions and retained political influence following liberalization. In Albania, for example, First Secretary Ramiz Alia called elections in 1991 amid rising dissent and capitalized on a weak opposition to secure a parliamentary majority. Former communist official Aleksander Kwaśniewski became president of Poland in 1995, and Maroš Šefčovič, who joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia shortly before the Velvet Revolution, has held various senior positions in the European Commission.

The form of mobilization may further shape political outcomes. Nonviolent campaigns typically facilitate broader participation, increase the likelihood of elite and security-force defection, and reduce the risk of militarized post-transition politics. Armed struggle, by contrast, concentrates organizational power within hierarchical military structures and heightens commitment problems among political actors, raising the risk of renewed authoritarian rule. Consistent with these expectations, research finds that leader removal is more likely following nonviolent mobilization than civil war (Gleditsch et al., 2023), and there is little evidence that armed movements increase the likelihood of democratic transition (see, e.g., Chin et al., 2023; Pinckney, 2020; Rivera Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013).

Finally, some scholarship emphasizes the limits of mobilization, showing that protest often fails to produce democratic change and may instead reinforce authoritarian rule (e.g., Bermeo, 2003; Bernhard & Edgell, 2022; Hellmeier & Bernhard, 2023; Lührmann & Rooney, 2021; Turner, 2023). Incumbents may respond to mobilization with repression and hardened resistance to reform. Outcomes following mass protest are highly uncertain and shaped by critical junctures and contingent sequences (e.g., Bernhard & Jung, 2017; Fernandes & Branco, 2017; Fishman, 2017).

Although existing research identifies diverse and potentially distinct mechanisms linking mobilization to political change, a common (and often implicit) assumption is that mobilization exerts a stable effect on the likelihood of democratic transition and that its effectiveness does not vary systematically over time. The frequency of mobilization may fluctuate, but prevailing theoretical accounts generally do not anticipate change in its relationship to democratization over time. Yet mobilization has remained frequent after the Arab Spring even as its apparent effectiveness has declined, a puzzle that existing work does not directly address.

Historical Variation in Democratization

A large literature documents temporal clustering and "waves" in democratization and regime change. Huntington (1991) famously argued that transitions toward and away from democracy occur in historically bounded waves, and subsequent research identifies substantial variation in transition rates and regime trajectories over time (e.g., Boix, 2011; Boix & Stokes, 2003; Djuve et al., 2020). One interpretation is that shifts in structural conditions alter the distribution of political outcomes: the distribution of outcomes Y changes as key determinants X evolve. Economic crises, for example, have been linked to democratic breakdown in the interwar period, while early democratic experiments in newly independent states often collapsed amid weak institutions and a high risk of military coups (see, e.g., Huntington, 1991). Apparent temporal differences may also reflect sample composition or truncation in empirical analyses; Boix and Stokes (2003), for instance, challenge the claim of Przeworski et al. (2000) that income does not affect the likelihood of democratization. They argue that analyses restricted to post-1950 data exclude earlier periods in which many high-income countries democratized, and show that extending the temporal scope yields substantially larger estimated effects of income on democratic transitions.

A distinct possibility is that the relationship between political determinants and regime outcomes itself changes over time, that is, the effect of a factor X on democratization Y varies across historical periods. Hermansen et al. (2021) emphasizes temporal heterogeneity in causal processes of democratization. For example, Przeworski and Limongi (1997, p. 166) argue that the likelihood of democratic breakdown is "practically zero" above $4,000 per capita (in 1990 USD), yet recent scholarship questions whether this relationship persists in the contemporary era, noting risks of autocratization even among high-income democracies (see Nord et al., 2025b). More broadly, pooling observations across long time horizons may obscure meaningful temporal heterogeneity, such that no single parameter estimate adequately

characterizes the relationship between political factors and regime change (see Hermansen et al., 2021).

Existing work on temporal change in democratization, however, remains largely descriptive. Observed differences across periods are rarely evaluated against statistical uncertainty or potential confounding influences. An instructive parallel comes from research on trends in conflict and warfare. If conflict outbreaks and their consequences are partly stochastic, observed patterns alone cannot establish trends; instead, plausible random variation must be modeled explicitly (see, e.g., Braumoeller, 2019; Cederman et al., 2017; Clauset, 2018; Clauset & Gleditsch, 2018; Cunen et al., 2020). Near-miss events, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, could plausibly have produced large-scale wars and altered observed trajectories. Distinguishing genuine temporal change from random fluctuation therefore requires formal statistical models that evaluate whether observed differences exceed plausible stochastic variation, compare effects across periods, and assess sensitivity to influential cases.

Modeling the Effectiveness of Mobilization Over Time

To evaluate whether the effectiveness of mass mobilization in promoting democratic transitions varies over time, we turn to formal statistical tests. We apply a one-way transition model from nondemocracy to democracy as a function of mobilization and other covariates commonly associated with democratic transitions. Conventional approaches assume that the relationship between mobilization and the likelihood of transition is constant over time. Our modeling framework departs from this by allowing temporal heterogeneity in both the overall specification and individual parameters.

Models of transitions between qualitative states have been central to research on democratization since Przeworski and Limongi (1997). Such models are well suited to analyzing transitions from nondemocracy and democracy as discrete outcomes, consistent with the often abrupt nature of regime change rather than gradual shifts in degree of democracy (see, e.g., Lichbach, 1984; Przeworski et al., 2000). We define a risk set of nondemocracies at time $t-1$ that could transition to democracy at time t, and estimate the probability of transition as a function of mobilization and other included covariates. Mass mobilization may also plausibly reduce the likelihood of autocratization or transitions away from democracy, but this constitutes a distinct question that requires separate analysis, beyond the scope of this article.[4]

More formally, the statistical model for transitions to democracy can be expressed as a generalized linear model:

$$\Pr(D_{i,t}= 1|D_{i,t-1} = 0) = f(\theta \text{NV mob}_{i,t}, \mathbf{x}_{i,t}\beta)$$

where D is an indicator of whether a country i is a democracy (1) or non-democracy (0) at the current year t or previous year $t-1$, NV mob denotes whether a country i is in a mobilization, the parameter θ captures the association between mass mobilization and transitions, $\mathbf{x}_{i,t}$ denotes a vector of additional covariates, β the corresponding coefficients, and $f(\cdot)$ indicates the logit link function. Our interest is both to estimate θ, the impact of mass mobilization on transitions to democracy, and to assess whether this parameter remains stable or instead exhibits systematic temporal variation over time.

We apply monitoring bridge plots to assess whether the model overall exhibits temporal homogeneity (Hermansen et al., 2016). Monitoring bridge plots provide a global diagnostic of model stability by exploiting the large-sample properties of the log-likelihood function under the assumption of parameter constancy (Hermansen et al., 2021, p. 491). The test evaluates whether the model remains stable as observations accumulate sequentially. Specifically, the procedure compares the maximized log-likelihood estimated over the full sample with the corresponding values obtained from successively expanding subsamples over time. If the relationship between mobilization and democratic transitions is stable across different time periods, the standardized deviations between these quantities should fluctuate randomly around zero and remain within known probabilistic bounds. Formally, the monitoring bridge process is defined as:

$$B_{n,j} = \sqrt{(n)}\left[n^{-1}\ \ell_{\,max,j} - (j/n)\widehat{a}\right]\widehat{\kappa}$$

where $\ell_{\,max,j}$ denotes the maximized log-likelihood based on the first j observations, $\widehat{a}$ is the full-sample estimate of $n^{-1}\ \ell_{\,max}$, and $\widehat{\kappa}$ is a consistent estimate of the standard deviation of $\ell_{\,n}$ scaled by $1/\sqrt{n}$. Under the null hypothesis of temporal homogeneity, $B_{n,j}$ converges in distribution to a Brownian bridge and remains within ± 1.358 with 95% probability. Values of $B_{n,j}$ that exceed this boundary indicate departures from parameter stability over time.

The monitoring bridge test provides a global diagnostic of temporal heterogeneity and evaluates whether the assumption of constant effects is supported by the data, potentially motivating subsequent analyses that explicitly model temporal heterogeneity. However, the test does not identify which parameters drive any detected instability, nor does it determine whether allowing coefficients to vary over time improves model fit. We

therefore next examine the temporal stability of individual coefficients through an analysis of time-varying effects within the framework of Hastie and Tibshirani (1993), employing cubic splines to model interactions between mobilization and calendar time with flexibility and precision. Because instability in the model could reflect time dependence in covariates other than mobilization, we also evaluate whether allowing additional predictors to vary over time improves model performance using the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), which balances improvements in fit against penalties for model complexity. For each candidate variable, we compare models with time-varying interactions to a benchmark specification without such terms. Shifts toward zero in the AIC score indicate a better fit of the model. Finally, we conduct a bootstrap analysis to assess uncertainty and evaluate the robustness of the estimated time-varying relations between mass mobilization and democratic transitions.

Data and Measures

We identify transitions to democracy using a dichotomized version of the V-Dem polyarchy index, derived from expert assessments of whether a country satisfies core features of electoral democracy, including clean and competitive elections (see Coppedge et al., 2025, p. 39). Following established practice, countries scoring below 0.4 are classified as nondemocracies, and we code a democratic transition when a country coded below 0.4 in year $t-1$ is recorded above 0.4 in year t. Baltz et al. (2022) compare alternative binary measures of democracy and their correspondence to continuous V-Dem indicators, and show that a threshold near 0.4 on the polyarchy scale maximizes agreement across data sets.

Mass mobilization is coded based on the Opposition Movements and Groups (OMG) dataset, which defines campaigns as "one or more related and temporally contiguous events of organized mass collective action within a polity unit, aimed at least in part at altering or stabilizing/strengthening the current political regime, removing the head of state or government, or altering the territorial composition of the polity" (Dahl et al., 2025, pp. 11–12). Campaigns are included if they mobilize at least 1,000 participants within a campaign year.

A key advantage of the OMG dataset is more detailed coding of campaign objectives and characteristics. This allows us to identify mobilization efforts more likely to be relevant to democratic change. OMG records campaigns advancing both liberal and illiberal claims. Movements that advance illiberal claims and seek to entrench undemocratic institutions obstruct liberalizing reforms are likely to promote autocracy rather than democracy (see Hellmeier

& Bernhard, 2023). We thus restrict attention to campaigns that explicitly advocate democratic governance or institutional reforms consistent with liberal democracy, including open and competitive elections, expanded freedom of expression, broader civil liberties, or strengthened constraints on executive power.

Most of the existing literature distinguishes campaigns by whether they rely predominantly on nonviolent or violent strategies (e.g., Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Rivera Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013). There is broad consensus that nonviolent mobilization is more conducive to democratization than violent mobilization (e.g., Chin et al., 2023; Pinckney, 2020). However, focusing exclusively on predominantly nonviolent campaigns entails several potential problems. First, there is limited agreement on what constitutes violence in mass mobilization, and discussions often conflate analytically distinct forms of violence. The Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data developed by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011), commonly used in existing research, identify violent mobilization largely on the basis of organized armed conflict. This approach excludes many forms of unorganized or incidental violence frequently observed during mass mobilization, such as clashes with security forces or property damage. Second, many campaigns involve both nonviolent mobilization and violent events, making mutually exclusive classification difficult and reducing agreement in coding (see Cunningham et al., 2017; Dworschak, 2023). Finally, empirical findings on relative success rates appear sensitive to classification decisions; reclassifying even a small number of campaigns can alter substantive conclusions (see Dworschak, 2023).

In our main analyses, we focus on all campaigns making claims for greater democracy and subsequently present complementary analyses distinguishing between campaigns involving nonviolent and violent events in the Online Appendix.[5] This approach allows us to assess whether evidence of temporal change depends on restrictive campaign criteria or is sensitive to the inclusion of campaigns involving violence.

To account for lagged effects, we consider an effect window for mobilization on transitions to democracy spanning active campaign periods and the subsequent two years. Political and institutional consequences of mass mobilization often materialize with a delay, for example when scheduled elections are held or new leaders assume office, making a two-year window a plausible horizon for attribution (see also Dahl & Gleditsch, 2023). Beyond this period, attributing democratic transitions to prior mobilization becomes increasingly questionable. The Online Appendix provides plots summarizing nondemocracy spells, transition timing, campaign duration, and post-campaign transitions.

Control Variables

We include a limited set of domestic control variables to account for alternative factors that may plausibly influence both mass mobilization and the likelihood of democratic transitions. There are relatively few established robust predictors for transitions to democracy, and correlates of democratic regime status do not necessarily predict the occurrence of transitions themselves (Boix & Stokes, 2003; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Przeworski et al., 2000; Rød et al., 2020). A similar pattern holds for mass mobilization, where there are few robust ex ante predictors, reflecting how successful collective action is often difficult to anticipate (see Chenoweth & Ulfelder, 2017; Kuran, 1989). A parsimonious model with covariates with broad coverage also limits problems of sample attrition due to missing data or short historical coverage, an important consideration given the long time span of the analysis from the start of the 20th century.[6]

We include the following controls: First, income may influence both the likelihood of democratic transition and the prospects for mass mobilization. Although higher income levels may stabilize autocratic regimes, they may also increase support for democracy and facilitate mobilization through greater resources and organizational capacity, consistent with resource mobilization theory. We therefore include GDP per capita (logged), using data from Fariss et al. (2022). Second, population size may shape both mobilization dynamics and transition prospects. Smaller countries may be more likely to democratize, whereas larger countries may be more prone to conflict, social fragmentation, or political instability in ways that reduce the likelihood of democratic transition (Alesina & Spolaore, 2003). We control for total population (logged), also from Fariss et al. (2022). Third, there is strong evidence of time dependence and consolidation effects in democratic transitions. Autocratic rulers are generally less likely to lose power the longer a regime has endured (Geddes, 1999; Svolik, 2012). Conversely, prior democratic experience increases the likelihood of restoration, particularly following relatively short autocratic spells (Nord et al., 2025a, 2025b). We therefore include a count of consecutive years under autocratic rule up to period $t - 1$, logged (with one added) to capture diminishing marginal effects over time.

Analysis

We start with a descriptive overview of trends in mobilization and transitions to democracy by year. The upper-left panel of Figure 1 plots the share of observations experiencing a transition from nondemocracy to democracy,

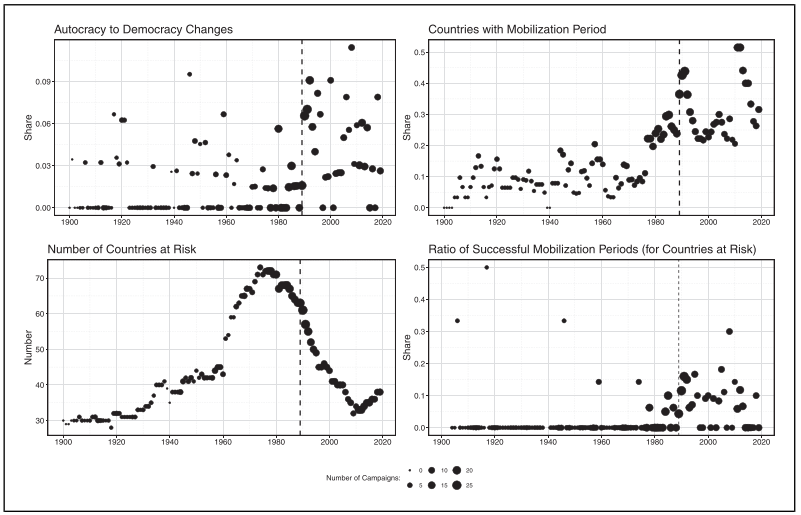

Figure 1. Changes from autocracy to democracy, 1900–2019

revealing substantial variation over time. Transition rates are generally higher after 1989, with fewer years in which no transitions occur. The upper-right panel displays the annual share of nondemocracies with mobilization periods (i.e., ongoing campaigns and subsequent two years). The prevalence of mobilization remains relatively stable until the late 1970s, but rises markedly thereafter. Two periods exhibit particularly high levels of mobilization: one around 1989, coinciding with the end of the Cold War, and a second around 2012, associated with the Arab Spring. Although mobilization has declined somewhat since the latter peak, it remains at historically high levels.

The lower-left panel of Figure 1 plots the risk set of nondemocracies that could experience a democratic transition. The increase after 1960 largely reflects the emergence of new states through decolonization rather than democratic breakdowns. From the 1970s onward, the risk set declines substantially following the third wave of democratization. After around 2010, the number of nondemocracies increases modestly, reflecting what is often characterized as the contemporary wave of autocratization (see, e.g., Boese et al., 2022; Chenoweth, 2022; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Ortiz et al., 2021). The lower-right panel plots the share of nondemocracies with mobilization periods and democratic transitions. Both mobilization campaigns and transitions are relatively rare events. Prior to the late 1970s, few years exhibit substantial shares of transitions among nondemocracies with

mass mobilization, whereas such events become more common in later periods. These descriptive patterns indicate that both mobilization and democratization vary considerably over time. However, this does not account for potentially time-varying covariates or uncertainty, which we address in the subsequent analysis with covariates.

Next, we present estimates from a time-invariant baseline transition model estimated over the full period (1900–2019), reported in Table A1 in the Online Appendix. This allows us to compare our results with key findings from previous research, and to consider any differences resulting from the new data sources. Consistent with established findings, mobilization is positively and statistically significantly associated with transitions to democracy, and robust across alternative specifications, including linear probability models and models with fixed effects (Kim & Kroeger, 2019; Pinckney, 2020; Rivera Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013). We find somewhat larger estimated effects of mobilization for nonviolent campaigns than for measures that also include violent campaigns, whereas analyses restricted to violent campaigns provide no evidence of any association with democratic transitions. The results for the remaining covariates are generally consistent with expectations and stable across specifications, although GDP per capita is not significant in a linear probability model with fixed effects.

We now turn to whether the mobilization–democratization relationship is stable over the period 1900–2019. Figure 2 compares the maximized log-likelihood from the full sample to estimates obtained from successively expanding time windows. Under temporal homogeneity, the standardized process behaves like a Brownian bridge and should remain within its confidence bands. This is not the case in Figure 2, as the process departs from these bounds for much of the period from the 1940s onward. We therefore reject the hypothesis of temporal stability for the model based on the observed data. The sharpest deviation occurs around 1989, marking the point at which early-period models begin to diverge the most strongly from the full-period fit.

Monitoring bridge plots establish whether a statistical model changes over time but do not identify which parameters drive this instability or the substantive implications for individual coefficients. To probe potential sources of temporal heterogeneity, we therefore examine parameter-level diagnostics based on score processes (see, e.g., Hjort & Koning, 2002). These diagnostics, reported in Figure A3 in the Online Appendix, indicate a pronounced break around 1989, with the clearest evidence of instability in the intercept (i.e., baseline transition odds) and the population term.

A limitation of score-process diagnostics, however, is that they reveal departures from parameter stability without indicating whether modeling

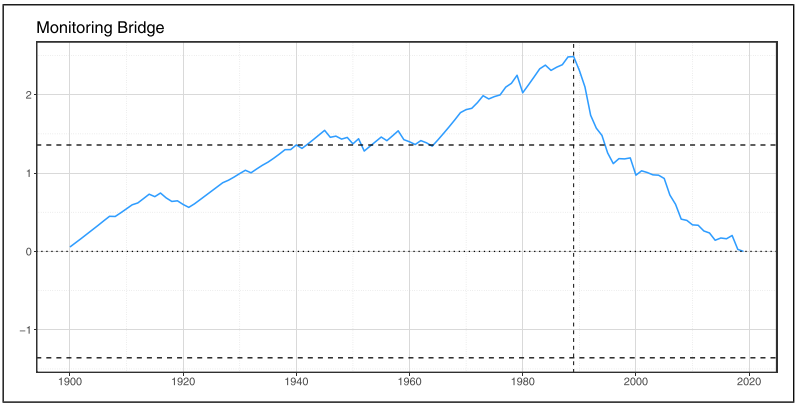

Figure 2. Monitoring bridge plot: Temporal stability of the transition model, 1900–2019

such shifts materially improves model fit or which parameters are substantively responsible for the observed heterogeneity. To directly examine this, we turn to an alternative framework that allows us to assess whether the temporal heterogeneity reflects changes in the effectiveness of mobilization itself or instead arises from broader temporal shifts, such as changes in baseline transition odds or the presence of non-stationary covariates (e.g., income or population) that trend over time.

To examine the sources of this temporal heterogeneity, we evaluate temporal heterogeneity in covariate effects using a flexible specification in which explanatory variables are allowed to interact with time. This approach enables the effect of each covariate to vary over calendar years and allows us to assess whether accounting for such variation meaningfully improves model fit. Importantly, it also distinguishes genuine changes in substantive effects from apparent instability driven by trending predictors. We implement this approach by identifying knot locations that best capture temporal variation. We begin with knots at 1910, 1960, and 2010, and incrementally add one additional knot at a time using a greedy algorithm that maximizes the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). This procedure is repeated for each covariate, with resulting AIC values compared to a baseline model without time-varying parameters.

AIC, defined as $\mathrm{AIC}(M_\theta) = 2 \times \ell_{\max}(M_\theta) - 2p$, balances gains in fit against penalties for added complexity, with improvements assessed relative to alternative specifications and reflected in movements toward zero. Table 1 shows that the largest improvement arises when the effect of mobilization is

Table 1. AIC Comparison of Time-Varying Specifications in the Transition Model

Variable	AIC
Baseline	−1037.4
Year	−1032.4
Mobilization period	−1020.0
Time at autocracy	−1033.7
GDP per capita, ln	−1036.1
Population, ln	−1032.8

allowed to vary over time; once this is included, adding time-varying terms for other predictors yields only marginal gains. This indicates that temporal heterogeneity that we observe in the model appears to be concentrated in the mobilization term. The absence of comparable improvements in fit when other covariates are allowed to vary over time indicates that temporal variation in the effectiveness of mobilization is more pronounced than for other predictors. This suggests that the changing effect of mobilization does not merely arise as an artifact of other covariates that trend over time.

To identify the specific shape of the changing effectiveness of mobilization on transitions to democracy we estimate a varying-coefficient model and bootstrap its sampling uncertainty. Figure 3 displays the resulting time-varying effect with 95% confidence intervals. The figure reveals pronounced historical shifts in the effectiveness of mobilization. Across most of the 20th century, the estimated effect is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Beginning in the early 1980s, however, mobilization exhibits a positive and statistically significant association with democratic transitions, strengthening through the late 1980s and 1990s and peaking just before 2000. The effect declines after this, losing statistical significance by around 2014 and approaching zero toward the end of the period. Substantively, this pattern suggests a reversion to pre-1980s dynamics, and highlights the bounded "golden age", roughly spanning the early 1980s to around 2010, during which mass mobilization was unusually effective in precipitating transitions to democracy.

The apparent spike in the early 20th century in Figure 3 warrants caution, and reflects the combination of sparse data and high spline flexibility. When relatively few countries experience mass mobilization in a given period (as shown in Figure 1), coefficient estimates can become volatile, yielding wide confidence intervals. In the Online Appendix, we report analyses using a penalized estimator designed to mitigate this artifact (Figure A4). These results recover a similar temporal profile for the peak period of mobilization's

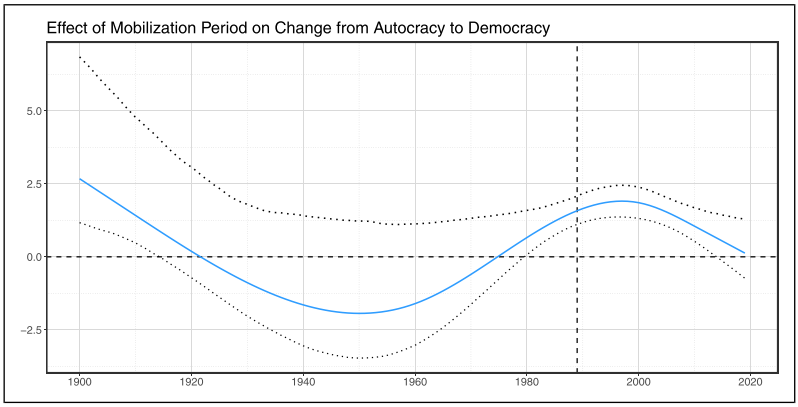

Figure 3. Estimated time-varying effect of mass mobilization on democratic transitions, 1900–2019

effectiveness, whereas the early-century estimates remain positive but statistically indistinguishable from zero. We therefore caution against interpreting the apparent early spike as evidence that mobilization was unusually effective at the beginning of the period.

Sensitivity Analyses

We conduct a series of analyses to evaluate the robustness of the observed temporal shifts to alternative measures, model specifications, and sample definitions. We summarize these analyses below, with full details reported in the Online Appendix. We first examine sensitivity to the choice of transition threshold by considering an alternative outcome measure that captures any increase of more than 0.1 on the V-Dem polyarchy scale. This measure captures both smaller movements toward greater democracy that fall short of changes crossing the regime transition threshold, as well as changes countries above the conventional 0.4 democracy threshold. Using this alternative outcome, we again find a time-varying effect of mobilization that closely mirrors the pattern observed for the binary transition measure (Figure A5). The period in which mobilization is most effective emerges over a similar time span, although the confidence interval remains clearly above zero for a somewhat narrower interval. Re-estimating the models with and without country fixed effects yields qualitatively similar estimated time trends (Figure A6).

Next, we assess the sensitivity of the results to alternative measures of mobilization, estimating time-varying effects separately for nonviolent and primarily violent campaigns. For campaigns in OMG applying nonviolence, we observe substantively similar time trends as in the baseline analysis (Figure A9), and there is little evidence of any systematic effect or changes over time for violent campaigns (Figure A10), consistent with the aggregate-period results.[7]

We examine whether the findings extend to predominant campaign strategies in the NAVCO data, and find broadly comparable overall results (Figure A11). The time-varying effect for nonviolent campaigns follows a similar shape, although the period of heightened impact appears to begin somewhat earlier (Figure A12). As before, we find no evidence of an association between violent campaigns and transitions to democracy (Figure A13).

A further concern is whether a small number of cases may exert disproportionate influence on the results, in particular since both mass mobilization campaigns and democratic transitions are relatively rare events. One might ask, for example, whether the apparent decline in the effectiveness of mobilization after the Arab Spring would be reversed if a small number of episodes, such as Egypt, had instead resulted in democratic transitions. Similarly, the elevated effectiveness of mobilization observed during the 1980s and 1990s might disappear if a handful of pivotal cases, such as the Philippines or Poland, had failed to democratize. We use counterfactual simulations to assess how many observed outcomes would need to change in order to materially alter the estimated temporal patterns.

In the first set of simulations (Figure 4), we reclassify 5, 10, 15, and 20 randomly selected successful campaigns from the peak period as unsuccessful. The results indicate that more than 20 cases would need to be reversed before the peak in effectiveness noticeably flattens. This suggests that the high-impact period does not arise from a small number of influential observations. In the second set of simulations (Figure 5), we reclassify 5, 10, 15, and 20 unsuccessful post-2010 campaigns into democratic transitions. Here, approximately 10 cases would need to change before the post-2010 decline is substantially attenuated, indicating that although the downward trend is somewhat more sensitive to individual cases than the peak period, it nonetheless remains highly robust.

These simulations also speak to potential limitations arising from the treatment of country–years as independent observations. Existing research suggests that international dependence and diffusion may play an important role in both democratization and mass mobilization (see, e.g., Gleditsch & Rivera, 2015; Houle et al., 2016). If mobilization outcomes in one country

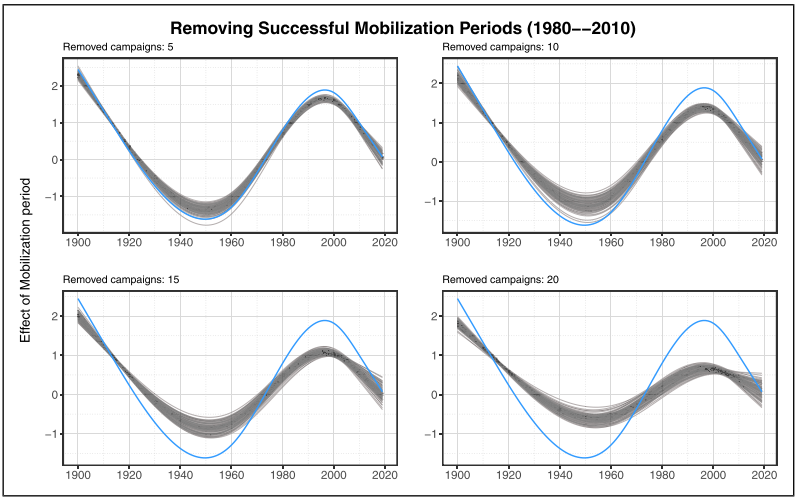

Figure 4. Counterfactual simulations: Reclassifying observed democratic transitions as failures

influence outcomes elsewhere, early successes or failures could generate multiplier effects. Although our counterfactual simulations modify individual cases independently, the large number of cases that would need to be altered to meaningfully change the observed temporal patterns makes it unlikely that the observed patterns are driven primarily by clustering or cumulative diffusion impacts.

Overall, our findings on the temporal variation in the effectiveness of mobilization are highly robust to alternative measures of democratization, different types of mobilization, and the exclusion of individual cases, and the observed changes over time cannot readily be dismissed as artifacts of measurement choices or model specification.

The Effectiveness of Mass Mobilization on Leader Turnover and Coup Attempts

Democratization is a common objective for mass mobilization campaigns, but unseating unpopular rulers is often the immediate objective. In many cases, mass mobilization may not see transitions to democracy in their aftermath, yet be "successful" in removing autocratic rulers, as in Iran in 1979 or Egypt in 2011. Existing studies suggest that mass mobilization often increases the likelihood of different types of autocratic instability other than transitions to

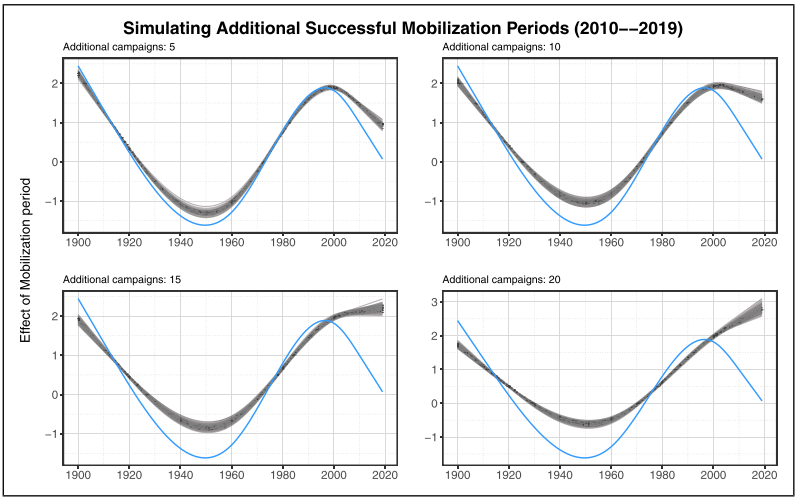

Figure 5. Counterfactual simulations: Reclassifying observed failures as democratic transitions

democracy, including leader changes and coup attempts (see, e.g., Gleditsch et al., 2023; Johnson & Thyne, 2018; Powell, 2012). This raises the question of whether the trends in the effectiveness of mobilization on democratic transitions extend to autocratic instability or outcomes other than transitions to democracy. We evaluate this by examining leader turnover and coup attempts as alternative potential outcomes. Observed leader turnover encompasses all cases where rulers lose power, including where they step down, whereas coup attempts reflect efforts by elites and the military to remove a ruler, even if these may not succeed.[8] We use data on leader turnover from the Archigos data (Goemans et al., 2009), and data on coup attempts from Powell and Thyne (2011).

Figure 6 presents the estimated temporal variation in the association between mass mobilization and leadership turnover using a similar time-varying coefficient model. Mobilization is associated with a significantly higher likelihood of leader removal throughout most of the 20th century, but this relationship weakens substantially in recent decades and becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero around 2010. In this respect, it mirrors the post–Arab Spring decline observed for democratic transitions, although earlier historical patterns differ.

Figure 7 shows that mobilization was consistently associated with a higher frequency of coup attempts after 1945, but this relationship declines steadily

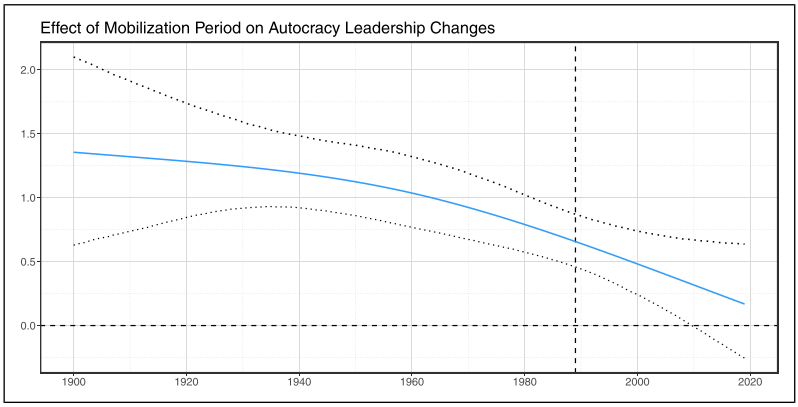

Figure 6. Estimated time-varying effect of mass mobilization on leadership turnover, 1900–2019

from the 1960s onward and becomes statistically insignificant by the mid-1990s. The association with coups thus weakens earlier, possibly reflecting a reduced willingness of militaries to seize power after the Cold War and stronger international sanctions against coup attempts (see Marinov & Goemans, 2014). As with leadership turnover, the declining association marks a clear departure from earlier patterns: prior to the 1980s, coups frequently followed mass mobilization even though democratic transitions after mobilization were comparatively rare.

Figures 3, 6, and 7 reveal clear differences in the impact of mass mobilization on autocratic instability and the prospects for transitions to democracy following mobilization over time. Contra the claims of Przeworski et al. (2000), the likelihood of democratic transitions is not simply proportional to the likelihood that autocracies will fall. Prior to the early 1980s, mobilization promotes autocratic instability, manifested in higher leadership turnover and coup attempts, but this rarely translates into reform or democratic transitions. Between the early 1980s and roughly 2010, political instability in autocracies also seems more likely to give way to transitions and democratic reform. By contrast, in the contemporary period after the Arab Spring, mobilization is no longer systematically associated with either autocratic instability or transition to democracy.

The contemporary period is thus characterized by an apparent greater ability of autocratic leaders to withstand mass mobilization without relinquishing power. A plausible explanation is weaker incentives for elite defection and stronger ruling-coalition cohesion, supported by improved

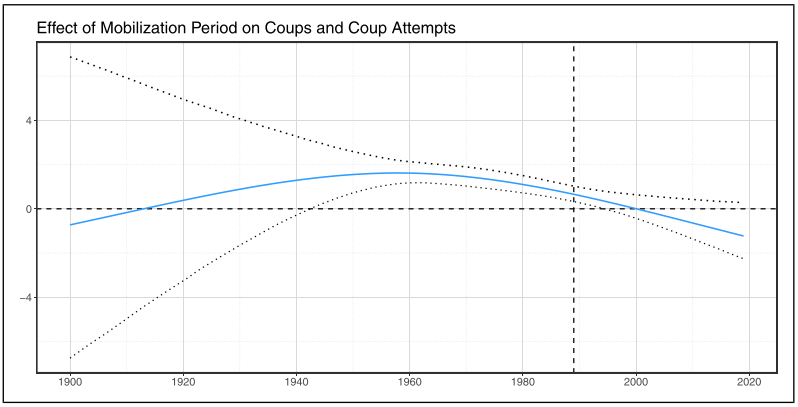

Figure 7. Estimated time-varying effect of mass mobilization on coup attempts, 1900–2019

monitoring of potential challengers and more effective rewards for loyalty (see, e.g., Applebaum, 2024; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). From a longer historical perspective, however, the most notable feature is the peak effectiveness of mobilization from the 1980s to the early 2010s, during which mass mobilization consistently increased the likelihood of democratic transition. This contrast highlights the need to explain why autocracies were comparatively vulnerable to mobilization in this period and why elites were more divided and receptive to democratic reform.

Discussion: Mobilization and Democratization Over Time

The observed patterns raise questions about why mobilization fosters democratization in some periods but not in others. Although other covariates in the transition model display less temporal variation, unobserved factors may nonetheless condition the effect of mobilization. In this section we consider several plausible mechanisms, drawing on existing research, and assess whether trends in these factors align with the observed temporal variation in the association between mass mobilization and democratic transition. We organize the discussion around four conceptual dimensions.

First, differences in *where* mobilization occurs: effectiveness may decline if protest increasingly takes place in countries with political or structural conditions less conducive to democratization. Second, differences in *how* mobilization unfolds, including changes in size, composition, organization, or

leadership. Third, differences in regime *responses* to dissent, were greater reliance on repression, containment, or cooptation may weaken the impact of mobilization. Fourth, differences in the *international context*, where broader geopolitical shifts alter the constraints and incentives shaping the prospects for democratic change following mobilization.

Where Does Nonviolent Mass Mobilization Take Place?

We first assess whether the changing impact of mobilization reflects shifts in the types of countries experiencing protest. One possibility is that the mobilization waves of the 1980s and 1990s were concentrated in countries with more favorable preconditions for democratization, such as higher income or human capital, whereas more recent campaigns have increasingly emerged in contexts with greater structural barriers to democratic rule (see, e.g., Lipset, 1959; Przeworski et al., 2000). In Table 2 we compare logged GDP per capita for nondemocracies with and without mobilization by decade. The observed patterns are not consistent with the "golden age" of effective mobilization taking place in wealthier autocracies more receptive to democratic change. Autocracies experiencing mass mobilization during the 1980s and 1990s were, on average, poorer than nondemocracies without mobilization. By contrast, in the 2010s, when mobilization appears less effective, campaigns increasingly occurred in relatively wealthier nondemocracies, and countries with mobilization had higher absolute income levels than in any previous decade.

Income, however, may be an imperfect proxy for receptiveness to democracy. Socialist states in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s were relatively poor by income measures, but arguably higher in human capital and state capacity, and thus more receptive to democratization than many Middle Eastern and North African countries that experienced large-scale mobilization in the 2010s. We therefore examine variation in the regional distribution of mobilization over time as a proxy for broader contextual differences. Figure 8 displays the number of years with mass mobilization in nondemocracies by region and decade. Mobilization was most prevalent in the Americas, Europe, and the Asia–Pacific during the 1980s; in Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s; and increased markedly in the Middle East and North Africa in the 2000s and 2010s. Figure 9 assesses the implications of these shifts by re-estimating the main model while excluding one region at a time. The overall temporal pattern remains largely unchanged: excluding Europe does not eliminate the peak in effectiveness, and excluding the Middle East and North Africa does not remove the post–Arab Spring decline.

Table 2. Difference in Mean GDP Per Capita for Campaign and Non-Campaign Countries by Decade, Logged Values, Based on Fariss et al. (2022)

Decade	Campaign countries	Non-campaign countries	Difference in means	*t*-value
1950s	3.90	3.62	0.28	0.30
1960s	4.08	4.49	−0.41	−0.43
1970s	5.17	7.97	−2.79	−2.95
1980s	6.41	7.25	−0.84	−1.07
1990s	6.20	7.16	−0.96	−1.32
2000s	8.16	9.99	−1.83	−1.55
2010s	13.99	11.76	2.23	1.60

These results do not rule out the possibility that some country-specific factors contribute to temporal variation in the effectiveness of mobilization, nor can we exhaustively assess all relevant contextual influences, but it seems unlikely that any single country-level attribute can account for the pronounced rise and subsequent decline in the democratizing impact of mass mobilization.

Have the Characteristics of Movements Changed?

We next examine whether temporal variation in effectiveness reflects changes in the characteristics of the movements themselves. Prior research highlights campaign size, diversity, and leadership capacity as central determinants of mobilization success (see Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Dahlum, 2023; Pinckney et al., 2022). Chenoweth (2020) argues that contemporary movements have become less successful partly because they mobilize a smaller share of the population, rely more heavily on street protest, and increasingly depend on social media.

Size

Campaigns are generally more effective when they mobilize large numbers of participants (see, e.g., Biggs, 2018; Popovic & Miller, 2015). One possibility, therefore, is that the peak effectiveness of the 1980s–1990s coincided with unusually large campaigns. The OMG data classify peak campaign participation on an ordinal 1–6 scale.[9] Panel *a* in Figure 10 displays the average peak size by year. Average campaign size increases gradually until around 1960, remains relatively stable through the late 1980s, declines until 2010,

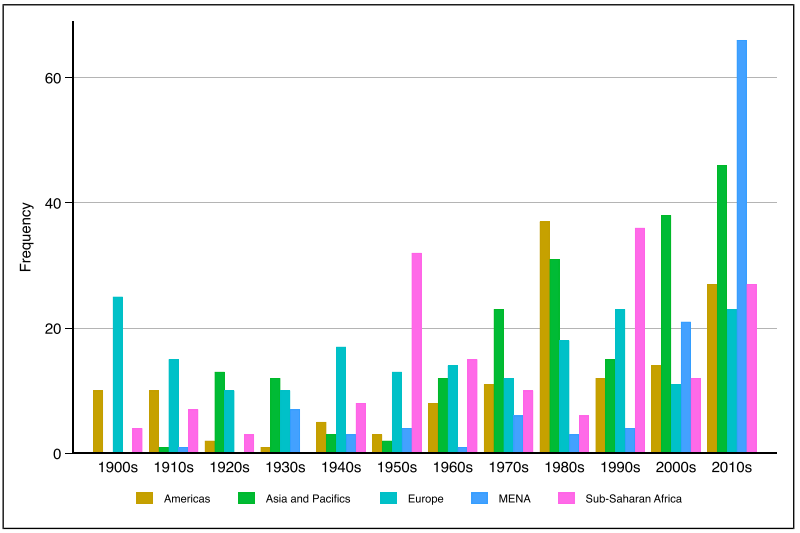

Figure 8. Country-years with mass mobilization in nondemocracies, by region

and then rises again. These trends do not align with the estimated effectiveness of mobilization: campaign size declines during the period of peak democratizing impact and increases in the post-2010 period when effectiveness is lower. Complementary analyses using NAVCO data (Figure A14 and Table A3 in the appendix) show slightly smaller median campaigns in the 2000s and 2010s than in the 1980s and 1990s, although this may partly reflect improved detection of smaller movements. Moreover, median campaign size was also high prior to the early 1980s, when mobilization was rarely followed by democratic transition. Campaign size therefore does not appear to account for the temporal variation in the impact of mobilization.

Diversity

More socially diverse movements may be more likely to lead to democratic change (Dahlum, 2023). We assess whether diversity varies in ways that correspond to the observed temporal pattern using OMG data on the breadth of participation by different social groups (see Table A4 in the Online Appendix). Panel b of Figure 10 shows the average number of participating social groups over time. Diversity does not covary with changes in the effectiveness of mobilization for democratic transitions: campaigns during

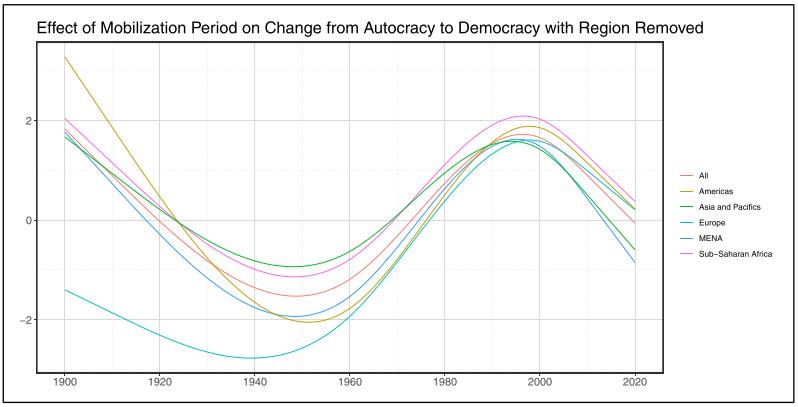

Figure 9. Estimated time-varying effect of mass mobilization on democratic transitions, excluding one region at a time

the period of peak effectiveness involved fewer social groups on average, followed by an increase from 2000 to 2010 and a subsequent decline.[10]

Coordinated Leadership

Movements may be more effective in promoting democratic change when they have coordinated leadership (Pinckney et al., 2022). The OMG dataset includes a measure of coordinated leadership, defined as campaigns in which identifiable individuals or organizations (such as labor unions, civil society groups, or political parties) play a central role in coordinating activities. Panel *c* of Figure 10 plots the annual share of campaigns with coordinated leadership. This share declines during the period of peak mobilization effectiveness and increases after 2010, when mobilization appears less effective. This does not align with the temporal variation in the democratizing impact of mobilization.

Overall, we find limited empirical support for the claim that changes in campaign characteristics account for shifts in the effectiveness of mass mobilization. Our measures may be relatively crude, but it is notable that trends in key movement characteristics do not coincide with the rise and subsequent decline in the impact of mobilization on democratic transitions.

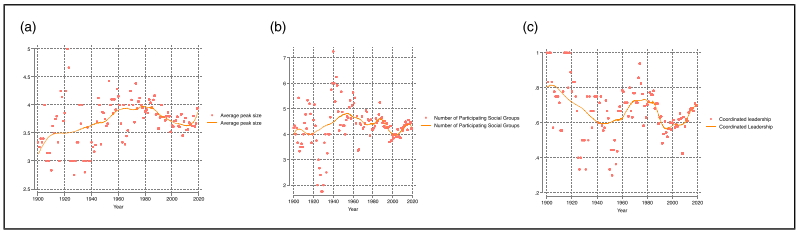

Figure 10. Trends in campaign size, social diversity, and leadership over time

How do Regimes Respond to Challenges?

We next consider whether the declining effectiveness of mobilization reflects changes in how regimes respond to dissent. One possibility is that mobilization has become less consequential because states increasingly rely on repression, thereby blunting its impact (see Zhukov, 2023). We therefore examine trends in repression in nondemocracies with and without mobilization using the V-Dem indicator of violent physical repression (rescaled from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater repression).[11]

Table 3 reports average levels of physical repression by decade. Repression declines overall from the 1970s through the 2000s and 2010s. Autocracies experiencing mobilization exhibited higher repression than non-mobilizing nondemocracies up through the 1970s, but this pattern reverses in later decades. In the 2000s and 2010s, nondemocracies with mobilization display significantly lower levels of repression than those without mobilization. These patterns are inconsistent with increasing physical repression as a primary explanation for the declining effectiveness of mobilization.

Direct repression may also be substituted with less visible forms of control. Some studies argue that contemporary autocracies increasingly rely on targeted bureaucratic repression and surveillance (Applebaum, 2024; see e.g., Arnon et al., 2023; Chenoweth, 2021; Davenport, 2007; Francisco, 2004; Smithey & Kurtz, 2018). Digital monitoring and online censorship may further enhance the capacity of states to identify and disrupt dissent (see e.g., Carter & Carter, 2021; Feldstein, 2021; Gohdes, 2020; Roberts, 2018; Rød & Weidmann, 2015; Weidmann & Rød, 2019).

To assess this possibility, we use a V-Dem indicator of bureaucratic repression capturing government control over the entry and exit of civil society organizations into public life (rescaled from 0 to 1). Table 4 shows average levels of CSO regulation by decade for nondemocracies with and without mobilization. Bureaucratic repression is consistently lower in

Table 3. Average Physical Repression by Decade for Nondemocracies With and Without Mass Mobilization, Annual Observations From V-Dem

Decade	Campaign countries	No campaign	Difference	*t*-test
1950s	0.69	0.64	0.06	2.52
1960s	0.66	0.64	0.02	0.93
1970s	0.78	0.68	0.09	3.97
1980s	0.63	0.67	−0.04	−1.21
1990s	0.54	0.56	−0.02	−0.77
2000s	0.44	0.51	−0.07	−2.94
2010s	0.45	0.51	−0.06	−2.67

countries experiencing campaigns than in nondemocracies without mobilization, with statistically significant differences from the 1980s onward. Although there is a modest increase from the 2000s to the 2010s, absolute levels remain substantially below those observed during the period when mobilization was most effective. Thus, shifts in observable repression, physical or bureaucratic, do not align with the temporal variation in the democratizing impact of mobilization.

Regimes may rely on other political strategies that alter elite incentives. Governments can divide opposition coalitions, reward potentially disloyal elites, or offer limited reforms that are subsequently reversed. Some regimes have contained large-scale mobilization by promising elections or reform and later undermining efforts or reneging on promises once opposition coordination weakens. The 2018 uprising in Sudan, for example, led to the removal of President Omar al-Bashir and promises of democratic transition, only for the military to dissolve the Transitional Sovereignty Council and reassert control in 2021. Electoral manipulation can likewise allow incumbents to retain power even when compelled to concede elections (see e.g., Schedler, 2002). The 2011 uprising in Egypt led to promises of elections, but many prospective candidates were excluded, and international observers deemed the final elections deeply flawed, underscoring how control over electoral processes can undermine competition and genuine transitions to democracy.[12] Such strategies target elite expectations and coalition dynamics rather than participation itself and therefore may weaken the link between mobilization and autocratic instability. Because these strategies operate through informal and only partially observable political processes, they are difficult to measure directly with available cross-national data.

Table 4. Average CSO Regulation by Decade for Nondemocracies With and Without Mass Mobilization, Annual Observations From V-Dem

Decade	Campaign countries	No campaign	Difference	*t*-test
1950s	0.65	0.66	−0.01	−0.53
1960s	0.70	0.72	−0.02	−0.78
1970s	0.76	0.75	0.01	0.43
1980s	0.62	0.70	−0.08	−3.95
1990s	0.48	0.57	−0.09	−5.10
2000s	0.45	0.51	−0.06	−2.98
2010s	0.51	0.57	−0.06	−3.23

Changes in the International Context

We finally consider whether changes in the international environment condition the effectiveness of mobilization. External support, geopolitical competition, and the perceived desirability of democratic rule can shape both elite defection and rulers' incentives to concede reform. The international context has varied substantially over time. In some periods, external actors, particularly the United States, prioritized stability and strategic alliances over democratic governance, including support for authoritarian regimes or military coups when competitive elections were perceived as destabilizing (see e.g., Robinson, 1996). In other periods, external pressure for liberalization increased, notably during the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights (see e.g., Fowler, 2015). The end of the Cold War further altered the strategic environment: declining fears of communist expansion reduced the perceived risks of democratization and created greater scope for external support of political liberalization (see e.g., Mueller, 2004).

From this perspective, the peak effectiveness of mass mobilization in driving democratic transitions coincides with a period where the United States was much less concerned about the strategic risks arising from competitive elections and democratization and more receptive to supporting regime change and reform in autocracies. For example, U.S. pressure on Ferdinand Marcos to call early elections in the Philippines in the early 1980s helped create conditions that facilitated mass mobilization, elite defection, and the eventual collapse of authoritarian rule (see Hawes, 1986). This is not to suggest that democratic transitions require foreign pressure, but the example underscores how domestic mobilization and elite defection will be more likely when it becomes clear that external patrons will not continue to

shield incumbent autocrats and competitive elections are expected or welcomed.

In more recent periods, new security concerns may have reduced U.S. support for democratization and increased fears over the stability of aligned autocracies. In particular, fears of militant or radical Islamist groups have plausibly lowered Western support for democratic reform in the Middle East and North Africa, especially after the September 11 attacks and the rise of the Islamic State. U.S. foreign policy has prioritized regime stability and effective counterterrorism, even when regimes resist or reverse democratic reforms (see e.g., Westad, 2004; Zakaria, 2004). During the Arab Spring, Western support for democratization was often limited to rhetorical commitments, with few material consequences for regimes that repressed mobilization or rolled back on promises of reform. The 2013 coup against President Morsi in Egypt, for instance, did not result in sanctions or the suspension of U.S. aid, and U.S. officials avoided characterizing the event as a coup.[13] Similarly, in Syria, initial U.S. threats against the Assad regime were later counterbalanced by efforts to combat the Islamic State, effectively shoring up the government.

The declining effectiveness of mobilization may also reflect shifts in the global distribution of power. Access to alternative external patrons may reduce the costs of resisting democratic reform for autocrats facing mobilization. The growing prominence of China since the 2000s, for example, has provided some regimes with sources of economic and diplomatic support largely decoupled from democratic conditionality. This is typically transactional and has often involved tacit acceptance of repression or resistance to political reform (e.g., De Soysa & Midford, 2012; Dreher et al., 2019). Increased coordination and cooperation among authoritarian regimes may further lower the costs of resisting mobilization (Applebaum, 2024).

Changes in the international context constitute a plausible source leading to changes in the effectiveness of mass mobilization on democratic transition over time. At the same time, these relationships are likely complex and difficult to evaluate systematically. We see the examples discussed above as suggestive and consistent with the observed trends, but evaluating these relationships more rigorously will require developing explicit theoretical expectations, identifying observable implications, and assembling appropriate data.

Synthesis: Mobilization, Elite Incentives, and Transitions to Democracy

The temporal patterns documented in this study provide empirical "hoops" that proposed explanations must be able to accommodate (see, e.g., Van Evera, 1997). Our results help rule out several plausible accounts that do not align with the observed historical variation. In particular, we find little support for explanations centered on where mobilization occurs, observable movement characteristics such as size, diversity, or leadership, or changes in physical repression and formal state control of civil society.

Many explanations advanced in response to the disappointing outcomes following the Arab Spring emphasize recent developments in isolation, and are difficult to reconcile with the longer historical record, or how mobilization was common but yet rarely translated into democratic transitions before the 1980s. For example, greater reliance on social media may be consistent with declining effectiveness after 2011, but it cannot explain why mobilization was also weakly associated with democratization prior to the early 1980s. Rather than focusing exclusively on constraints emerging in the most recent period, a more productive approach is to identify mechanisms capable of accounting for why mobilization was unusually effective from the early 1980s through the early 2010s but not before or after.

A broader implication of our discussion is that no single factor is likely to account for the observed variation in the effectiveness of mobilization for democratic transitions. Transitions to democracy depend not only on pressure from below through mass mobilization, but also on whether ruling elites and potential defectors perceive reform as preferable to alternatives and the feasibility of continued autocratic orders. From this perspective, mobilization is primarily likely to contribute to democratization when pressure on rulers also contributes to incentives for elite defection and commitment to meaningful institutional reform as opposed to apparent concessions that can be reversed later.

This perspective helps reconcile differences across historical periods. During much of the Cold War, mass mobilization often produced leadership turnover or instability but rarely sustained democratic reform. Even when rulers fell, elites faced limited incentives to embrace competitive elections and low costs of maintaining authoritarian rule under alternative leadership. By contrast, the period from the early 1980s to the early 2010s coincided with an international environment more permissive of democratization. Declining fears of communism, reduced external support for authoritarian incumbents, fiscal pressures on autocratic regimes, and increasing

international costs of repression helped make reform comparatively attractive to ruling elites facing mass mobilization.

Beyond the early case of the Philippines in 1986, where U.S. pressure on Marcos for elections and withdrawal of support helped create mass mobilization and elite defection (Hawes, 1986), the reforms initiated under Gorbachev weakened party control and encouraged elite fragmentation elsewhere, with elites increasingly presenting themselves as reformers rather than attempting to resist mass mobilization. Structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s were sometimes linked to requirements for political reform, leading many African countries such as Kenya to open for competitive elections (see Brown, 2001).

The declining effectiveness of mobilization following the Arab Spring can be attributed to a reversal of these permissive conditions. When elites abandoned individual rulers under pressure, they often lacked incentives to support genuine democratic reform. In Egypt, elite defection from Mubarak did not extend to support for sustained competitive democracy: key candidates were excluded from subsequent elections, and actors initially opposed to authoritarian rule later collaborated with the military in the 2013 coup against President Morsi.[14]

Some regimes have withstood large-scale mobilization without substantial elite defection. In Bahrain, protests did not fracture the ruling coalition, and in Venezuela even high-level defections failed to dislodge the government while the military remained loyal.[15] Limited external pressure and muted international responses to authoritarian rollback may have further reduced the costs of repression and policy reversals during this period. The late Cold War and immediate post–Cold War decades thus appear as a historical interval in which mass mobilization simultaneously generated regime instability and incentives for democratic transition, rather than a general pattern.

Finally, changing effectiveness over time raises questions about expectations and strategic behavior in collective action. Mobilization remains frequent and often large-scale, even as its association with democratization has weakened (Chenoweth, 2020). If success were the primary motivation for participation, declining effectiveness might be expected to dampen mobilization. The persistence of protest suggests instead that expectations of success are uncertain, expressive motivations are important, or participants overestimate the likelihood of political change. Understanding how expectations, elite opportunism, and international signals jointly shape both mobilization and its consequences represents an important direction for future research.

Conclusion

We have presented analyses showing that the impact of mass mobilization on democratic transitions fluctuates substantially over time. The magnitude of this variation exceeds what can be attributed to changes in the frequency of mobilization or democratic transitions themselves, and is considerably larger than the temporal variation observed for other key covariates commonly included in models of democratic transition. These findings pose a challenge to studies that assume a stable, time-invariant relationship between mobilization and democratization. Researchers should therefore be cautious in seeking to estimate "the causal effect of mobilization" without explicitly considering how this relationship may vary across historical periods.

Our analyses place the recent decline in the democratizing effectiveness of mass mobilization in a longer historical perspective. Rather than representing an unprecedented rupture, the period from the Arab Spring and on resembles earlier periods where mobilization was common but rarely translated into democratic transitions. It is the period from the early 1980s through the early 2010s that stands out as an historically exceptional "brief moment in time", where mass mobilization was unusually effective in promoting democratization. The contemporary period and earlier low-effectiveness periods both show few transitions following mobilization, but differ in that autocratic instability has declined and rulers are less likely to fall or face coup attempts when facing large-scale mobilization.

This variation over time highlights important limitations in existing theoretical approaches that implicitly assume a stable relationship between mobilization and democratic change. Identifying when mobilization has been more or less consequential helps clarify the empirical patterns that explanations must be able to accommodate. Our discussion shows how several common explanations, including differences in where mobilization occurs, observable characteristics of movements such as size, diversity, or leadership, and linear increases in repression, do not align well with the historical trends we observe. Our findings underscore the need for explanations that can explicitly account for how mass mobilization varies across political contexts and over time. We cannot claim to offer a fully specified theory in this study, but our results on the timing of changes help draw attention to elite incentives, strategic responses, and the international environment as promising avenues for understanding why mobilization has sometimes translated into democratic reform and at other times has not. A clearer understanding of what shapes the effectiveness of mobilization can also help inform efforts to enhance the prospects for democratic change.

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Data Availability Statement

Replication material and code can be found at Gleditsch (2026).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See, for example, Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), Bayer et al. (2016), Bermeo (1997), Bratton and van de Walle (1992), Collier (1999), Dahlum et al. (2019), García-Ponce and Wantchekon (2023), Kadivar (2018), Rueschemeyer et al. (1992), Moore (1966), Nepstad (2013), Schock (2005), and Sharp (1973).
2. A common concern is that mobilization may not cause democratization if weak regimes are simply more prone to experience both protest and political change. Contrary to this view, studies that explicitly address selection show that non-violent campaigns often arise under adverse conditions that would appear unfavorable for both mobilization and reform (see, e.g., Pinckney, 2020). Our analysis does not seek to adjudicate causal identification strategies, but we see no

clear reason why problems of endogeneity or selection would vary systematically over time.

3. Historically, transitions from democracy to nondemocracy are substantially less frequent than transitions to democracy, yielding far fewer events for empirical analysis. Moreover, evidence regarding change in one direction does not necessarily generalize to the other. Rød et al. (2020) show that predictors of democratization perform poorly in explaining democratic backsliding. Transition models do not impose symmetry between movements into and out of regime states. In addition, limited dependent variable models such as logit or probit normalize the error variance for identification, implying no inherent statistical advantage to estimating a two-way transition model: predicted probabilities of transition to democracy are identical to those obtained from a one-way specification.
4. We include all campaigns for which democratization is one of the primary objectives, and explicitly call for democracy, liberalization of core democratic institutions, including competitive elections, freedom of expression, civil liberties, constraints on executive authority, or limits on the arbitrary exercise of state power.
5. We focus only on domestic covariates. Both transitions and mobilization may plausibly cluster among connected countries, but models with simultaneous spatial diffusion or spatial dependence over time raise many statistical challenges beyond the scope of this study.
6. In the Online Appendix we report analyses that restrict attention to campaigns that apply nonviolent tactics; results are substantively similar across monitoring bridge diagnostics, AIC-based model comparisons, and the baseline time-varying analyses.
7. Dahl et al. (2026) identify a wider range of types of security force defection, but these data do not extend beyond 2013, and have limited coverage for evaluating impacts of mass mobilization in the post-2010 period.
8. The scale codes participants in ordinal brackets: 1: 500–999, 2: 1,000–9,999, 3: 10,000–99,999, 4: 100,000–499,999, 5: 500,000–999,999, and 6: 1,000,000+.
9. Some argue that diversity may hinder democratization when broad coalitions lack a shared program beyond opposing an incumbent, potentially making diversity a liability in cases such as Egypt (see e.g., Ketchley & Barrie, 2020; Pinckney et al., 2022). The data, however, do not support a negative relationship either.
10. These country-level indicators do not capture campaign-specific repressive responses.
11. "International Observers Find Egypt's Presidential Election Fell Short of Standards," *New York Times*, 29 May 2014, https://tinyurl.com/2tukv.
12. See "Kerry Says Egypt's Military Was 'Restoring Democracy' in Ousting Morsi", *New York Times*, 1 August 2013, https://tinyurl.com/yj3fzdeb.

13. "In Egypt, the 'Deep State' Rises Again", *Wall Street Journal*, 19 July 2013, https://tinyurl.com/22a6ambv.
14. "Venezuela's Crisis Deepens by the Day. But Maduro is Celebrating the Start of Six More Years in Office", *Washington Post*, 9 January 2019, https://tinyurl.com/5h24r96p.

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