The Geography of Recognition: Repression and Protest Escalation

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Abstract

When do protesters escalate to violence after repression? Existing research often treats repression as carrying similar consequences across locations. This article argues that its effects depend on place. Repression is more likely to provoke escalation where communities expect little external recognition but possess strong collective witnessing capacity. In such settings, coercion becomes both a threat of erasure and a shared grievance, making escalation a way to preserve a claim that might otherwise disappear. Using global event data from ACLED, the analysis shows that where marginalization and collective witnessing capacity are jointly high, excessive force is associated with more protester-initiated violence in the absence of state forces, but not with more clashes involving state forces. In contrast, low-intensity intervention leads to less escalation. The 1980 Gwangju Uprising illustrates how spatial isolation and collective witnessing transformed repression into communicative escalation.

Introduction

Why protesters turn to violence has been answered along two largely separate tracks. The first is rationalist. It asks what violence costs and what it can win, explaining escalation as a response to incentives and constraints (e.g., Gamson, 1975; Horowitz, 2020; Ives and Lewis, 2020; Onursal and Hobbs, 2025; Ryckman, 2020; Rudé, 2014; Sullivan, 2019; Wilkinson, 2009). The second is affective. It attributes escalation to spontaneity, anger, or crowd dynamics, treating violence as something that emerges when feeling outruns restraint (e.g., della Porta, 2018; Gustafson, 2020; Le Bon, 2001; Waddington and King, 2005).

Yet both traditions tend to treat repression as carrying the same strategic costs and emotional consequences across locations. Repression, however, does not carry the same meaning everywhere. Spatial processes constitute social relations rather than simply containing them (Martin and Miller, 2003). The same coercive act can thus become a different social fact across localities, depending on who beyond the locality learns of it and how residents collectively interpret it. Location here is thus not bare distance but place: a locality positioned, witnessed, and remembered (Tilly, 2000).

The argument proposes that escalation becomes more likely where communities expect repression to remain unnoticed beyond the locality but can witness and interpret it collectively within the locality. The first condition turns repression into a threat of erasure because the event may never become known elsewhere. The second transforms the damage into a shared and durable grievance. Together, these conditions make violent escalation intelligible as a way to preserve a claim that might otherwise disappear.

This spatial account connects the two explanatory tracks. Classic arguments emphasize that passion and reason coexist in contention (Gramsci, 2012; Turner and Killian, 1987); Snow and Moss (2014) argue that spontaneity and organization are interactive rather than oppositional. What remains less clear is the condition under which strategic judgment and emotional response converge. The argument identifies place as that condition. Because spatial setting shapes both the expected consequences of escalation and the emotional meaning

of repression, calculation and affect emerge as interconnected aspects of the same political situation.

Empirically, the argument is evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. The large-N analysis draws on spatially fine-grained, event-level data from ACLED, examining protest and riot events worldwide. At the level of the individual event, logistic models with country and year fixed effects estimate whether the effect of prior repression on violent escalation depends jointly on two features of the locality: its marginalization from wider circuits of public attention and its capacity for dense local witnessing. Every estimate is reproduced across a grid of radii and time windows, and the results are read as a pattern across that grid rather than as any single specification. To examine the underlying mechanism, the analysis distinguishes protester-initiated violence from clashes with state forces and tests whether repression affects these forms of violence differently.

The results support a conditional account of repression's effects. Where marginalization and collective witnessing capacity are jointly high, excessive force is associated with increased protester-initiated violence, but not with clashes involving state forces. No comparable association emerges where either condition is absent. In contrast, low-intensity intervention is followed by less escalation. These findings are more consistent with recognition-seeking escalation than with a simple account of retaliation against state forces. An illustration of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising traces the process behind this pattern, showing how repression under geographical isolation and intense local witnessing was read as a threat of erasure and turned into a communicative act aimed at anchoring durable collective memory.

The argument adopts a purposive definition of violent escalation. Rather than treating escalation as the breakdown of nonviolent discipline (Pinckney, 2016) or as a lapse in restraint by unruly protesters (RezaeeDaryakenari, 2021), it defines escalation as "a process forming through strategy, structure, and conjuncture, and involving adoption and sustained use of violent means to achieve articulated political goals" (Bosi, Demetriou and Malthaner, 2016). This definition does not assume that every violent act is carefully planned or effective.

It simply allows escalation to be analyzed as a political choice shaped by both strategic reasoning and emotion.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the argument linking repression, external recognition, and collective witnessing. Section 3 illustrates the proposed mechanism through the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. Section 4 presents the research design and measures, and Section 5 reports the empirical results. Section 6 concludes by discussing the broader implications and limitations of the argument.

Recognition, Witnessing, and Escalation

Repression does not have uniform political consequences. In some contexts, it deters further action; in others, it generates outrage, mobilization, or violent escalation. The existing literature provides important explanations for this variation, highlighting factors such as organizational strength, regime type, or the strategic environment faced by protesters (Aytaç, Schiumerini and Stokes, 2018; Chiang, 2021; Koopmans, 1997; Lewis and Ives, 2025; Pierskalla, 2010; Sullivan, 2016). But these approaches often rely on an implicit assumption that episodes of repression become part of a shared public conversation. These approaches have thus given less attention to how the visibility and meaning of repression vary across space. Episodes of repression do not enter shared public conversation equally, and broader audiences are not uniformly available to reshape the strategic incentives of states and protesters. In reality, however, the visibility of repression is far from evenly distributed across space. Some communities routinely see their political experiences reflected in national discourse, while others operate at the margins of attention, knowing that events affecting them rarely resonate beyond their own locality (Daphi et al., 2025; Oliver and Meyer, 1999; Tilly, 2000; Smith et al., 2001; Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto, 2008; Zhang, Lu and Bai, 2024).

This study argues that the likelihood of violent escalation depends on how repression is situated within this unequal geography of recognition. Specifically, escalation becomes more

likely when repression occurs under two joint conditions. The first condition is related to a community's expectations about whether its experiences will be acknowledged outside the local sphere, which could be described as the degree of external recognition (see Staeheli, 2008; Iser, 2019). Some places are accustomed to having their concerns reach national audiences; their conflicts, grievances, and interactions with state authorities are more likely to be discussed in major political and media arenas. On the other hand, other places operate with the opposite expectation. They may have histories of being overlooked, both politically and informationally (Brown and Harlow, 2019). Residents of these localities often assume that what happens to them will remain unknown to outsiders, especially those living in or near national centers of power. When repression occurs in such a community, the harm is not just physical. It is experienced as an injustice that may never be recognized, a type of silencing layered on top of direct coercion.

Research on backlash helps clarify why these recognition expectations matter. Studies show that repression generates resistance when it violates widely held norms and when audiences beyond the immediate site of conflict can interpret the event as unjust (Aytaç, Schiumerini and Stokes, 2018; Grimm and Ahmed, 2025). Under these circumstances, protesters believe that their suffering carries political meaning because others can witness it. But when repression is expected to remain invisible, the emotional and strategic considerations may shift. There is less reason to believe that conventional political channels or public opinion will come to their aid (Pop-Eleches and Way, 2023). Protesters in such settings often develop a keen sense of marginality. They understand that if they do not act in ways that force attention, their grievances are likely to fade without acknowledgment.

Still, the expectation of limited external recognition does not, by itself, determine how communities react to repression. Many places that seldom receive national attention do not escalate, even when facing severe coercion. A second condition shapes whether coercion becomes a political turning point, alongside low recognition: the internal capacity of a locality to turn a state action into a shared interpretive event. This capacity reflects the density and

structure of everyday social interactions: how many people observe the incident directly, how quickly accounts circulate, and how often residents encounter one another in settings where such events are discussed and evaluated. These environments do not merely expose individuals to the same event; they allow the incident to be framed, debated, and understood collectively (Daphi, 2017; Gordillo-García, 2025; Polletta and Jasper, 2001). People compare observations, align their interpretations, and generate a common sense that the coercion reflects a broader pattern in the state's relationship with the community. The event thus becomes a shared political experience, not a set of isolated personal reactions.

This is a community's collective witnessing capacity. Localities vary in how easily common experiences form, circulate, and intensify, and this variation shapes how repression is understood (Miller and Nicholls, 2013; Lühe and Baines, 2025; Surdea-Hernea and Plopeanu, 2025; Yang, 2023). When many people observe the same act of coercion or hear about it afterward, the event becomes a shared reference point that influences how residents view their relationship with the state. Research on contentious politics shows that such collective exposure to perceived injustice produces anger, moral indignation, and a desire to voice or publicize the wrong (Lorenzini and Rosset, 2024). Communities with a strong collective witnessing capacity amplify these dynamics: they allow grievances to spread rapidly, reinforce shared emotional responses, and make it far more difficult for authorities to reinterpret or downplay what occurred (Robinson, 2022).

The combination of weak expectations of external recognition and strong collective witnessing creates a distinctive strategic environment. When repression occurs under these conditions, and residents anticipate that external audiences are unlikely to acknowledge or even learn of the event, they may conclude that only a more dramatic response can prevent the injustice from fading into obscurity. A confrontational escalation, though risky, has the potential to be vividly remembered within the community, retold across local networks, and preserved as a shared political memory (Edelmann, 2014; Smit, Heinrich and Broersma, 2017; Can, 2022; Murphy, 2023). Because a locality with strong witnessing capacity can

reliably store and circulate such collective memories, residents understand that a dramatic episode created in the present may still influence national attention in the future, even if it does not do so immediately (see Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013; Rigney, 2024; Desposato, Zurich and Wu, 2025). In this way, escalation becomes a possible means of generating an internally anchored event that is difficult to erase.

It is important not to interpret this mechanism as automatic or deterministic. Communities are not compelled to escalate merely because repression is collectively observed. Rather, these informational conditions shape how residents evaluate the consequences of different courses of action. When communities expect that repression will be noticed by national audiences, they may view moderate strategies such as appeals, demonstrations, or institutional engagement as viable means of generating attention or sympathy (e.g., Gleditsch, Macías-Medellín and Rivera, 2023). In such settings, escalation would appear unnecessarily risky. Conversely, when repression is witnessed by only a few individuals or when social networks are too fragmented to sustain a shared interpretation, it may fail to acquire the collective weight that would justify a confrontational response. Under these circumstances, escalation is unlikely to be perceived as meaningful, because the episode cannot be transformed into a durable local narrative that might later travel beyond the community.

In sum, place conditions how repression is interpreted and how protesters respond to it. Repression generates anger, indignation, and fear of being forgotten, but these emotions become politically consequential where a locality's position and witnessing capacity make a durable, transmissible episode a plausible response to erasure. Escalation is therefore an emplaced combination of felt injustice and strategic judgment about external indifference.

Hypothesis: Repression is more likely to trigger violent escalation when it occurs in localities characterized by both low expectations of external recognition and strong collective witnessing capacity.

The 1980 Gwangju Uprising

The 1980 Gwangju Uprising offers a close view of the mechanism at the center of the theory. The case makes the interpretive process visible, showing how communities under geographical isolation and strong collective witnessing read repression as a threat of erasure and deliberately turn to violence as a communicative act. Following this process clarifies how the conditions specified above translate into escalation.

Overview

After President Park Chung Hee's sudden assassination in 1979, which abruptly ended his authoritarian rule, members of Hanahoe, a covert group of military officers, staged a coup on December 12 under the leadership of Major General Chun Doo Hwan. In the wake of this takeover, students across the country mobilized, demanding an end to martial law, Chun Doo Hwan's resignation, and the removal of all remnants of the previous authoritarian regime. In response, the military intensified martial law in May 1980, occupying the National Assembly and banning all political activities, including rallies and demonstrations. This escalation led to heightened repression of democratic movements, which proved largely effective across most regions, except for South Jeolla Province (Kim, 2003).

In Gwangju, the capital city of South Jeolla Province, one of the strongest acts of resistance took place (Park, 2021). The military subsequently deployed paratroopers to Gwangju to suppress the protests, using indiscriminate force against civilians. The brutality led to numerous casualties and fueled widespread outrage among residents. On May 21, protesters and civilians armed themselves in self-defense, successfully driving the soldiers out and creating a liberated zone in Gwangju that endured for several days. However, on May 27, the military returned with machine guns, tanks, and helicopters, using overwhelming force to crush the remaining protesters defending the Provincial Government building. This violent crackdown ended the ten-day Gwangju uprising, resulting in hundreds of deaths and arrests

among protesters.

Isolation and Collective Witnessing in Gwangju

From the outset of the uprising, the military pursued a deliberate strategy of informational isolation. Authorities framed the protests in Gwangju as a strictly local disturbance and repeatedly claimed that they were instigated by North Korean infiltrators and aided by opposition leader Kim Dae Jung, who was himself regionally stigmatized as a figure from Jeolla Province. This framing was designed to sever the uprising from national political discourse and to preempt sympathetic recognition from broader audiences by portraying the violence as illegitimate and dangerous (Mosler, 2020).

This strategy was effective in sharply lowering expectations of external recognition among Gwangju's residents. Emergency media controls filtered reporting that reached Seoul, while official narratives cast the city as chaotic and lawless, fundamentally misrepresenting conditions on the ground (Jung, 2003). As a result, repression in Gwangju was widely understood locally as suffering that would not be acknowledged by the national or wider public.

At the same time, Gwangju possessed a strong internal capacity for collective witnessing. As a large provincial city, it contained dense social networks and institutions, including universities, churches, unions, neighborhood associations, and local media, that enabled thick diffusion of information and shared interpretation of events. Violence by paratroopers was not experienced as isolated encounters but as collectively observed and discussed episodes, quickly incorporated into a common understanding of state behavior. Residents compared accounts, verified rumors, and aligned emotional responses, transforming repression into a shared political experience rather than a series of private traumas.

Consequently, the city combined low expectations of external recognition, reinforced by state-led stigmatization and informational containment, with a high capacity for internal witnessing that allowed repression to be jointly experienced, emotionally amplified, and remembered. Under these circumstances, repression was less likely to be understood as

deterrence, and escalation became a meaningful response. Violence could be interpreted as a communicative strategy aimed at creating an internally anchored event that could not be erased, even if it failed to gain immediate national acknowledgment.

Overcoming Security Vacuum and Cultivating Community Identity

Following May 21, when protesters expelled military forces from the city, Gwangju effectively filled the potential security vacuum and fostered a highly cooperative community. Highlighting parallels between the Gwangju Uprising and the Paris Commune, Katsiaficas (2003) identifies several key dynamics that characterized the uprising's liberated period, including the spontaneous formation of popular democratic decision-making bodies and a strong sense of solidarity and cooperation among citizens. Reflecting on the community experience from May 22 to May 27, Han Sang Jin wrote that "through a number of meetings, the collective will of the Gwangju citizens was expressed, and spontaneous and voluntary cooperation was achieved, despite the variety of participants. With the experience of mutual understanding and solidarity, the citizens promoted trust and self-respect among themselves." Han further believed that the Gwangju Uprising demonstrated that "we had the ability to carry out self-governing with the citizens' spontaneous friendship and cooperation" (Jung, 2003).

Notably, there was also a marked reduction in criminal behavior within the city (Katsiaficas, 2003). According to Hwang (1985), the crime rate in Gwangju was lower during the liberation period than when the city was under government control. When minor crimes occurred, patrol teams formed by protesters managed the situation, bringing those involved to the Provincial Government building, which was under protester control. With no military or police presence, citizens displayed high levels of coordination and spontaneous volunteerism. There was no hoarding, and electricity, water, and phone services remained stable throughout the city. Bank deposits were left untouched, and the limited blood supply, due to casualties, was supplemented by voluntary donations from citizens. Witnessing the citizens' unconditional participation and the lack of looting or criminal behavior, some observers referred to

Gwangju as an "absolute community" (Na, 2003). In an interview, one Gwangju activist recalled: "When all lines of communication were cut off, we felt deeply isolated. Gwangju citizens were effectively trapped on an island, with the press silenced and transportation blocked. Yet, they managed to govern themselves with remarkable solidarity. ... People reminded each other to act in ways they would not be ashamed of later. They discouraged wrongdoing and generously shared what they had" (Kim, 2021).

Motivations

Faced with the prospect of overwhelming government forces, there were intense internal debates about whether to continue violently resisting or to stand down. For those who wished to keep fighting, the motivation was clear: they did not want the deaths that had already occurred to be in vain. "None of the demands put forward by those who gave their lives have been met, yet we're talking about surrender? Surrendering would be an insult to the fighters who died in the struggle." (Hwang, 1985). In his speech on the afternoon of the 26th, Yoon Sang Won, one of the leading figures of the protest, declared, "We must fight to the end so that the will of those who died in sorrow for freedom and democracy is not in vain." Those who chose to continue resisting decided to remain inside the Provincial Government building, despite the military's ultimatum threatening to seize it by force. At the same time, the leadership delivered the military's ultimatum and demobilized the majority of protesters (Kim, 2021).

As they prepared for the final confrontation, the protesters intentionally divided roles between those who would directly confront the military and those who would serve as witnesses, aiming to publicize their resistance and create a historical legacy for future audiences. Yoon Sang Won strongly urged high school students to leave the Government building and return home. "I understand the students' determination, but this fight should be carried out by adults. Young students must survive and share what they witnessed today. Please become the witnesses of history and tell others how we fought and died today." Around 4

AM on the 27th, a broadcast was also made from the rooftop of the Provincial Government building. “Fellow citizens, the military is approaching. Our beloved brothers and sisters are being killed by their guns and blades. We must resist the military to the very end. We will stand and defend Gwangju. Please, do not forget us. We will fight to the end. Citizens, the military is now coming.” The deliberate division of roles between confronters and witnesses, along with the broadcasts to the city, was clearly intended to publicize the confrontation and ensure it would be remembered as a historical moment, which could potentially catalyze future mobilization.

From the perspective of the theory, these motivations reflect the interaction of emotional commitment and strategic reasoning under conditions of strong collective witnessing and limited external recognition. Protesters did not escalate because they believed they could defeat the military, nor because violence was expected to attract immediate national recognition. Rather, escalation became meaningful because repression was intensely witnessed locally but widely expected to be ignored or distorted outside the city. Under these conditions, continuing to resist, and explicitly organizing witnesses, offered a way to transform otherwise erasing repression into a durable, transmissible political event. Violence thus functioned as a communicative act anchored in collective memory, rather than as a purely instrumental attempt at short-term victory.

The communicative character of escalation was also visible before the final stand. On May 20, as reports of paratrooper violence circulated through the city, crowds set fire to the Gwangju MBC building and the local tax office. Records describe the former as a symbol of distorted reporting and the latter as a symbol of state administration (National Institute of Korean History, N.d.). These targets reflected the two institutions through which residents experienced their isolation: an administration that imposed repression and a media system that concealed or misrepresented it. In a city portrayed to national audiences as a site of disorder instigated by outside infiltrators, violence against the broadcasting station expressed more than undirected anger. It turned escalation toward an institution associated with the

public denial of what residents had collectively witnessed. The episode thus provides an early indication that escalation responded not only to physical coercion but also to the prospect that the community's experience would be erased or distorted beyond Gwangju.

In sum, the military government positioned Gwangju at the margins of national political attention, sharply reducing expectations that repression in the city would receive sympathetic recognition elsewhere. Within this spatial isolation, protesters resisted despite overwhelming military force, not because they expected immediate victory, but because they sought to prevent their sacrifices and experiences of state violence from being erased or distorted. By separating the roles of fighters and witnesses and broadcasting appeals across the city, protesters organized resistance as a collectively witnessed event whose meaning could survive beyond the confrontation itself. The attacks on the MBC building and tax office also targeted institutions associated with the suppression and misrepresentation of local grievances. Together, these episodes illustrate how violent escalation could become a spatial form of political communication, anchored in a marginalized locality yet directed toward both contemporary and future audiences.

Although the downstream effects of dramatic protest fall outside this study's scope, subsequent developments fit the logic proposed here. As Park (2021) documents, memories of the Gwangju Uprising later motivated high-risk activism and sustained solidarity across South Korea's democratic movements: narratives that resonated with future activists even though immediate recognition was unlikely, confirming that escalation can function as a long-term political signal.

Research Design

Data

The study utilizes a large-N research design relying on the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) (Raleigh et al., 2010). ACLED provides detailed information on the

type, actors, location, date, and characteristics of political violence, demonstrations, and nonviolent political events globally. The analysis draws on ACLED's protest and riot events worldwide, covering 2015 through 2026. The lower bound of the period is imposed by the data rather than selected. The local population counts on which witnessing capacity is built are unavailable for earlier events. Events are retained only where the reported coordinates and dates carry the highest precision codes, since both the treatment and the placebo depend on placing an event exactly in space and time. Country-year covariates are drawn from V-Dem and the World Development Indicators.

The analysis is conducted at the level of the individual event, and the temporal structure enters through the timing of repression relative to each one. For every event, the analysis identifies prior repression occurring within a specified radius of its location during a preceding time window, and each event is marked by whether repression occurred within that window. Because the measure is built only from actions that precede the event, it places repression before escalation in time.

Variables

Violent Escalation

This study operationalizes violent protest escalation by drawing on ACLED's sub-event-type distinctions. Violent demonstrations are coded when demonstrators engage in violence or destructive acts such as physical clashes with state forces, vandalism, or the use of barricades and burning materials. Within the protest context, the category captures contention that involves violence while remaining a form of collective claim-making. The analysis excludes mob violence from the outcome because the proposed mechanism presupposes a political claim that protesters seek to communicate. Unlike violent demonstrations, mob violence does not necessarily involve such claim-making and thus falls outside the outcome of interest.

However, not all violent demonstrations provide equally clear evidence of protesters' own decision to escalate. Clashes with state forces depend partly on state deployment and con-

frontation dynamics, including police dispersal, whereas violence occurring without state forces present more directly reflects protesters' actions independent of immediate confrontation. This distinction is particularly relevant to the proposed mechanism. Communicative escalation does not require the absence of state forces, as direct clashes may also convey political grievances. Nevertheless, violence occurring without state forces provides a clearer observable implication of protesters' decision to escalate beyond direct confrontation with the authorities, although it does not by itself establish communicative intent. The primary outcome therefore codes violent demonstrations in which no state force is listed among the actors.

Repression

Repression is measured in two degrees. First, excessive repression is captured through the sub-event type Excessive Force against Protesters, which captures instances in which peaceful protesters are targeted with lethal force or violence severe enough to cause serious injury. Second, protest with intervention captures police action that disperses or arrests without serious injury.

The two forms of repression should have different consequences. Severe repression signals what the government is prepared to deny afterward. Where a community expects no acknowledgment from outside, escalation is the response to that threat. In contrast, mild repression only raises the cost of protesting. There is little threat of erasure to answer; only the cost of violence increases, reducing escalation.

Marginalization and Witnessing Capacity

ACLED records, for every event, the scale at which its sources operate, ranging from local outlets through subnational and national media to regional and international ones. An event is treated here as having traveled if any of its sources is national, regional, or international; reporting confined to local or subnational outlets is not.

Marginalization is measured by how readily a locality's contention reaches audiences beyond it. For each event, whether an event was reported by a national, regional, or international source is regressed on its sub-event type and its reported fatalities, with a separate intercept for each subnational region and for each country-year. The region intercepts are what remains once the kind and gravity of the event are accounted for: the extent to which contention in that region reaches national media more or less than contention of the same type and severity elsewhere in the same country and year. Marginalization is that quantity reversed in sign, so that it rises as a region's contention becomes less likely to travel. The analysis uses an initial burn-in period so that the marginalization measure is constructed from earlier observations rather than from the focal outcomes it is later used to explain.

Witnessing capacity combines two indicators of how dense a locality is around the site of an event. The first is the population within one kilometer. Where many residents live in proximity, they are more likely to see an incident firsthand, or to encounter someone who did. Episodes of coercion thus become common memory rather than isolated experiences. The second is the concentration of that population relative to its wider surroundings, computed as the difference between logged population within one kilometer and logged population within five kilometers. It captures spatial concentration, or nucleation, around the event site. A locality that forms a dense center against the surrounding is where its region converges. What happens there is the region's event, not one scene among many. Each indicator is log-transformed and standardized, and the two are summed.

A concern is that the two components are not distinct but represent a single dimension of urbanization. Figure 1 shows the two components against one another. All four quadrants are populated, including the one combining high marginalization with high witnessing capacity. Localities whose contention does not travel beyond them, yet which are densely settled and highly observed at the local level, are common rather than exceptional. If the two were ends of a single urbanization axis, they would move together: the closer a place is to national attention, the more densely it would be settled. The points would fall along a diagonal, and

the quadrant the theory needs would be empty; yet the quadrant is not empty.

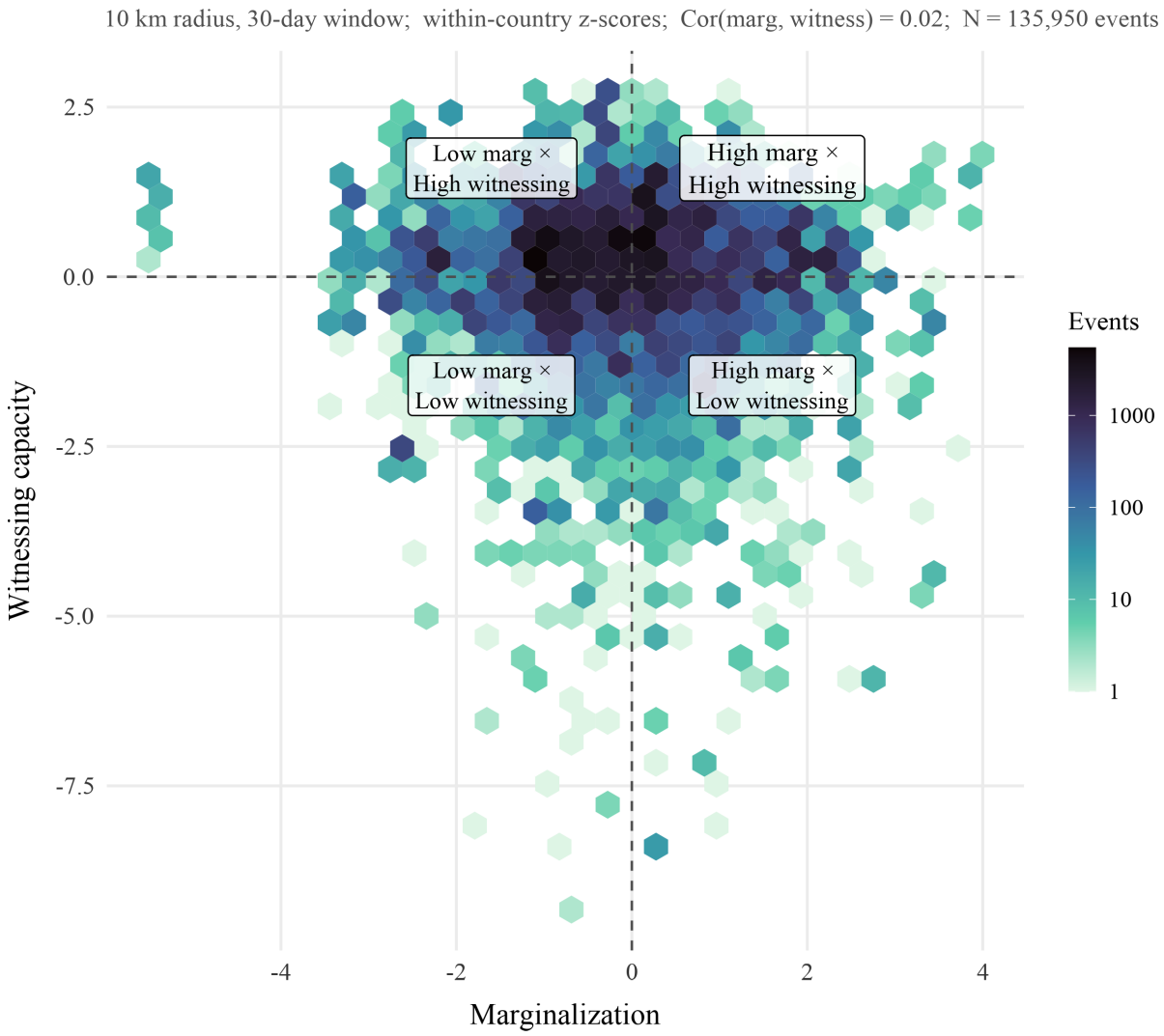


Figure 1. Distribution of Events Across Marginalization and Witnessing Dimensions

Both indicators are constructed from event-level information, which raises the possibility that they reflect features of reporting or urbanization rather than the intended concepts. The article assesses this concern by examining their convergent and discriminant validity: whether the measures correspond to independent structural indicators and whether they predict distinct observable outcomes (Adcock and Collier, 2001). For convergent validity, marginalization aligns with geographic isolation, including distance to the capital and largest city and travel time to the nearest urban center, while witnessing capacity tracks nighttime

luminosity. These measures come from data sources independent of ACLED (Weiss et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2019; Elvidge et al., 2013, 2021). For discriminant validity, the two measures diverge behaviorally: marginalization is negatively associated with reported crowd size, whereas witnessing capacity is not, indicating that they do not represent a common dimension of urban scale. These external indicators serve as validation benchmarks rather than primary measures because they capture structural antecedents rather than recognition or collective witnessing themselves. Their largely time-invariant character also makes them poorly suited to the within-country variation used in the analysis. Full results appear in the Appendix.

Control Variables

To isolate the proposed mechanism, the analysis includes controls that address alternative explanations. The models control for the distribution of access to public services across urban and rural areas, which proxies the spatial reach of state authority. They also control for urban-rural inequalities in civil-liberties protections, so that the pattern is not driven by entrenched local grievances unrelated to the signaling value of repression (Coppedge et al., 2022; Pemstein et al., 2023). The models also include the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index measured at the country-year level, logged GDP per capita, and logged total population (Teorell et al., 2019; Arel-Bundock, 2025), which capture cross-national differences in media environments, state capacity, and mobilization opportunities. The models further condition on the number of mobilization events recorded within the same radius and window, so that the treatment registers whether repression occurred nearby rather than how much was happening nearby. All controls except the local event count are measured at the country-year level; marginalization is measured at the level of the subnational region and witnessing capacity at the location of the event.

Risk Set

The models are estimated over recorded protest and riot events occurring in contentious environments in which state forces had previously appeared within the same radius and time window. As defined above, the primary outcome identifies violent demonstrations occurring without state forces present, while other protest and riot events remain in the comparison category. The analysis estimates whether prior repression is associated with the occurrence of this form of violent contention among subsequently observed events in the same local contentious environment.

The risk set is restricted to events near which a demonstration or riot involving state forces had previously occurred. This restriction focuses the comparison on contentious settings in which state coercion was locally relevant, rather than comparing events in places where state forces had not recently appeared.

Exposure is defined over four radii (5, 10, 25, and 50 kilometers) and six time windows (3, 7, 10, 14, 21, and 30 days). The reference specification uses a radius of 25 kilometers and a window of 14 days. A 25-kilometer radius approximates a city and its immediate surroundings, where residents may learn of the same act of repression, while a 14-day window allows information to circulate locally without extending far beyond a single episode of contention. At this specification, the risk set contains 124,893 events across 81 countries, of which 6,917 were preceded by excessive force. Because the risk set is defined separately for each radius-window combination, both its size and the number of events preceded by excessive force vary across the twenty-four specifications. Figure 2 reports these distributions.

Both the number of treated events and the size of the risk set increase as the radius and window expand. The smallest specification contains approximately twenty-nine thousand events and just over eight hundred treated observations, whereas the largest contains more than two hundred thousand events and nearly nineteen thousand treated observations.

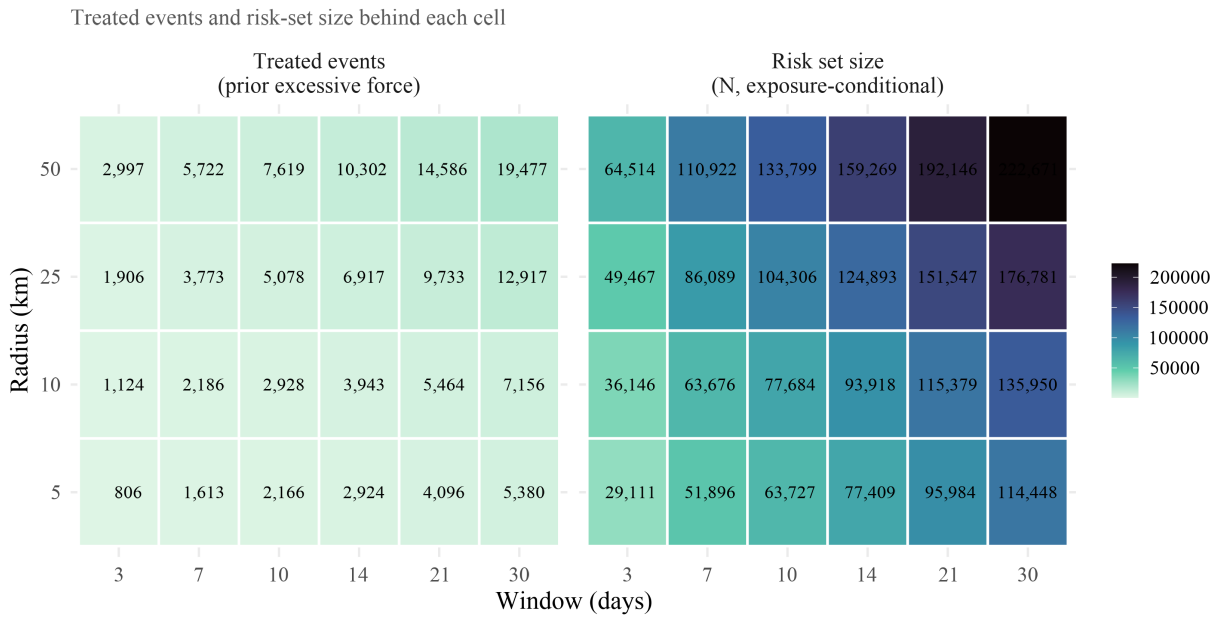


Figure 2. Treated Events and Risk-Set Size across the Exposure Grid

Two-Way Fixed Effects Models

The analysis estimates logistic regressions with country and year fixed effects. Marginalization and witnessing capacity are each interacted with prior repression, so that the effect of repression is free to vary with both conditions and with their combination. Standard errors are clustered by country. Because the theory concerns the region of the space where the two conditions are jointly high, the effect of prior repression is evaluated at the four corners of the marginalization-by-witnessing space, each defined at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the two components. The corner at which both conditions are high is where the theory makes its prediction, while the remaining three allow assessment of whether comparable effects emerge where either condition is lacking.

A locality may be passing through a period of unrest. Coercion on one day and escalation on the next are then two expressions of the same episode rather than cause and effect. Repression in the window after each event is thus entered alongside repression in the window before it. The future cannot cause the present, so the forward window should be near zero. If an unobserved episode drives coercion and escalation together, repression after the event

would be positive too.

To examine whether the association differs depending on the presence of state forces, violent demonstrations involving state forces are modeled as a separate outcome on the same events, exposed to the same prior repression. The difference between the two effects at the joint-high corner is tested in a stacked model that estimates both outcomes jointly.

Results

Main Analysis

Each model is estimated in all twenty-four combinations of radius and window, and the resulting estimates are interpreted together as a sensitivity grid. Additional outcome and robustness analyses are reported in the Appendix.

The estimates are evaluated as a pattern across the grid rather than as separate hypothesis tests. Very small radii are more vulnerable to coordinate imprecision, short windows contain relatively few treated events, and long windows may combine several cycles of contention. The analysis therefore examines whether the effect retains its direction and remains confined to the geographical configuration specified by the theory.

For each combination of radius and window, Figure 3 reports the effect of prior excessive force at the joint-high corner (left panel) and its difference from the mean effect at the other three corners (right panel).

In the left panel, the estimate is positive in twenty-three of the twenty-four cells and statistically significant in fifteen. The only negative estimate appears at the smallest radius and shortest window, where the number of treated events is also lowest. Across the remaining specifications, the estimates are consistently positive and often similar in magnitude. The pattern indicates that excessive repression is followed by a greater likelihood of protester-initiated escalation in localities that are both marginalized and capable of dense collective witnessing. The estimates are most informative around the reference specification, in the

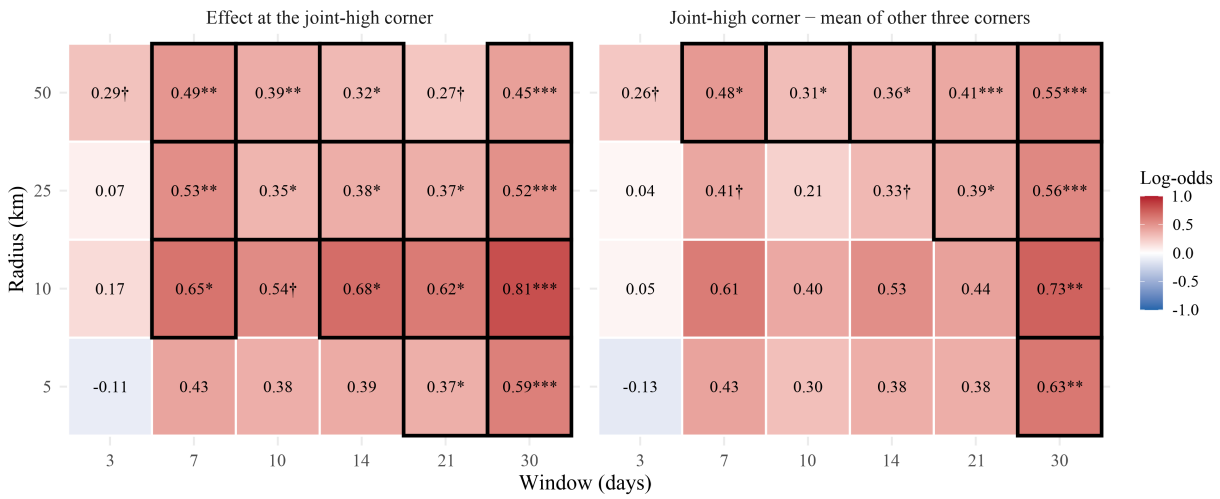


Figure 3. The Effect of Repression at the Joint-High Corner across the Exposure Grid and Its Difference from the Other Corners

cells with radii of 25 to 50 kilometers and windows of 7 to 14 days. In all six of these cells, the estimates are positive and statistically significant.

The right panel of Figure 3 compares the effect at the joint-high corner with the mean effect at the other three corners. The joint-high effect exceeds that mean in twenty-three of the twenty-four cells. The difference is statistically significant in nine cells, including all three 50-kilometer cells with windows of 7 to 14 days; in two of the corresponding 25-kilometer cells, it is significant at the 0.10 level.

The nonsignificant estimates in Figure 3 are concentrated in the more restrictive exposure definitions, where the number of treated events is smallest (Figure 2). These estimates are therefore less precise. This pattern suggests that isolated nonsignificant cells should be interpreted cautiously, while also underscoring that precision varies considerably across the exposure grid.

Figure 4 reports the placebo across the same grid to assess whether the main result reflects a broader episode of local unrest rather than the temporal effect of prior repression. The left panel reports the effect of future repression, and the right panel reports the effect of prior excessive force at the joint-high corner while controlling for future repression.

In the left panel, the lead estimate is statistically indistinguishable from zero in twenty-

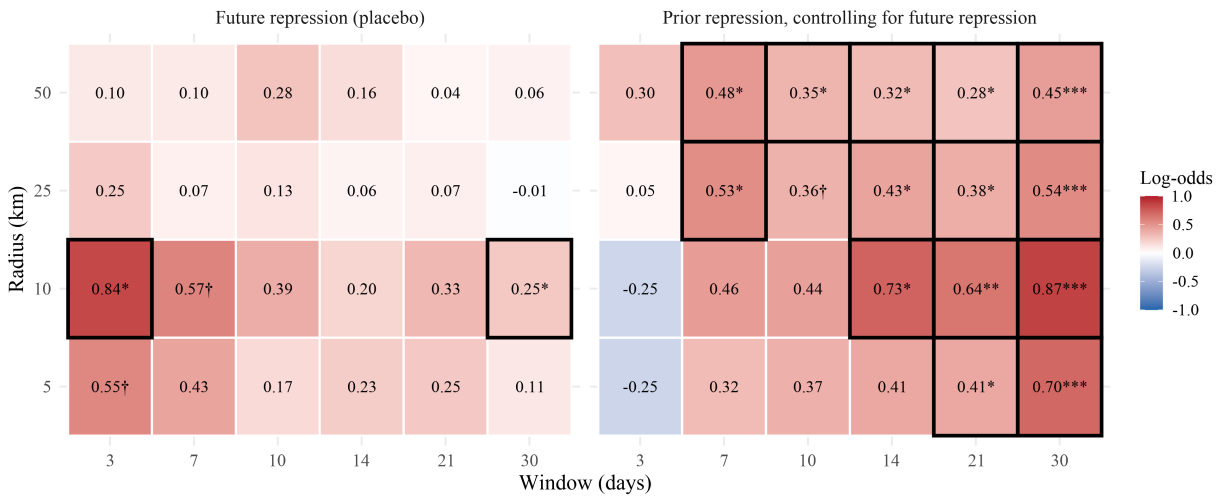


Figure 4. Lead Placebo and the Effect of Prior Repression Controlling for Future Repression across the Exposure Grid

two of the twenty-four cells. The two significant exceptions are confined to the 10-kilometer radius, with one occurring only at the longest time window. Because these estimates do not reproduce the broader pattern observed for prior repression, they provide little evidence that the main result is driven by a general episode of local unrest. After controlling for future repression, the effect of prior excessive force at the joint-high corner remains positive and statistically significant in five of the six cells with radii of 25 to 50 kilometers and windows of 7 to 14 days, as well as in fourteen of the twenty-four cells overall (Figure 4, right panel).

Together, the main analyses show that excessive repression is not uniformly provocative. Its association with escalation is concentrated in localities that combine weak external recognition with strong collective witnessing. The relationship is absent at the other corners of the geographical space, largely absent for future repression, and robust to controlling for future repression. These patterns support the argument that the consequences of repression depend on the geographical setting in which it occurs.

Disaggregating Violent Demonstrations

To assess whether the association depends on the presence of state forces, the analysis separately examines violent demonstrations involving state forces. Table 1 compares the two outcomes using the same risk set and prior repression measure at the reference specification.

Table I. Effect of Prior Excessive Force at the Joint-High Corner, by Form of Protest Violence (25 km, 14 days)

Outcome	Outcome events (N)	Effect (SE)	Point estimate, future force controlled
Violence where state forces are absent	5,221	0.380^{*} (0.174)	0.427^{*}
Clashes with state forces present	5,190	-0.046 (0.280)	-0.071
Difference (absent − present)		$0.512^{\dagger}$ (0.267)	

Note: $^{\dagger}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$.

At the joint-high corner, excessive force is positively associated with violent demonstrations occurring without state forces present, but not with those involving state forces. The difference between the two effects is marginally significant. This contrast remains after controlling for future repression.

Figure 5 extends the comparison across the exposure grid. The effect on demonstrations involving state forces is statistically indistinguishable from zero in all twenty-four specifications, with no consistent direction. The difference between the two outcomes is positive in twenty-one specifications and statistically significant in four, with three additional specifications reaching the 0.10 level.

These results indicate that the association is concentrated in violent demonstrations occurring without state forces present. This pattern supports the choice of the primary outcome, which is less dependent on immediate confrontation dynamics, without implying that clashes involving state forces necessarily lack communicative meaning.

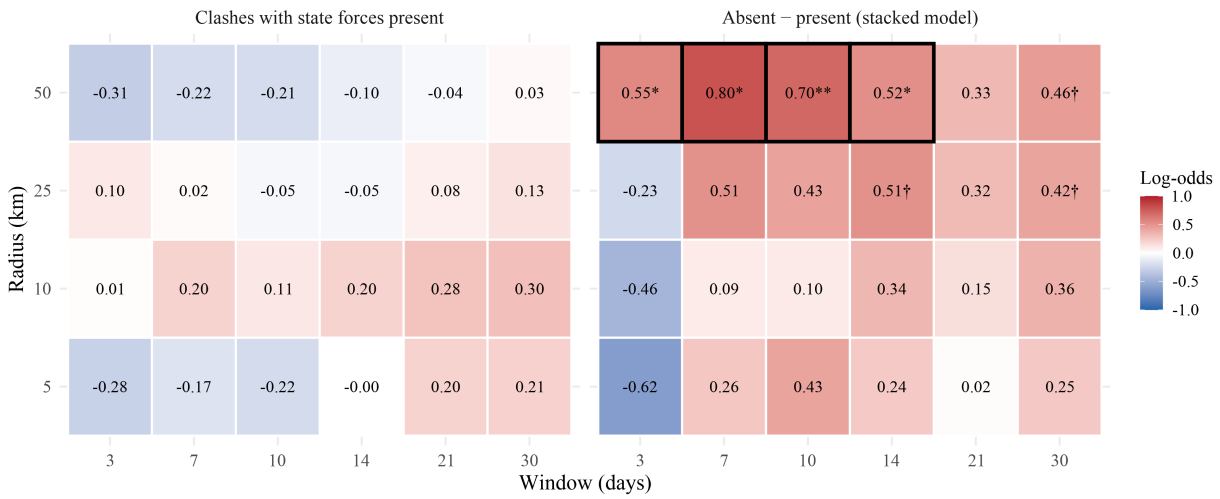


Figure 5. Clashes with State Forces and the Difference between the Two Forms of Violence at the Joint-High Corner

Complementary Results

The proposed mechanism further implies that the intensity of coercion should matter. A general provocation account predicts that milder repression should generate a weaker positive response. The threat of erasure account instead predicts that excessive force can signal that the state is prepared to suppress both a community and the public record of its experience, whereas dispersal and arrest primarily increase the immediate cost of protest.

Figure 6 replaces excessive force with protest intervention and estimates the same grid. The left panel reports the effect of protest intervention at the joint-high corner, and the right panel reports the difference between the effects of excessive force and protest intervention.

The two forms of repression differ in direction rather than only in magnitude. In the left panel, protest intervention is followed by less escalation in every cell and reaches statistical significance in nineteen of the twenty-four cells. This sign reversal is inconsistent with the claim that any coercive action simply produces anger in proportion to its severity. It instead suggests that escalation emerges when repression crosses the threshold at which coercion can be understood as a threat of erasure. The difference between the two forms of repression at the joint-high corner is positive in all twenty-four cells, significant in twenty-three, and

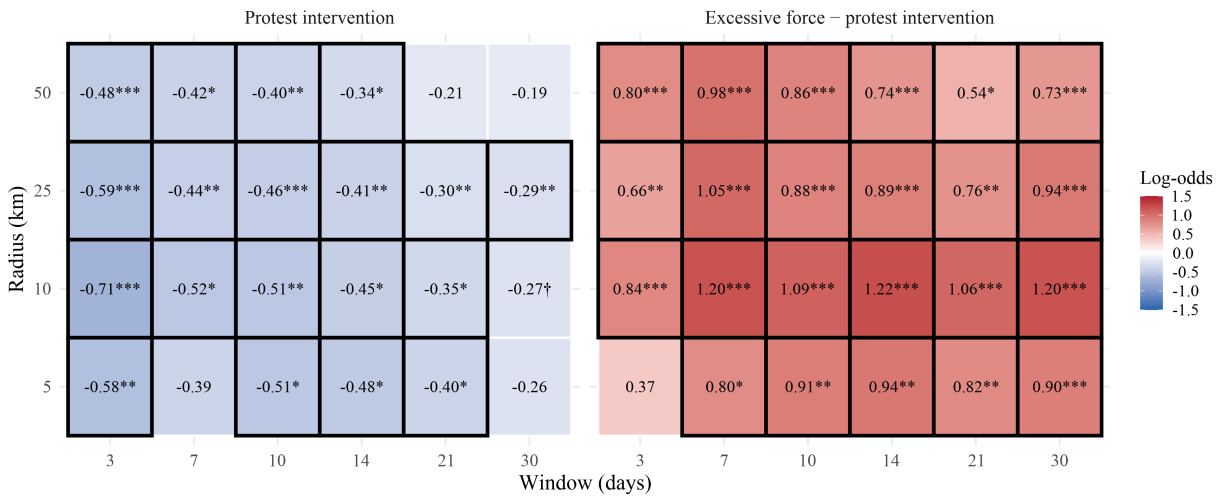


Figure 6. The Effect of Protest Intervention at the Joint-High Corner and Its Difference from Excessive Force

significant in all six cells with radii of 25 to 50 kilometers and windows of 7 to 14 days, a substantively plausible range around the 25-kilometer, 14-day reference specification.

Robustness and Alternative Explanations

The reference specification is supplemented with three additional analyses. First, the risk set is restricted to events preceded by peaceful protest in the same locality, linking the analysis more directly to settings in which nonviolent contention was already underway. Second, subsequent peaceful and violent protests are modeled separately to distinguish escalation from a compositional shift caused by the withdrawal of nonviolent participants. Third, the analysis distinguishes events according to whether a named social movement organization was active nearby, allowing the role of organizational presence to be assessed directly. The pattern remains consistent across these checks. The joint-high effect is similar in the restricted risk set, peaceful protest does not systematically decline after excessive force, and the association is comparable in places with and without a nearby named organization. These results indicate that the main pattern is not limited to a particular composition of contentious events or to settings with greater organizational presence. The Appendix reports the full results.

Reporting Bias and the Direction of Selection

Media-based event data are shaped by unequal reporting environments. ACLED may underreport both protest violence and coercive state action in places that receive limited attention, although its use of local media and nongovernmental sources reduces this problem (Raleigh et al., 2010; Weidmann, 2016). If events in marginalized localities are disproportionately missed, the resulting measurement error may attenuate the observed association by omitting both relevant repression and subsequent escalation. However, the direction of bias depends on how these events are selectively reported.

A separate concern is that reporting in remote areas may be disproportionately concentrated on the most dramatic episodes, which could make escalation appear more common in marginalized locations. Table 1 helps assess this possibility. Violent demonstrations involving state forces are recorded through the same reporting system as those occurring without them, yet they do not show the same response to excessive force at the joint-high corner. The divergence between these two outcomes is thus not readily explained by a general tendency to report dramatic events.

The restricted risk set further reduces this concern. The comparison is limited to events near a prior confrontation involving state forces. It therefore does not compare places that enter the reporting system with those that remain entirely unobserved. Instead, it compares events in already observed localities according to whether nearby state action involved excessive force. The identifying variation consequently operates within the portion of the contentious environment already recorded by ACLED, rather than along the basic divide between covered and uncovered locations.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the relationship between repression and violent escalation depends on the geographical setting in which coercion occurs. Excessive force is associated with

greater escalation where external recognition is limited and collective witnessing capacity is strong, particularly in violent demonstrations occurring without state forces present. In contrast, lower-intensity intervention is associated with less escalation. These patterns are consistent with the argument that repression can become a threat of erasure rather than simply a cost of contention.

The study contributes to debates in political geography and contentious politics in three ways. First, the argument brings geography into explanations of repression and protest escalation. Existing accounts often examine strategic incentives or affective responses without fully considering how the meaning of repression varies across places. The mechanism developed here emphasizes a locality's position within wider circuits of recognition and its capacity for collective witnessing. The same coercive act may enter national political debate in one locality while remaining largely confined to local knowledge in another. Geography thus structures not only exposure to repression but also the audiences available to interpret it and the expectations protesters form about whether their experiences will travel beyond the place in which they occur.

Second, the argument bridges the divide between instrumental incentives and affective motivations. Emotion is not an alternative to strategy but one of the channels through which strategic assessments are formed. Repression may generate anger, indignation, fear, or a sense of abandonment, but these emotions do not operate independently of actors' judgments about their political environment. Where external recognition appears attainable, outrage may reinforce appeals to broader publics, media, or political institutions. Where repression is locally witnessed but expected to remain externally unrecognized, the same emotional response may instead strengthen the perceived value of a more dramatic confrontation. Strategic judgment and emotional response can therefore emerge from the same experience of place.

Third, the argument broadens how the audience for contentious action is understood. Much of the literature treats protest as addressed to audiences that are present and reachable

in the moment, such as national publics, media, or authorities. The mechanism developed here suggests that escalation can also be oriented toward audiences that are not yet available. Contention is thus addressed across time as well as space, and its rationality cannot be judged solely by the immediate responses available to protesters. Actors may care not only about whether confrontation changes state behavior in the present, but also about whether their experiences survive politically and become available to wider audiences later. Escalation can thus serve not only to impose costs or attract immediate attention, but also to create an episode that is difficult to erase from collective memory.

These contributions come with limitations. The analysis is correlational and cannot directly observe protesters' intentions or the interpretive processes through which repression becomes a shared event. The spatial measures are also indirect proxies that may capture other characteristics of locality alongside the intended concepts. Marginalization is measured through the extent to which contentious events travel beyond local reporting environments, while witnessing capacity is inferred from population density and spatial concentration. The empirical findings should therefore be interpreted as a geographical pattern consistent with the proposed mechanism rather than direct evidence of each step of that mechanism.

Future research could examine these processes more directly through fieldwork, interviews, or text analysis of protest communications. Such work could investigate whether actors frame escalation as an effort to contest erasure or preserve transmissible memory, and distinguish between the visibility of an event and recognition of its political claims. Information may reach wider audiences without those audiences treating the community's claims as politically meaningful.

Future research should also examine downstream consequences. The article explains escalation as a response to repression, not whether it succeeds in attracting sympathy, shaping narratives, or producing concessions. A confrontational episode may preserve a claim without persuading broader audiences; it may generate later solidarity, but it may also facilitate stigmatization or justify additional coercion. Understanding when locally anchored memo-

ries travel beyond their original setting, when they generate support rather than backlash, and when they remain politically contained is central to assessing the broader stakes of the mechanism.

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Appendix

Sample Construction

Table 2 summarizes the construction of the analysis sample, from the full set of ACLED protest and riot events to the exposure-conditional risk set at the reference specification. The restrictions ensure that events have sufficiently precise spatial and temporal information, the relevant measures are available, and state forces had previously appeared in the surrounding contentious environment. Within the final risk set, violent demonstrations occurring without state forces present constitute the primary outcome.

Table II. From ACLED Events to the Analysis Risk Set

Step	Events
ACLED protest and riot events, 2015–2026	1,198,985
with precise location and date (precision code 1)	1,049,406
Analysis sample (after burn-in and measure availability)	526,072
Exposure-conditional risk set (25 km, 14 days)	124,893
preceded by excessive force (treated)	6,917
preceded by protest intervention	87,957
Violent demonstrations in the risk set	10,411
no state forces present (main outcome)	5,221
state forces present	5,190
Peaceful protests in the risk set	97,859
Countries	81

Note: Among events in the risk set, the rate of escalation is 8.9 percent for events preceded by excessive force and 3.9 percent for the remainder.

Alternative Outcomes: All Violent Demonstrations

The primary outcome focuses on violent demonstrations occurring without state forces present, as these events provide a clearer indication of protesters' actions independent of immediate confrontation with state forces. This distinction does not imply that clashes involving state forces lack communicative meaning. Rather, their occurrence also depends

on state deployment and confrontation dynamics, and ACLED does not identify which side initiated a clash.

To assess whether the findings depend on this outcome definition, the analysis combines violent demonstrations with and without state forces present. The pooled outcome produces a weaker association than the primary measure at the reference specification. Figure 7 extends this comparison across the exposure grid. The estimates remain predominantly positive, but statistical support is less consistent than for the primary outcome. This attenuation is consistent with the finding that the association is concentrated in violent demonstrations occurring without state forces present, although it does not establish differences in protesters' motivations.

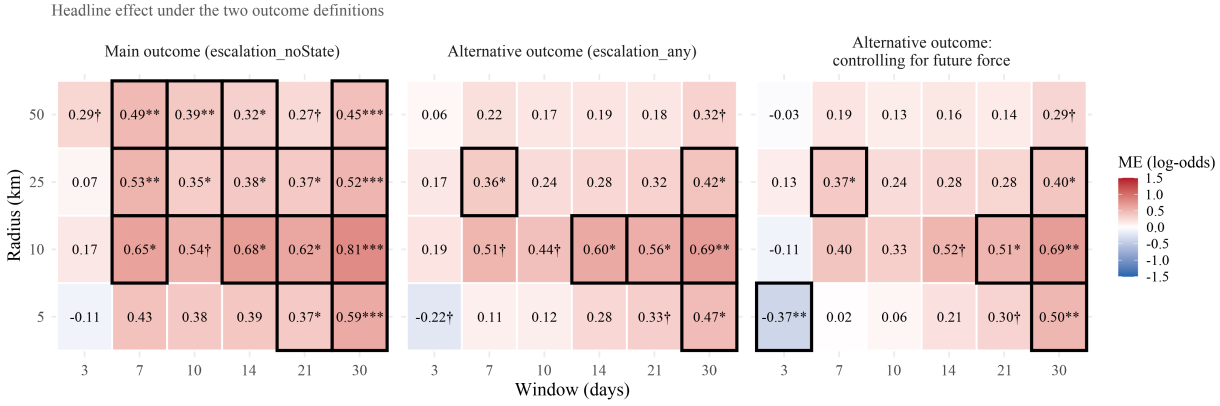


Figure 7. The Effect of Repression at the Joint-High Corner under Alternative Outcome Definitions

Measurement Validity

Figure 8 examines the convergent and discriminant validity of the spatial measures introduced above. Marginalization is positively associated with geographical isolation, including distance from the capital, distance from the largest city, and travel time to the nearest urban center. Witnessing capacity is positively associated with nighttime luminosity, consistent with its emphasis on local population density and spatial concentration.

The two measures also exhibit different relationships with reported crowd size. Marginal-

ization is associated with smaller crowds, whereas witnessing capacity shows no statistically distinguishable association. Taken together, these patterns suggest that the measures capture distinct dimensions of locality rather than a single underlying dimension of urbanization. Nevertheless, these structural indicators provide indirect validation rather than direct observations of recognition expectations or collective witnessing.

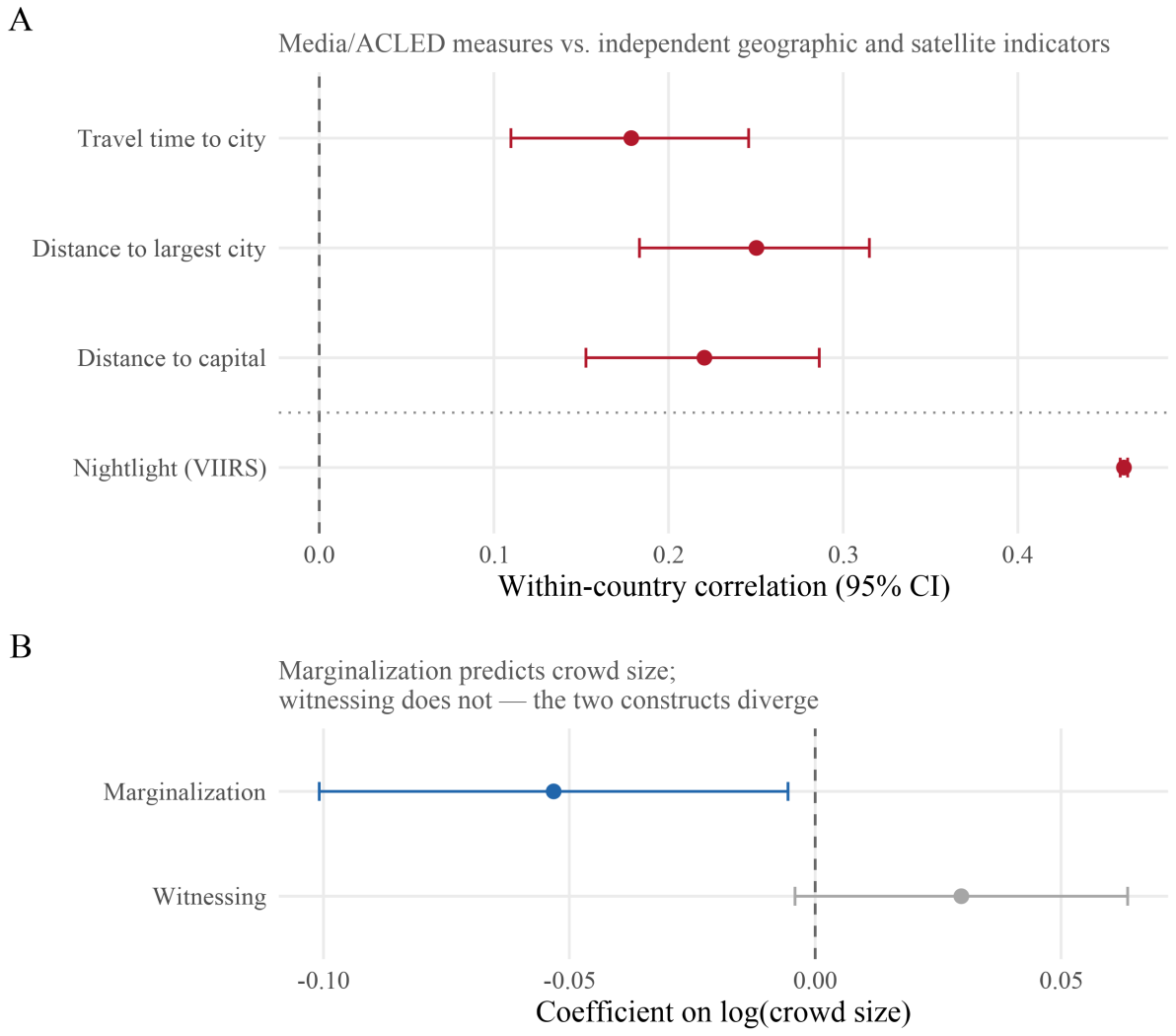


Figure 8. Convergent and Discriminant Validity of the Spatial Measures

Robustness and Alternative Explanations

Three additional analyses examine alternative explanations for the main findings. All are conducted at the reference specification, and Figure 9 summarizes the results.

First, the primary risk set includes recorded protest and riot events without requiring a preceding peaceful protest. To assess whether the findings extend to settings where nonviolent contention was already underway, the analysis restricts the risk set to events preceded by peaceful protest within the same radius and time window. The estimated association at the joint-high corner remains positive and statistically significant, including when future repression is controlled for. This result indicates that the main pattern is not confined to contentious environments without recently recorded peaceful mobilization.

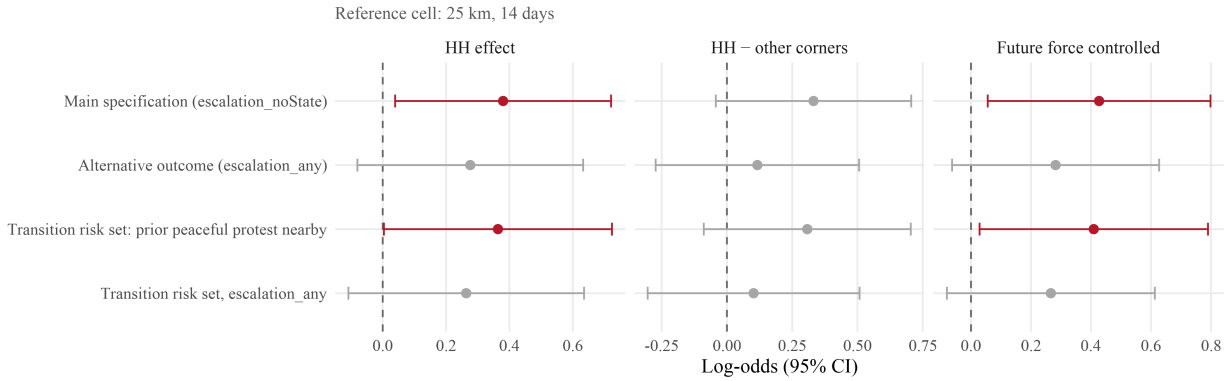


Figure 9. Robustness at the Reference Specification (25 km, 14 days)

Second, the observed association could reflect a compositional change rather than an increase in violent contention. If repression deters nonviolent participants more strongly than violent participants, the proportion of violent events could rise even without a corresponding increase in violent activity. Figure 10 examines subsequent peaceful and violent protest counts to assess this possibility. Peaceful protest does not systematically decline following excessive force, while violent demonstrations increase across geographical configurations. These findings provide little support for an explanation based solely on the withdrawal of nonviolent participants. They also indicate that the distinctive result at the joint-high corner concerns the composition of subsequent contention rather than an increase in the

overall volume of violent events unique to that setting.

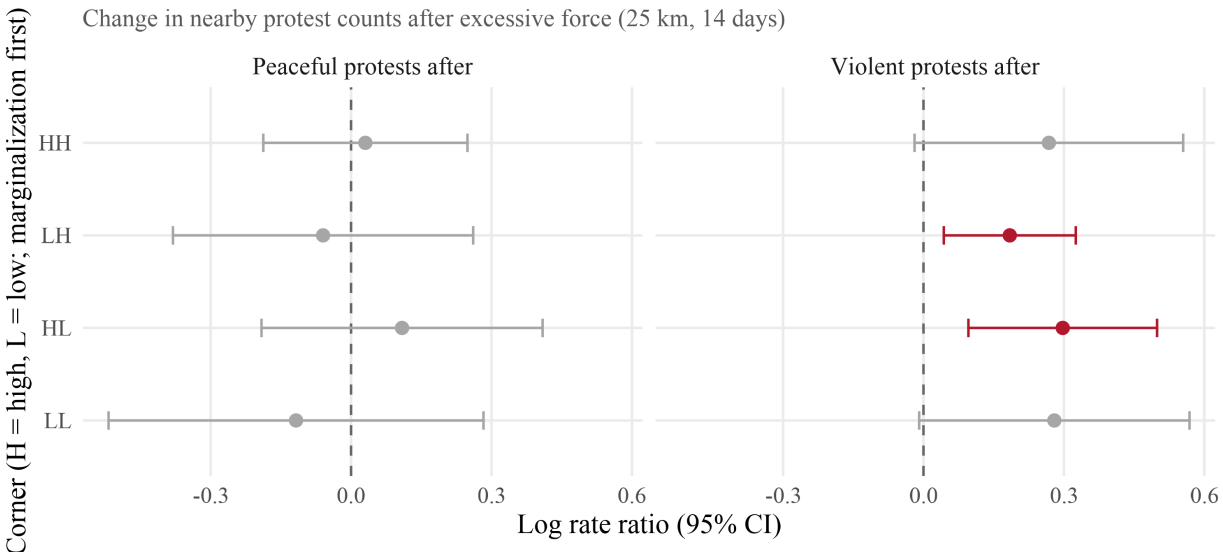


Figure 10. Protest Counts after Excessive Force (25 km, 14 days)

Third, the association may reflect the presence of formal organizations capable of coordinating escalation. Using ACLED's associated-actor information, the analysis distinguishes contentious environments according to whether a named organization was recently active nearby. The estimated association at the joint-high corner is positive in both settings, and the difference between them is not statistically significant. The result suggests that the observed pattern is not confined to environments with identifiable organizational presence, although informal coordination cannot be ruled out.

Together, these analyses indicate that the main association is not readily explained by the absence of preceding peaceful protest, the selective withdrawal of nonviolent participants, or the presence of named social movement organizations.