

# Expert interviews: Protest outcomes and success factors

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## 1. Introduction

**Social Change Lab conducted interviews with 12 experts, six academics and six social movement experts, who mainly focus on protests or Social Movement Organisations (SMOs).** Our conversations led to many useful insights, highlighting the degree to which there was mostly consensus on some claims relating to protests and SMOs (such as the degree to which violence is often counterproductive). However, it also highlighted how much uncertainty and room for future work there was within social movement research, such as questions around the generalisability of findings to other contexts or the importance of internal vs external factors. **This report is split into two sections; the first focuses on protest outcomes, and the latter focuses on success factors of protest movements.** More comprehensive notes from our conversations can be found [here](#).

## 2. Summary of Results

Common themes from the interviews we conducted with experts can be seen below, with some illustrative quotes provided (more quotes are given in subsequent sections):

- **Protests can have significant positive impacts on various outcomes**, such as:
  - a) Voting behaviour
  - b) Public opinion
  - c) Legislator behaviour

Various examples of activism that were linked with positive change were given, including LGBT activism, environmentalism and the Civil Rights movement.

- *"The main consensus is that protest matters, but there isn't consensus on why protest matters."*
- **Large protests can be seen as credible signals of public opinion, and public opinion has a significant impact on policy.**
  - *"If you look at the drivers of policy-change, there is a large consensus that general public opinion is very important in impacting legislation"*
  - *"Politicians are often impressed by protests that don't just involve the 'usual suspects'. If a protest involves people who do not usually attend protests (e.g. school kids), politicians take it as a more credible signal of broader public opinion."*
- Protests can also be counterproductive - in that some protesters have directly contributed to outcomes that are antithetical to their stated aims.
- **It is extremely hard to make causal inferences** when it comes to protest activity and especially difficult to figure out when protests have had a long-term impact. That being said, short-term impacts (such as policy change) can lead to long-term impacts in a way that is easier to attribute causality to.



- *"It can be very difficult to really substantiate the causal impact of protest on any outcome - is the European Green New Deal a result of Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion? But it's also hard to believe that those protests didn't contribute to climate action."*
- **There was widespread agreement that external conditions, such as the political context or media landscape, will play a significant role in the overall success of an SMO.** There was disagreement on the exact balance of these two, but external conditions are likely to be slightly more important, according to our experts.
- There was broad consensus amongst experts we spoke to that **the organisation and governance of activists was one of the most important factors.**
  - *"[Successful SMOs] have systems in place. Designing big and scalable systems instead of doing things ad-hoc seems hugely important for movement success."*
- Several academics also had very strong views that the **number of protestors** was one of the most likely predictors of the success of a protest movement.
- The social movement experts we spoke with thought **that the make-up and experience of the core team was one of the most important factors in the success of SMOs.** Specifically, they said that organisers who had at least several years of experience in SMOs, as well as teams with the ability to handle internal conflict, were much more likely to succeed relative to other groups
  - *"Potentially most importantly is the make-up and experience of the core team [for an incubated social movement to do well]."*
- It seems likely that **violent protests are less likely to be successful** than non-violent protests, but **large disruptive non-violent protests can be more likely to succeed than non-disruptive protests** depending on the context.

Below, we created a table to highlight the top six success factors in what we perceived was the consensus amongst all our interviews. **These top six are in no particular order, but we believe they came up much more frequently, or with more confidence, than the other factors mentioned.** We also list the total number of claims made that were relevant to that success factor, as well as how many different experts made a claim related to it. It's important to note that in some cases, such as for disruption, not all of the claims made were positive. Additionally, there may be some bias present, in that experts were much more likely to speak about their work rather than give an objective view of the most important success factors. We also asked a specific question to some experts about disruption, hence the prevalence of this particular success factor.

Success Factor	Frequency of claims	Number of unique experts who thought this was important
Governance & Organisational factors	15	5
Numbers (of protestors)	6	3
Experienced core team	10	3
Trigger Events	11	3
Disruption	11	6
Elite Allies	3	2

Table 1: The top six success factors that our experts spoke about as being the most important factors for successful protest movements, in no particular order. The frequency of claims refers to how many individuals claims referenced this success factor, which might have been repeated by one expert.

# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	1
<b>2. Summary of Results</b>	1
<b>3. Methodology</b>	4
<b>4. The Impact of Protests</b>	5
4.1 Summary of findings on protest outcomes	5
4.2 Overall Impact	6
4.3 Impact on Legislators	6
4.4 Public Opinions role on policy	7
4.5 Causality	8
<b>5. Success Factors</b>	9
5.1 Summary of findings on protest or SMO success factors	9
5.2 Internal vs External Factors	11
5.3 Generalisability of success factors	12
5.4 Governance & Organisation	13
5.5 Core Team & Internal Culture	13
5.6 Number of Protesters	14
5.7 Polarisation	15
5.8 Disruption	16
5.9 Elite Allies	17
5.10 Violence	17
5.11 Trigger Events	18
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	19

### 3. Methodology

We spoke to 12 experts, six of whom were academics who have conducted significant research on protests and Social Movement Organisations (SMOs). We also spoke to six Social Movement experts, who were people we thought were highly respected in this field (e.g. helped launch successful movements, created widely used concepts for movements, etc). We prioritised academics with papers we included in our previous [literature reviews](#) on the impact and success factors of protests for inclusion in these interviews. We do not consider these interviews to be representative of the views of either academics or social movement experts. This isn't because there is some reason to suspect bias in one direction or another, but rather that the experts we spoke to were selected on the basis of having particularly useful or important work, rather than because we were attempting to speak with a fully representative sample.

We conducted semi-structured interviews using [this set of questions](#), which we adjusted based on the specific expertise of the person we spoke to. The experts we spoke to approved the conversation summary notes afterwards, which can be found [here](#). They're a synthesised version of full conversations, so some details were left out. These interviews were focused on both the outcomes of protest movements, which are covered in the first half of the report, as well as the factors that make protest success more (or less) likely, which is covered in the second half of the report.

We used thematic analysis to analyse this interview data and coded it using [taguette](#). Each quote that was taken from an interview was classified into one of several themes which had come up multiple times in multiple interviews. This report makes use of select quotes; these were selected either because they give a good summary of the thoughts of several of the academics or because they offer an original piece of insight.

## 4. The Impact of Protests

### 4.1 Summary of findings on protest outcomes

We spoke with [6 academics](#) about protest outcomes, and the summary of our interviews are as follows (with illustrative quotes in italics):

- **Protests can have significant positive impacts on various outcomes**, such as:
  - a) Voting behaviour
  - b) Public opinion
  - c) Legislator behaviour

Various examples of activism that were linked with positive change were given, including LGBT activism, environmentalism and the Civil Rights movement.

- *"The main consensus is that protest matters, but there isn't consensus on why protest matters."*
- **Large protests can be seen as credible signals of public opinion, and public opinion has a significant impact on policy.**
  - *"If you look at the drivers of policy-change, there is a large consensus that general public opinion is very important in impacting legislation"*
  - *"Politicians are often impressed by protests that don't just involve the 'usual suspects'. If a protest involves people who do not usually attend protests (e.g. school kids), politicians take it as a more credible signal of broader public opinion."*
- Protests can also be counterproductive - in that some protesters have directly contributed to outcomes that are antithetical to their stated aims.
  - *"Sometimes protests are completely counterproductive - for instance, one protest against the privatisation of a factory led to the factory being shut down and all the workers losing their jobs."*
- **It is extremely hard to make causal inferences** when it comes to protest activity, and especially difficult to figure out when protests have had a long-term impact. That being said, short-term impacts (such as policy change) can lead to long-term impact in a way that is easier to attribute causality to.
  - *"It can be very difficult to really substantiate the causal impact of protest on any outcome - is the European Green New Deal a result of Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion? But it's also hard to believe that those protests didn't contribute to climate action."*
- The research on protest outcomes is largely in political science, which means there has been lots of focus on legislative outcomes and less focus on the effects on industry. **More research into the impact of protest movements on corporate behaviour could be extremely useful**, as this is a common target for social movements.

## 4.2 Overall Impact

There seemed to be a consensus among the experts we spoke to that **protests can have a significant impact on various outcomes**, but that the impact is contingent on the political context and the tactics used by activists. The experts we spoke to also generally believed that the view that protests can have a notable impact on various outcomes was the consensus view among experts more broadly. There were also concerns that some protests were counterproductive, and this was especially likely to be true with protests that were either controversial or particularly extreme, although **they could also backfire when protesters had short-term aims that seemed to collide with their long-term aims.**

### Select Quotes:

- “The main consensus is that protest matters, but there isn’t consensus on why protest matters.”
- “The majority of social movement scholars agree that protest can matter sometimes, but that its effectiveness will be dependent on context”
- “Sometimes protests are completely counterproductive - for instance, one protest against the privatisation of a factory led to the factory being shut down and all the workers losing their jobs. Although the factory was not privatised, privatisation would perhaps have led to only half of the workers losing their jobs.”
- “The research on protest outcomes is largely in political science, which means there has been lots of focus on legislative outcomes and less focus on the effects on industry. Some of the biggest campaigns in Australian history have targeted corporations, and these seem worth examining in more detail. “

## 4.3 Impact on Legislators

The most common view was that **there are some forms of protests that politicians often feel as though they can’t ignore. This was especially true of large protests that involved people other than the ‘usual suspects’.** For instance, one academic reported that a climate protest led by schoolchildren that quickly gains thousands of participants seems more likely to catch the attention of politicians than an ‘ordinary’ protests that involved fairly typical environmental protesters.

There were other factors that were liable to affect the extent that protests are able to influence politicians, such as whether the personal costs to the politician were high,

whether the protest is gaining widespread media attention or catching the attention of the politician's constituents, whether the politician perceived the protests as a valid signal of public opinion, whether the protests were well-attended, etc.

**Select Quotes:**

- "Politicians are often impressed by protests that don't just involve the 'usual suspects'. If a protest involves people who do not usually attend protests (e.g. school kids), politicians take it as a more credible signal of broader public opinion."
- "One of the most important aspects to consider when thinking about the impact of protest is that its impact is very indirect - the effect of protest on legislators is almost always mediated by other factors, often either the media or public opinion"
- "Change happens because of legislators - even if a protest can change public opinion, change will not happen unless legislators are convinced that public opinion has changed. The signals of public opinion that politicians rely on are not necessarily signals that actually show what public opinion is - for instance, they are more likely to take a conversation with one of their constituents or with ordinary people more generally as a credible sign of public opinion than they are to rely on actual opinion polls."

#### 4.4 Public Opinions role on policy

**The number of people protesting may increase the impact of protests** on account of the fact that legislators would be more likely to take the protests seriously as a signal of public opinion. **Public opinion does seem likely to have an impact on legislation**, so a causal pathway that involves protests impacting public opinion, and public opinion impacting legislators seems like a plausible way that protests could impact legislation. It was also noted **that politicians must perceive there to be a change in public opinion for protests to make a difference** - even a real change in public opinion won't make a difference if politicians don't register it.

**Select Quotes:**

- "Change happens because of legislators - even if a protest can change public opinion, change will not happen unless legislators are convinced that public opinion has changed. The signals of public opinion that politicians rely on are not necessarily signals that actually show what public opinion is."
- "If you look at the drivers of policy-change, there is a large consensus that general public opinion is very important in impacting legislation"



- “A very strong protest movement that has public opinion on their side is likely to get away with disruptive protest, and can inflict costs on legislators that may make them more likely to be successful”
- “Politicians are becoming much more dependent on public opinion because most of the public are floating voters.”
- “The personal ideology of legislators is an important factor in policy making. This and public opinion are the two main drivers of policy making”

## 4.5 Causality

There was a majority view that **it is extremely hard to infer when protests are having a causal effect on some outcome variable**. This is especially true when trying to evaluate the long-term impacts of protests. There were also concerns about reverse causality - could it be the case that increased concern about some issue is causing the protests, rather than the other way around? Academics shared the view that even in cases where long-term trends have occurred, it is difficult to know whether this is due to protest activity or other factors.

### Select Quotes:

- “It can be very difficult to really substantiate the causal impact of protest on any outcome - is the European Green New Deal a result of Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion? But it’s also hard to believe that those protests didn’t contribute to climate action.”
- “There are some long-term trends, such as the improving treatment of LGBT people, that seem like they are probably at least partially caused by protests. But the causal effect is difficult to isolate”
- “It is immensely difficult to measure the long-term impacts of a protest. The best we can do is figure out if protests had a short-term impact that led to long-term change - for instance, if we can demonstrate that a protest had a causal effect in giving women the vote, obviously women gaining the vote is going to lead to long-term changes.”

## 5. Success Factors

There was a significant amount of discussion about the factors that were necessary and beneficial for protests and SMOs, as well as the factors that made SMOs less likely to be successful. We present the summary and factors with the most consensus, with further discussion on the most important factors included below.

### 5.1 Summary of findings on protest or SMO success factors

Based on our conversations with 4 academics and 6 movement experts, we found that:

- **There was widespread agreement that external conditions, such as the political context or media landscape, will play a significant role in the overall success of an SMO.** Despite this being potentially over 50% of the reasons why SMOs succeed or fail, many experts also spoke to the importance of organisations capitalising on favourable conditions.
  - *"The odds are people will always lose when trying to win for your community. However, you can take advantage when the moment is right. The world is unpredictable, and these opportunities do arise, so it's important to know how to win power when the external conditions are suitable."*
- **Most experts thought that as much of the research was done in the US and Western Europe, it would provide lessons for SMOs in Western democracies,** but it was unclear if it would be applicable to SMOs in developing countries.
  - *"Broadly, it seems reasonable that [research from the US] might apply to comparable democracies e.g. Europe and the UK."*
- There was broad consensus amongst experts we spoke to that **the organisation and governance of activists was one of the most important factors for success.** Specifically, experts believe that factors such as having scalable systems to onboard volunteers, systems for healthy teamwork (e.g. resolving conflict, fair compensation, etc.) and the level of decentralisation play significant roles in the success of an SMO.
  - *"[Successful SMOs] have systems in place. Designing big and scalable systems instead of doing things ad-hoc seems hugely important for movement success."*
- The social movement experts in particular whom we spoke with thought **that the make-up and experience of the core team was one of the most important factors in the success of SMOs.** Specifically, they said that organisers who had at least several years of experience in SMOs, as well as teams with the ability to handle internal conflict, were much more likely to succeed relative to other groups

- *"Potentially most importantly is the make-up and experience of the core team [for an incubated social movement to do well]."*
- *"A good core also needs to be able to deal with conflict well, many organisations fall apart when the conflict begins."*
- **The numbers of people involved in a protest movement also seems to be a highly relevant factor for success.**
  - *"The number of people at a protest is probably the most important factor in its success, but this is somewhat obvious to protestors."*
- It seems likely that **violent protests are less likely to be successful** than non-violent protests, but **sometimes disruptive non-violent protests can be more likely to succeed than non-disruptive protests** depending on the context in which the protests are occurring.
  - *"Lots of advocates of violent protest argue for the 'radical flank effect', but it seems really obvious that sometimes the radical flank effect will work and other times it won't, you can't just cite the radical flank effect as a justification for violent protests."*
- There was a consensus that protestors are more likely to succeed if they time their protests as such to take advantage of trigger events. **Protesters that are organised in such a way that allows them to respond quickly to events related to their cause are more likely to be successful.**
  - *"Protest groups should build the groundwork so that when an opportunity comes, they are able to grasp it. It is important for protestors to be ready for when they have a chance to build some momentum. "*
- Polarisation can be both positive and negative for activists. There is a degree to which polarisation is inevitable on contentious issues, but on issues where the public isn't supportive of protestors, it may lead to failure or backlash.
  - *"Polarisation might also be a good thing for social movements - if your issue is being ignored, polarising a debate is what protest is about. People will get informed, politicians will try to take positions, etc. BLM was polarising, but that was advantageous for the protestors. The backfire effect might be a risk, but protestors might take the view that sometimes it is more important to do something rather than nothing."*

Success Factor	Frequency of claims	Number of unique experts who thought this was important
Governance & Organisational factors	15	5
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*Table 1: The top six success factors that our experts spoke about as being the most important factors for successful protest movements, in no particular order. The frequency of claims refers to how many individuals claims referenced this success factor, which might have been repeated by one expert.*

**The table above highlights the top six success factors in what we perceived was the consensus amongst all our interviews. These top six are in no particular order, but we believe they came up much more frequently, or with more confidence, than the other factors mentioned.** We also list the total number of claims made that were relevant to that success factor, as well as how many different experts made a claim related to it. It's important to note that in some cases, such as for disruption, not all of the claims made were positive. Additionally, there may be some bias present, in that experts were much more likely to speak about their work rather than give an objective view of the most important success factors. We also asked a specific question to some experts about disruption, hence the prevalence of this particular success factor.

## 5.2 Internal vs External Factors

**There was widespread agreement that external conditions, such as the political context, public opinion for your issue and media landscape, will play a significant role in the overall success of an SMO.** The more contentious issue was exactly how important external conditions were relative to factors that SMO had within their control. **There was disagreement on the exact balance of these two, but external conditions are likely to be slightly more important according to our experts.** However, many experts also spoke about the importance of SMO agency, and the ability of organisations to capitalise on external conditions to secure wins.

### Select Quotes:

- "The odds are people will always lose when trying to win for your community. However, you can take advantage when the moment is right. The world is unpredictable, and these opportunities do arise, so it's important to know how to win power when the external conditions are suitable."
- "You also can't downplay the impact of luck in social movement success"



- “One thing worth mentioning is that the right conditions need to exist for a mass protest movement to emerge. While we might not be good at predicting this, we know when it’s easier to frontload: when you have a pre-existing base, when you have trigger events, when you have experienced leadership.”
- “The internal factors are half the battle.”
- “It can be extremely difficult to figure out why a movement did or did not succeed - there are so many moving parts and variables. An analysis that says ‘Movement X failed only because of Y’ is guaranteed to be simplistic.”
- “The most important driver for protest success in influencing the news agenda specifically is whether the issue was already topical - the political and media context surrounding a protest is more important in influencing its chance of success than movement agency is.”

### 5.3 Generalisability of success factors

We asked academics how generalisable the success factors were to other contexts, such as other issues or other countries. **In summary, most experts thought that as most research was done in the US and Western Europe, it would provide lessons for SMOs in Western democracies, but would be less valuable for SMOs in developing countries.** However, there were some concerns about the amount of research done in the US, and the unique political context there, which might make generalising more tricky.

#### Select Quotes:

- “Broadly, it seems reasonable that it might apply to comparable democracies e.g. Europe and the UK.”
- “It is a pity that so much of the work done is in the United States, because the US is an exceptional case that is different to most other countries. Many countries are fairly similar to other countries, but the US is very special and so research there may be less generalisable to other countries.”
- “There is huge disagreement on how much we can generalise - can we take research from the US and assume that it is likely to apply to other countries?”
- “The results of agenda setting looked similar in Western Europe and the UK, so we can probably generalise across these contexts.”
- “Thoughts about protest might be different in different countries - and the US probably has a lower tolerance to protest than most (hence more arrests). It’s worth noting that the UK is probably a lot more similar to Western Europe in this regard than it is to the US.”

## 5.4 Governance & Organisation

A common theme among both academics and Social Movement experts was that **the organisation and governance of activists was one of the most important factors for success**. Specifically, experts believe that factors such as having scalable systems to onboard volunteers, systems for healthy teamwork (e.g. resolving conflict, fair compensation, etc.) and the level of decentralisation play significant roles in the success of an SMO. However, there was some uncertainty about what level of decentralisation is optimal for an SMO, and that this is likely to depend on the campaign and aims of the SMO. Additionally, experts who themselves had trained activists spoke about the necessity of understanding that an SMO needs to operate differently at different stages of its existence.

### Select Quotes:

- “If you compare Black Lives Matter and protests during the Civil Rights Movement, it seems likely that the Civil Rights Movement benefited from [having clearer leadership](#). Having a central figure makes it easier to identify with a social movement.”
- “[Successful SMOs] have systems in place. Designing big and scalable systems instead of doing things ad-hoc seems hugely important for movement success. They also need to have a healthy team - it’s possible for a team to add much more than the sum of its parts or to be much less effective than the sum of its parts, depending on how it is structured”
- “Democratic governance structures and practices is a common issue within groups.”
- “‘[Directed Network Campaigns](#)’ have a central structure that works with grassroots groups on the outside of the campaign; this appears to be highly successful.”
- “We don’t know how centralised a social movement or protest should be - some research suggests that bottom-up organisations seem to be more effective than having a centrally organised movement, but it isn’t definitive.”
- “People often say that interpersonal dynamics are the most important factor in achieving a healthy team - in fact, the empirical evidence suggests that systems and structures are much more important.”

## 5.5 Core Team & Internal Culture

The social movement experts in particular whom we spoke with thought **that the make-up and experience of the core team was one of the most important factors in the success of SMOs**. Specifically, they said that **organisers who had at least**

**several years experience in SMOs, as well as teams with the ability to handle internal conflict, were much more likely to succeed relative to other groups.** In addition, groups that had worked together previously, particularly had failed on other projects, were likely to benefit most from the frontloading process when incubating new SMOs.

#### Select Quotes:

- “Potentially most importantly is the make-up and experience of the core team [for an incubated social movement to do well].”
- “The most successful cores had organisers who had been organising for at least ten years, but some of the cores only had people who had organised for one or two years”
- “Sunrise [Movement] people all knew each other from the divestment movement. They all spoke in similar language and had all experienced failure together.”
- “They also need to have a healthy team - it’s possible for a team to add much more than the sum of its parts or to be much less effective than the sum of its parts, depending on how it is structured.”
- “A good core also needs to be able to deal with conflict well, many organisations fall apart when the conflict begins.”
- “The thing that keeps people coming back to protests is if they had positive experiences with other people in their activist groups - activists would keep coming back to protests despite harsh crack-downs if the other protesters were committed and supportive.”
- “People often say that interpersonal dynamics are the most important factor in achieving a healthy team - in fact, the empirical evidence suggests that systems and structures are much more important.”

## 5.6 Number of Protesters

**Two academics of the six placed a heavy emphasis on the role of the number of protesters as being a key determinant of protest success.** One Social Movement expert appeared to be more sceptical, arguing that social movements that are well organised and have clear systems in place to achieve their goals can be successful without large numbers of people involved.

#### Select Quotes:

- “The public has a different logic to legislators. Politicians are thinking about public support so the ‘numbers’ element might make more of a difference to them. ”

- “Although politicians invest so much effort in discovering public opinion, often they don’t have good models, so they might use protest and the numbers at a protest to get a sense of public opinion.”
- “The number of people at a protest is probably the most important factor in its success, but this is somewhat obvious to protestors.”
- “It’s also worth noting that, in discussions with Belgian legislators, there was a common view that what really led to protest success was there being an unexpected presence - if the numbers were dramatically higher than legislators had expected, if there were certain types of protesters there who differed from those you would usually expect to be in attendance, etc.
- “When the local Friday for Futures march in Belgium took place it initially attracted 3000 people, the week after it attracted 12,000, then eventually 70,000. Then they decided to occupy the political epicentre of Brussels - physically, they sat in the street. If they had started by occupying the street with the initial 3000 people, it would have been ‘unworthy’. Because of the obvious growth of the movement, it was considered ‘worthy’.”
- “There’s a lot of disagreement and misunderstanding about what is required for a movement to be successful. For instance, Chenoweth’s 3.5% statistic is often reported as though it is prescriptive - ‘if you get to 3.5% support, you win!’. This isn’t true. In reality, it just describes movements that did succeed, we can’t infer that any movement that gets the support of 3.5% of the population will necessarily be successful.”
- “It’s worth noting that it’s very unclear what effect small protests are likely to have - some studies looking at small protests against austerity in Greece, Spain, and Portugal seem to find that they had pretty much zero effect. Very small protests seem really different to large protests, and the evidence they are effective is much less strong.”

## 5.7 Polarisation

Interviews with many of the experts involved a discussion of the impact of polarisation, and the chance that polarisation would impact the chance of protest success. **The most commonly expressed view was that polarisation was not necessarily likely to lead to social movement failure**, and that some forms of polarisation could be positive for SMOs, while other forms could be harmful. **Some thought that polarisation of the public on an issue that activists are highlighting is inevitable, as the issue will inevitably be controversial.**

### Select Quotes:



- “Within mass protest movements, polarisation is inevitable. The important thing is training people to understand the difference between positive and negative polarisation.”
- “Polarisation might also be a good thing for social movements - if your issue is being ignored, polarising a debate is what protest is about. People will get informed, politicians will try to take positions, etc. BLM was polarising, but that was advantageous for the protesters. The backfire effect might be a risk, but protesters might take the view that sometimes it is more important to do something rather than nothing.”
- “Polarisation can be really bad - if you force people to take a side, they might choose the other side. On the other hand, people might move towards you on the issue even when they dislike the actual protesters.”
- “The problem with the conversation about polarisation is that the word means something different for political analysts than what it does among most people. What polarisation means among most people in the US is divisiveness, juxtaposed to unity. Funders and politicians understand it in those terms.”

## 5.8 Disruption

There was a reasonable consensus that disruptive nonviolent protests were sometimes an important tool in the arsenal of social movement organisations, due to its ability to attract media attention and impose direct costs on policymakers. Another view was that whether a protest could ‘get away’ with being disruptive was contingent on whether they already had public opinion on their side - protesters can probably be extremely disruptive if the public is largely supportive of their cause.

Similar to violent protests, there was concern that **disruptive protests were more likely to attract government repression**, and that some decisions (such as targeting police) were extremely likely to lead to backlash. Repression can also lead to people leaving the protests and turning to new forms of political expression. One academic also advocated for non-violent ‘tactical diversity’, meaning use a range of tactics in order to figure out which non-violent tactics were most likely to succeed.

### Select Quotes:

- “Disruptive nonviolent protest might work in some circumstances. If you have severe time constraints, such as with climate change, being disruptive might be the only way to attract attention.”
- “The disruption is important as it can be embarrassing for politicians, who don’t want to impose costs on the public so they feel compelled to act.”

- “Extreme protest may or may not work depending on whoever is observing the protest. What is ‘worthy’ in one context might be ‘unworthy’ in another context, even if the action is exactly the same.”
- “If you’re a smaller movement using more extreme tactics, high levels of repression might cause people to leave the movement and therefore curtail your long-term potential. On the other hand, it could also radicalise people.”
- “Tactical diversity or an ‘action repertoire’ can be useful. It is very hard to figure out whether one tactic is more likely to be successful than another, massive datasets are needed and often do not exist. Almost every group uses multiple tactics, so teasing out which tactics are effective is extremely difficult, so developing a repertoire of the tactics that theoretically seem like they might be effective is the best option here.”

## 5.9 Elite Allies

There wasn’t a particularly strong consensus on the role of elite allies. While one academic said that they believed the role of elite allies was very important, it was also expressed that there is not a consensus about whether elite allies are a key factor in protest and SMO success.

### Select Quotes:

- “Elite allies seem to be immensely important, because legislators are ultimately the people who drive the changes. The reception that protest receives from elites may account for 80% of the variance in outcomes”
- “Sunrise Movement got a lot of media attention when [AOC decided to join their takeover of Nancy Pelosi’s office.](#)”
- “There is disagreement over the role of public opinion, the role of elite allies, and the role of party support, as it all depends so much on the context”
- “There may also be other routes to legislative change that involve increasing the chance of having elite allies by changing public opinion - for instance, if a protest movement increases the salience of climate change, this may result in, for left-wing movements, for instance, more Green Party legislators, who may act as elite allies to climate protesters.”

## 5.10 Violence

There seemed to be a common view that **protests that were violent are mostly counterproductive** (although not *always* counterproductive), but that **protests that were disruptive without being violent might be effective**, as they could attract more

media attention (see Disruption section below). The main reasons given were that violent tactics are more likely to alienate a movement from the general public, leading to a loss of support for an issue. The other reason was that violent tactics are more likely to lead to government repression, which can lead to a movement fragmenting and activists arrested and/or convicted.

**Select Quotes:**

- “A question like ‘*Do extreme protests work?*’ might be difficult to answer because it will be dependent on context. There’s also the case that even a violent or extreme protest might lead to protesters developing more of a commitment to the cause - movements are kept alive by people who are passionate.”
- “There are lots of similarities across nations about the ineffectiveness of violent protest, this is true whether you’re in an autocratic or democratic context, except in the US where it might be more socially acceptable.”
- “We can say with a reasonable amount of confidence that violence is probably less effective than nonviolence, and violence against the police is a terrible idea.”
- “Lots of advocates of violent protest argue for the ‘radical flank effect’, but it seems really obvious that sometimes the radical flank effect will work and other times it won’t, you can’t just cite the radical flank effect as a justification for violent protests.”

## 5.11 Trigger Events

**There seemed to be a consensus that protests taking place in the aftermath of trigger events were more likely to be successful.** It also became apparent that many experts agreed that activists who are organised in such a way that allows them to take advantage of opportunities and trigger events have a better chance of achieving their aims. For example, groups that had spent time developing ‘rapid response capacity’, such as the ability to scale the number of paid volunteers, trainings delivered, protests organised and other activities quickly tended to make better use of these trigger events.

**Select Quotes:**

- “Protests can make use of momentum to ensure that media coverage is sustained, and legislators respond to the increased attention on whatever the pertinent issue is. BLM was influential because the murder of George Floyd was a trigger event - there was an opportunity for them to have an impact on police departments in the US.”
- “In Belgium, the topic of decolonisation quickly became a subject of public debate in the aftermath of BLM protests, resulting in a Commission in parliament

about the actions of Belgium in the Congo. The King also apologised for Belgium's actions in the Congo."

- "Protest groups should build the groundwork so that when an opportunity comes, they are able to grasp it. It is important for protesters to be ready for when they have a chance to build some momentum. The Spanish group Indignados had gatherings and collective identity-building to enable them to take action when opportunities arose."
- "We learned a lot from Serbian protesters about what are good predictors of a good core - having 'hype people' who know how to capitalise on a trigger event, and figuring out what actually constitutes a trigger event."
- "One important characteristic is 'rapid response capacity', people can temporarily become staff to help the mass protests. If people come and think this is a career for life, you can barely give any of those jobs for a mass protest movement. You need people who can drop out of whatever they're doing and live on 30k for only a year - not people who want to earn 80k for ten years."

## 6. Conclusion

There was not a particularly strong consensus on how strong the impact of protests is in general, other than the consistent claim that **protests are able to have an impact on outcomes that matter**. There also seemed to be a consensus view that experts generally agree that protests can have an impact on outcomes that matter. The likely explanation for the lack of consensus on the exact significance of the impact of protests is that **making causal claims about the impact of protests is difficult**, and especially that **it is extremely hard to know the long-term impacts of protests and social movements**.

There were a variety of opinions on the impacts of protests and the factors that make protests more likely to succeed or fail. The views that seemed to be most commonly held were that **violent protests are less likely to succeed than non-violent protests**, but it should be noted that even this came with caveats. Some experts expressed the view that it may be the case that violent and extreme protests can sometimes lead to protesters becoming more committed to their cause. Similarly, there seemed to be a consensus that **protests are more effective in the immediate aftermath of trigger events**, and that activists who were organised in such a way to take advantage of trigger events were more likely to be successful.

There were other consensus positions that were fairly unsurprising, such as the consistent claim that **well-organised activists are more likely to succeed in achieving their aims**. In addition, **SMOs with an experienced core team and good**



**internal culture are much more likely to succeed than groups that struggle to resolve internal conflict.** There were varied views on the extent to which activists benefit or are harmed by polarisation of the issues that they're highlighting. Similarly, there were varying views on the extent to which the number of people involved with a social movement or protest was important, with two academics claiming that legislators were strongly influenced by the number of people involved with a protest, whereas one social movement expert believed that numbers are often fairly unimportant.

However, we note that academics who study outcomes of protests and SMOs might have a bias towards thinking this strategy is more effective than is accurate. This could be due to [motivated reasoning](#) towards justifying their current involvement in the field, or intuitions that initially drew them towards the field. Therefore, readers might want to adjust for this factor when interpreting the outcomes suggested by academics. We think the claims around success factors are less likely to be affected by this issue, as there is no theoretical reason we are aware of to believe that academics or movement experts intrinsically believe some factors are more important than others.