Ignoring or Responding to Protests

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Abstract

Ignoring is the most common government response to protests across the globe. Yet the literature on contentious politics overwhelmingly assumes that governments must respond to popular mobilizations with repression or accommodation. I model an environment, where activists cannot coerce the government to make concessions. Activists use public mobilization to signal grievances to the government and the general public. The model shows small protests can risk exposing an incumbent government's lack of interest in the citizens' welfare and push them to make concessions in order to retain support. The model also specifies when a government will ignore large number of protesters.

Keywords: repression, protest, contentious politics, repression–dissent nexus, game theory

1 Introduction

Of university student protests in 1968, Suleyman Demirel, then Prime Minister of Turkey, famously said "roads won't wear off by walking on them" and that his party had no reason to be upset over the matter.[1]Almost fifty years later, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeated the famous line–albeit with a lot of anger– as a response to the The March for Justice led by the opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu.[2] President George W. Bush had a similar response when thousands of people protested against the invasion of Iraq: "Size of protest –it's like deciding, well, I'm going to decide policy based upon a focus group."[3] Of course, neither Turkey, nor the US are strangers to government violence against protesters. However, these cases, where governments simply dismissed the demands of protesters without resorting to repression, are not isolated or special. In fact, simply ignoring the participants is the most common government response to collective action around the world (Yuen and Cheng, 2017; Klein and Regan, 2018; Li, 2019).

Despite decades of research on government response to popular mobilizations, the literature fails to adequately explain why and when governments simply choose to ignore protesters (Bishara, 2015). The modal approach to government response assumes all public mobilizations are threats against the status quo that the government must respond either with coercion or accommodation (Earl, 2003; Davenport, 2007; deMeritt, 2016; Ritter and Conrad, 2016; Klein and Regan, 2018; Shadmehr and Boleslavsky, 2022). Protests are considered threatening either because they directly impose costs on the state (Ritter and Conrad, 2016; Klein and Regan, 2018), or provide the spark that will trigger prairie-fire like cascades and lead to revolution (Kuran, 1991; Lohmann, 1994; Ginkel and Smith, 1999; Lorentzen, 2017). While certainly fitting for a limited number of cases, this framework does not explain

[1] https://t24.com.tr/haber/suleyman-demirel-yollar-yurumekle-asinmaz-demedi,301188

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_March_for_Justice

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/19/world/threats-responses-white-house-antiwar-protests-fail-sway-b
html

why activists, more often than not, take the streets without the intention—let alone the capacity— to harm or threaten the state. Similarly, it provides a poor fit to the empirical evidence that governments routinely ignore protests, even when they amass huge numbers.

This paper presents a formal model of collective action and government response before the general public. In the model activists cannot directly force the government to accept their demands (Pierskalla, 2010; Ritter, 2014; Shadmehr and Boleslavsky, 2022). Rather, they use mobilization to signal their grievances, with the hope that the government will take action and respond to their demands (Lohmann, 1993; Holdt et al., 2011; Gause, 2020). Changing policy is costly for the incumbents. Even good governments—those with preferences that are relatively aligned with their citizens— often want to make sure that the issue at stake is sufficiently salient before incurring these costs. Popular mobilization is necessary to credibly communicate this salience (Gause, 2020).

While good governments often welcome credible signals about issue salience, bad governments—those that are less interested in citizen preferences— have little use for this information. They would rather ignore the protesters' demands, but because the information is revealed publicly through popular mobilization, this would inform the public about their lack of interest in citizens' needs. When the public's baseline support for the incumbent is neither very high or very low, this information is decisive in determining whether they will withdraw their support or not. When this is the case, bad governments have to consider how the broader public will react to their response to protester demands. When the public believes that the government is likely to be a good type, a bad government can accommodate protesters just like a good one in order to maintain their popularity.

However, when public's belief in the government's quality is already low, this strategy becomes less useful. Consequently, the incumbents ignores the protesters with a positive probability in equilibrium. Observationally, it looks like governments end up ignoring protesters precisely when they would gain the most from boosting their popularity through

accommodation. Indeed, the model shows that governments can become less likely to accommodate protests as they their popularity decreases. Similarly, they respond—either with repression or accommodation— when it is seemingly less necessary for them.

In addition to explaining why activists take the streets only to get dismissed by the government, the model also provides insight into why governments respond to protests in counter-intuitive ways. Governments that feel confident enough to ignore thousands of protesters sometimes accommodate or repress small protests with modest goals. When they protest, activists with high level of grievances—those with more to gain from accommodation—have to mobilize enough to credibly signal that the issue at stake is indeed salient for them. Because the activists' resources affect their capacity for mobilization, governments—but more importantly the general public— take this into account and do not expect the same level of mobilization from every group on every issue (Gause, 2020). That is, both the government's and the public's threshold for deciding that an issue is highly salient vary across contexts. For good governments, this sometimes means responding to protests with modest numbers is worth the cost. For bad governments, it means that even a small number of protesters with no capacity to directly threaten the regime risk exposing their lack of interest in the citizens' welfare, thereby forcing them to respond.

Taking governments' option to ignore protests seriously is crucial to improve the study of protest dynamics for three reasons. First, almost all empirical and theoretical accounts, formal or informal, are based on the assumption that governments only face a "concession-repression dilemma" in dealing with popular mobilization (Bishara, 2015; de-Meritt, 2016). However, the prevalence of ignoring over other forms of response suggests that it cannot be treated as a residual category that only happens off-equilibrium path.

Second, any research aiming to gain causal insight on the occurrence or the effect of government sanctions has to deal with ignored mobilizations as a potentially relevant counterfactual. Focusing on cases where there is a clear, observable government response is

inevitably going to lead to biased findings (Hill and Jones, 2014; Ritter and Conrad, 2016).

Third, relationship between protests and their outcomes is equifinal. Distinguishing these pathways and drawing the right lessons are essential because they have different practical implications. Lack of repression against protests does not always mean that protesters are successful in achieving their goals, or are resolved enough to deter government violence. Similarly, activists who achieve their goals do not always do so because they threaten or impose costs on the government. Failing to differentiate these distinct mechanisms is likely to lead researchers to wrong results, and bad advice for citizens and governments.

2 Mobilization, Information, and Government Response

Both formal and empirical literature on popular mobilization and government response typically assume that governments always want to maintain the status quo (Ginkel and Smith, 1999; Moore, 2000; Pierskalla, 2010; Ritter, 2014; deMeritt, 2016). This often leads to classifying all popular mobilization as efforts to threatening to or actually imposing costs on the government in order to extract concessions (Ritter and Conrad, 2016; Klein and Regan, 2018). All protests are treated as mini-revolutions, where the protesters' victory is necessarily the government's loss. This approach does not accurately capture why most activists take the streets in the first place. It is also a poor fit for the empirical evidence that mobilizations that do inflict direct costs on the government—through property damage, looting, or blockades— are less likely to succeed (Franklin, 2009; Klein and Regan, 2018; Wasow, 2020).

A key reason people engage in public collective action is to make their grievances known (McAdam et al., 2001; McAdam and Tarrow, 2010). Protests often affect policy outcomes by informing the incumbent leaders about the citizens' preferences (Lohmann, 1993; Gause, 2020). That is, key channel of effect for most public mobilizations is informational

(Bueno De Mesquita and Tyson, 2020). There is of course, an extensive formal literature on informational role of protests starting with Kuran (1991)'s work on preference falsification and informational cascades. But this literature focuses on contexts where the goal of protesters is to incite regime change by *coordinating* anti-government sentiment or information about government strength (Lohmann, 1994; Ginkel and Smith, 1999; De Mesquita, 2010; Shadmehr and Bernhardt, 2011; Casper and Tyson, 2014). My model is focused on settings where activists have reformist goals, but can still potentially *lead* to anti-government sentiment by revealing the government to be non-responsive.

The works of Gause (2020) and Lorentzen (2013), where protests similarly function as way for citizens to communicate their grievances are closer in scope. Focusing on the protests by low-income and racial-minority groups in the US, Gause (2020) presents a formal model where groups can take costly action to communicate their interests to an reelection-minded legislator. Taking a mechanism design approach, Lorentzen (2013) argues that the Chinese regime prevents anti-government actions from aggrieved populations as well as opportunistic protests by conditioning transfers to sufficiently high levels of protests. The model presented here similarly features a vertical information transfer to the government about the citizens' needs (Lorentzen, 2017). The key addition in my model is that protests can also provide information about the responsiveness or the quality of government to the broader public. Once protests make a small group of citizens' grievances public, the broader population observes how the government responds and updates its belief about the government's quality.

The reference to protests in China might be surprising, given the focus on government's interest in citizen grievances and the government's accountability to the broader public. However, scholars of contentious action in China have long highlighted that the Chinese regime—despite being highly repressive and authoritarian— routinely tolerates protests with narrow and modest goals, and addresses the participants' grievances (O'Brien and Li, 2006; O'Brien and Deng, 2015; Lorentzen, 2017; Li, 2019). If protests can achieve goals by

signaling grievances in a highly repressive regime with a vast coercive apparatus, one would expect this dynamic even more prevalent in more democratic contexts.

Shadmehr and Boleslavsky (2022) also consider a context where the potential response from the general public influences the interaction between the activists and the government. In their model, the bystander has to decide between supporting the government or joining the activists after observing repression. The key tension for the general public is that it cannot observe the types of the activists or the government. Therefore, upon observing repression the public remains uncertain about which side best represents its interest. Because their primary focus is how international pressure affects the use of government coercion— both legitimate and illegitimate— they assume that the activists will succeed unless stopped by coercion. Consequently, their analysis does not cover the settings where governments have the option to ignore the protests, which is the focus of my model. In addition in my model the uncertainty of the general public (and the government) with regards to activists is not whether they are good or bad for the public, but rather whether their grievances are high enough to warrant costly policy change.

3 The Model

3.1 The Setup

I model a scenario with three players: an Incumbent government (I,it), an Activist(A,they), and a median voter (V,he) who represents the general public.[4] Similar to political delegation models (Canes-Wrone et al., 2001; Bendor et al., 2001; Bendor and Meirowitz, 2004), the Incumbent's interest in the well-being of citizens is determined by its privately known type $\gamma \in \{G, B\}$, where $1 \geq G > B = 0$. That is, the Incumbent is either "good (G)" or "bad

[4]Having the general public represented by a unit mass of voters, rather than the median voter would not change the results.

(B)." Under the common prior, the incumbent is good with a probability $p \in (0,1)$. Both types of incumbent get a utility of 1 from holding office.

Activist also has a privately known type $\{L, H\}$, where $H > L \geq 0$. The Activist's type determines their gain from policy change: activists with type H have higher grievances, and gain more from accommodation than low L types. If the incumbent accommodates the activist, their payoff is θ. Both types of activists have the same status-quo payoff of 0.[5] Under the common prior, the activist is a high type with a probability $q \in (0,1)$. The activist can choose a level of mobilization $m \geq 0$ to signal grievance at a cost $C(m) = cm$.[6]

For simplicity, I assume that the activists are a small enough portion of the society that they cannot impact the elections through voting. However, considering the activists also as a small percentage of voters does not change the results presented here. This is in line with the empirical evidence. Even the biggest mass-protests typically feature only a small subset—around 3%— of the population (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2013; Chenoweth, 2021).

After observing the level of mobilization, the incumbent decides to accommodate the activist or not $a = \{0, 1\}$. I call the option to not accommodate as ignoring throughout, and consider the option to repress in a subsequent section. If the incumbent accommodates the activist, it pays a cost a regardless of its type, but gains $\gamma\theta$. Only good incumbents gain from accommodating the activists.[7] Even good incumbents gain more from accommodating an activist of the high type than the low type. I assume $1 > a > LG$ to focus on cases, where the costs of policy change are neither trivial or prohibitively high for the good incumbent.

[5] An alternative way to capture grievances is to make the status-quo costlier for High type activists such that $-H < -L \leq 0$, and set payoffs after accommodation to 0. This has no bearing on the results.

[6] The linear costs are chosen for simplicity, and the results would be the same if the costs were convex such as $C(m) = cm^2$.

[7] This assumption does not drive any of the results presented. All results would be preserved if $G > B > 0$ was assumed instead.

Finally, the voter decides whether to reelect incumbent or not: $v \in \{0, 1\}$. If the voter chooses to reelect the incumbent, $v = 1$, his payoff is simply the incumbent's type γ. The voter is forward-looking and is not directly impacted by the accommodation.[8] Nevertheless, he prefers a good incumbent to a bad one. His decision also depends on the expected quality of the opposition candidate $1 > k > -1$.[9] Voter's payoff is simply the quality of the (possibly new) incumbent in the end. Consequently, the voter reelects the incumbent if $E[\gamma] > k$. An alternative way to interpret the parameter k is the valence-based support the incumbent, where lower k means higher support. For example, a conservative leaning voter always prefers a higher quality conservative government to a lower quality one. But his decision to reelect the incumbent also depends on the expected quality of the liberal opposition candidate.

To sum up the sequence is :

1. Types γ, θ chosen by Nature and revealed to I and A respectively. $Pr[\gamma = G] = p$ and $Pr[\theta = H] = q$.
2. A chooses a level of mobilization $m \geq 0$ at a cost cm.
3. G decides whether to accommodate or not $a \in \{0, 1\}$ at a cost a.
4. V decides whether to vote for the incumbent or not $v \in \{0, 1\}$.

And the utilities are:

$$U_I = v + a\theta\gamma - a$$

$$U_A = a\theta - cm$$

$$U_V = k + v(\gamma - k)$$

[8]The neutral activist assumption is apt for many empirical cases. However, adding a direct impact of policy change to the voter utility would not fundamentally change the results presented.

[9]I consider A's uncertainty about k in addition to γ in the appendix.

The solution concept is Perfect Bayesian Equilibrium. Any proofs that do not follow from the main text are in the appendix.

3.2 Analysis

3.2.1 Voter's Decision

I begin the analysis with the voter's decision in the end. The voter updates his belief about the incumbent's type after observing the activist's and the incumbent's actions. The voter reelects incumbent if he expects it to be higher quality than the opposition candidate. Formally:

$$\dot{p}G > k \tag{1}$$

where $\dot{p}$ is the updated belief about $Pr[\gamma = G]$, which depends on the strategy of I. For the voter's belief's about the incumbent's type to matter for his decision, it must be $G \geq k \geq 0$. If $k > G$, the incumbent is so unpopular that even if it is revealed to be a good type, the voter does not reelect him. Similarly, when $k < 0$, the incumbent is popular enough that he wins reelection regardless of his type. When information about the incumbent's type matters, the voter reelects the incumbent his updated belief that it is a good type is sufficiently high:

$$\dot{p} > \frac{k}{G} \equiv \bar{p} \tag{2}$$

Lemma 1 *The voter's belief about I's type only matters if the incumbent's popularity compared to the opposition is neither too high or too low.* $G \geq k \geq B = 0$.

The parameter ranges of Lemma 1 are depicted in Figure 1 below.

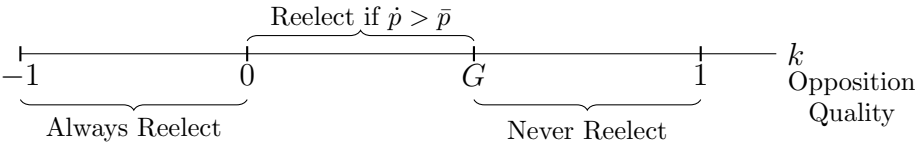

Figure 1: Voter's decision with regards to k

3.2.2 Incumbent's Decision

After updating its belief's about the activist, the incumbent decides whether to accommodate or not depending on the cost of accommodation, and the voter's expected reaction. Let σ_V be the probability that the voter reelects the incumbent after accommodation. After observing a level of mobilization $m \geq 0$, an incumbent of type γ accommodates if:

$$\underbrace{\sigma_V - a + \gamma(L + \dot{q}(H - L))}_{\text{Expected Utility of Accommodation}} > \underbrace{1 - \sigma_V}_{\text{Expected Utility of Ignoring}} \tag{3}$$

where $\dot{q}$ is the updated belief about the activist's type. Because the bad incumbent does not benefit from policy change, its only motivation for accommodation comes from electoral pressures. Note from equation 3 that when the cost of policy change is sufficiently low $a < LG$ or sufficiently high $a > HG$, beliefs about the activist's type do not matter. In the former case, the good incumbent changes policy even if the activist is a low type for certain, $q = 0$. In the latter case, the costs are prohibitively high that even the high type activist's demands get rejected. Between these extremes, a good incumbent accommodates if:

$$\dot{q} > \frac{a - LG}{G(H - L)} \equiv \bar{q} \tag{4}$$

To see how the incumbent's, and sometimes more importantly the voter's posterior beliefs, $\dot{q}$, are formed, I now turn to the activist's decision to mobilize.

3.2.3 Activist's Decision

Intuitively, the activist only mobilizes if it is necessary. If the incumbent (and the voter) already believes that the activist is likely to be highly aggrieved—$q > \bar{q}$— neither type of

activist mobilizes. When the activists do not mobilize, the incumbent gains no additional information about their grievances and acts on their prior belief.

When this is not the case, activist has to mobilize to get concessions. However, only the high type mobilizes, because the low type has no incentive to reveal their type. When the high type activist mobilizes, they choose a level mobilization high enough to credibly reveal their type.

$$m \geq \frac{L}{c} \equiv \bar{m} \tag{5}$$

Finally, incentive compatibility requires that the high type activist prefers $\bar{m}$ to not mobilizing at all. Let σ_I be the probability that the incumbent accommodates after observing $\bar{m}$. The high type only mobilizes if:

$$\sigma_I H - L > 0 \tag{6}$$

3.3 Protest Equilibria

Given the paper's focus on government response to protests, I focus the analysis on equilibria where protests are necessary to gain accommodations. That is, the likelihood that the activist is a high type is sufficiently low, $q \leq \bar{q}$. A complete statement of all equilibria is in the appendix. Figure 2 below depicts the protest equilibria.

Conditions 5 and 6 point to an important result for the protest equilibria, summarized in Proposition 1 below.

Proposition 1 *In all protest equilibria—when $q \leq \bar{q}$— the equilibrium level of mobilization of the high type activist $\bar{m}$ decreases as the marginal cost of mobilization c increases.* $\frac{\partial \bar{m}}{\partial c} < 0$

Proposition 1 points to why simply comparing number of participants across protests can be deceptive. The highly aggrieved activist has to mobilize enough, $\bar{m}$, to credibly show their type. Because activists have the same marginal cost for mobilization regardless of their

grievance, this threshold changes with the cost of mobilization. When mobilization becomes easier, for example due to pleasant weather, easier transportation and communication, or simply more resources, both the incumbent and the voter demand to see a higher level of mobilization to be convinced. Put differently, both the government and the general public know that a protest of 1000 people organized by a resource rich group on a sunny day is different than a protest of 1000 people with low resources in the rain (Bueno De Mesquita and Tyson, 2020).

Gause (2020), makes a similar argument, suggesting that lawmakers should pay attention to resource constraints of protesters. Empirically, she finds that US legislators are more likely to pay attention to protests by low-resource groups such as ethnic minorities, even when the size of protests are similar. The model here shows the opposite is true as well: governments also pay attention to reduced costs of mobilization and adjust their expectations accordingly.

Butcher and Pinckney (2022) also find evidence for this dynamic. Using Friday —a day of congregation for many Muslims— as an instrument for exogenous change in protests, they find higher number of participants are not associated with higher likelihood of concessions from the government. Fridays, particularly Friday prayers, make mobilization easier for activists. Consequently, governments and the general public adjust their expectations and discount the numbers.

3.3.1 Separating Equilibria

In the separating equilibria, observing ignored protests allows the voter to infer that the incumbent is a bad type, reducing his support. However, this reduced support is only consequential within the parameter space of Lemma 1. Consequently the bad incumbent can fully reveal its type only outside Lemma 1, where the voter's support is already so high or so low that its poor quality does not matter. This is the Region I in the Figure 2.

For example, President George W. Bush went on to the win the reelection after ignoring the demands of tens of thousands of protesters against the invasion of Iraq. Similarly, Suleyman Demirel was reelected as Prime Minister in 1969, shortly after his remarks about students protests. While both politicians drew ire for their dismissive attitude towards the demands of thousands, they had enough support among the electorate.

On the other extreme, Brazilian President Michel Temer already had a single-digit approval rating in 2016, when students occupied schools to protest against budget cuts. Temer did not try to repress the students and prevent them from protesting. He also did not attempt to boost his popularity by accommodating the protesters knowing it would not help. In each case, the incumbents did not feel the need to concede to the demands of the protesters, knowing that it would have little impact on their electoral prospects.

Of course, the activist does not know what type of incumbent they are facing before mobilizing. When activists cannot count on electoral pressures, they only mobilize if the incumbent is likely to be a good type. Because even without electoral pressures, a good incumbent always accommodates after protests. If there are no protests, neither type of incumbent accommodates when $q \leq \bar{q}$. Thus, the incumbent's type is not revealed.

Proposition 2 *: **Ignored Protests***

Incumbents only fully separate outside Lemma 1.

Low type activist never mobilizes. High type activist mobilizes if $p > \frac{L}{H}$*, at a level* $\bar{m}$*.*

Upon observing mobilization, the good incumbent accommodates and the bad incumbent ignores.

3.3.2 Pooling Equilibria

In a pooling equilibria both types of incumbent respond the same way to mobilization. The voter does not gain any additional information—$\dot{p} = p$— and maintains his existing level of

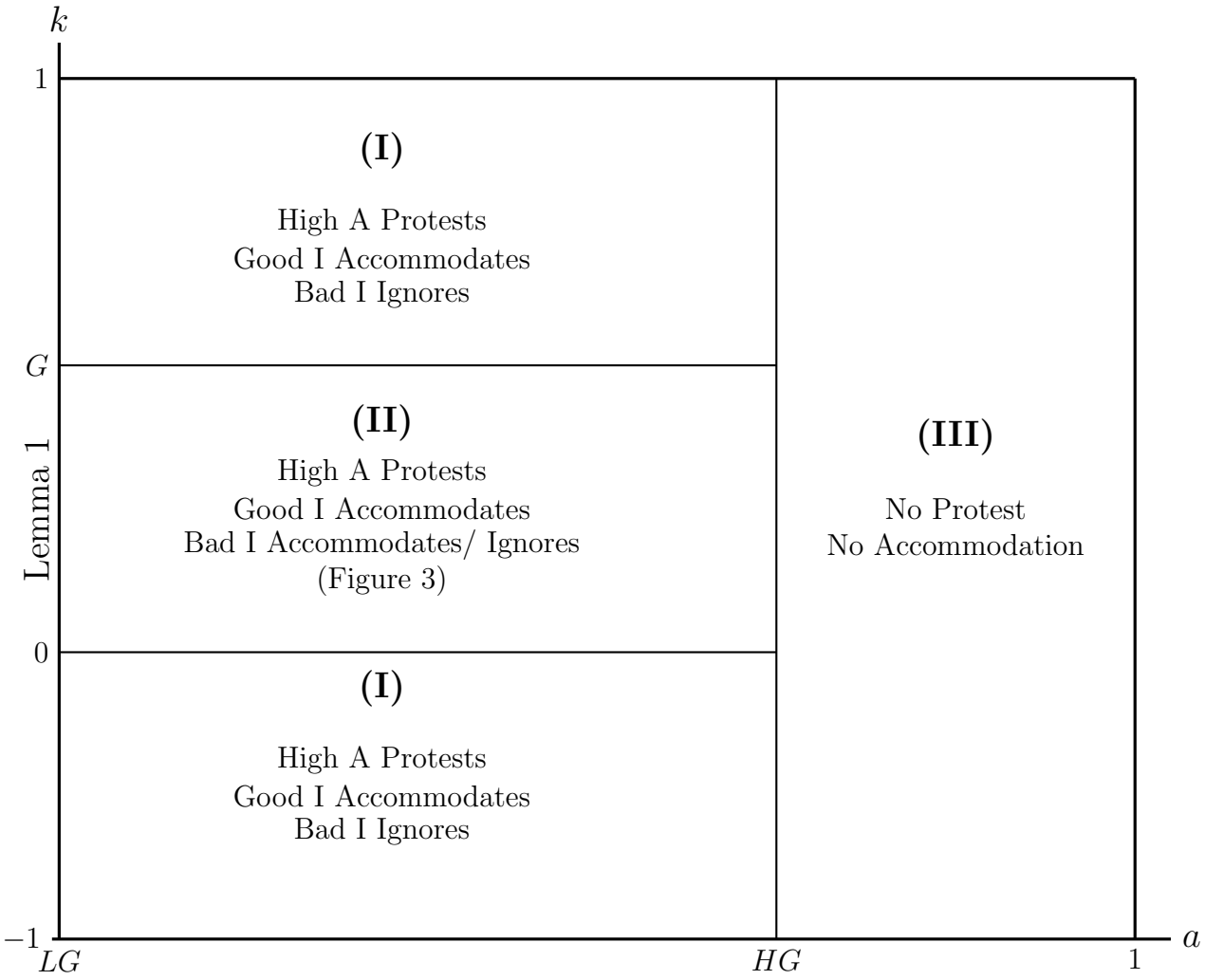

Figure 2: Equilibria Ranges as a Function of a and k.

support.

Protesters succeed in acquiring accommodations in two different ways. In the first case, the good incumbent accommodates genuinely: based on its own preferences rather than electoral pressure. Good governments use the information from protests to make accommodations that they would have already done under complete information.

In the second case, protesters succeed in getting policy changes that the bad incumbent does not prefer. Within Lemma 1, the bad type cannot ignore protests because it would reveal its type and cost it the voter's support. Thus, the bad incumbent has to

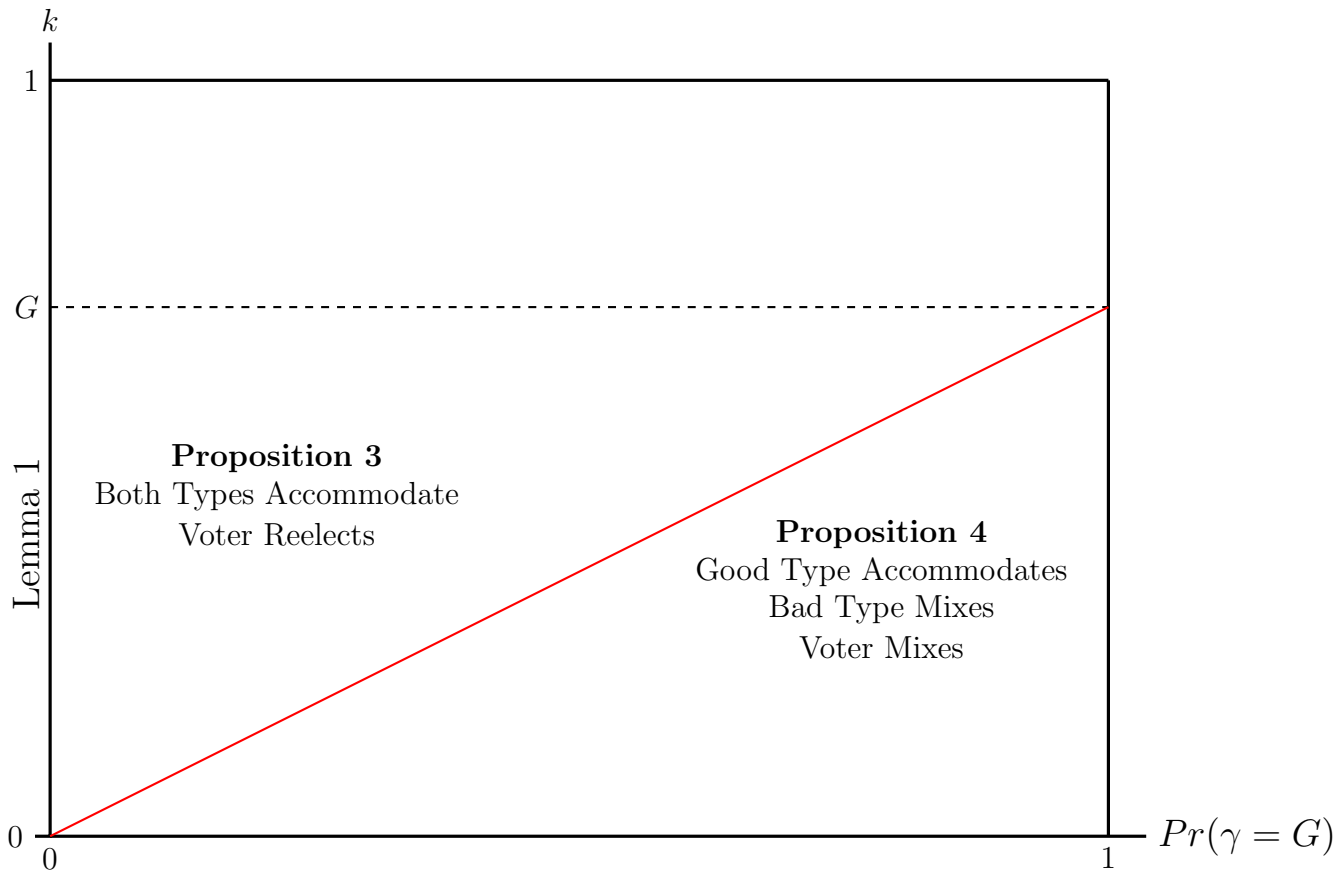

Figure 3: Equilibrium outcomes of protests within Lemma 1 as a function of p and k. The red line represents the $\bar{p} = \frac{k}{G}$.

balance making accommodations it does not want and its chances of reelection. This trade off is simple when voter's prior belief that the incumbent is a good type high: $p > \bar{p}$. In this case, the bad type mimics the good type and accommodates the activist. The voter does not gain any additional information. Consequently, he acts on his prior and reelects the incumbent. This outcome occurs in Region II of Figure 2, which is further detailed in Figure 3.

Proposition 3 ***Successful Protest***

Within Lemma 1, when the likelihood that the incumbent is a good type is high, $p > \bar{p}$:

High type activist always mobilizes.

Both types of incumbent accommodate.

Voter reelects the incumbent.

The equilibrium under Proposition 3 has two interesting implications. First, this parameter range, the cost of accommodation has no effect on the outcome. From a particular view, this might seem counterintuitive. After all, one might expect governments to be less likely to accommodate when the costs of policy change are high. However, recall that the activist only mobilizes if a good incumbent is willing to accommodate. Otherwise, they have no reason to engage in reformist protest.[10] Consequently, the good incumbent always accommodates the activists after protests.

When the good type is willing to accommodate, the bad incumbent cannot pursue a different strategy without revealing its type to the voter. This trade off becomes increasingly less palatable for the bad type as the cost of accommodation increases. However, as long as the bad type can guarantee retaining enough to support to win the reelection, mimicking the good type remains the best strategy. Consequently, in this parameter range, protests—if and when they happen— are always accommodated regardless of the cost of their demands.

Second, the incumbent's popularity similarly has no effect on the protests' outcome. The logic is analogous to the case of accommodation costs. The good incumbent accommodates genuinely and the bad incumbent accommodates to *retain* his popularity and support. Within Lemma 1, as long as the voter's prior belief in its quality is sufficiently high, mimicking the good type remains the best strategy, regardless of the opposition candidate's quality k.

Remark 1 *Conditional on being in the pooling equilibrium under Proposition 3:*
The cost of accommodation, a, has no effect on the outcome of protest, and the voter's decision.
The incumbent's relative popularity, k, has no effect on the outcome of the protest, and the voter's decision.

[10]The activists can still engage in more revolutionary actions that are outside the scope of this model.

3.3.3 Semi-Pooling Equilibria

The bad incumbent's trade off gets a little more complicated if the voter's belief in the quality of the incumbent is not high: when $p \leq \bar{p}$. In this case, absent new information the voter chooses not to reelect the incumbent. While the good incumbent still prefers to accommodate, this plays out poorly for the bad types. If they pool by accommodating, they lose the reelection and make costly concessions they do not want. However, it also cannot fully separate as this would reveal their type leading the voter to always vote for the opposition.

The remaining possibility is that the bad types semi-separate. They sometimes accommodate, and sometimes do not. This strategy ensures that the voter is indifferent between reelecting the incumbent or not. From the point of view of the bad incumbents, this a preferable outcome to the alternative: getting voted out of the office for certain. However, the voter sometimes ends up reelecting the bad incumbents, and dismissing the good ones. Similarly, the activists end up taking the streets only for their demands to fall on deaf ears. This parameter range is depicted in Region II of Figure 2, and further detailed in Figure 3.

Proposition 4 ***Successful and Ignored Protests***

Within Lemma 1, when $p \leq \bar{p}$*:*

Incumbents semi-separate after protests: $\dot{p} = \frac{k}{G}$

The good type always accommodates. The bad type accommodates with a probability $\sigma_B^* = \frac{\dot{p}(G-k)}{(k)(1-\dot{p})}$.

The voter reelects the incumbent with probability ${\sigma_V}^* = a$ *if it accommodates, and never reelects if it ignores.*

High type activist mobilizes if $(p + (1-p)\sigma_B^*)H - L > 0$

Unlike the separating equilibrium in Proposition 2, revealing their lack of interest in

citizens' demands proves more consequential for the bad incumbents. In this equilibrium, the voter always votes against the incumbent if protests are ignored. One might think that these governments are shooting themselves in the foot by dismissing the demands of their citizens. However, this is not the case. In this parameter range, the voter does not reelect incumbent absent new information. Consequently, if bad incumbents simply mimic the good types, they end up making concessions they do not want only to gain zero additional support. Thus, mixing between accommodating and ignoring becomes a rational response for bad types, even if ignoring costs them valuable electoral support.

However, accommodating protesters does not guarantee an electoral victory. In fact, accommodating protests can never boost an incumbents popularity to certain electoral victory. It either provides a modest increase—Proposition 4—or maintains what popularity the incumbent already has—Proposition 3—. Put differently, accommodation happens when it is seemingly needed the least: when the incumbent is already expected to win the reelection.

Within the semi-pooling equilibrium under Proposition 4, the voter sometimes does not reelect the incumbent even after accommodation. This is when the incumbent can gain the most by demonstrating that they are a good type. However, because the bad incumbents mimic the good types, after observing accommodation the voter is never certain that the incumbent is a good type. Consequently, he sometimes votes against the incumbent after accommodation, possibly voting good types out of office and retaining bad ones. Indeed, the comparative statics highlight that the less popular the incumbent is compared to the opposition, the more likely he is to ignore protests.

Conditional on being in the semi-pooling equilibria under Proposition 4, the likelihood of accommodation is decreasing in incumbent's relative popularity. In other words, as the opposition candidate's quality, k, increases, the bad incumbent becomes less willing to accommodate. The intuition is as follows. The bad incumbent mixes between and accom-

modating to create the particular belief of the voter that makes him indifferent: $\dot{p} = \frac{k}{G}$. As k increases and approaches G, the voter becomes less willing to vote for the incumbent. In order to retain the incumbent, he must have a stronger belief that it is a good type after observing accommodation. This means that for the voter to be indifferent and continue mixing, the bad incumbent must accommodate less.

The voter engages in a similar calculation. Because accommodations are more unpalatable for the bad incumbents, the voter has to reelect the incumbent with a higher probability to keep the bad type indifferent. The substantive intuition is straightforward. The voter is more likely to reward the incumbent after costly concessions than the small ones.

Proposition 5 *Conditional on being in the semi-pooling equilibrium under Proposition 4:*
As the incumbent's relative popularity decreases, k increases, accommodation becomes less likely.
As the cost of accommodation a increases, voter is more likely to reelect the incumbent after accommodation.

Although it looks like the accommodation often leads to worse prospects for the incumbent as in the standard models of protests and government response (Ritter, 2014), the dynamics are quite different. In the standard models, accommodation leads to the incumbents losing office because it either directly diminishes the prospects of the incumbents (Ritter, 2014), or signals their weakness to potential challengers (Ginkel and Smith, 1999; Pierskalla, 2010). Here, accommodation is followed by electoral defeat because it cannot credibly signal to the general public that the incumbent is a good type that cares about citizens' grievances. Put differently, accommodation does not necessarily diminish the popularity of incumbents. However, it also often fails to increase incumbent's popularity when it is needed the most.

For example, Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno rescinded the cuts of on fuel

subsidies after protests in October 2019.[11] However, his popularity had already fallen considerably throughout his term, reaching lower than 30 percent before the protests. Accommodating protesters, while perhaps preventing an even bigger drop in his approval, did not boost his popularity.[12]

3.3.4 When is Repression Useful?

Having examined when governments will ignore protests, I now consider when they will resort to repression. Suppose the game is played just as in the main analysis, except now the incumbent can preemptively choose a level of repression r at a cost kr. Repression succeeds in preventing mobilization if $r \geq m$. This is in line with both the theoretical and empirical literature on repression, which argues that governments primarily use repression in expectation of protests. Key goal of repression is either to prevent protests from materializing in the first place, or demobilize them before they attract public or media attention.[13] Finally, assume that with a probability $n \in [0, 1]$ repression is revealed to the broader public. This can happen either through international organizations, free press, or social media.

Because good incumbents prefer to accommodate protesters, only bad incumbents have incentives to use repression. Intuitively, they only need to repress in order to avoid concessions that they do not prefer. This only happens within the parameter space of Lemma 1, where ignoring the activist's demands affects their electoral prospects. Otherwise, they can simply ignore the protesters and not pay the costs of repression.

Even within the parameter space of Lemma 1, repression is only useful when suppressing information would benefit them. That is, when they can count on winning the reelection absent additional information. This is only possible within the pooling equilib-

[11] `https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/americas/ecuador-protests-lenin-moreno.html`

[12] `https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/04/11/lenin-morenos-new-economic-policy`

[13] See Ritter and Conrad (2016); De Jaegher and Hoyer (2019); Dragu and Przeworski (2019); Slantchev and Matush (2020); Rozenas (2020); Dragu and Lupu (2021)

rium in Proposition 3, when the incumbent is already popular, $p > \bar{p}$. This might seem counter-intuitive. Repression is used when it is least expected and when it is seemingly most counterproductive. Furthermore, the bad incumbent must choose a level of repression enough to deter the high type activist from mobilizing: $r \geq \frac{H}{c}$. Thus, the bad type only uses repression if:

$$\underbrace{1 - n - k\frac{H}{c}}_{\text{Expected Utility of Repression}} > \underbrace{1 - a}_{\text{Expected Utility of Accommodation}} \tag{7}$$

Proposition 6 *The good incumbent never uses repression.*
The bad incumbent uses repression only within Proposition 3 if Condition 7 is satisfied.

To see the intuition behind Proposition 6, recall the explanation of the semi-pooling equilibria in Proposition 4. Within this parameter range, the incumbent loses the reelection without additional information. If it successfully preempts protests, it ends up paying the cost of repression only to lose the reelection for certain. However, if it accommodates it can still win the reelection with a probability σ_V^*. Consequently, the bad incumbent never represses within Proposition 4.

Finally, Condition 7 points to another important result. Repression becomes more likely as the cost of mobilization for the activist increases. This might seem counter-intuitive from the common approaches to repression-dissent nexus. After all, governments should feel more secure against groups that have less capacity to directly threaten them.

However, the explanation follows intuitively from Proposition 1. Recall that both the good incumbent and the voter pay attention to the cost of mobilization in determining the level of grievance of the activist. If the cost of mobilization is high, they adjust their threshold for accommodation downwards accordingly. This means that even relatively small scale protest can reveal the incumbents poor quality when they are ignored. Incumbents who want to hide their type and retain their popularity will find it cheaper to repress these

smaller protests than larger ones. Consequently, repression will be more likely targeted at activists who have limited resources to mobilize. In other words, groups who are already disadvantaged—for example due to low economic resources— can become even more discriminated through repression.

Proposition 7 *Repression is more likely to be used against activists whose costs of mobilization is high.*
Repression is more likely when the cost of accommodation is high.

Propositon 7 provides insight into why governments crack down on seemingly innocuous protests, only for repression to backfire. However, the mechanism here is different from the "backlash hypothesis" (Francisco, 1995; Aytaç et al., 2018; Shadmehr and Boleslavsky, 2022) which is often invoked to explain why more dissent is observed after repression. According to this hypothesis, repression fails when it motivates the bystanders to join the opposition, making the opposition even stronger than before. While the backlash effect might be at play, it does not explain why governments engage in repression if it only makes the opposition stronger.

Here, governments repress because protests threaten to reveal their poor quality. What makes the general public turn against the government is not necessarily the repression. Repression might of course create additional discontent with the general public. However, in many cases learning that the incumbent is uninterested in their grievances is often sufficient for the public to turn against it (Bishara, 2015). Governments use repression to retain support that they would lose by ignoring. Put differently, repression is used when its most likely to be harmful for the government if it is observed by the broader public.

Consider the Gezi Park protests took place in Turkey in late May, 2013. The initial protests were aimed to oppose the demolition of Gezi Park, a green space in the center of Istanbul (Tufekci, 2017; Aytaç et al., 2018). The initial group of activists were small number

of environmentalists and members of the Istanbul's LGBTQ community (Tufekci, 2017). From a coercion, or disruption perspective, their numbers were too small to be effective or threatening. Yet they had a modest demand to preserve a park, which the general public was mostly unaware or agnostic about. However, the activists cleared signaled it was a salient issue for them with a relatively high level of mobilization given their scarce resources. The combination of modest demands and the small group of participants made them a target for repression. The government calculated–very erroneously as it turned out— that rather than cancel a building project, or look unresponsive to modest pleas of preserving trees, it would be much less costly to forcefully remove a small number of protesters from the park.

4 Theoretical Implications of Empirical Findings

The assertion that governments respond to popular challenges with repression is so commonly accepted that it has been come to known as the "Law of Coercive Responsiveness"(Davenport, 2007; deMeritt, 2016; Ritter and Conrad, 2016). Yet this assertion lacks robust empirical support (Hill and Jones, 2014; Ritter and Conrad, 2016). One reason is that empirical and formal literature often rely on a zero-sum framework to understand all popular mobilization. This leads to categorization of all collection action as a challenge to the government's authority. Yet for many activists, the goal of mobilization is not to undermine the authority of the government, but rather to implicitly recognize it and put it to the task of addressing their needs. In some cases, this might be equally threatening for governments. An incumbent government that ignores legitimate and modest demands of activists can lose crucial support from the general public. In others, governments can safely ignore the protesters.

This is indeed, what governments do most of the time. Klein and Regan (2018) find that around 40 percent of protests between 1990 and 2014 have received no response from the government. As the model presented demonstrates, the window of opportunity for

protesters can be narrow. Governments that are already unpopular have few incentives to accommodate or repress protesters. Similarly, sufficiently popular governments can safely ignore the demands for policy change they do not prefer, knowing their supporters will not switch sides.

Yet in many empirical work, government's option to simply ignore protests is not taken into account (Bishara, 2015). For example, Ritter and Conrad (2016) use rainfall as an instrument to account for the endogeneity between repression and dissent. They find that once selection effects are accounted for, the expected relationship between observed protests and repression disappear. While they point to strategic interaction as an explanation for the lack of statistical and substantive significant relationship, their argument is based on protester resolve and threat (Fearon, 1995). Protesters that survive preventive coercion or mobilize in expectation of repression are more resolved, thus repression is a poor response against them.

As the model presented here demonstrates, lack of repression does not mean successful protests. Governments routinely ignore protesters, not because protesters are resolved dissidents that are too strong to repress, but because protests are not threatening to their existing support. Indeed, as Proposition 6 demonstrates, preventing protests through coercion is useful in a relatively limited set of circumstances. In other settings, letting protests happen and either accommodating or ignoring them is much more efficient.

Klein and Regan (2018) consider ignoring as a strategic response as an alternative to repression or accommodation. Looking at protests across the world, they find that protests with modest demands and high participation are more likely to be accommodated. However, they similarly frame protests are a zero-sum game, where protesters' only leverage to gain accommodation is to threaten economic disruption. That is, protest numbers matter not because they reveal issue salience, but because higher numbers make protests directly more costly. They argue that activists that are ignored reveal "a weak hand" by not threat-

ening sufficient enough disruption. This line of reasoning cannot explain why activists often mobilize without any intention to create disruption, and that disruptive forms of collective action such as riots and looting are less likely to succeed Franklin (2009); Wasow (2020).

Rather than treating all protests as potential revolutions or purely extractive efforts, my model points to a informational dynamics. Protests are necessary to credibly reveal issue salience to the governments (Gause, 2020). When activists are accommodated, its rarely because of their direct coercive capacity. Either the government is willing to act on the information provided by the protests, or they are forced to by the expected response from the broader public (Proposition 3). Governments are forced, not because of coercion or disruption by protesters, but rather ignoring protesters would reveal the government's poor quality to the broader public.

5 Conclusion

The modal approach to collective mobilization assumes all protests are threats to status quo that the governments must respond. Yet governments often simply disregard protesters, neither repressing or accommodating them. This paper explored why activists take costly political action when they cannot coerce to government, and why and when governments respond to them. Activists mobilize to signal their grievances with the status quo policies. Governments that care about their constituents can use this information to enact policy, even when such change is costly. For governments who care little about grievances, the response is a little more complicated. When their support is very high or very low, they can ignore protests and safely reveal their lack of interest to the broader public. In other cases, they have to respond in a way that balances making costly accommodations, and hiding their poor quality.

By focusing on the informational effects of the protests, the model explains why

governments often ignore large protests with no repercussions, but also target much smaller protests with coercion. In contrast to common approaches to informational effects of the protests, protests do not simply coordinate existing anti-government sentiment. Rather, by potentially revealing the government to be non-responsive to legitimate and modest demands, they can cause it. This dynamic can make some public mobilizations "threatening" even their size is relatively small.

The closest the paper comes to a policy implication is that researchers should be wary about making causal claims about collective mobilization and government response without accounting for multiple dynamics at play. Appreciating, and distinguishing various dynamics between mobilizations and their outcome is crucial for the validity of empirical claims as well as the lessons drawn from them. Assuming all protests are disruptive efforts, or threats to government authority not only gets the data generating process wrong, but also paints repression as an obvious choice for governments. This can lead to normalization of government violence and the undermining of the efforts by non-violent activists.

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6 Appendix

6.1 Proofs and Full Equilibria

Proof of Lemma 1: Follows from the main text.

I's Decision:Let σ_V be the probability that V votes for the incumbent after $a = 1$. After observing $m \geq 0$, a type γ accommodates if:

$$v(1 - a + \gamma(L + \dot{q}(H - L)) + (1 - v)(0 - a + \gamma(L + \dot{q}(H - L))) > (1 - v)1 + v0$$

$$\sigma_V - a + \gamma(L + \dot{q}(H - L)) > (1 - \sigma_V)$$

where $\dot{q}$ is the updated belief about q after observing $m \geq 0$.

A's decision: Only mobilize to signal they are the high type. Low type never mobilizes. To show that it is a high type it must be the $H > cm^* \geq L$ or $cm \geq L$ or $m^* = \frac{L}{c}$. Incentive compatibility requires:

$$\sigma_I H - cm^* > 0$$

$$\sigma_I H - c(\frac{L}{c}) > 0$$

Full Description of Equilibria The following proposition describes the Perfect Bayesian Equilibria of the overall game, in which both types of activists choose a level of mobilization; both types of incumbents choose to accommodate or not; and voter decides to reelect the incumbent or not.

Proposition 8 *The game has multiple equilibria. On the equilibrium path:*

1. *Neither type of activist mobilizes and both types of incumbents pool on ignoring or accommodating.*

2. *Neither type of activist mobilizes and the Incumbents separate. Good I accommodates, and bad I ignores.*

3. *High type activists mobilizes and the incumbents pool on accommodating.*

4. *High type activist mobilizes and the incumbents separate. Good I accommodates, and bad I ignores.*

5. *The high type activist mobilizes, the good type accommodates and the bad type mixes.*

The voter reelects the incumbent if Condition 1 is satisfied.

6.1.1 No Protest Equilibria

Activists Pool; Incumbents Separate. Suppose $q > \bar{q}$. Neither type of activists mobilizes, so that $\dot{p} = p$. Good I accommodates, Bad I does not accommodate. So that $\dot{q} = 0$. This is only possible outside Lemma 1, when $a > HB$, otherwise Bad I would have a profitable deviation to $a = 1$.

Activists Pool; Incumbents Pool. Suppose $q > \bar{q}$. Neither type of activists mobilizes, so that $\dot{p} = p$. Good I accommodates, Bad I accommodates. $\dot{q} = q$. This is only possible when $a < HB$, or within Lemma 1 when $p > \bar{p}$. Bad I would have a profitable deviation to $a = 1$.

6.1.2 Protest Equilibria

Proof of Proposition 1: Follows from the main text from Condition 5.

Proof of Proposition 2: Follows from the main text and above. Where $\sigma_B = 0$ and $\sigma_G = 1$, so that $\sigma_I = p$.

Proof of Proposition 3: Follows from the main text and above. Where $\sigma_I = 1$ so that Condition 6 is always satisfied.

Proof of Proposition 4: Semi-pooling. Bad I accommodates with a probability σ_B.

V's posterior after observing $a = 1$ is $\dot{p} = \frac{p}{p+(1-p)\sigma_B}$, and when $a = 0$ is $\dot{p} = 0$.

V must be indifferent between reelecting the incumbent:

$$\dot{p} = \frac{k}{G}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
\frac{p}{p + (1-p)\sigma_B} &= \frac{k}{G} \\
\frac{p(G)}{k} &= p + (1-p)\sigma_B \\
\frac{p(G) - p(k)}{k} &= (1-p)\sigma_B \\
\frac{p(G-k)}{(k)(1-p)} &= \sigma_B \equiv \sigma_B^*
\end{aligned}$$

σ_V has to make bad I indifferent between $a = 1$ and $a = 0$.

$$\begin{aligned}
\sigma_V(1-a) + (1-\sigma_V)(0-a) &= 0 \\
\sigma_V - a &= 0 \\
\sigma_V^* &= a
\end{aligned}$$

Which is $\in (0, 1)$ and positive when $1 \geq G\theta > a > 0$.

For A, this means that the probability of accommodation is: $p + (1-p)\sigma_B$ for it to mobilize:

$$\begin{aligned}
(p + (1-p)\sigma_B)H - c\frac{L}{c} &> 0 \\
(p + (1-p)\sigma_B)H - L &> 0
\end{aligned}$$

So when $p \leq \bar{p} = \frac{k}{G}$: High type A mobilizes if above is satisfied. Good I always accommodates. Bad I accommodates with a probability σ_B. Voter retains with a probability σ_V.

Proof Proposition 5: The derivative of σ_B with respect to k is: $-\frac{p(G-k)}{k^2(1-p)} - \frac{p}{k(1-p)}$, which is always negative within the parameter ranges of the equilibrium. The bad incumbent's indifference condition, i.e. the voter's probability of reelection after $a = 1$, follows from the statement of equilibrium above.

Proof Proposition 6: Follows from the main text.

Proof Proposition 7: Follows from the main text.

6.2 Robustness Checks

6.2.1 Unit Mass Voters and A's Uncertainty About I's Support

To see how considering multiple voters do not change the results, suppose now that there are a unit mass of voters $[0, 1]$.

Assume a voter i reelects the incumbent $E[\gamma] > k_i$. Without loss of generality, order voters in increasing order so that k_i, so that if $i < j$, $k_i \leq k_j$. Now Lemma 1 changes to $G \geq k_i \geq B = 0$. And the incumbent wins the reelection if $F[k_i < E[\gamma] \geq x$, where x is the electoral threshold. Since k is common knowledge, this would reproduce same results in the baseline model.

To add another layer of uncertainty, suppose now that the Activist does not know the realization of k, but I does. This means that the government has better information about the electorate than the activists. The voters and the incumbent's strategy are unchanged,

but now activists condition for victory becomes:

$$\sigma_I H - L > 0$$

where, $\sigma_I = p + (1-p)Pr[(F[0 < k < G]) \leq x]$.

Consider the switchers, that is all with $(F[0 < k_i < G])$. Which is

$$1 - (1 - F(G)) - F(0) = F(G) - F(0)$$

Second term is strong opposition to the incumbent who will never vote for the incumbent. Third term is strong supporters who will always vote for the incumbent. Right hand side gives the voters that do vote for I after it ignores i.e. revealed to be the bad type.

For a uniform distribution, second term is $\frac{2-G}{2}$ and third is $\frac{1}{2}$. So overall $\frac{G+1}{2}$ are the expected proportion of switchers. Which is the same if it was just one single vote with uniformly distributed k.