

# **PROTEST SUCCESS FACTORS: LITERATURE REVIEW**

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# SUMMARY

- We believe that there is moderate evidence that the protesters are more likely to succeed if they are perceived as a diverse group, if they have a unified message, and if the number of protesters is high.
- The factors that influence the public are slightly different to factors that influence policymakers. Namely, the public is much more concerned about the worthiness of protestors, whilst policymakers are more influenced by the numbers of protestors and the diversity of groups present.
- We believe that there is strong evidence that non-violent protest is preferable to violent protest for achieving desired outcomes. There have been multiple studies that indicate that peaceful protesters are more likely to persuade the public - including Wasow (2020) and Feinberg et al. (2017).
- The political context in which a protest takes place is also relevant: there is some evidence that protesters are more likely to achieve their aims if they highlight an issue about which the public is already on their side, and that they are more likely to have an influence at the early stages of the legislative process rather than the later stages. We believe in some cases, the political context might be important enough to dominate over factors within the movement's control, whereby detrimental external conditions might lead to failure regardless of how well the movement crafts its strategies or tactics.



# FEATURES OF THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

Charles Tilly, one of the most cited scholars working on understanding protest movements, developed the WUNC Framework for understanding why protests succeed and fail. WUNC is an acronym that stands for 'Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment' - four factors that Tilly claimed would have a large impact on the chance that a protest would achieve its aims. Wouters and Walgrave also claim that the diversity of a protest movement is an important factor in its success - coining the term 'dWUNC' (Wouters and Walgrave, 2017).

There is some empirical support for the WUNC framework - as noted above, Wouters and Walgrave (2017) manipulated each part of the WUNC framework in an experiment on Belgian legislators to see if they were more responsive to protesters when those protesters demonstrated high levels of worthiness (non-violent, disciplined), unity (all protesters using the same signs and slogans), numbers (large numbers of protesters), and commitment (stating that the protesters had already protested before and planned to do so again). The finding is that signals about the worthiness of protesters, unity of protesters, and the numbers of protesters all have highly significant effects on the attitudes of the elected representatives - the news reports that were manipulated to show high unity and high numbers among protesters were shown to increase the extent to which the elected representatives took the view that the issue was of high salience, to bring the representatives' position closer to that of the protesters, and to increase the chance that a representative said they would take action on the issue. The worthiness of the protesters affected the position of the representative but not the representative's view on the salience of the issue or the chance they would take action on the issue. The commitment of the protesters had no significant effect on the representatives.

Wouters (2019) looks at the dWUNC framework (now including diversity) and the extent to which protest movements appeal to the general public. He performs two studies - one looking at a demonstration for the rights of asylum seekers, and another looking at Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality, testing which features of each protest make a difference in the amount of support the protests receive from the general public.



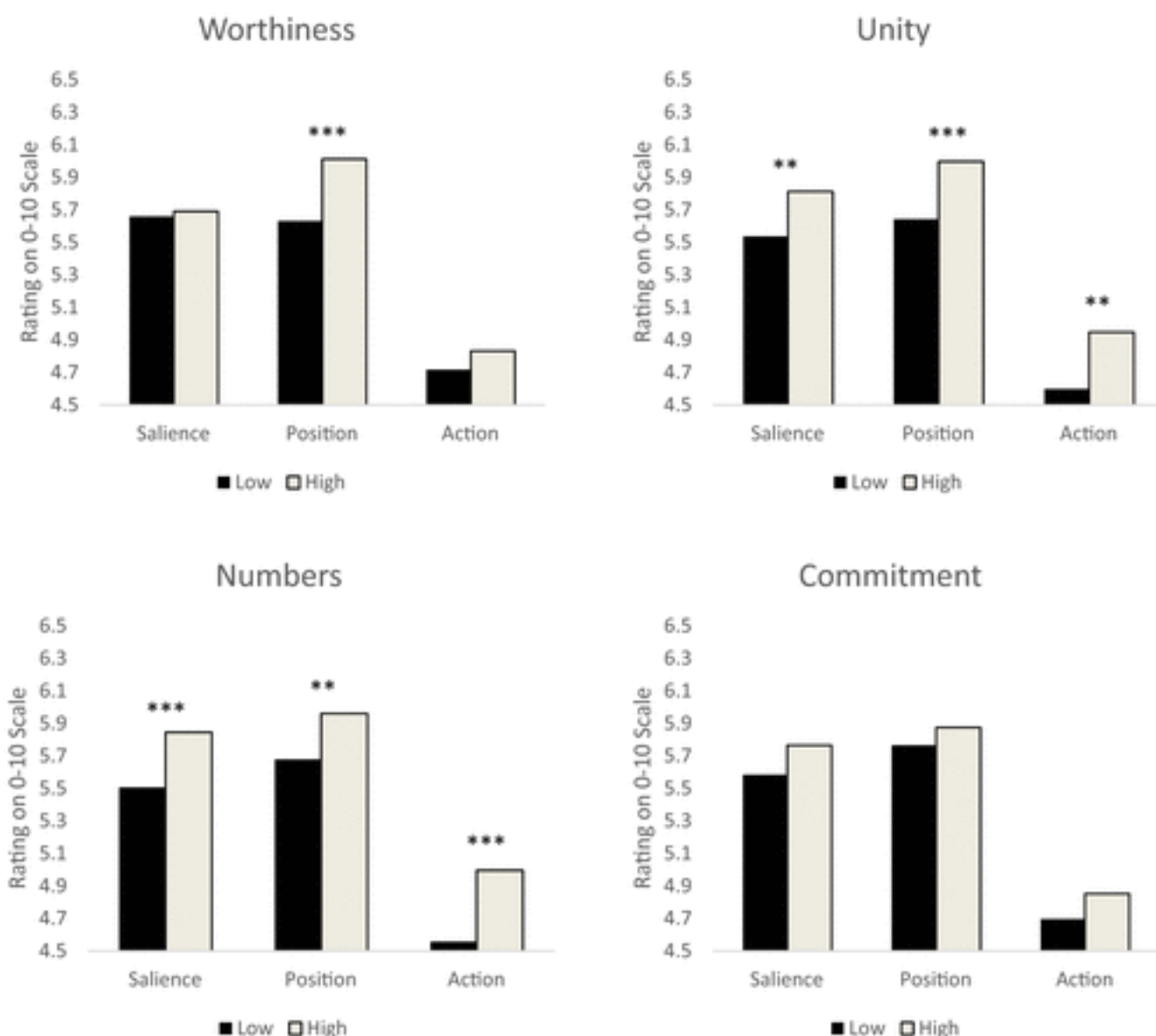


Figure 1. Predicted Values of Salience, Position, and Intended Action Effects by Protest Feature, measured in Belgian legislators. Source: Wouters and Walgrave (2017)

In each study, the elements of the protest shown to respondents were manipulated to show varying levels of worthiness, unity, numbers, commitment, and diversity, as in Wouters and Walgrave (2017). In Study 1, which examined protests relating to the rights of asylum seekers, the WUNC elements that had a statistically significant association with positive perceptions of the protesters were diversity, worthiness, and unity. In Study 2, which examined Black Lives Matter protests, the same factors were positively associated with support for the protesters. It is worth noting that in Study 2, there seemed to be an interaction effect between the race of the respondent and the factors that affected their perception of the protests - African American respondents' tendency to support the protests was not contingent on the levels of diversity at the protests.

## Worthiness

While there are not many studies that explicitly examine whether Tilly's conception of 'worthiness' is an important factor in protest success, there are a number of studies (some of which have already been discussed) that examine whether non-violent protests are more likely to be successful than violent protests, and this corresponds fairly well with Tilly's conception of worthiness. As Wouters and Walgrave note in their reintroduction of the WUNC framework, 'violent, disruptive behaviour is worthiness's flipside' (2017, p. 5).

As discussed in Section 1, Wasow (2020) demonstrates with an instrumental variable approach that during the US Civil Rights Movement, non-violent protest was more successful in increasing Democratic vote share than was violent protest. Similarly, Budgen (2020) showed that respondents were more receptive to news reports showing peaceful environmental protesters than violent protesters - both of these give empirical support to the 'Worthiness' component of the WUNC Framework. Research from Feinberg et al (2017). also lends support to the idea that violent protest is less likely to be effective - they carried out three experiments that showed that extreme activism resulted in reduced public support, and resulted in fewer people identifying with the protest movement.

Simpson et al. (2018) conducted another experiment looking at whether violent tactics made people more or less likely to support protests, using a survey of 800 participants. Participants read newspaper articles about white nationalist protesters and counter-protesters, with articles being manipulated to show either the protesters or counterprotesters (or both) as violent. The experiment found that if the only counter protesters alone were violent, respondents were significantly less likely to support the counter protesters, and similarly, if only the white nationalists were violent, they also received less support from respondents.

Rojas (2006) examines movements that attempted to get universities to establish departments for African-American studies at their universities, looking at whether disruptive tactics (including violence, property damage, and building occupations) are more effective than non-disruptive tactics (including rallies and other non-violent demonstrations), controlling for organisational structure, institutional type, and client demography. He finds that after controls are introduced, disruptive protest has no statistically significant effect, whereas the effect of non-disruptive protest remains statistically significant.

One type of ‘worthiness’ that may alter the chance of protest success is whether activists are perceived as eccentric or individually aggressive. In one experiment conducted by Bashir et al. (2013), people were shown either the profile of a ‘typical feminist’, an ‘atypical feminist’, or an undefined target whose stance on feminism was not given (as a control group). The ‘typical feminist’ was described as campaigning by holding rallies outside corporate headquarters to pressure CEOs into resigning, whereas the ‘atypical feminist’ was described as organising social events that promote women’s rights. Participants in the experiment were more likely to associate the ‘typical feminist’ with negative stereotypes (unpleasant, militant, etc.) and less interested in affiliating with the ‘typical feminist’ than the ‘atypical feminist’. The results indicate that if people perceive a protester as conforming with negative stereotypes they have about the group to which the protester belongs, they may be less likely to want to affiliate with the protest and the cause area.

## Unity

While there have not been many studies other than those carried out by Walgrave and Wouters that relate specifically to the unity of protesters, there are some studies that look at factors that are roughly analogous to unity. For instance, Fassiotto and Soule (2017) find that ‘signal clarity’ is associated with protest movements having an effect on legislators. Looking at marches relating to women’s rights in the United States, they operationalise ‘signal clarity’ in two ways: firstly, if women were reported as being the primary presence at a protest, and secondly, if the issues being espoused at protest events are similar over time. They find that both aspects of ‘signal clarity’ are strongly associated with at least one Congressional vote on Women’s issues in the subsequent month.

## Numbers

Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) famously proposed a 3.5 percent rule - claiming that no protest movement that involved at least 3.5% of a country's population had ever failed to achieve its aims. Their book *Why Civil Resistance Works* examines 323 protest movements that took place between 1900 and 2006, and does find an association between the number of protesters and the likelihood that the protest achieved its aims. While they acknowledge that huge numbers of protesters do not always mean a protest movement is successful (for instance, they give the example of the anti-Japanese insurgency in China in the 1930s and 1940s that had over 4 million participants), they note that a single unit increase in the number of active participants in a protest makes a campaign over 10% more likely to be successful - as can be seen in the figure below. That being said, there are obvious issues in establishing causality when simply looking at the association between the number of protesters and the chance of success - for instance, protest movements that seem to be succeeding will be more likely to attract more numbers of participants. In addition, this work focuses largely on regime change in authoritarian countries in the Global South, so there are large contextual differences if attempting to apply these findings to North American or European movements campaigning for policy change in liberal democracies.

FIGURE 2.1 THE EFFECT OF PARTICIPATION ON THE PROBABILITY OF CAMPAIGN SUCCESS

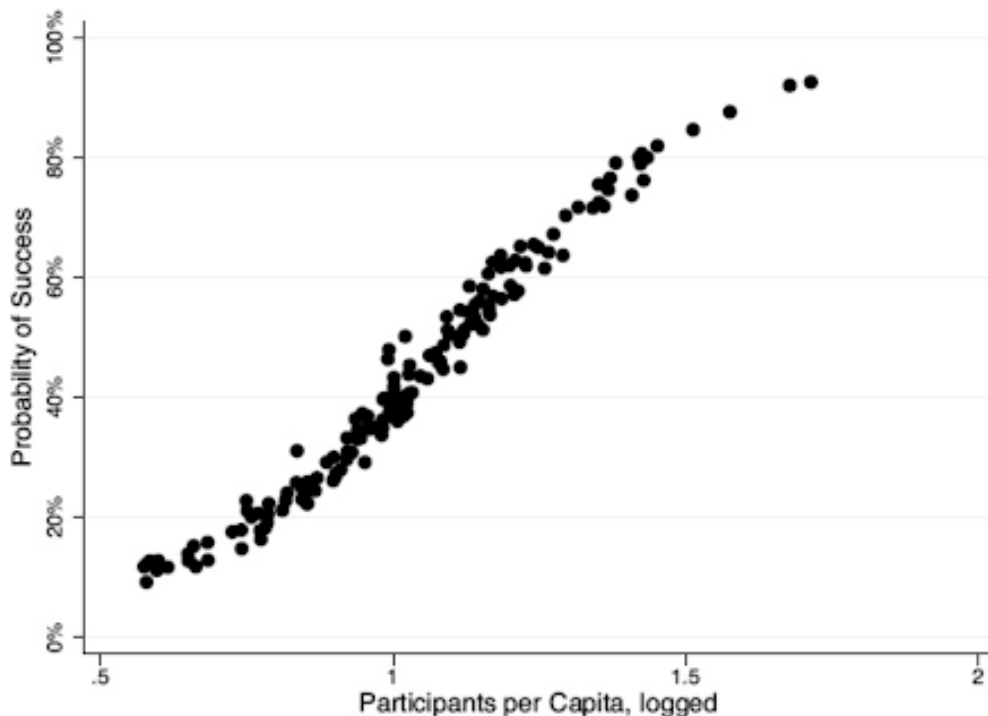


Figure 2: Chenworth and Stephan (2011) demonstrate that there is a strong association between the probability that a protest is successful and protest participants per capita - although this does not demonstrate a causal influence of protest size on chance of success



But there is some indication that the number of people at a protest has a causal impact on the chance of success - as noted above, Wouters and Walgrave (2017) found an effect manipulating the number of protesters in a news vignette shown to legislators. Legislators who were shown news vignettes that showed protests with higher numbers of protesters had a position closer to that of the protesters, believed that the issue being highlighted by the protesters was of a higher salience, and said they were more likely to take action on the issue that the protesters were highlighting. Teeselink and Melios (2021) also highlights the importance of numbers at a protest - their quasi-experiment used Instrumental Variables to demonstrate that people in areas with Black Lives Matter protests with high participation (those that had no rainfall) were more likely to vote Democrat than those in areas with protests with low participation (due to rainfall). Walgrave and Vliegenthart (2017) also find that the size of a protest had a direct effect on a parliamentary agenda - topics highlighted by protesters were more likely to make it on to the legislative agenda if the number of people at a protest was high.

## **Commitment**

Although Tilly originally proposed that 'commitment' was a factor in the success of social movement organisations, there is not currently fairly limited evidence that protesters demonstrating that they are committed to the cause they are highlighting is a particularly important factor in protest success. In their experiment testing how different factors affect the views of legislators, Wouters and Walgrave (2017) manipulated the 'commitment' of the protesters by telling legislators that the protesters being shown had protested in the past and planned to do so again in future - but this had no significant effect on the legislators' attitudes towards the protest. Wouters (2017) similarly finds no effect of the perceived commitment of protesters on the attitudes of respondents taken from the general public towards the protesters. Walgrave and Vliegenthart (2007) do find that protest frequency, which perhaps serves as a proxy for the commitment of the protesters, has a significant impact on government action in Belgium, although there is no significant effect on legislation in parliament.

That being said, while there is not currently strong evidence that the perceived commitment of the protesters has a direct impact on public opinion or the views of legislators, the commitment of protesters is obviously important for ensuring that protest activity can continue with large numbers of people.

## Other Factors

Bernardi et al. (2020) find that the effectiveness of protest on changing legislative agendas is contingent on the issue that is being highlighted. They find that there is a direct effect of protest on legislator behaviour for the issue of social welfare, and an interaction effect between protest and public opinion (a la Agnone's Amplification model) for the issues of housing, unemployment, and education. Legislators seem to be more responsive to protests on 'bread and butter issues' that strongly impact citizens' lives and may become an issue in upcoming elections if not addressed. They argue that the impact of protest is highly contingent, noting that 'Only if protesters' signal is strong and supported by public priorities will protest matter for attention changes'.

Burstein (2020) reviews studies into whether advocacy is more likely to be effective at changing legislator behaviour on 'high-activity issues' or 'low-activity issues', meaning issues that are particularly controversial or have received a significant amount of attention from advocacy groups in the past (for instance, abortion is classified as a high-activity issue whereas monetary policy is considered a low-activity issue), finding that whether the issue is high-activity or low-activity is not significantly correlated with the chance of success - it should be noted that this included studies on lobbying and actions by smaller interest groups as well as protests.

It is also worth noting that the feelings that protesters have in the immediate aftermath of a protest can have an effect on how likely they are to protest again - people who feel pride after protesting is likely to give a protester the impression that their protest is likely to be successful, and the belief that the protest is likely to be successful is, in turn, likely to lead to protesters being willing to participate in protests in future (Tausch and Becker, 2012).

## Political Context

One of the recurrent themes in the Political Sociology literature relating to protest is that of the Political Opportunity Structure (POS). In their paper *Conceptualizing Political Opportunity*, Meyer and Minkoff (2004) quote Tarrow as describing the POS as 'dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure'. The structure of the institutions of a country can make a protest more or less likely to be successful, and more or less likely to occur in the first place. Whether or not protest movements emerge and are successful is likely to be contingent on various aspects of the POS - whether there are Social Movement allies among political elites, the extent to which the political system is open/closed, and so on.

Tarrow (1998) argues that there are five dimensions of the Political Opportunity Structure: the opening of access to participation, the evidence of political realignment within the polity, the appearance of influential allies, emerging splits within the elite, and a decline in the state's capacity or will to repress dissent. There is some debate in the literature about whether the relationship between protest movements and the POS is linear or curvilinear. On the linear understanding of the relationship, the more political opportunity there is, the more likely protest is to occur. On the curvilinear understanding, protest is unlikely to occur when political opportunities are very limited, but it is similarly unlikely to occur when citizens' demands are usually met, as protest groups are likely to be assimilated into the political system - see the figure below from Opp (2009).

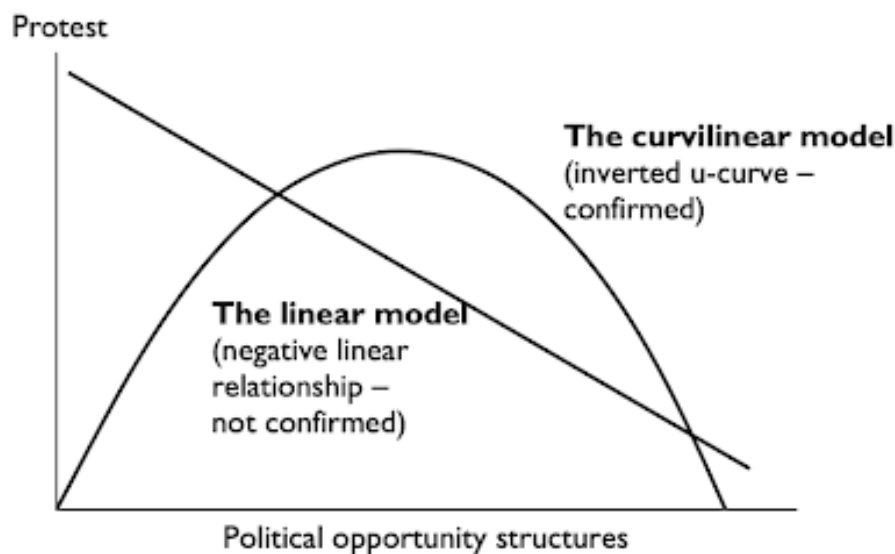


Figure 3: Opp (2009) shows two theorised models of the relationship between political opportunities and the amount of protest that occurs.

One example of the POS being used in empirical research is Kitschelt's 1986 paper on the anti-nuclear movement in France, Sweden, the United States, and West Germany. He notes that while the origins of the anti-nuclear movement in each country was fairly similar (growing out of the environmental movement and reaching a peak in the second half of the 1970s), there were large differences in the opportunity structures that they faced. He focused on how open a country's political system it is, and how strong it is, arguing that open political systems (such as the US and Sweden) had anti-nuclear movements that tried to influence legislators and political parties directly, whereas in closed political systems (such as France and West Germany) activists tried to press for structural changes rather than trying to influence legislators directly. Protest action was more likely in closed systems - in France, 175,000 people rallied against nuclear power, and in West Germany, 280,000 people participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations.

It is also worth noting that many scholars take the view that elite alliances are an important factor in protest success, although the evidence is fairly mixed. In their 2010 literature review, Amenta et al. (2010) note that influencing legislators can be beneficial for social movements, as they are able to introduce bills aligned with the objectives of social movements as well as help get them through the legislature. They further note that a challenger's action is more likely to produce results when legislators see benefit in aiding the group the challenger represents. Similarly, in their paper on the impact of the Civil Rights movement, Andrews and Gaby (2015) claim that the availability of elite allies is commonly understood as an important feature of the POS that is beneficial to protesters.

Giugni also stresses the importance of political allies, noting that protest movements are much more likely to be successful in the presence of both favourable public opinion and allies in political institutions. Giugni (2007) paper indicates that in order to achieve success in attaining policy changes, protest movements require both public opinion on their side and political allies. He calls this the 'joint-effects model', using data from ecology, anti-nuclear, and peace movements in the United States. He found that there was a highly significant interaction effect between protest, public opinion, and political allies on spending for both environmental protection and reducing spending on nuclear energy, but no similar effect for the peace movement.

However, Olzak et al. (2013) cast some doubt on the claims that elite allies are highly beneficial for protesters and social movements. Looking at the effect of environmental protests on the United States Congress, they note the members of congress who are allied to protest movements are less likely to be successful in passing legislation in Congress, whereas members of congress who are not allies of protest movements are often closer to the median member of Congress and more likely to be able to get legislation passed.

King, Cornwall and Dahlin (2005) make some important claims about how legislators can be more or less responsive to social movements at different stages of legislating. They look at legislation relating to women's suffrage between 1848 and 1918, finding that legislators were willing to respond to protesters by introducing bills, but the protesters are much less influential on whether legislators actually vote for and pass legislation. They also find that bureaucratised organisation (indicating a hierarchical leadership structure) and campaigning for candidates who were very sympathetic to the suffragette's cause were both significantly and positively associated with legislators introducing bills relating to women's suffrage. However, none of the social movement characteristics were significantly linked with the bills actually passing. It may be the case, then, that SMOs are able to have an impact on getting legislation onto the agenda, but do not influence how likely the legislation is to pass.

Soule and King (2006) also examine how responsive legislators are at different stages of the legislative process, finding similar results. They examine the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and find that social movements were more likely to have an effect on legislators at the beginning of the legislative process, whereas public opinion became more important when it came to ratifying legislation. When the consequences of legislators taking action are lower (such as right at the beginning of the legislative process), legislators seem more likely to support bills that aren't in alignment with public opinion. At the stage when a bill needs to be ratified, however, public opinion becomes more important, whereas the influence of the pro-ERA movement was completely diminished.

Uba carried out a meta-analysis on studies looking at the effectiveness of SMOs, and found that a protest was more likely to be successful in a democratic country than in an undemocratic country, but was not a necessity for a protest to be effective - writing that 'democracy facilitates the impact of mobilization but is not a precondition for it' (Uba 2009, p. 413).



Banaszak's 1996 book *Why Movements Succeed or Fail* looks at the differing routes towards women's suffrage in the United States and Switzerland (women in Switzerland gained the right to vote in federal elections in 1971, and the last Swiss canton to give women the vote on local issues did so in 1991) looking at competing factors: the resources of the movement, the political opportunity structure, and the values/beliefs of participants in the movement. Banaszak finds that the Swiss women's movement was less likely to recruit nationally - the Swiss belief in the importance of federalism meant that Swiss campaigners were not willing to recruit campaigners outside of their own canton. Similarly, campaigners in the United States targeted legislators directly in order to hasten the passing of federal women's suffrage, whereas the Swiss campaigners took the view that persuading the general public was more important than targeting politicians, meaning they largely abstained from action designed to impact legislators specifically.

## Conclusion

- Overall, there is broad consensus that nonviolent protests are generally more successful than violent protests. Several studies find that violent protests can lead to a loss of support or negative consequences for a protest movement, such as increased voting for an opposition party. However, there is also some evidence of violent protests succeeding in achieving their aims.
- There is some evidence to show that diversity, worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (dWUNC) are important factors for protest movements to utilise. Specifically, the size of the protest (numbers) and a cohesive message (unity) were found to be the two most important factors in affecting the beliefs and intended actions of policymakers. Worthiness, often related to the protestor's behaviour, mattered less for legislators, but was the most important factor for shifting the opinions of ordinary citizens.
- External conditions, such as political structures, existing media narratives and public opinion, have significant impacts on the success of protest and social movements. Whilst it's not exactly clear what the exact importance of movement agency vs external factors are, it's apparent that external conditions play a large role.

### **Limitations of existing research include:**

- Generally, there is not much research on the topic of success factors for protests and social movements. Moreover, a significant proportion of this research has been conducted in the US or Belgium, and results in these countries might not extrapolate well to other contexts. Therefore, it would be useful to have greater research from both European countries and other countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.
- Most of the research for success factors has been conducted using controlled experimental conditions, which raises validity concerns around replicability for real-world movements. Greater focus on observational studies or natural experiments might add to the strength of evidence. Similarly, a large-scale statistical analysis, similar to Gamson (1990) or Chenoweth (2008), focused on more recent protest movements might form the basis of a more systematic and comparative analysis of different factors that affect the success of social movements.
- There is little research on issues outside of civil rights, racism, immigration and climate change is very scarce. These issues make up the vast majority (80%+) of the protest research we have examined to date.
- It's unclear how different levels of extremity of nonviolent protest affect outcomes. Whilst there is a good amount of research on the outcomes of nonviolent vs violent protest, there is little on the differing impacts of different levels of disruption. This seems pertinent due to recent protest movements, such as Extinction Rebellion or Insulate Britain, employing highly disruptive yet nonviolent tactics, which raises concerns around the loss of public opinion.

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