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Navigating Violence between Surface and below: Effect of Protester Reaction to Violent Flanks on Mobilization

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Abstract

How do nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks shape mobilization in unarmed movements? Existing research rarely centers on these responses, instead estimating a single net effect of violent flanks with mixed results. This article argues that the effects of responses hinge on fragmentation discrepancy, the gap between how unified a movement appears to outsiders and how cohesive it is internally. As responses to violent flanks (endorsement or opposition) operate as outward public signals and internal organizing devices, their effects on mobilization vary with the fragmentation discrepancy's sign and size. Using NAVCO 2.1, ACLED, and an illustrative case of Hong Kong's 2019 anti-extradition movement, I show that endorsement increases mobilization when movements look unified but are internally divided, whereas opposition is more effective when movements appear fragmented yet are internally cohesive. These results reconcile mixed findings on violent flanks and re-center protesters' agency in explaining mobilization.

Resumen

¿Cómo influyen las respuestas por parte de los manifestantes no violentos ante los flancos violentos en el contexto de la movilización de los movimientos desarmados? Las investigaciones existentes rara vez se centran en estas respuestas. Por el contrario, tienden a estimar un único efecto neto de los flancos violentos, lo que resulta en conclusiones dispares. Este artículo sostiene que los efectos de estas respuestas dependen de la discrepancia en materia de fragmentación, es decir, de la diferencia entre la aparente unidad de un movimiento desde la perspectiva de los observadores externos y su nivel real de cohesión interna. Dado que las respuestas a los flancos violentos, ya sean a favor o en contra, actúan como señales públicas hacia el exterior y como mecanismos de organización interna, sus efectos sobre la movilización varían según el signo y la magnitud de la discrepancia en materia de fragmentación. Utilizamos NAVCO 2.1, ACLED y un caso ilustrativo del movimiento contra la extradición en Hong Kong de 2019 y demostramos que el apoyo a la movilización aumenta cuando los movimientos aparentan estar unificados, aunque estén divididos internamente. Por otro lado, la oposición resulta más eficaz cuando los movimientos parecen fragmentados, pero son cohesivos a nivel interno. Estos resultados concilian las conclusiones dispares en materia de los flancos violentos y vuelven a centrar la atención de la agencia de los manifestantes en la explicación de la movilización.

Résumé

Comment la réponse des manifestants pacifistes aux flancs violents façonne-t-elle la mobilisation dans les mouvements démunis d'armes ? La recherche existante se focalise rarement sur ces réponses, préférant estimer un seul effet net des flancs violents avec des résultats mitigés. Cet article affirme que les effets des réponses dépendent de la différence de fragmentation, l'écart entre l'apparence d'unification que donne un mouvement aux personnes extérieures et sa véritable cohérence interne. Comme les réponses aux flancs violents (soutien ou opposition) fonctionnent comme des signaux publics vers l'extérieur et des dispositifs d'organisation en interne, leurs effets sur la mobilisation varient en fonction des symptômes et de l'envergure de la différence de fragmentation. À l'aide de NAVCO 2.1, d'ACLED et d'un cas d'illustration du mouvement d'opposition à l'extradition de 2019 à Hong Kong, je montre que le soutien accentue la mobilisation quand les mouvements paraissent unifiés en dépit de divisions internes, alors que l'opposition s'avère plus efficace quand les mouvements semblent fragmentés malgré une cohérence interne. Ces résultats viennent réconcilier des conclusions mitigées sur les flancs violents et recentrent l'agence des manifestants dans l'explication de la mobilisation.

Key words: protest violence; mobilization; fragmentation discrepancy.

Palabras clave: Violencia en las Protestas; Movilización; Discrepancia en la Fragmentación.

Introduction

How do nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks influence levels of participation in unarmed protest?[1] The question remains largely underexplored, as research on violent flanks tends to assess their average impact rather than the mediating role of protesters' agency. Reported net effects of violent flanks are mixed across these studies. Some studies argue that violent flanks can aid mobilization by disrupting the state apparatus or controlling urban spaces (Kadivar and Ketchley 2018; Bjork-James 2020).[2] Others contend that violent flanks damage movements by alienating potential supporters, provoking repression, and undermining legitimacy (Thomas and Louis 2014; Wasow 2020; Abbs and Gleditsch 2021). Despite failing to reconcile these inconsistent findings, the literature continues to treat the simple presence of violent flanks as the central explanatory factor. Accordingly, addressing the proposed question calls for a more micro-level lens than prior studies, one that recognizes the room for nonviolent protesters to maneuver through different responses.

This article argues that nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks, endorsement or opposition, play a decisive role in shaping protest mobilization. But the effects of these responses are not uniform. They are contingent on fragmentation discrepancy, a novel concept capturing the gap between how unified a protest appears to outsiders (surface-level fragmentation) and how internally cohesive it actually is (actual fragmentation). This gap arises because it is difficult for outsiders to directly access a protest's internal unity; they tend to infer it by assessing surface-level heuristics that may often misrepresent the internal dynamics.

Specifically, nonviolent protesters' endorsing or opposing violent flanks function as signals to outsiders and as organizing devices for insiders: the right response either reassures outsiders about unity or helps resolve internal coordination problems. The wider the gap between appearance and reality (i.e., higher fragmentation discrepancy), the greater the

leverage of a response. In this case, a response simultaneously (1) triggers larger belief updates among outsiders and (2) gives insiders a sharper focal point to coordinate or to consolidate cohesion without new fault lines. As a result, the movement can both attract new recruits, drawn by a signal of greater unity than outsiders had inferred, and retain existing participants. On the other hand, when appearance and reality already coincide (i.e., lower fragmentation discrepancy), the same responses do less to change beliefs or internal dynamics, yielding weaker mobilization effects. Whether, and how much, endorsing or opposing violent flanks helps mobilization hinges on the sign and magnitude of fragmentation discrepancy.

To test this theory, the article draws on two datasets: NAVCO 2.1 and ACLED, and an illustrative case study of the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition protest. The quantitative analysis shows that the effects of endorsing and opposing violent flanks on mobilization are conditional on the fragmentation discrepancy. Endorsement tends to boost mobilization when a movement appears unified but faces internal divisions, whereas opposition works better when a movement looks divided yet is internally well coordinated. To enhance inferential rigor, additional observable implications are tested: both protesters' responses and state repression vary systematically with fragmentation discrepancy. The 2019 Hong Kong protest case further demonstrates how protesters' tactical coordination with violent flanks, amid low surface but high actual fragmentation, generated both solidarity and expanded participation without provoking overwhelming repression.

The article begins by surveying debates on the effects of violent flanks and their limits, then advances the theory, detailing fragmentation discrepancy and its dynamics. It next describes the research design (data, variables, methods), presents the empirical results, and concludes with discussions, contributions, and implications.

Debates Surrounding Violent Flanks

The literature has rarely examined how nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks affect unarmed movements. As a result, most work evaluates the average impact of violent flanks themselves on protest dynamics, including mobilization, with no consensus on whether those effects help or harm the host movement (Chenoweth 2023).

On one hand, a collection of studies presents a perspective suggesting that violent flanks can poten-

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[1]   An unarmed protest movement refers to a mass movement that predominantly relies on unarmed resistance as its primary tactical approach, although it may include occasional instances of unarmed collective violence, fringe violence, or organized armed action of varying degrees. From this point forward, the article will use the term "protest" to denote an unarmed protest movement. A violent flank denotes an occurrence of violence within an unarmed protest movement (Chenoweth 2023). Accordingly, the universe of this study includes all protest with violent flanks.

[2]   Protest mobilization encompasses various dimensions, but in this article, it specifically refers to the number of participants. Accordingly, the terms mobilization and participation are used interchangeably throughout the text.

tially have a positive impact on unarmed movements through a variety of mechanisms. The potential benefits that violent flanks can provide encompass a broad spectrum, including securing increased funding support, driving policy changes, bolstering the endurance of the movement, achieving tangible concessions from authorities, and shifting public opinion (Haines 1984; McAdam and Su 2002; Cobb 2014; Kudelia 2018; Enos, Kaufman, and Sands 2019; Shuman et al. 2022; Leon-Ablan and John 2022).

On the other hand, an extensive body of research suggests that violent flanks typically bring about unfavorable outcomes through a variety of mechanisms. One of the primary adverse consequences associated with the presence of violent flanks is a potential decline in public support for the protest movement (Thomas and Louis 2014; Murdie and Purser 2017; Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018; Orazani and Leidner 2019; Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020; Lizzio-Wilson et al. 2022). The decrease in public support is primarily attributed to the perception that demands involved with violent flanks are unjustifiable, leading external audiences to have less identification with the movement (Haines 1984; Chenoweth and Schock 2015; Tompkins 2015).

The decline in public support can have negative effects on various aspects of the movement, including its fundraising capacity, organizational strength, and policy impact (Muñoz and Anduiza 2019). The negative shift in public opinion can also contribute to an increase in support for state repression (Edwards and Arnon 2021). Consequently, violent challenges are likely to meet state repression, as they have a lower potential for generating a backlash from the public and are perceived as posing a greater threat by the government (Franklin 2009; Carey 2010). Moreover, when faced with violent dissent, the government's response is likely to involve harsher forms of state repression, including acts such as torture (Conrad and Moore 2010). Various other detrimental outcomes of violent flanks are also documented. Protest violence reduces the likelihood of the government offering a concession to the movement (Franklin 2009; Huet-Vaughn 2013), increases the probability of failure to break down authoritarian regimes (Ulfelder 2005), hastens the collapse of the movement (Abbs and Gleditsch 2021), and exacerbates intergroup hostility (Beber, Roessler, and Scacco 2014).

Amidst this extensive discourse on the nature of violent flanks, the influence of these flanks on the mobilization capacity of protests stands out as a significant point of controversy. On one hand, studies that highlight the positive effects of violent flanks suggest that these flanks have the potential to contribute to the mobilization of a protest that shelters them. According to Kadivar and Ketchley (2018), the presence of violent flanks can promote greater mobilization by disrupting the repressive apparatus and diverting repressive forces away from their responsibility of policing protests at the frontline. Likewise, Bjork-James (2020) suggests that combative protests can make a material and tactical contribution to larger mobilization by effectively blocking, entering, and controlling crucial urban spaces. Protest militancy can also stimulate an oppositional culture that will work to expand the organizing capacity of the movement (Isaac, McDonald, and Lukasik 2006). On the other hand, engaging in protest violence can create a rift between the protest movement and bystanders, as it raises the costs of participation by inviting harsher state repression and undermining the legitimacy of the movement. As a result, this can lead to a decrease in the mobilization capacity of the protest (Abbs and Gleditsch 2021; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan, and Joo 2022).

These mixed results not only undermine the case for pursuing net-effect estimates of violent flanks; they also offer little guidance on how nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks affect mobilization. Addressing these limitations, this article advances a micro-level, agency-centered approach to protest violence. Although less parsimonious than prior work, it uncovers nuanced patterns obscured by aggregate net effects of violent flanks.

Theory

While nonviolent protesters are often unable to manipulate various factors that contribute to the presence of violent flanks, they may face the need and chance to navigate appropriate responses. Various factors can influence nonviolent protesters' reactions. They may intend to address immediate issues, such as safeguarding the protest or disassociating themselves from violent actions. For example, during the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea, armed protesters defending the movement against military violence received widespread support. In contrast, the main coalition in the anti-G8 protest in Genoa in 2001 prohibited any violent actions among the protesters (Albertani 2002). Nonviolent protesters may also endorse or oppose violence because it resonates with their beliefs, ideas, and cultural frames of meaning (Taylor and Van dyke 2007). Marks (1997) demonstrates that in the Charterist Movement in South Africa, the identity of youths as protectors of the community served as a justification for their use of violent tactics.

While important, these defensive or self-fulfilling functions themselves may not be sufficient to contribute to increased protest participation. To enhance participation, nonviolent protesters' responses to protest violence should achieve two key objectives: (1) attract new participants and (2) retain ex-

isting participants. First, to attract additional participants, nonviolent protesters' responses must ultimately generate a positive impression that significantly increases the perceived likelihood of the protest achieving its goals. Then, nonparticipants who support the protest's cause but have refrained from active involvement due to doubts about its potential impact may decide to join. Second, to retain existing participants, nonviolent protesters should respond in ways that prevent violent flanks from disrupting the internal dynamics of the protest. Existing participants would then continue to participate in demonstrations, as the protest's potential impact remains minimally affected by protest violence.

Discrepancy between Surface and Actual Fragmentation

Nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks can increase or decrease protest mobilization depending on the level and nature of protest fragmentation. Movement fragmentation is often an important mediating factor for significant consequences, such as conflict resolution (Findley and Rudloff 2012), the adoption of violence (Pearlman 2012; Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymou 2012), the length of insurgencies (Mahoney 2020), and the likelihood of government concessions (Cunningham 2011). Tilly (1993) emphasizes that the information of unity can influence whether protests attract more support or face a decline. In the widely recognized WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment) framework, unity is one of the four key elements that shape how governments and protest sympathizers perceive movements alongside worthiness, numbers, and commitment (Tilly 2006).

Specifically, this article argues that nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks can influence protest participation, but the effect is contingent on two distinct dimensions of protest fragmentation: surface-level and actual fragmentation. Surface fragmentation refers to the degree of perceived internal division within a protest movement as observed by external actors, particularly nonparticipants. It reflects how fragmented a protest appears from the outside, based on observable structural features such as the number of participating organizations, the diversity of social cleavages (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and ideology), and public expressions of disunity. These indicators are typically constructed from externally accessible proxies, such as media reports, group affiliations, or demographic heterogeneity of protest. Surface fragmentation is primarily perceptual and shapes nonparticipants' willingness to join: movements perceived as unified are more likely to attract recruits, while those appearing divided may be seen as disorganized or ineffective.

In contrast, actual fragmentation captures the internal, experienced degree of division within a protest, as understood by its participants and organizers. It is shaped by the quality of coordination, trust, and strategic alignment among constituent actors. Indicators of actual fragmentation include levels of internal cooperation or competition, tactical disagreements, inter-organizational distrust, and intra-movement sabotage or violence. While surface fragmentation affects recruitment by shaping external perceptions, actual fragmentation influences participant retention: low actual fragmentation fosters cohesion and sustained participation, whereas high actual fragmentation leads to internal strain, demobilization, or collapse.

The distinction between surface-level and actual fragmentation proposes that there could be a discrepancy between what nonparticipants perceive and what protesters experience within the movement. This discrepancy may be substantial since nonparticipants often struggle to directly observe the true extent of internal unity (Wouters and Walgrave 2017).[3] For example, Dormagen, Michel, and Reungoa (2022), separating the two levels of fragmentation, caution against focusing solely on external cleavages while overlooking intra-movement divisions. Analyzing the Yellow Vests movement, they warn against overstating unity, noting that many participants mobilized alongside rather than together. On the other hand, Fominaya (2010) argues that, in the heterogeneous Global Justice Movement, the publicly projected movement identity is often diverse (e.g., issue-based), and that outsiders (adversaries and audiences) respond to these outward projections rather than to the internally experienced collective identity that unites participants. These cases indicate a marked gap between outsiders' perceptions of a protest's unity and participants' experience of it.

The discrepancy implies that the strategic value of nonviolent protesters' response to violent flanks can diverge across the two dimensions; what enhances surface-level unity may not necessarily strengthen actual cohesion, and vice versa. At the surface level, being strategically beneficial hinges on how effectively nonviolent protesters' reactions to protest violence can reinforce the perception among nonparticipants that the protest is united or less fragmented than anticipated. At the actual level, being beneficial depends on how effectively nonviolent protesters' responses can genuinely foster or sustain internal unity. Achieving benefits at both levels of fragmentation is crucial, as it can ultimately boost protest participation: a strengthened surface perception of unity can attract former nonparticipants to join the protest, while en-

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[3] In more general terms, the meaning of specific actions, not just those signaling unity, may be obvious to activists but opaque to outside audiences (Juris 2008).

hanced or sustained actual unity retains existing participants.[4]

When Endorsing Violent Flanks Is Beneficial

Nonviolent protesters could gain maximum benefit in terms of mobilization from endorsing violent flanks under the condition that surface-level fragmentation is at its minimum (Situation 1), and actual-level fragmentation is at its maximum (Situation 2).

Situation 1 (Low Surface-Level Fragmentation)

In a hypothetical situation where surface-level fragmentation is low and nonparticipants perceive the protest as completely unified, nonviolent protesters' opposition to violent flanks may be interpreted by nonparticipants as a signal or precursor of internal disagreement over tactics. Then, nonparticipants interpret this as disunity that has actually been weakening, or would soon weaken, the protest, and they continue to refrain from joining. In such conditions, thus, opposing violent flanks may incur costs rather than yield benefits regarding surface fragmentation.

Conversely, under the same hypothetical condition, endorsing violent flanks reaffirms the nonparticipants' perception that the protest is unified and creates the impression that well-coordinated violent flanks might further strengthen the protest.[5] Consequently, expecting the protest to become more viable, nonparticipants would begin to join the movement. This suggests that endorsing violent flanks can help attract recruits and increase mobilization when surface-level fragmentation is minimal.

Situation 2 (High Actual-Level Fragmentation)

On the other hand, endorsing violent flanks yields maximum benefit when actual-level fragmentation is at its highest level. Since the protest is actually and fully fragmented, endorsing violent flanks can provide an opportunity or trigger for protesters to reconcile, thereby rebuilding unity. For instance, Myan-

mar's 2021 anti-coup protests demonstrated that a diverse movement can enhance cooperation to support armed resistance, instead of fragmenting during escalation (Vrieze 2024). As a result, existing protesters may perceive that their movement is either minimally impacted or even strengthened by the presence of protest violence, leading them to continue their participation.

Conversely, opposing violent flanks can deepen actual fragmentation by creating a new tactical cleavage, disillusioning participants, and eventually prompting exits. Thus, where fragmentation is high, such opposition may weaken mobilization by driving out existing protesters.

Taken together, the combination of Situation 1 (low surface-level fragmentation) and Situation 2 (high actual fragmentation) provides optimal conditions under which endorsing violent flanks yields the greatest mobilization gains. However, such alignment should be empirically rare; most movements would fall in less extreme configurations, where the benefits are correspondingly expected to be more modest. Figure 1 depicts how benefits from nonviolent protesters' responses change as surface-level and actual fragmentation vary.

The left side of figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of endorsing violent flanks. The top horizontal line represents surface-level fragmentation, ranging from 0 to 1, while the lower horizontal line represents actual-level fragmentation, ranging from 1 to 0. When nonviolent protesters endorse violent flanks, they retain benefits within the blue-shaded region, where deeper blue indicates greater benefits. For instance, at the leftmost point—the most intense blue area—surface fragmentation is at its lowest (Situation 1), and actual fragmentation is at its highest (Situation 2). In this scenario, as discussed above, endorsing violent flanks can strengthen the perception of unity among nonparticipants and serve as a turning point in fostering actual internal cohesion within the protest movement.

As surface-level fragmentation increases, it raises doubts about the protest's unity among nonparticipants, making the endorsement of violent flanks less impactful than when surface fragmentation remains minimal. The higher the surface fragmentation—and consequently, the greater the doubt—the smaller the reaffirmation of unity that endorsing violent flanks can provide. Similarly, as actual fragmentation decreases from its maximum, the effectiveness of endorsing violent flanks as a turning point toward unity diminishes. Once both surface and actual fragmentation surpass their midpoint (0.5) from their initial blue regions, endorsement is no longer more advantageous than opposing violent flanks.

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[4] This logic builds on the growing recognition that protest violence is not interpreted uniformly, but is instead filtered through contextual and social cues, emotions, and group identification (Baggetta and Myers 2022; Zhu et al. 2022). Thus, this study highlights that the same act of protester violence and nonviolent responses can be read either as discordant or disciplined depending on the visible fragmentation.

[5] Indeed, well-coordinated violent factions often safeguard nonviolent protesters by establishing frontlines. As an example, during the 2021 protest in Colombia, members of the Primera Linea, armed with shields and Molotov cocktails, organized themselves with the purpose of protecting the frontlines and attempting to create a physical separation between riot police and nonviolent protesters. Occasionally, these coordinated violent flanks contribute to protest mobilization. As Kudelia (2018) observed in the case of the Euromaidan Revolution, the safe main square maintains the movement's high mobilization level by being strictly nonviolent while a militant vanguard wages battles with government forces in other sites.
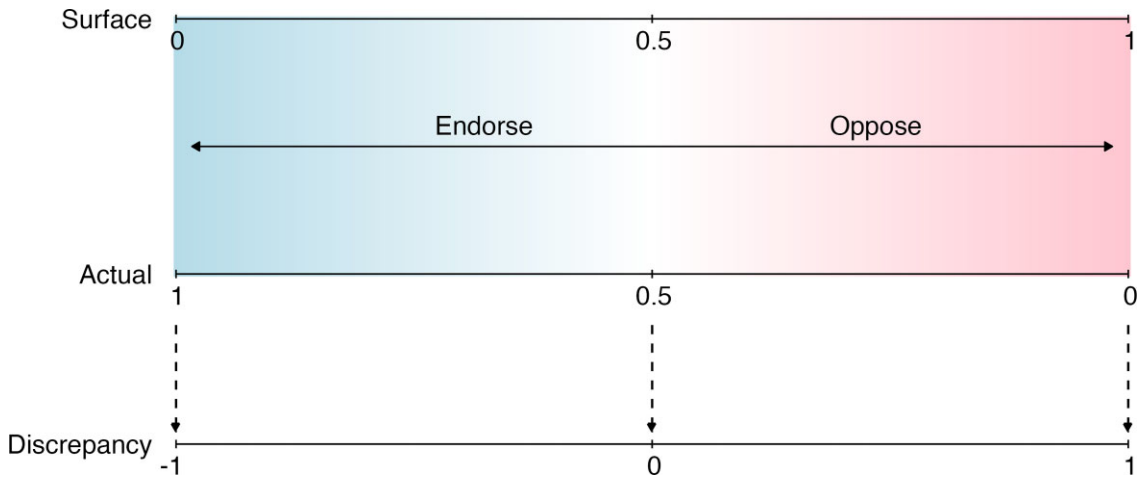
Figure 1. Benefits of endorsing or opposing violent flanks under different fragmentation levels.

When Opposing Violent Flanks Is Beneficial

In contrast to endorsement, opposing violent flanks offers nonviolent protesters the greatest benefit when surface-level fragmentation is at its maximum (Situation 3) and actual-level fragmentation is at its minimum (Situation 4).

Situation 3 (High Surface-Level Fragmentation)

Because nonparticipants already perceive the protest as highly fragmented due to visible divisions among groups, they are likely to interpret the endorsement of violent flanks not as a unified strategic choice, but as further evidence of disorder and lack of coordination, reinforcing doubts about the movement's coherence and purpose. Endorsing protest violence could also reaffirm nonparticipants' notion that it reflects severe fragmentation, as increased fragmentation often raises the likelihood of protests turning violent (Pearlman 2012). Nonparticipants will then remain on the sidelines, indicating a limited inflow of new participants. Consequently, under such conditions, endorsing violent flanks imposes costs rather than providing benefits.

Conversely, in the same situation, nonparticipants might interpret nonviolent protesters' opposition to protest violence as a positive signal, with fragmented groups coming together to a unified commitment to nonviolence. They would think that, since fragmentation is already extreme, an added tactical split is unlikely to matter, whereas a clear pledge of nonviolence can provide an umbrella for coordination. On that expectation, nonparticipants may start to participate, boosting the movement's mobilization capacity.

Situation 4 (Low Actual-Level Fragmentation)

In contrast, opposing violent flanks offers nonviolent protesters maximum benefit when actual fragmentation is low. Unified protesters may avoid creating unnecessary fault lines over violent flanks and are sufficiently cohesive to suppress tactical divisions efficiently. Accordingly, opposing violent flanks would help sustain the protest's already high unity and encourage original participants to remain.

In combination, Situation 3 (high surface-level fragmentation) and Situation 4 (low actual fragmentation) offer conditions in which opposing violent flanks are most advantageous for mobilization. Again, such cases are uncommon, and the returns diminish as the environment becomes less extreme.

The right side of figure 1 depicts the mechanisms of opposing violent flanks. At the rightmost point, surface-level fragmentation is at its highest (Situation 3), while actual-level fragmentation is at its lowest (Situation 4), represented by the most intense red region. At that point, the benefits of opposing violent flanks reach their peak by demonstrating nonviolent discipline under the same commitment to nonparticipants and preventing the emergence of additional fault lines within the protest. However, as surface-level fragmentation decreases, the benefits decline because the heightened perception of protest unity among nonparticipants makes the signaling effect of nonviolent discipline less essential. On the other hand, as actual fragmentation rises, opposing violence becomes less meaningful, as pre-existing fault lines within the protest may already be undermining cohesion. Once both surface and actual fragmentation exceed their midpoint (0.5) from their initial red
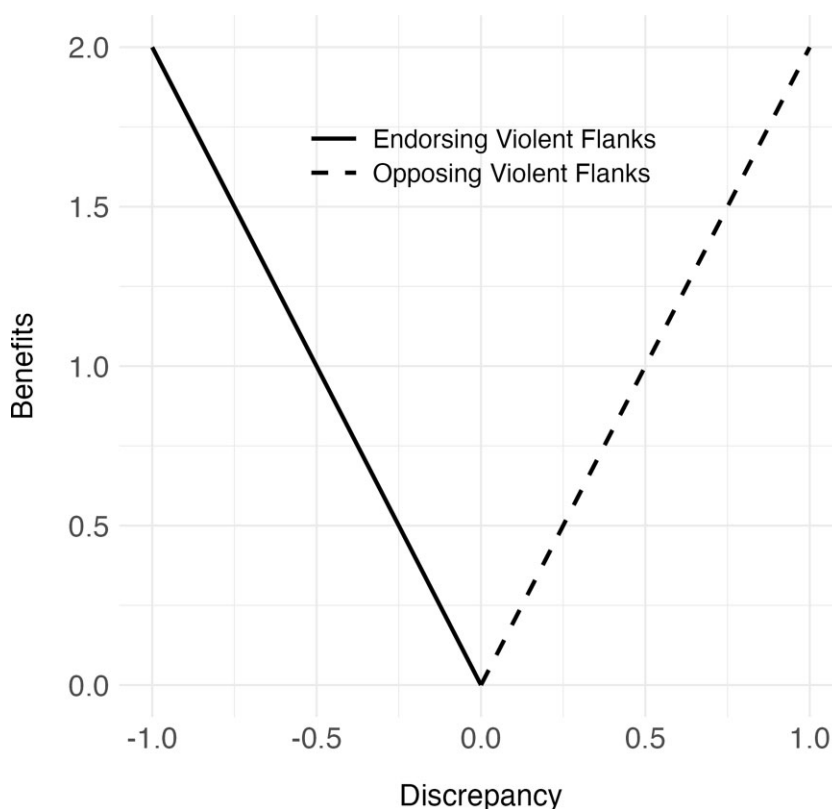
Figure 2. Relationship between benefits and discrepancy

zones, opposition to violent flanks ceases to be more beneficial than endorsing them.

Discrepancy as a Better Predictor than Separate Fragmentation

Figure 1 also illustrates that as the absolute value of the discrepancy between surface-level and actual fragmentation increases—calculated by simply subtracting actual fragmentation from surface-level fragmentation—either endorsing or opposing violent flanks becomes more beneficial. As the figure indicates, when the discrepancy approaches negative 1, endorsement becomes more beneficial, whereas opposition becomes more advantageous when it approaches positive 1. Figure 2 depicts the relationship between benefits and discrepancies. The solid line represents the function of endorsing violent flanks, highest at a discrepancy of negative 1 and reaching zero when the discrepancy is 0. The dashed line represents the function of opposing violent flanks, which reaches its maximum at a discrepancy of positive 1 and also drops to zero when the discrepancy is 0.[6]

Importantly, when both surface-level and actual fragmentation are similarly low or high, the benefit of any particular response by nonviolent protesters may be minimal. For instance, if surface fragmentation is near zero, endorsing violent flanks might appear beneficial by reinforcing the image of unity to outsiders. However, if actual fragmentation is also very low, indicating strong internal cohesion, such an endorsement might create unnecessary tension or division within the movement, prompting some participants to disengage. This close alignment between surface and actual fragmentation results in minimal discrepancy, thus offering no clear strategic direction for nonviolent protesters. The benefits of endorsing or opposing violent flanks are neutralized at both levels of fragmentation, resulting in minimal mobilizing impact. This suggests that it is not the absolute level of either type of fragmentation that best predicts mobilization outcomes, but rather the degree of discrep-

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[6] This assumes that a discrepancy of 0.1, for example, from different scenarios is qualitatively equivalent in terms of the benefits of opposing protest violence. For instance, a discrepancy of 0.1 could come from surface-level fragmentation of 0.9 and actual-level fragmentation of 0.8, or surface-level fragmentation of 0.2 and actual-level fragmentation of 0.1. When surface-level fragmentation is 0.9 and actual-level fragmentation is 0.8, the benefit of opposing violent flanks is significant at the surface level but very low at the actual level. Conversely, when surface-level fragmentation is 0.2 and actual-level fragmentation is 0.1, the benefit of the opposition at the surface level is very low, while it is substantial at the actual level.

Table 1. Summary of theory.

Surface fragmentation	Actual fragmentation	Discrepancy (surface − actual)	Status	Responses
Low (situation 1)	High (situation 2)	Negative (−)	Protest appears unified, but is internally divided	Endorsing violent flanks increases mobilization
High (situation 3)	Low (situation 4)	Positive (+)	Protest appears fragmented, but is internally united	Opposing violent flanks increases mobilization
Low	Low	Near zero (0)	Protest appears and is unified	Little strategic gain from either response
High	High	Near zero (0)	Protest appears and is fragmented	Limited strategic gain from either response

ancy between the two. These dynamics are summarized in table 1.

As a result, increased protest participation can occur when nonviolent protesters respond with a greater degree of discrepancy.

> Hypothesis 1: The effect of endorsing violent flanks on protest size increases as the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation becomes more negative.

> Hypothesis 2: The effect of opposing violent flanks on protest size increases as the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation becomes more positive.

Observable Implications

Following Elster (2015), confidence in a hypothesis increases when it yields additional, and preferably novel, testable implications. In terms of King, Owen , and Verba (2021), these are empirical patterns that should be observed if the hypothesis is correct. Testing such observable implications allows a sharper assessment of the hypothesis. While the hypotheses above generate multiple observable implications, two are most pertinent: (1) strategic choices by nonviolent protesters as a function of the fragmentation discrepancy and (2) a corresponding decline in repression.

If the benefits of endorsing or opposing violent flanks hinge on fragmentation discrepancy, nonviolent protesters' responses should likewise be contingent on that discrepancy. When surface-level unity is strong but internal cohesion is weak (high negative discrepancy), endorsing violent flanks can advertise continued solidarity while internally functioning as a rallying point. Conversely, when internal unity is strong but surface fragmentation appears high (high positive discrepancy), opposing violent flanks may publicly signal discipline without risking internal splits. In both scenarios, substantial discrepancies provide clearer strategic cues, potentially

guiding nonviolent protesters toward the response that best leverages mobilization advantages. Therefore, the greater the discrepancy, the more likely it is that nonviolent protesters will choose responses that align with the strategic logic of mobilization benefits.

> Hypothesis 3: The likelihood of endorsing violent flanks increases as the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation decreases.

> Hypothesis 4: The likelihood of opposing violent flanks increases as the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation increases.

Even if the proposed mechanisms are operating, an escalation of government repression, especially when violent flanks are endorsed, may deter mobilization and overwhelm the effects of protesters' responses. However, since strategic choices align with fragmentation discrepancy by nonviolent protesters and subsequent mobilization gains involve positive signals of viability and cohesion, the movement's legitimacy is expected to strengthen. This can broaden public sympathy and raise the political costs of repression, as governments often calibrate coercion to the perceived legitimacy of their actions. Accordingly, the forementioned hypotheses should coincide with the government's restraint from escalation to minimize backlash and additional mobilization. In other words, fragmentation discrepancy also shapes state calculations regarding the use of force. While studies suggest that protest violence often leads to harsher repression (Franklin 2009; Carey 2010; Conrad and Moore 2010), this suggests that appropriate responses under conditions of high discrepancy could indirectly lead to lower levels of repression.

> Hypothesis 5: The effect of endorsing violent flanks on the level of repression decreases as

the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation becomes more negative.

Hypothesis 6:The effect of opposing violent flanks on the level of repression decreases as the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation becomes more positive.

Research Design
Definition of Violence

This study defines violence as referring primarily to physical or materially disruptive acts, including property damage, physical confrontations with police, and organized clashes involving direct coercion. This definition follows the coding standards in datasets such as Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO 2.1) and Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010; Chenoweth and Shay 2019, 2022), where violence is restricted to observable physical disruptions. Symbolic or verbal acts, such as inflammatory rhetoric or threatening slogans, are excluded unless accompanied by such material actions. This approach ensures conceptual consistency with both datasets and improves analytical clarity by focusing on reliably measurable behaviors.

Data: NAVCO

This study tests its hypotheses using the NAVCO 2.1 dataset, which includes annual data on 384 mass movements for regime change, anti-occupation, or secession from 1945 to 2013. The unit of analysis is the campaign-year, capturing sustained, goal-oriented movements distinct from isolated events. The dataset offers a wide range of variables, such as diversity, responses to violent flanks, levels of mobilization, and repression, that align well with the study's theoretical framework. Focusing only on campaigns that primarily employ nonviolent methods, the analysis excludes those classified as predominantly violent.

Independent Variable 1: Nonviolent Protesters' Responses

The study includes variables that capture whether the protest expresses an endorsement or opposition to violent flanks. For NAVCO 2.1, the endorsement variable is assigned a value of 1 when the campaign issues a statement expressing support or praise for the violent flank; extends an invitation for the violent flank to join the movement; or initiates coordination of actions with the violent flank. On the other hand, the opposition variable is coded as 1 when the campaign issues a statement explicitly expressing a commitment to nonviolent action, disavows the violent flank, and reportedly engages in training or regroup-

ing efforts to uphold nonviolent discipline. Another variable measures whether protesters display ambiguity toward violent flanks. The variable is assigned a value of 1 when protesters showcase conflicting statements about whether the movement welcomes or disavows the violent flank, or involves instances of reported internal disagreement, conflict, or arguments concerning the violent flank's position within the movement. The argument does not have any specific expectations concerning this variable. The reference category for these binary variables is the absence of violent flanks.[7]

Independent Variable 2: Fragmentation Discrepancy

For NAVCO 2.1, two indicators are used to create a variable that captures surface-level fragmentation. First, a diversity index is formulated using nine dichotomous variables, each capturing distinct cleavages. The diversity index aggregates the number of cleavages, with higher values likely indicating greater fragmentation to external observers. The cleavages considered in constructing the diversity index are as follows: gender, age, class, urban-rural division, ideology, political party, region, ethnicity, and religion. The index is built additively. For instance, if there are three cleavages within the protest, the index is simply coded as 3. The proportions of internal cleavages are presented in the Appendix.

This index is designed to capture surface-level fragmentation as it is perceived by external observers, rather than the internal dynamics experienced by participants. As research in the management literature has shown (e.g., Milliken and Martins 1996; Harrison, Price, and Bell 1998), demographic diversity is typically more visible to outsiders than underlying factors such as members' attitudes, beliefs, or values. Although some cleavages, such as political parties, urban–rural divisions, or ideology, may seem less directly observable, protesters frequently signal these identities through visible symbols (e.g., flags, banners) or by physically clustering and media coverage, making them salient markers of division. Accordingly, this measure offers a reasonable proxy for how fragmented a movement appears from the outside.

Second, the count of new organizations participating in a given year is used. The number of organizations variable measures the count of newly named campaign organizations that join the movement within a particular year, as reported in news sources or research materials. Protests that involve a higher number of new organizations are likely to

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[7]   Among 206 instances where moderate protesters made one of the above responses, 65 instances (31.5 percent) showed explicit endorsement of violent flanks, 112 instances (54.4 percent) demonstrated opposition to violent flanks, and 29 cases (14.1 percent) presented ambiguous responses. The original response variable is categorical but recoded as three dummies for analysis.

be seen as potentially more fragmented.[8] Treating the number of new organizations as an indicator of surface-level fragmentation aligns with research on rebel group fragmentation, where the count of formal organizations is commonly used as the primary measure: more organizations signaling greater fragmentation and fewer organizations indicating greater cohesion (Bakke et al. 2012; Cunningham 2013).

The two indicators are combined into a surface fragmentation index by summing them and then normalizing the outcome. The normalization process is as follows, resulting in an index that ranges from 0 to 1: $x_{normalized} = \frac{x - x_{min}}{x_{max} - x_{min}}$

Although measuring the actual fragmentation level of protests is challenging, NAVCO 2.1 offers a useful variable that assesses fragmentation based on various sources generated during or after campaigns. These post-event sources, derived from narratives and histories that are often inaccessible to external observers at the time of the event, can provide a more accurate reflection of the actual level of internal fragmentation. The variable is coded as follows: 0 if the campaign appears united; 1 for cooperation with moderate disunity; 2 for verbal or active competition among distinct groups without physical violence; and 3 for active competition among groups involving violence. The higher numbers thus indicate greater fragmentation. This variable is normalized using the same process as the surface fragmentation index.[9]

The fragmentation discrepancy variable is then calculated by subtracting the actual fragmentation index from the surface fragmentation index. This variable ranges from -1 to 1, with nonviolent protesters more likely to endorse violent flanks as the value approaches -1, and more likely to oppose them as it approaches 1. This discrepancy variable is utilized both independently and in interaction terms with nonviolent protesters' response variables to test hypotheses. The density plot of the discrepancy variable is presented in the Appendix.[10]

This operationalization strategy closely reflects the theoretical distinction between surface-level and actual fragmentation. Surface-level fragmentation, as previously defined, refers to the degree of perceived internal division as observed by external ac-

tors, based on structural and visible characteristics. The use of externally observable indicators, such as the number of participating organizations and the breadth of internal cleavages, aligns with this concept by capturing how fragmented a protest may appear from the outside. In contrast, actual fragmentation refers to the internal experience of division among protest actors, rooted in coordination, trust, and strategic cohesion. The NAVCO-coded variable used here draws on post-event qualitative assessments that are often inaccessible to external observers at the time of protest. This makes it a strong proxy for the internal, substantive fragmentation experienced by participants themselves. By calculating the discrepancy between these two indices, the analysis captures a theoretically grounded gap between perceived and experienced protest unity, which is central to the article's argument.

The independent variables from NAVCO are not lagged for two reasons. First, the responses of nonviolent protesters are likely to have an immediate impact on the mobilization of the protest. Introducing a 1-year lag would thus create a significant time gap between the cause and the effect, enabling other factors to potentially intervene and complicate the relationship between them. Second, incorporating a lag in the independent variables results in the exclusion of numerous cases that did not last longer than 1 year. Excluding these protests, which likely ended promptly due to nonrandom factors such as their weak mobilization capacity, would introduce severe bias in the analysis.

Dependent Variables

To test the main hypotheses (Hypotheses 1 and 2) regarding protest mobilization, the article uses the logged estimated number of participants engaging in active contention from NAVCO 2.1 as the dependent variable. Also, to examine the hypotheses regarding repression (Hypotheses 5 and 6), the natural log of the total reported fatalities is used for both datasets. NAVCO 2.1 reports both high and low estimates of state-inflicted fatalities in a given year as part of efforts to suppress a campaign. In this study, the average of these estimates as the fatality measure is calculated, divided by the total number of reported participants, and then the natural logarithm is applied. Finally, to assess the hypotheses of whether nonviolent protesters' decisions are influenced by fragmentation discrepancy (Hypotheses 3 and 4), endorsement/opposition are employed as dependent variables.

To ensure the robustness of the analysis, the article incorporates additional indicators of protest mobilization and state repression. NAVCO 2.1 provides a backlash variable that measures how state repression affects the level of popular mobilization within

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[8] The correlation between these two indicators is 0.16, indicating a weak relationship.

[9] Criticism may arise regarding the normalization of an ordinal variable using the same process as for interval variables. While this critique is valid, the original ordinal variable is relatively symmetric (with 0 and 1 indicating unity and 2 and 3 indicating fragmentation). As a result, the normalization process can reasonably convert the ordinal levels into an interval scale without significant distortions.

[10] The correlation between the surface fragmentation index and actual fragmentation index in 0.13, suggesting a significant gap between the two levels of fragmentation.

a campaign. When no significant activity occurs after repressive actions, the movement is classified as suppressed. If opposition activity persists but with fewer events and reduced participation, mobilization is categorized as decreased. Conversely, when state repression is followed by larger and more visible opposition activities, it is classified as backlash in the form of increased domestic mobilization. This variable is recoded as 1 if domestic mobilization increased following repression and 0 otherwise. NAVCO 2.1 also offers the presence of state repression, with the original variable distinguished between none, mild, moderate, and extreme forms of state coercion. This variable is recoded into a binary indicator that captures only whether repression was absent or present.

Control Variables

Control variables are included to reflect the social characteristics within which protests are situated. As stated by Gupta, Singh, and Sprague (1993), repression by democratic regimes has the potential to escalate protest mobilization, whereas repression by authoritarian regimes may discourage dissident demonstrations. To consider the varying impact of state repression across different regime types, the analysis incorporates the Electoral Democracy Index derived from the Varieties of Democracy data (Teorell et al. 2019). Logged GDP (gross domestic product) per capita and population are also included as control variables (Fariss et al. 2022).

Models that use nonviolent protesters' responses as the dependent variable include a distinct set of control variables. These controls comprise the logged number of participants, the Electoral Democracy Index, and two dichotomous variables reflecting audience reactions to state repression. Domestic condemnation is coded when prominent individuals or organizations within the country, not directly affiliated with the campaign, publicly denounce repressive state actions. International condemnation captures instances where politically significant states publicly express disapproval of state repression.

Models

The hypotheses are evaluated using multiple models. For analyzing protest mobilization and fatalities resulting from repression, random-effects linear regression is employed. For models assessing nonviolent protesters' responses, backlash mobilization, and the occurrence of state repression, random-effects logit regression is utilized.[11] When examining nonviolent

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[11] Random effects models are used instead of fixed effects models because NAVCO 2.1 is severely unbalanced panel data. Also, random effects models are favored when a study's important covariate of interest remains constant within units, or when independent variables that change very gradually over time exhibit a strong correlation with the unit fixed effects (Clark and

protesters' responses in NAVCO 2.1, a subset of the data is used, focusing exclusively on observations where violent flanks are present. Robust standard errors are calculated by clustering on protest campaigns to account for heteroscedasticity in NAVCO 2.1 and ACLED.

Results

Models 1 and 2 in table 2 explore the effects of nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks mediated by fragmentation discrepancy on protest mobilization. Figure 3 depicts the conditional marginal effects of their responses. Higher values on the *y*-axis (the marginal effects on protest mobilization) indicate that endorsing or opposing violent flanks, conditional on fragmentation discrepancy, is associated with greater protest mobilization. When the confidence intervals overlap with the zero line, the marginal effects are not statistically distinguishable from zero and thus do not provide evidence of a systematic association.

Figure 3 demonstrates that the marginal effect of endorsing violent flanks (the green line) is highest when the fragmentation discrepancy is lowest, and it decreases as the discrepancy increases. Accordingly, endorsing violent flanks demonstrates a positive and significant marginal effect on mobilization when the discrepancy is more negative, but loses its significance as the discrepancy shifts toward positive values. This pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 1, which predicts that the effect of endorsing violent flanks on protest size increases as the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation becomes more negative.

Figure 3 also depicts the marginal effect of opposing violent flanks contingent upon fragmentation discrepancy on protest mobilization (the orange line). As shown in the figure, the marginal effect of opposing violent flanks is most pronounced when the discrepancy is at its highest positive values, gradually diminishing as the discrepancy becomes more negative. The observed pattern aligns with Hypothesis 2: as the discrepancy between surface and actual fragmentation becomes more positive, the effect of opposing violent flanks on protest size becomes stronger. In sum, models 1 and 2 support Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Models 3 and 4, based on NAVCO, examine the effects of nonviolent protesters' responses on fatalities resulting from government repression.[12] The findings, depicted in figure 4, reveal that the marginal effect of endorsing violent flanks is lowest when the fragmentation discrepancy is -1 and increases as the discrepancy moves toward more positive values (the

Linzer 2015). The article's decision to use the random effects model is thus reasonable, given that the main independent vari-

Table 2. Random effects regression results (NAVCO): Mobilization and fatalities.

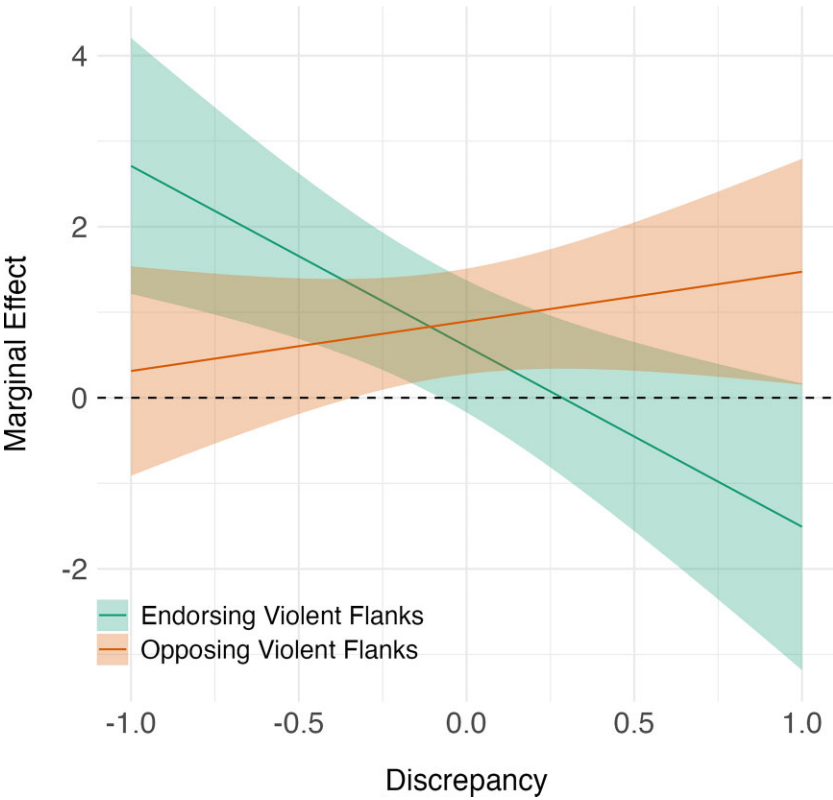| Variable	Model 1 (mobilization)	Model 2 (mobilization)	Model 3 (fatalities)	Model 4 (fatalities)
Discrepancy	1.540***(0.533)	1.069**(0.523)	-0.623(0.914)	-0.229(0.972)
Endorsement	0.593(0.395)	0.398(0.428)	3.521***(0.907)	3.694***(0.990)
Opposition	1.037***(0.346)	0.893***(0.315)	3.059***(0.720)	3.193***(0.704)
Ambiguity	0.694*(0.395)	0.624(0.421)	5.024***(1.100)	5.125***(1.089)
Endorsing × Discrepancy	-2.110***(0.712)		1.169(1.754)	
Opposing × Discrepancy		0.580(0.569)		-0.714(1.230)
Electoral Democracy Index	0.135(0.921)	0.153(0.957)	-1.617(1.996)	-1.621(2.000)
Logged Population	0.262**(0.115)	0.268**(0.117)	0.111(0.237)	0.110(0.237)
Logged GDP per Capita	0.278(0.182)	0.292(0.190)	-0.925**(0.446)	-0.934**(0.446)
Constant	7.508***(0.956)	7.548***(0.978)	-12.327***(2.103)	-12.396***(2.122)
Observations	318	318	291	291

$*P < 0.1, **P < 0.05$, and $***P < 0.01$.

Figure 3. Average marginal effects of protesters' responses on protest mobilization (NAVCO: Models 1 and 2)

green line). This pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 5, which predicts that the impact of endorsing violent flanks on repression diminishes as the discrepancy becomes more negative.

ables utilized in the study display minimal variation within each unit.

[12] Although the interaction terms are not statistically significant, it is completely possible that the marginal effect of X on Y can still be significant at substantively relevant values of Z (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006).

Conversely, the marginal effect of opposing violent flanks in figure 4 is lowest at a discrepancy of 1 and increases as the discrepancy shifts toward more negative values (the orange line). This finding supports Hypothesis 6, suggesting that the impact of opposing violent flanks on repression declines as the discrepancy moves in a positive direction. Taken together, Models 3 and 4 uphold Hypotheses 5 and 6.

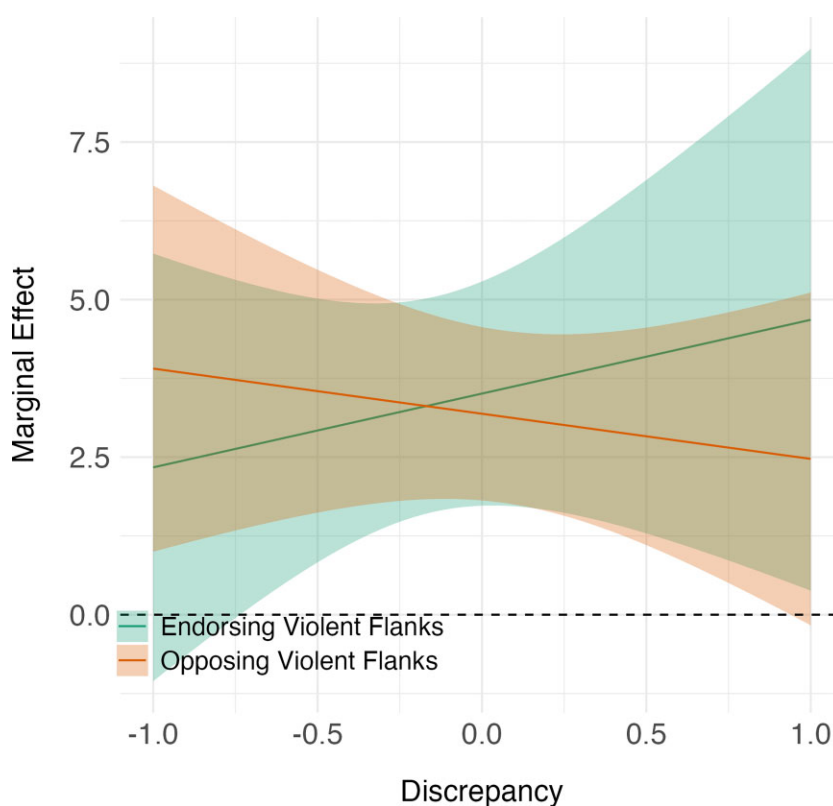Figure 5 presents the results of Models 5 and 6 from table 3, which use the backlash mobilization

Figure 4. Average marginal effects of protesters' responses on fatalities (NAVCO: Models 3 and 4).

as the dependent variable. As the fragmentation discrepancy approaches -1, the marginal effect of endorsing violent flanks on the likelihood of backlash mobilization becomes more pronounced, diminishing as the discrepancy shifts toward more positive values. Conversely, the marginal effect of opposing violent flanks on backlash mobilization is strongest when the discrepancy is at 1 and decreases as it moves toward more negative values. These patterns are consistent with those in figure 3, which uses the estimate of participants as the dependent variable, thereby lending additional support to Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Figure 6 presents the results of Models 7 and 8, which employ the presence of repression as the dependent variable. Consistent with earlier figure 4 on the number of fatalities from government repression, the marginal effect of endorsing violent flanks on the likelihood of repression becomes more pronounced as the fragmentation discrepancy approaches 1, while diminishing and losing significance as the discrepancy moves toward -1. On the other hand, the marginal effect of opposing violent flanks is strongest when the discrepancy is -1 and decreases as it approaches 1. These findings further support Hypotheses 5 and 6.

Table 4 examines the relationship between nonviolent protesters' responses and fragmentation discrepancy. Model 9 reveals a significant negative coefficient for fragmentation discrepancy, indicating that as the discrepancy decreases and moves toward more negative values, nonviolent protesters are increasingly likely to endorse violent flanks. This evidence aligns with Hypothesis 3: as the discrepancy decreases, the chance of endorsing violent flanks increases.

In contrast, Model 10 shows a significant positive coefficient for fragmentation discrepancy, suggesting that as the discrepancy increases and shifts toward more positive values, nonviolent protesters are more likely to oppose violent flanks. This pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 4, which predicts that the probability of opposing violent flanks rises as the discrepancy increases.

The findings converge into a coherent narrative. First, nonviolent protesters' choice to endorse or oppose violent flanks is linked to the discrepancy between the two levels of fragmentation. This suggests that the discrepancy may be one of the factors in nonviolent protesters' decision-making. While nonviolent protesters may not consciously calculate the exact discrepancy, they may recognize rather intu-
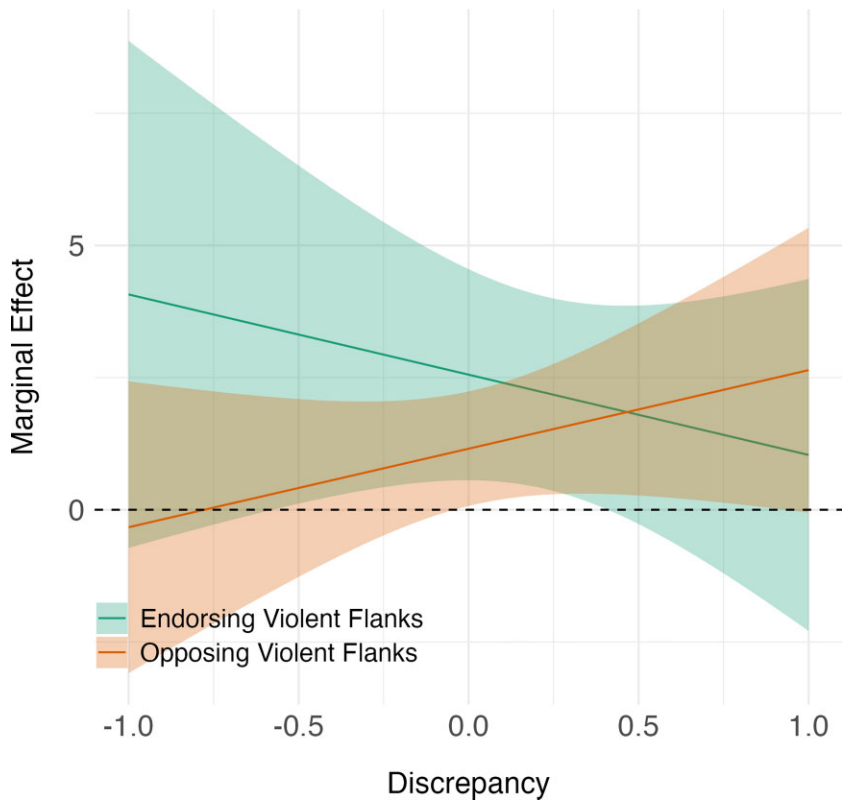
Figure 5. Average marginal effects of protesters' responses on backlash mobilization (NAVCO: Models 5 and 6).

Table 3. Random effects regression results (NAVCO): Backlash and repression.

Variable	Model 5 (backlash mobilization)	Model 6 (backlash mobilization)	Model 7 (repression presence)	Model 8 (repression presence)
Discrepancy	0.593(0.740)	-0.060(0.724)	-2.204**(0.970)	-1.830*(0.975)
Endorsement	2.557**(1.014)	2.277**(0.920)	3.233*(1.849)	3.478*(1.825)
Opposition	1.344**(0.560)	1.159**(0.550)	2.950***(0.978)	4.367***(1.016)
Ambiguity	-0.269(0.835)	-0.504(0.851)	2.360(1.659)	2.507(1.798)
Endorsing × Discrepancy	-1.511(1.835)		2.167(1.676)	
Opposing × Discrepancy		1.484(1.270)		-3.664**(1.780)
Electoral Democracy Index	-2.485(1.800)	-2.431(1.747)	-3.527*(1.930)	-3.738*(2.081)
Logged Population	-0.071(0.225)	-0.062(0.215)	0.220(0.268)	0.222(0.287)
Logged GDP per Capita	0.307(0.488)	0.334(0.471)	0.406(0.421)	0.414(0.448)
Constant	0.046(1.774)	0.054(1.719)	1.505(2.097)	1.533(2.212)
Observations	363	363	368	368

$*P < 0.1$, $**P < 0.05$, and $***P < 0.01$.

itively that it could influence the impact of their response. Second, nonviolent protesters' deliberate responses often lead to positive outcomes, such as greater mobilization and reduced repression. These findings suggest that when nonviolent protesters respond strategically, public support may grow, encouraging more people to join the movement, while existing protesters do not exit the protest. Simultaneously, the increased support for the protest may make the government wary of potential backlash. This suggests that the presence of violent flanks can be either a crisis or an opportunity for the protest, depending on how nonviolent protesters respond. Third, these findings remain robust across various indicators of mobilization and repression, as well as across different datasets.

Robustness Checks

As a robustness check, this article replicates the analysis with ACLED protest event data. Unlike NAVCO's annual format, ACLED records daily
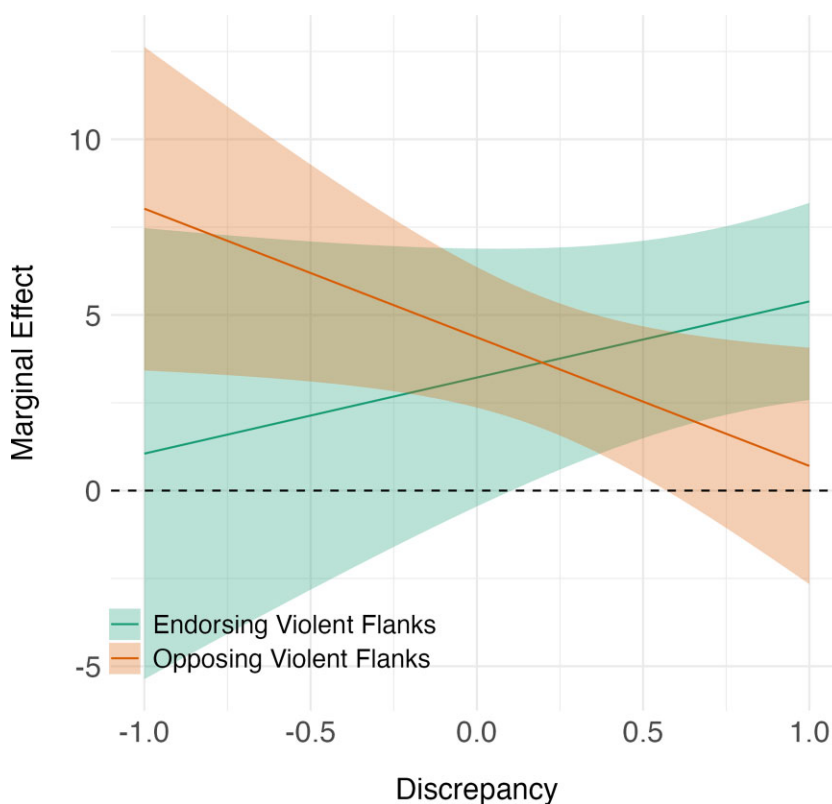
Figure 6. Average marginal effects of protesters' responses on repression presence (NAVCO: Models 7 and 8).

Table 4. Random effects Logit regression results (NAVCO): Responses.

Variable	Model 9 (endorsement)	Model 10 (opposition)
Discrepancy	-4.115**(1.709)	2.807**(1.156)
Domestic condemnation	0.540(2.321)	2.744(1.819)
International condemnation	-1.285(2.785)	4.665*(2.785)
Logged participants	-0.641**(0.279)	1.023***(0.313)
Electoral Democracy Index	-29.451(18.531)	21.791**(10.339)
Constant	8.175*(4.521)	-21.442***(8.227)
Observations	144	144

$*P < 0.1$, $**P < 0.05$, and $***P < 0.01$.

events, enabling the use of short-term lagged variables. To construct campaign-level data, events are grouped through K-means clustering and then collapsed to the campaign-date level. The results are consistent with the NAVCO findings, reinforcing their validity while complementing them with lagged specifications that are less feasible within NAVCO's annual format. They are reported in the Appendix.

Illustrative Case: Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Protest

The 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition protest provides an illustrative case that concretely demon-

strates the mechanisms identified in the quantitative analysis. As shown in the previous models, protester endorsement of violent flanks tends to increase mobilization when surface fragmentation is low and actual fragmentation is high. As a typical case of the theory, the Hong Kong protest reflects precisely this configuration and reveals how strategic endorsement of violence aligned with fragmentation discrepancy to reinforce participation and manage repression.

According to the coding standards employed by NAVCO and ACLED, which define violent flanks by the presence of physical clashes, property destruction, and other materially disruptive tactics,

rather than by the use of firearms or organized armed struggle, Hong Kong's militant protesters fall within the conceptual boundaries of violent flanks. Their methods, including throwing Molotov cocktails, erecting barricades, obstructing transit systems, and damaging property, constituted a clear tactical deviation from conventional nonviolent approaches. These actions not only disrupted state functions but also marked a distinct divergence in strategy and risk from the broader nonviolent movement. Importantly, whether these actions were primarily defensive or offensive is not decisive; under the theoretical framework of this study, what matters is their divergence from mainstream protest tactics in shaping broader mobilization dynamics.

Emerging as the largest and most sustained protest movement in Hong Kong's history, the anti-extradition campaign began in June 2019 in response to a proposed bill allowing extradition to mainland China. Despite the bill's withdrawal in September, protests continued, evolving to include broader democratic demands (Lee et al. 2022). The surface-level unity of the movement was evident early on: protestors collectively articulated five shared demands, repeatedly emphasized across major marches and media (Lee, Yuen, and Tang 2019). These visible indicators of unity conveyed a low level of surface fragmentation to external observers and potential participants.

The protest's low surface-level fragmentation, signaled by unified messaging and consistent demands, suggests that the movement was likely to have a negative fragmentation discrepancy metric where endorsing violent flanks is beneficial for mobilization. Indeed, actual-level fragmentation was sizable: while the movement was often depicted as cohesive, clear disagreements over tactics and norms divided moderate and radical protesters (Lee et al. 2022). In line with this logic, moderate protesters in Hong Kong explicitly endorsed their militant counterparts, a move that not only signaled outward unity but also helped alleviate internal divisions by reinforcing a shared identity and purpose. Movement slogans highlighting solidarity between nonviolent and violent protesters emerged from online discussions, including phrases such as "no splitting and no severing of ties," "brothers climbing mountains, each offering one's efforts," and "going up and down together" (Lee 2020). Protesters consciously cultivated solidarity by incentivizing online content that encouraged collective actions and fostered unity among participants, while discouraging divisive content that could potentially undermine the movement's sense of solidarity (Leung, Hsiao, and Garimella 2022). The articulation of solidarity slogans played a role in reminding participants to remain calm during heated discussions or preventing them from becoming excessively divisive (Lee 2020), thereby helping to control the actual fragmentation within the protest.

The tactical integration of militant flanks into the main rallies also likely reinforced external perceptions of unity, consistent with the theoretical expectation that visible cohesion enhances mobilization under negative fragmentation discrepancy. While these militant actors assumed frontline roles against police forces, their presence helped shield nonviolent protesters and sustain participation amid escalating repression (Ngai 2020; Stott et al. 2021). As Delmas (2020) notes, such defensive actions may have reduced the perceived cost of joining protests, further expanding the protest base.

The endorsement of violent flanks in Hong Kong did not trigger repression severe enough to suppress mobilization, a finding consistent with Hypothesis 5, which posits that alignment between protester response and fragmentation discrepancy can mitigate state violence. While repression did escalate, ranging from tear gas and water cannons to live ammunition (Lee et al. 2022), it fell short of demonstrating a systematic intent to kill. This level of coercion, rather than deterring participation, appeared to reinforce it. This echoes the statistical patterns where endorsement under negative fragmentation discrepancy is associated with reduced fatalities. Surveys show that while early protests centered on the extradition bill, later participation was increasingly driven by dissatisfaction with police handling of demonstrators (Lee, Yuen, and Tang 2019). This supports that repression, when occurring under conditions of strategic endorsement amid negative discrepancy, can paradoxically amplify mobilization.

In sum, the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition protests illustrate how moderate protesters' strategic responses to violent flanks, when aligned with fragmentation discrepancy, can shape mobilization dynamics. While the movement appeared externally cohesive, underlying internal divisions made endorsement of violent flanks particularly effective, both in reinforcing perceived unity among nonparticipants and in bolstering actual internal solidarity. This dual reinforcement helped drive broader participation. Moreover, despite intensified repression, the strategic alignment of protester response limited its demobilizing effect and, in fact, contributed to further mobilization. The Hong Kong case thus underscores the critical role of protester agency in navigating fragmentation and managing violence to sustain and increase mobilization.

Conclusion

The use of violence is becoming increasingly common in protest campaigns (Chenoweth 2023). Besides the government's typical use of repres-

sive tactics to disperse dissident collective actions (Davenport 2007), protests also frequently employ violence in response to state repression (Della Porta 2018). Investigating the violent interactions between the government and protests is a crucial task in comprehending the mechanisms behind protest development.

The article makes three major contributions. The article's first contribution is to address the underexplored question of how nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks affect mobilization, going beyond the literature focused on inconsistent net effects of violent flanks. Second, the article advances testable predictions from the concept of fragmentation discrepancy: endorsement or opposition can markedly boost mobilization depending on the discrepancy's sign and magnitude, offering novel insights. Third, it introduces fragmentation discrepancy, a transferable concept that can apply to a range of questions beyond protest violence.

A critical dimension that remains underexplored in this study is how the fragmentation discrepancy is constructed in the first place. In particular, the role of media framing may significantly influence the perceived (surface-level) fragmentation of protest movements. Nonparticipants' impressions of protest fragmentation are often influenced by media representations, which may either obscure deep divisions or exaggerate minor disagreements. Such dynamics may complicate the effectiveness of nonviolent protesters' responses to violent flanks, as the mobilizing impact of endorsement or opposition could be amplified or undermined depending on how media narratives frame the broader movement's coherence. This suggests that fragmentation discrepancy is not merely a structural reality, but a communicatively mediated one. Future research could thus benefit from explicitly incorporating media content analysis to assess how framing interacts with protester responses in shaping mobilization dynamics.

This study adopts a relatively broad categorization of protest violence and nonviolent responses. However, as recent studies suggest (Beissinger 2022; Lawson et al. 2022; Cheng and Yuen 2025), different forms of protest violence, such as symbolic property damage versus direct confrontations, may differentially affect mobilization and repression. Future research should disaggregate both violent tactics and nonviolent reactions to investigate how specific types interact with fragmentation dynamics to shape outcomes.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Journal of Global Security Studies* online.

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