

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
Santa Barbara

The Power of The People: What History Teaches Us About Collective Action

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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March 2026

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## Preface

When I was in elementary school, my family had a habit of watching *ABC: World News Tonight*. In 2011, my family sat down as we always did and saw the Occupy Wall Street movement happening on the other side of the country. These protestors kept chanting “We are the ninety-nine percent,” as they marched through the streets of New York and occupied Zuccotti Park. I was too young to understand what I was seeing. I had no idea what populism was, what “bank bailouts” meant, or what *Citizens United* was. I just saw a bunch of angry people with signs and Guy Fawkes masks yelling on my TV screen.

What started on Wall Street quickly spread across the country. Offshoots sprang up in Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, fueled not just by shared grievances but by the rapid spread of information online. Twitter and Facebook allowed organizers to remotely plan protests and gather massive crowds in a matter of hours. Social media spread photos and videos like wildfire. Minutes after something happened, the entire world knew of it. When the news came on at night, it was a highlight reel of the day’s most notable actions, but it was always playing catch-up. The digital dawn had finally come.

The violence I witnessed during Occupy Wall Street did not seem real to me. I was shocked to see tear gas, broken windows, and rubber bullets in America, the so-called “land of the free.” But as the protests kept dragging on and on, they started getting less and less coverage on the news. There were no more violent scenes on the TV. Slowly, the protests dwindled in size, until one day they stopped completely. All the violence, all the resentment so easily observable in September just...vanished. Dreams of liberty transformed into dreams of cookies and Christmas presents. Cries for justice gave

way to carols and cheer, and those same streets traded protestors with twinkling lights and holiday sales.

Eight years later, and I was in high school when I first learned about the Hong Kong democracy protests. But this time it was not through a TV, it was through Twitter and my cellphone as I rode the bus to school. Instead of tents in Zuccotti Park, there were umbrellas in the streets of Hong Kong. Protestors wore masks not as symbols of rebellion but as shields from cameras that turned their faces into death warrants. Instead of signs, they held up white rectangles of silence. The emblems said nothing, but their emptiness was the message. These blank canvases became a mirror reflecting a sad truth: in Hong Kong, speaking out was signed one's death warrant. Hunted by algorithmic bloodhounds, protestors began disappearing, "falling" from buildings and being "found" hanging in their cells. As the government arrested them, protestors made a point to scream "I am not suicidal" as a final prayer, as they were carted into the clutches of a government that killed quietly and efficiently. Hong Kong proved authoritarianism could be digitized, invisible and ever-lingering. And it could now hunt faster than any protestor could run.

The last fifteen years have completely changed how the world accesses and uses information. We collectively cast aside our televisions for pocket-sized personal devices that can instantly gather data from every corner of the globe. In a way we have become more connected than ever, yet somehow more isolated as well. My family stopped gathering around the television to hear Diane Sawyer—or by this point David Muir—read the nightly news. Instead we each followed it as it unfolded through our phones, delivered through a tailored algorithm designed to hold our attention as long as possible. My exposure to the Hong Kong protests did not come because I saw a reputable news article about it, but

rather because Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey set the NBA world ablaze by tweeting “Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong.”

During my time in high school and university, I witnessed the world crawl towards authoritarianism in an inexplicable international backslide. The so-called “end of history” professed by Francis Fukuyama revealed itself to be a great mirage. We believed global democracy was inevitable and certain, and not the product of generations of struggle and sacrifice. Instead, democracy has eroded in front of our very eyes. On 6 January 2021, I found myself sitting in an AP US History class as insurrectionists marched on the American seat of democracy. Though we all watched updates of it in real time through our phones, we never once addressed it as a class, taking it for granted that everything was going to be alright. Later that day, I found myself stuck in traffic as supporters of that same insurrection blocked the highway that took me home. Finally, my hometown responded to the attack on democracy—and it cheered.

As I conclude my university studies, I cannot help but marvel at what I’ve witnessed in my youth, and I’ve chosen to focus my senior thesis around a narrow piece of this very vast puzzle. I began this project because I assumed that something must fundamentally be different about political mass movements. Somehow, sometime in the last seventy years, they stopped working. Perhaps governments have learned to anticipate and suppress dissent before it gains momentum. Or perhaps technology itself has evolved into a tool of near-omnipotent control, allowing states to monitor, manipulate, and crush opposition with unprecedented precision. Or perhaps we convinced ourselves that we are not actually moving backwards, and that we have not buried our heads in the sand as injustice accumulates around us. Each individual step towards tyranny seems so natural that we no

longer recognize the direction we are traveling, and so minor that we do nothing. After all, it is far easier—and far more lucrative—to be in the good graces of power than to challenge it.

If democracy must be reborn in every generation, then the birthright of this one has been stunted. We have more information at our fingertips than any generation before us, yet we remain shockingly unprepared to recognize when freedom is under siege. Technology connects us, amplifies our voices, and documents injustice, but it also serves as a conduit of fear, manipulation, and indifference. From the streets of Zuccotti Park to the umbrellas of Hong Kong, from the Capitol in Washington to a cheering crowd 3,000 miles away, the lessons of liberty have been written in plain sight, yet are too often ignored. The question now is whether this generation will awaken, confront the machinery of authoritarianism, and carry democracy forward—or simply scroll past history as it repeats itself.

“Protest beyond the law is not a departure from democracy; it is absolutely essential to it.”

- Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*

## Introduction

As a girl, Dolours Price believed a monster lived in her house. And every evening, her mother made her approach the monster, light a cigarette, and gently place it between its disfigured lips. For young Dolours, this experience was traumatizing. She stared, wondering how it was possible such a creature was even alive, studying the grotesque face and blind eyes. But this “monster” was actually Dolours’ Aunt Bridie. And to many, she was a national hero.<sup>1</sup>

Bridie and Dolours came from a long line of Irish freedom fighters. When it was her turn to take up the mantle, Bridie became a bombmaker for the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Tragically, one evening in 1938, Bridie was moving a cache of explosives when it suddenly detonated, shredding her hands up to the wrist, blinding her, and leaving much of her face scarred. At the time, Bridie was twenty-seven years old. Young Dolours occasionally asked if Bridie had any regrets, if the cause was really worth losing her hands, eyes, and face. But Bridie did not regret a thing. She was proud of her sacrifice.

One might expect that seeing the enormous costs to her aunt would have turned Dolours away from freedom fighting. But it did not. Both Dolours and her sister, Marian, would later join the IRA in 1971, with Dolours even joining an elite group known as “the Unknowns” that was tasked with transporting alleged traitors from Northern Ireland to Ireland, where they frequently “disappeared.” The term “traitors” did not just apply to members of the IRA who fed information to the British, but

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<sup>1</sup> For the full story of Dolours Price, see Keefe, Patrick Radden. *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*. (London: William Collins), 2018 or the film, Lorna Larkin et al.. *I, Dolours*. Magnolia Pictures, 2017.

rather any citizen—even a civilian widowed mother of ten—who were believed to be informants.

Dolours was willing to do whatever it took to see Ireland united once again.

Dolours' story is not an anomaly. It is just one thread woven into a much larger tapestry of resistance spanning all of history. This thesis aims to unravel that tapestry and understand the inner workings of these movements: to discover how campaigns endure brutal repression for decades while others collapse, to learn under what circumstances violence undermines legitimacy instead of hardening resolve, and ultimately to identify why some movements transform the world while others fade into obscurity.

In order to achieve these goals, this paper mixes large scale statistical analysis with in-depth historical case studies. This mixed-methods approach is slightly unorthodox in the field of history but is very common in political science, as it allows for measurable comparisons across spatial and temporal boundaries while not compromising the human element that numbers alone will never be able to capture.

The statistical analysis portion utilizes the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes database (NAVCO) published by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The dataset covers 384 social movements between 1945 and 2013 that had one of the following goals: regime change, territorial secession, removal of an occupying force, significant institutional reform, or the establishment of an autonomous region. The specific NAVCO dataset employed in this paper also divides each campaign through each year of its respective existence, making it possible to analyze how the movements changed over time. The effect is that it is possible both to measure a campaign's progress through partial concessions garnered over the years as well as whether or not it was successful

in achieving its ultimate goal. These two measurements—yearly progress and overall success—are the focal point of the subsequent analysis.

To situate these quantitative findings with lived experience, the second half of this thesis returns to Northern Ireland to analyze The Troubles. This violent campaign that spanned nearly three decades has been written about extensively, and there exists a vast wealth of knowledge into the inner workings of both sides of the conflict. The core of this section utilizes archival research to explore strategic decision making surrounding the Bloody Sunday incident of January 30, 1972, which remains the worst mass shooting event in Northern Irish history, and led directly to the suspension of the Northern Irish government two months later.

Bloody Sunday and The Troubles at large provide key insights into how social movements adapt to new strategies of repression over time, elicit international support for their cause, and struggle to maintain cohesion over the years as they deal with fluctuating public sentiment.

The story of Dolours Price is reflective of millions of individuals across the world who have taken up arms and done whatever possible for a cause they believed in, believing their actions justified by a higher goal. This thesis argues that these individuals and the campaigns they fight for are often complex and ever evolving, and that the success of one side is dependent on a host of different factors, some of which lie outside their control. The goal of this paper is to shed light on what methods lead to the eventual success or suppression of social movements, arguing that while movements of the same variety share features that transcend temporal or geographical boundaries, their eventual victory or defeat is shaped by regular people: politicians, soldiers, civilians, and activists who must navigate difficult situations, where the slightest misstep can have the most dire of consequences.

## Chapter 1: Statistical Analysis

“[Statistics] real contribution to society is primarily *moral*, not technical.”

- Stephen B. Vardeman and Max D. Morris

### Part 1: The NAVCO Data

Intensive study of social movements began with the trailblazing work of Gene Sharp in the 1970s. Sharp was the first to study nonviolent action from a methodological perspective, and catalogued 198 different tactics of direct nonviolent civil action.<sup>2</sup> Sharp also identified that nonviolent action can succeed through any one of three ways: conversion, accommodation, and coercion.<sup>3</sup> Conversion succeeds by changing the hearts and minds of the opposition as well as third parties, convincing them of the righteousness of the cause. Sharp quotes Edward Alsworth Ross: “The spectacle of men suffering for a principle and not hitting back is a moving one. It obliges the power holders to condescend to explain, to justify themselves. The weak get a change of venue from the will of the stronger to the court of public opinion, perhaps world opinion.”<sup>4</sup> Suffering is not the only way to convince an opponent of the error of their ways, but it is the most powerful. An individual willing to endure violence or death without fighting back naturally calls into question the moral position of their opponent, leading even the perpetrators of violence to question themselves. Conversion is the most powerful and complete success nonviolent action can achieve.

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<sup>2</sup> Sharp, Gene. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. With Internet Archive. Boston: P. Sargent Publisher, 1973. 423. <http://archive.org/details/politicsofnonvio0000unse>.

<sup>3</sup> Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 706.

<sup>4</sup> Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 658-659.

Below this lies accommodation, where the opponent does not agree with the changes and could continue to struggle, but finds it more desirable to willingly concede than to continue resisting. The hearts and minds of the opponent remain unaligned with the protesting group, but they nonetheless give in to the demands by willingly giving up the fight. Perhaps the opponent realizes that they do not care about the issue as much as they initially did, or resisting the change is simply not worth the effort. Last among the ways of success is coercion, where the opposing group remains ideologically opposed and *would* continue to fight, yet no longer has the means to do so. Not only do the opponents' hearts and minds remain unvaried, they very much would continue to resist if it was feasible. A hypothetical example could be a dictator clinging to power who is abandoned by the military and therefore no longer has the means to resist the usurpation. The dictator would very much want to resist, but ultimately lacks the means to defend their position.

Sharp's work laid the groundwork for an era of qualitative research on political mass movements, which came to include both violent and nonviolent movements. But the advent of quantitative studies only became feasible when NAVCO 1.0 was released in 2008.<sup>5</sup> NAVCO 1.0—standing for Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes—is a dataset of 323 “maximalist” campaigns that tracks dozens of factors, such as a movement's leadership structure, number of participants, degree of repression by the state, etc. The dataset focuses on “maximalist” campaigns, which it defines as having a primary goal of “overthrowing the existing regime, expelling foreign

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<sup>5</sup> Stephan, Maria J., and Erica Chenoweth. “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008): 7–44. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.33.1.7>.

occupations, or achieving self determination,”<sup>6</sup> and encodes the data in one of the following forms: regime change, significant institutional reform, policy change, territorial secession, greater autonomy, or anti-occupation.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will be analyzing the NAVCO 2.1 dataset—an updated version of the aforementioned 1.0 dataset—so it is important to first discuss how the NAVCO data was collected, how the dataset encodes movements, and what its limitations and biases are. In order to be included in the NAVCO dataset, a campaign had to mobilize at least 1,000 participants and have a maximalist goal as defined above. In order to identify campaigns, researchers under Erica Chenoweth at Harvard University looked through several databases such as the Swarthmore Nonviolent Database,<sup>8</sup> ACLED,<sup>9</sup> UCDP Armed Conflict Database<sup>10</sup> to identify qualifying movements. Though never explicitly stated, it is almost assured that only movements with credible information available in English were considered. This selection process is particularly relevant, as several papers have noted a variety of campaigns that met both the minimum participation and maximalist requirements yet were inexplicably excluded.<sup>11</sup>

The version of NAVCO this paper is concerned with features 384 individual campaigns ranging from 1945 to 2013, and it breaks down each campaign by individual year, so a campaign that

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<sup>6</sup>Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. “Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1.” *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 2. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

<sup>7</sup>Chenoweth, “Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes”, 18.

<sup>8</sup>Associated with Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

<sup>9</sup>The acronym refers to “Armed Conflict Location and Event Data”. The organization is a non-profit that receives US government funding and monitors all anti-government protests around the world.

<sup>10</sup>Refers to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. The database is maintained by Uppsala University in Sweden.

<sup>11</sup>Lehoucq, Fabrice. “Does Nonviolence Work?” *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 2 (2016): 278. <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041516817037691>.

began in 2000 and ended in 2004 would have five total entries.<sup>12</sup> Each campaign-year is encoded with 110 factors from that year such as geographic location, year, number of participants, goals, number of fatalities inflicted, methods of government suppression, etc.<sup>13</sup> There is also an encoding measuring any progress a campaign made during a given year, and each campaign's final year has a binary label describing if the goals of the movement were achieved or not. These particular encodings are invaluable, as they provide the measure by which it is possible to compare the strategies and techniques of differing social movements.

Labeling the data in this manner allows us to analyze movements as they unfolded. Thus if a movement changed tactics by transitioning from nonviolent to violent, this change is accurately described, and it is possible to compare the progress the movement made before and after this occurred. Similarly, if a group only started to break ground after it began using the courts to achieve its goals, this would also be reflected.

It should be noted NAVCO 2.1 is not the only updated version of the data, as there exists a NAVCO 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 at time of writing.<sup>14</sup> NAVCO 2.1 is different from these versions because it utilizes the "campaign-year" format and therefore does not treat campaigns as static events. This is a crucial distinction because nearly all foundational books and articles in the field that use NAVCO data rely on the fixed form of encoding. This has meant that much of the debate about social movements

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<sup>12</sup> Though NAVCO 2.1 contains more campaigns than prior versions, it still does not account for all of the campaigns Lehoucq identified as missing.

<sup>13</sup> A codebook offering a thorough breakdown of every factor and its methodology is available [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> The most up-to-date version of the NAVCO project can be found at this link:

<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/navco>

treats them statically and ignores how they escalated over time, how states adapted to counter them, or how shifts in tactics proved vital for success.

Before commencing an analysis of the NAVCO data, it is first necessary to discuss a potential bias in its creation. The NAVCO data project is led by Dr. Erica Chenoweth, who published a book, *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011), based on their own findings from the data. Funding for the book came from the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), which is an organization that has been entangled with CIA affiliates and was formerly chaired by a US Council of Foreign Relations board member.<sup>15</sup> Any scholar would be wise to be skeptical of the book's claim of political neutrality. Adding to this skepticism is that *Why Civil Resistance Works* does not just make the argument that nonviolence is an ethically superior method to violent protest, but that it enjoys a significantly higher success rate too.<sup>16</sup> This is where the unexplained exclusion of certain qualifying movements becomes additionally suspect, as Alexei Anisin conducted an independent analysis that included these previously excluded movements and found the percentage of successful nonviolent campaigns was lower than reported in *Why Civil Resistance Works*, and the percentage of successful violent campaigns was higher.<sup>17</sup>

This criticism stems from an important philosophical divide in the study of social movements: the difference between ethical nonviolence and pragmatic nonviolence. Ethical nonviolence is the

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<sup>15</sup> Gowans, Stephen. "The Revolution Will Not Be Assisted By The ICNC (The Counter-Revolution Is Another Matter)." *What's Left*, March 12, 2010. <https://gowans.blog/2010/03/12/the-revolution-will-not-be-assisted-by-the-icnc-the-counter-revolution-is-another-matter/>.

<sup>16</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, August 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Anisin, Alexei. "Debunking the Myths Behind Nonviolent Civil Resistance." *Critical Sociology* 46, nos. 7–8 (2020): 1, 38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520913982>.

doctrine preached by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. It is a doctrine grounded in religion, morality, and philosophy that often goes beyond social movements. It is as much a code to live by as it is one to organize under. But pragmatic nonviolence does not have these deep-seated roots; it instead utilizes nonviolence for tactical rather than moral reasons. And while nonviolent methods of resistance may often be the best choice for a social movement, the fact remains that there are clear situations when it simply is not. Falsely promoting nonviolence as the most effective strategy regardless of circumstance may actually damage social movements in the long run. In the words of Canadian political analyst Stephen Gowans in a response to Prof. Brian Martin,

The problem with pragmatic nonviolence is not that it is always ineffective, but that it is not unconditionally more effective than violence, as its promoters claim. It is easy to conceive of circumstances in which nonviolence is the method of choice, but equally easy to conceive of other circumstances in which nonviolence will fail miserably. The position of the ICNC [International Center on Nonviolent Conflict], AEI [Albert Einstein Institute] and Brian Martin is that nonviolence is always more effective than violence, a claim which, to throw Martin's words back at him, withers under scrutiny and lacks evidence.<sup>18</sup> The complaint against Martin and his fellow pragmatic nonviolence promoters,

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<sup>18</sup> The aptly-named ICNC and the misleadingly-named AEI are two organizations that study and promote strategic nonviolence in conflicts. They provide grants for many researchers in the field, meaning that some of the literature appears to be biased to support this conclusion, regardless of whether or not it is correct. The goal of these organizations may be quite noble, but they fail to account for what happens when peaceful protests are met with violent repression. It would be impossible to expect protestors to maintain a commitment to nonviolence while being massacred, yet these organizations insist that nonviolence is always the superior method of protest.

then, is that what they are promoting is a position that locks domestic activists into a nonviolence that is not always the best tactic for the circumstances at hand.<sup>19</sup>

History is riddled with examples of violent social movements that are near universally believed to be just: the Haitian Revolution, the French Resistance, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. These movements arose from situations where nonviolent resistance was impossible, and to contend otherwise would be asinine.

The argument in favor of pragmatic nonviolence also ignores the dark reality that even peaceful social movements can be met with violent responses. Not every regime is held accountable by its people, swayed by moral appeals, or deterred by international scrutiny. In these situations, a commitment to nonviolence has, on several occasions, resulted in massacres. To claim that nonviolence is always superior to violence risks exposing individuals to extreme harm and death, and to claim that a social movement should wait to be massacred before turning violent imposes an untenable moral and strategic standard on groups facing existential threats to their existence.

Scholarship on social movements has largely been structured around the violence–nonviolence dichotomy, which serves as the field’s dominant framework for evaluating movement strategy and effectiveness. Scholars even dispute whether individual movements were actually violent or nonviolent in practice, with some accusing the NAVCO data of being blatantly or negligently handled to perpetuate the argument that nonviolence is more effective than violence.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gowans, “The Revolution Will Not Be Assisted By The ICNC (The Counter-Revolution Is Another Matter).”

<sup>20</sup> Anisin, “Debunking the Myths Behind Nonviolent Civil Resistance,” 12.

But this is far from the only way to analyze social movements, and, as the next section will show, is quite a limiting and factitious lens to utilize. It completely ignores the vast majority of contributing factors, such as the goals of the movement, the degree of repression which they faced, or the type of government they opposed. As an example of this, Jeff Goodwin's study of revolutionary movements throughout history found that these movements fared much better against indiscriminately repressive "neopatrimonial or 'sultanistic' dictatorship[s]", but struggled against authoritative regimes that had some degree of electoral participation.<sup>21</sup> Goodwin also found that no movement—violent or nonviolent—had ever successfully overthrown a consolidated democratic regime.<sup>22</sup>

If outcomes depend more on contextual configurations, then social movements should be analyzed multidimensionally. Fortunately, the robustness of the NAVCO dataset makes this possible. The next section begins an analysis of the NAVCO data to understand what factors are most important in determining campaign success, whether these factors vary by time and place, and whether these factors are consistent across different types of movements (e.g. regime change vs territorial secession). However, it is crucial to refrain from drawing generalized, sweeping conclusions across different eras and regions, but understand that underlying patterns will demonstrate how movements successfully build power and are influential in determining their eventual success or failure. An algorithm, while insightful, cannot capture the complexities of these movements in real time. Individuals must act without perfect information given situational, emotional, and operational

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<sup>21</sup> Goodwin, Jeff. *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945 - 1991*. Reprinted. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003, 291-292.

<sup>22</sup> Goodwin, *No Other Way Out*, 300.

constraints, none of which can be properly labeled with a number. This analysis makes possible an understanding of maximalist movements, but it cannot be confused to be a perfect recipe for their success.

## Part 2: Analysis

From 1945 to 2013 there is data on 384 social movements broken into 2,717 campaign-years. Figure 1 displays the distribution of each of these campaign-years by maximalist goal. This chart makes clear that the dataset is heavily skewed, with 1,232 campaign-years corresponding to “regime change”

<b>Figure 1: Distribution of Campaign Goals</b>	
<b>Campaign Goal</b>	<b>Number of Campaign-Years in Data</b>
<b>Regime Change</b>	<b>1,232</b>
<b>Territorial Secession</b>	<b>796</b>
<b>Anti-Occupation</b>	<b>368</b>
<b>Greater Autonomy</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Policy Change</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Significant Institutional Reform</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Unknown/Unlabeled</b>	<b>4</b>

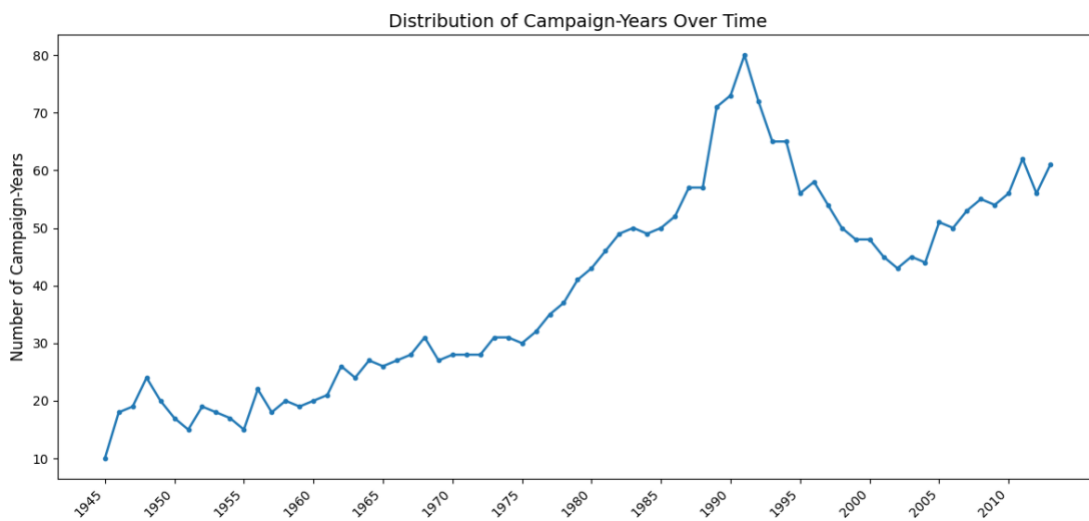
movements—by far the most common category—but only forty-four entries for “significant institutional reform” movements.

This distribution reflects historical reality: the post-WWII era witnessed decolonization of the world’s largest empires along with the USSR’s collapse in the 1990s. Regime change, territorial secession, and anti-occupation movements therefore featured in great quantities during this period.

When plotting the number of events per year on a map, it generally trends upward, with a massive spike peaking in 1991. This plot suggests that the number of campaigns has remained

relatively high in the twenty-first century, but this may actually be a temporal trick aided by technology; it is likelier that the number of events immediately following WWII was instead at a historic low as the world attempted to rebuild following the destruction. Perhaps if this chart began in the year 1900, this would be evident.

**Figure 2**



Additionally, the advent of modern technology, instantaneous communication, and real-time media coverage means that contemporary social movements have left a much larger footprint than their predecessors, making them much easier to research. As a result, modern movements may appear more numerous because those that occurred decades ago remain unknown and uncatalogued. Had comparable records been available, the upward trend seen in the graph may not have been as pronounced.

Geographically, the data represented in the sample is enormously diverse, coming from every corner of the earth. Even Tonga is represented through its pro-democracy protests in the early 2000s.

The map in Figure 3 was created from the data and displays the approximate locations of movements in the countries in which they occurred. Every single world region is represented to some degree,

**Figure 3**



though it is clear that former European colonies as well as former Soviet States are concentrated areas. This provides clear geographic evidence reinforcing the claim that a plurality of the social movements from this period came as a result of the collapse of the USSR and the end of imperialism.

The coloring of Figure 3 is also important, as it indicates the degree of repression used by the state against the social movement. Maroon corresponds to extreme repression, characterized in the dataset by “physical action exhibiting intent to kill and violently silence opponents; torture or severe violence (such as severe beatings), which could easily kill someone; [or] mass violence.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps what is most shocking is just how much maroon dominates the map. Of the 2,717 campaign-years in the data, 2,460 (90.5%) were met with some form of extreme repression.

<sup>23</sup> Chenoweth, “Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes”, 20.

It is sadly apparent that even the most democratic countries have still been willing to use the most extreme forms of repression on their citizens. This is doubly true when considering the role these countries played as colonizers of foreign states. The United Kingdom, for example, was the government targeted in eighty-nine entries. Sixty-nine of these campaign-years (77.5%) were met with the most ruthless form of repression. Similarly, France utilized the most extreme forms of repression in forty-nine of fifty-one (96%) entries.

It is impossible to justify these statistics, particularly in the cases of imperialism, but it is still relevant to note that not all movements were peaceful. This returns us to the paramount debate in current social movement studies: the efficacy of violence versus nonviolence. A surface level analysis appears to confirm the prevailing claim that nonviolent movements are more effective than their violent counterparts. Figure 4 details this numerically by comparing the progress made by a campaign within a year with its primary method of resistance. Nonviolence appears overwhelmingly more successful than violence. Even with significantly more violent campaigns in the dataset, this chart lays bare that a larger absolute number of nonviolent campaigns achieved complete success within a given year.

<b>Figure 4</b>	<b>No change in status quo</b>	<b>Visible gains of short concession</b>	<b>Limited concession achieved</b>	<b>Significant concession achieved</b>	<b>Complete success</b>	<b>Campaign ends in failure</b>
<b>Violent</b>	<b>1621</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Nonviolent</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>59</b>

Though Figure 4 lends credence to the certainty with which scholars have proclaimed the superiority of nonviolence as a strategy, that does not necessarily mean it applies universally. To illustrate this, let us look at Figure 5, which compares the primary method a campaign used in a campaign year with the level of progress witnessed. It cannot be said that nonviolence undisputedly outperforms violence in all scenarios. This ambiguity is even more pronounced in Figure 6, which further groups the data into primarily violent movements, primarily nonviolent movements without a violent flank, and primarily nonviolent movements with a violent flank. This graph complicates the claim that purely nonviolent movements are universally the most successful method. There are situations in which they in fact yield the most progress, but also situations in which they do not.

A more exhaustive breakdown of the data to identify the efficacy of incidental property damage, institutionalized non-lethal violence, ambivalent lethal violence given differing levels of repression, media coverage, campaign size, etc. is possible. But the results would show only that violence is not a unitary strategy. Indeed, violence often arises out of self-defense or fringe individuals as opposed to a deliberate, organized decision, and therefore categorizing campaigns as violent, purely nonviolent, or nonviolent with a violent wing risks misinterpreting the internal dynamics of the social movement.

Consider, for example, the US Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Though not a maximalist campaign,<sup>24</sup> the main contingent of this movement—under Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—was certainly a nonviolent movement. This group protested through bus boycotts, freedom rides, sit

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<sup>24</sup> Recall that “maximalist” refers to overthrowing an existing regime, expelling foreign occupiers, or achieving self-determination in some way.

ins, and peaceful marches. Yet Dr. King was joined by other sects such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers, two groups that *did* resort to violence in the fight for racial equality. To consider the Civil Rights movement a completely nonviolent movement, or to label these other groups as merely “flanks” of the main organization, risks erasing from history the tangible contributions of these groups.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the enduring emphasis on the violence–nonviolence binary obscures more than it clarifies. While nonviolent movements often achieve notable successes, their effectiveness is neither universal nor independent of context. Treating violence and nonviolence as mutually exclusive strategies flattens the internal dynamics of movements and overlooks how tactics evolve in response to state behavior, media environments, and strategic constraints. Rather than asking whether nonviolence is categorically superior to violence, scholars would be better served by examining how different forms of contention interact within broader movement ecosystems to shape outcomes over time. Reframing the debate in this way not only yields a more accurate understanding of historical movements but also carries significant implications for how contemporary movements assess risk, legitimacy, and strategic choice under conditions of extreme repression.

Figure 5

Campaign Progress by Goal Type: Violent vs Nonviolent Methods

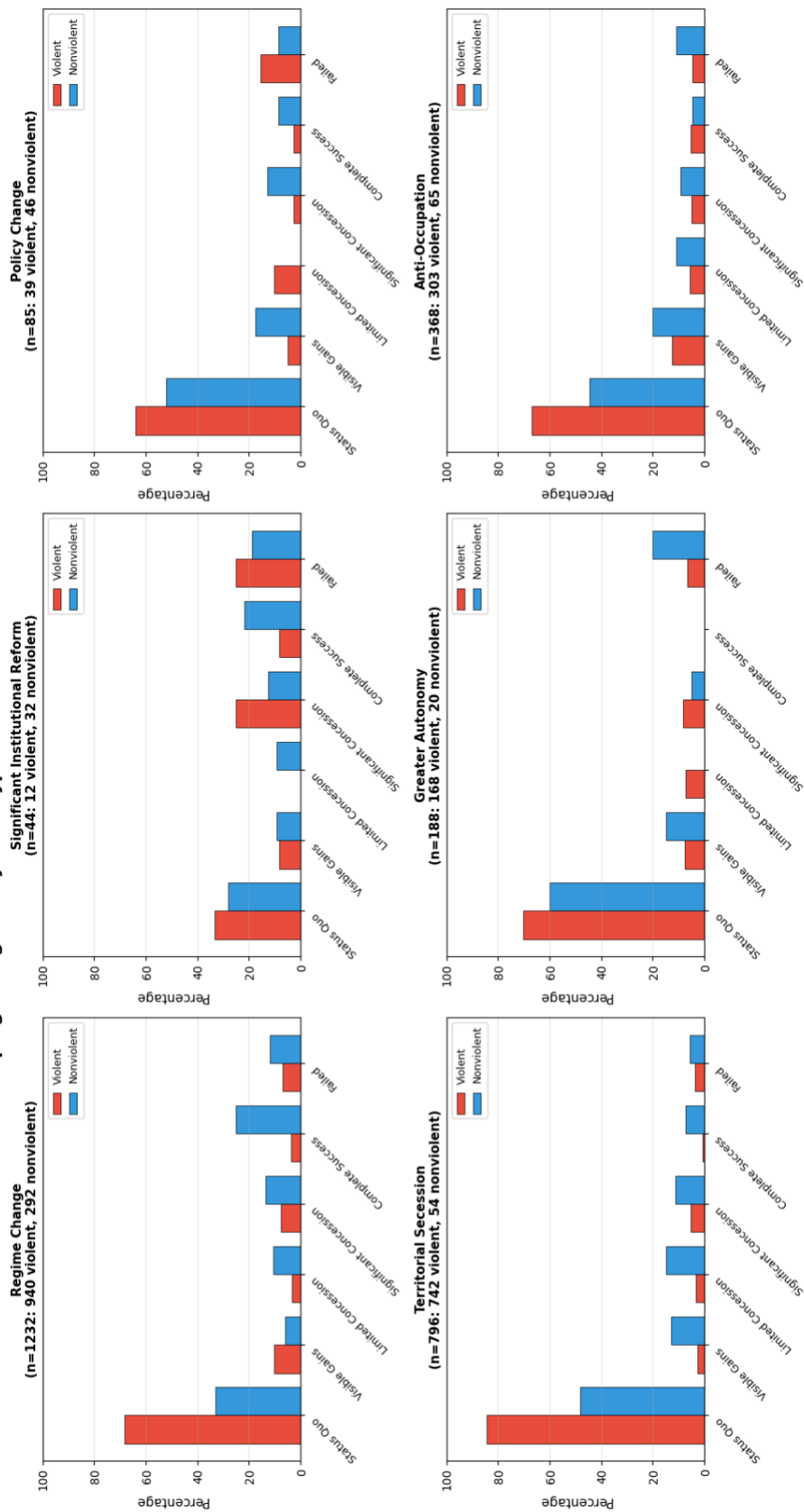
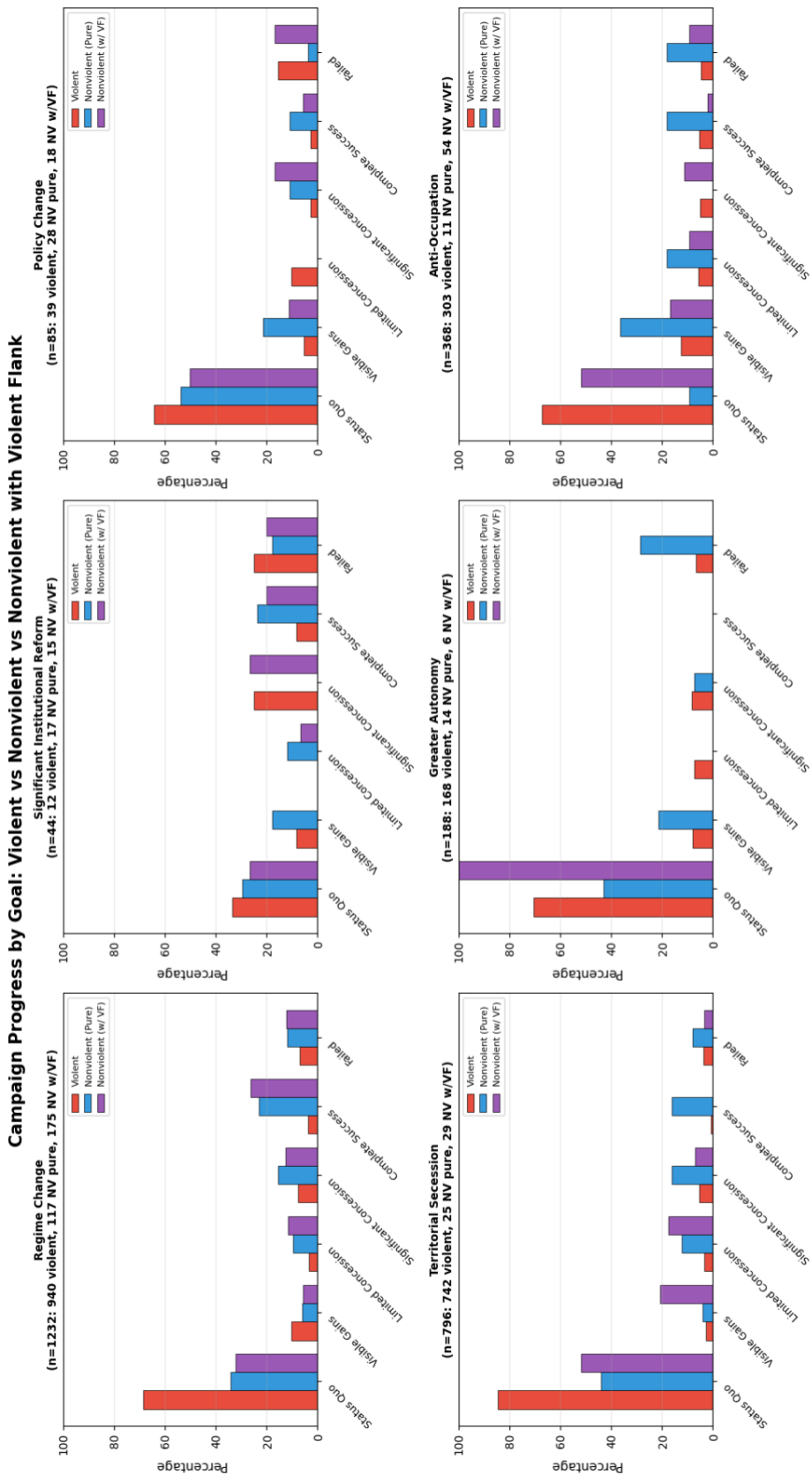


Figure 6



### Part 3: Analyzing Campaigns by Country

Instead of analyzing movements purely from the amount of violence they inflicted, let us consider alternative frameworks with which to use. In his aforementioned analysis of revolutions, Goodwin emphasizes a state-focused approach. Goodwin's overarching argument is that revolutions occur when there is "no other way out," when it is impossible to fight repression in any other way.<sup>25</sup>

But he also acknowledges the limitations of this approach:

In fact, the revolutionary movements of the Cold War era do not fit easily into a single mold. These movements had rather different social bases or constituencies, that held distinctive cultural beliefs; their leaders adhered to different ideologies (even the Marxists seldom shared the same Marxism); they pursued different strategies and employed different tactics; they faced different enemies, including differently organized states and regimes; and, as we have seen, they had quite different political fortunes. There were, in short, multiple paths to the formation of revolutionary movements and to actual revolutions during the Cold War era, including many cul-de-sacs.<sup>26</sup>

While understanding these limitations, it is possible to attempt an original country-specific analysis. The most prevalent countries in the dataset are the United Kingdom, Russia, and France. This is highly reflective of the post-WWII period with the dissolving of empires and the Soviet Union. Over 120 countries are included in total, which shows that most parts of the globe dealt with some sort of

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<sup>25</sup> Goodwin, *No Other Way Out*, 289.

<sup>26</sup> Goodwin, *No Other Way Out*, 290.

major social movement in the last seventy years. But when attempting to compare countries with successful movements, no immediate pattern emerges. Figure 7 shows the ten countries with the highest campaign success rate given a minimum of three campaigns.<sup>27</sup>

<b>Figure 7</b>					
<b>Target Country</b>	<b>Success Rate (%)</b>	<b>Successful Campaigns</b>	<b>Total Campaigns</b>	<b>Nonviolent Campaigns</b>	<b>Percentage Nonviolent</b>
<b>Afghanistan</b>	<b>100.000</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.000</b>
<b>Zambia</b>	<b>100.000</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>100.000</b>
<b>Madagascar</b>	<b>100.000</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>100.000</b>
<b>Nepal</b>	<b>100.000</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>75.000</b>
<b>Bolivia</b>	<b>80.000</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>60.000</b>
<b>France</b>	<b>77.778</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>33.333</b>
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>75.000</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>100.000</b>
<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>75.000</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>50.000</b>
<b>Argentina</b>	<b>75.000</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>50.000</b>
<b>Thailand</b>	<b>71.429</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>85.714</b>

It might be tempting to hypothesize a relationship between former colonies and success, but that argument quickly falls apart. The countries with the lowest success rates include Togo, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka, and India, all of which were once European colonies. But that does not mean that this country-specific approach is worthless. In fact, it speaks to the

<sup>27</sup> This chart only considered campaigns that had concluded by 2017, the last year available in the study. This is reflected in the data with the “status” variable, which identifies whether campaigns were ongoing or had concluded.

durability of movements even after repression. This dataset includes seven Iraqi movements, all of which were violent, none of which were successful. Three of these movements related to Kurdish claims at greater autonomy. Though each movement was violently crushed, resolve never withered. Today,<sup>28</sup> Kurdistan is a semi-autonomous region of northern Iraq with its own parliament and prime minister.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, campaign frequency reflects not opportunity for success, but the durability of grievances and the inability of political institutions to resolve them.

<b>Figure 8</b>					
<b>Country</b>	<b>Success Rate (%)</b>	<b>Successful Campaigns</b>	<b>Total Campaigns</b>	<b>Nonviolent Campaigns</b>	<b>% Nonviolent</b>
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>18.182</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>54.545</b>
<b>Russia</b>	<b>36.364</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>45.455</b>
<b>France</b>	<b>77.778</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>33.333</b>
<b>Pakistan</b>	<b>25.000</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>62.500</b>
<b>China</b>	<b>12.500</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>50.000</b>
<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>42.857</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>28.571</b>
<b>Thailand</b>	<b>71.429</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>85.714</b>
<b>Lebanon</b>	<b>42.857</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>28.571</b>
<b>D.R.C.</b>	<b>16.667</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.000</b>

<sup>28</sup> This development occurred after 2017, which is why it is not featured in the dataset.

<sup>29</sup> Freedom House. 2025. *Freedom in the World 2025: Iraq*. Freedom House.

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-world/2025>.

This is not an attempt to claim that Iraq or the Kurdistan regime is a free democratic state, as the reality is quite the opposite. Kurdistan also faces a variety of challenges to its autonomy, and its duration as a semi-autonomous state is not guaranteed.

As Figure 8 shows, countries with many campaigns directed towards them were often imperial powers, ruthlessly suppressed movements, or both. But repressive victory is only temporary. It may dismantle organizational structures, imprison leaders, and drive movements underground, but it does not quell the grievances that caused them. In this sense, repression can interrupt mobilization without eliminating its causes, producing periods of apparent quiescence that mask unresolved political conflict. The recurrence of movements over time thus reflects not strategic irrationality, but the durability of collective claims in contexts where institutional channels for redress remain blocked.

While this insight highlights the tenacity of social movements, it reveals little else about their dynamics. It is not easy to decipher how different components of movements influence and interact with each other, or which factors contribute—or inhibit—progress over time. In order to understand these relationships, it is vital to conduct a detailed statistical examination of the NAVCO data and employ advanced methodology to uncover underlying patterns.

#### Part 4: Advanced Analysis

The goal now is to determine what tools available to movements are the most important to ensuring their success. How important are traditional media institutions? Do international sanctions work? Is seeking progress through the judicial system effective? It is possible to answer all these questions through detailed analysis using machine learning techniques.

Before beginning, it is useful to briefly define the techniques and their purpose in this paper. This analysis employs Random Forest algorithms, which works much like a flowchart, breaking down data into groups with a series of “yes or no” decisions. But instead of doing this just once, it creates multiple trees, each of which begin at different points in the data and is therefore different from the others. The trees work together, and any predictions made by the model represent what most of the trees agree upon. Much of the literature on this subject, by contrast, utilizes logistic regression, which is a method to determine how likely an event is to occur given other variables. It predicts values as falling between zero and one, so it can be easily converted to a percentage, though it only predicts binary outcomes.

There are several drawbacks of logistic regression algorithms—namely that they require homoskedasticity, linearity,<sup>30</sup> normality, and lack of multicollinearity—that cannot safely be made with this data, and are likely not true in general.<sup>31</sup> In particular, they require a linear relationship between

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<sup>30</sup> A statistician may complain about this wording since logistic regression *technically* only requires linearity concerning the log-odds of the dependent variable, but some pedantry is inevitable when statisticians are involved.

<sup>31</sup> This is a rather fancy way of saying that the data needs to have a straight-line relationship, it needs to be relatively consistent in its pattern, and our explanatory variables cannot be strongly related to each other.

the independent and dependent variable. This means that any complex relationship—be it exponential, quadratic, or logarithmic, is obscured. For logistic regression, the data must fit a neat line.

This is not the case for a Random Forest algorithm, as it can adapt to any underlying structure in the data. This means that regardless of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, a Random Forest algorithm can find it. Additionally, it also does not suffer from other mathematical constraints, making it much more adaptable to the data, regardless of its underlying conditions.

Having created a Random Forest model, there are two ways to assess feature importance. The first is a permutation technique that measures how much the model's accuracy decreases when a given feature is randomized. The more important a feature, the more the model's accuracy should diminish by randomly changing it. To understand the relationship between each feature and the target variable, it is possible to graph the feature's SHAP value to better understand its influence. This provides a measure of how a given feature impacts a prediction: whether it pushes it towards success or failure, and how much influence it bears. By ranking variables by their SHAP value, it is possible to see which factors are most important to the model, and how they influence its decision making.

Having outlined the methodology, it is now time to assess the results. Doing this gives us several rather obvious conclusions. According to this analysis, the single most telling variable when determining campaign success is how the campaign responds to state repression. If the campaign demonstrates resilience to the repression, the movement has a very high chance of succeeding. But if the repression succeeds in crushing it, then it is suppressed. This is, of course, joined by the equally

obvious conclusions that campaigns that last longer and mobilize more people are more likely to succeed.

But moving past the blatantly obvious conclusions, diversity appears as highly influential. Ethnic, class, and religious diversity make up three of the eight most important factors. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan also identified this in their analysis. Campaigns with diverse populations tend to both be larger—which helps them succeed—but also harder to repress. “The more diverse the participation in the resistance—in terms of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, ideology, profession, and socioeconomic status—the more difficult it is for the adversary to isolate the participants and adopt a repressive strategy short of maximal and indiscriminate repression.”<sup>32</sup> This is especially interesting because diversity is slightly correlated with infighting amongst the opposition groups, but clearly not to such an extent that it actually harms campaign success. Diversity is also significantly correlated with both increased domestic and international media coverage, making it an exceptionally powerful tool for campaigns. Taken together, these results suggest that diversity’s net effect is to strengthen campaigns by broadening participation, limiting the state’s ability to effectively repress, and attracting increased domestic and international coverage of the movement.

### **Breaking Down Campaigns by Goal**

While these results both confirm prior work in the field as well as common-sense reasoning of the situation, the reality is that not all movements are equal. For instance, the goals of social

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<sup>32</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 32.

movements are often viewed as being collective goods, to borrow from economics.<sup>33</sup> Yet this would seem to mean that every person, acting in their own best interest, would stay at home and let someone else do the protesting, as this spares them the time and effort but also shields them from potential harm. It follows that many social movements are desperate for members in an attempt to assemble the largest coalition to achieve their goal. And in many cases, this is true. This is often referred to as the “collective action problem,” and is a very big issue campaigns must grapple with.<sup>34</sup>

But in revolutions and civil wars, the collective action problem is not a factor. In fact, in many kinds of violent movements, being a civilian is more dangerous than fighting for either (or depending on the nature of the conflict, any) side.<sup>35</sup> Revolutionary movements offer protection, shelter, and food, all three of which may be in short supply during a war. Because of this fact, revolutionary movements may not have any difficulties recruiting members as they offer a sort of safe haven from terror.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, they may not *want* to recruit new members for fear of spreading their resources too thin. It is thus worth questioning what relationship movement size has with success, and whether it varies based on the type of movement.

Returning to the dataset, it seems likely that different types of movements experience different challenges. Treating them all the same obscures the nuances that may emerge from campaigns with

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<sup>33</sup> An obvious example of this principle is that one person’s enjoyment of the rule of law does not in any way limit another person’s same enjoyment of the rule of law.

<sup>34</sup> See Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Gordon Tullock, “The Paradox of Revolution,” *Public Choice* 11 (September 1971).

<sup>35</sup> Kalyvas, Stathis N., and Matthew Adam Kocher. “How “free” is free riding in civil wars?: Violence, insurgency, and the collective action problem.” *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (2007): 209.

<sup>36</sup> This is particularly the case when violence by the state is indiscriminate, as it is in 60% of the campaign-years in the NAVCO data.

fundamentally different objectives or that operate in different technological and informational environments. To address this, it is worth disaggregating campaigns based on their primary goals to analyze how predictors vary across movement types and then analyzing the data temporally to determine if any key shifts have occurred over the past seventy years.

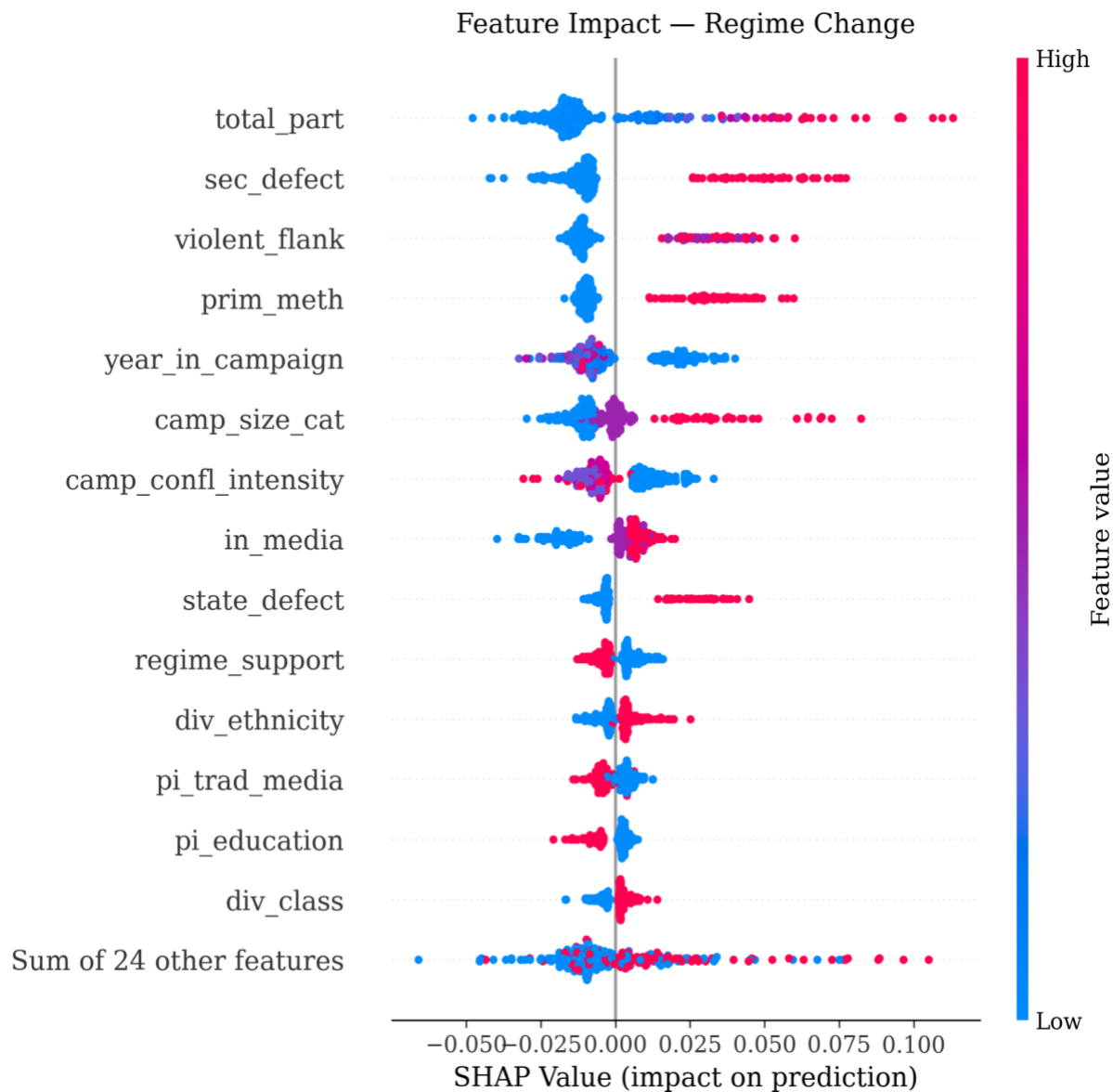
### **Regime Change Campaigns**

The figure below displays the SHAP values of a Random Forest algorithm with progress being the target variable. The features are ranked from most influential to least influential. Each dot represents one campaign-year, and its position on the x-axis represents the direction and magnitude of its effect. The further a dot is to the right, the more the model believes it contributed to progress, while the further left, the more it detracted from progress. Additionally, the dot's color reflects the actual value of the feature in the given campaign-year, with red corresponding to higher values and blue to lower values.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Many features in the dataset are binary, where red corresponds to the feature being present, and blue indicates absence. For nonbinary features such as `camp_duration`, the features are colored along a blue-red spectrum visible on the right side of the figure.

Figure 9



This chart confirms many conclusions that seem self-evident, but it does provide rather interesting insights of its own. For example, the `pi_trad_media` encoding is very interesting. This feature corresponds to a movement publishing its own newspaper, radio broadcast, or television channel, but the presence of these things seems to actually *not* be beneficial to progress. The model suggests that they are a waste of effort and resources. To add to the complexity, it appears that the

presence of international media coverage (in\_media) does have a significant relationship with movement progress. Taken together, it would suggest that a campaign should not spend its resources printing newspapers or broadcasting radio or news channels, but instead court international media coverage of the event.

This chart also suggests that nonviolence is the superior tactical choice for movements of this variety, as they appear to be vastly better at extracting progress. But while nonviolence as the primary method is related to progress, having a violent flank is as well. This may seem contradictory, but it is consistent with the literature of the field.<sup>38</sup> Much of the violence perpetrated by a violent flank, as it is encoded in the NAVCO data, is unarmed and reactive.<sup>39</sup> It comes from individuals throwing rocks at security forces after being attacked with tear gas and rubber bullets. It is desperation, not terrorism. And that fact is what gives these moments so much power. They call attention to the campaign and force society to reflect on its cruelty. They are an indefensible indictment of the regime. They are the moments that live in history and ultimately lead to change.

To illustrate that point, another analysis can be done, this time with the target variable being success. Figure 10 reflects this change. Each dot in this graph represents the final year of a regime change campaign. This figure looks similar to the one above, but it is very interesting to compare the two. For instance, the vast majority of campaigns that achieve total success do so very quickly, as all the moderate and high values of camp\_duration are left of zero in the graph. Another element of note is

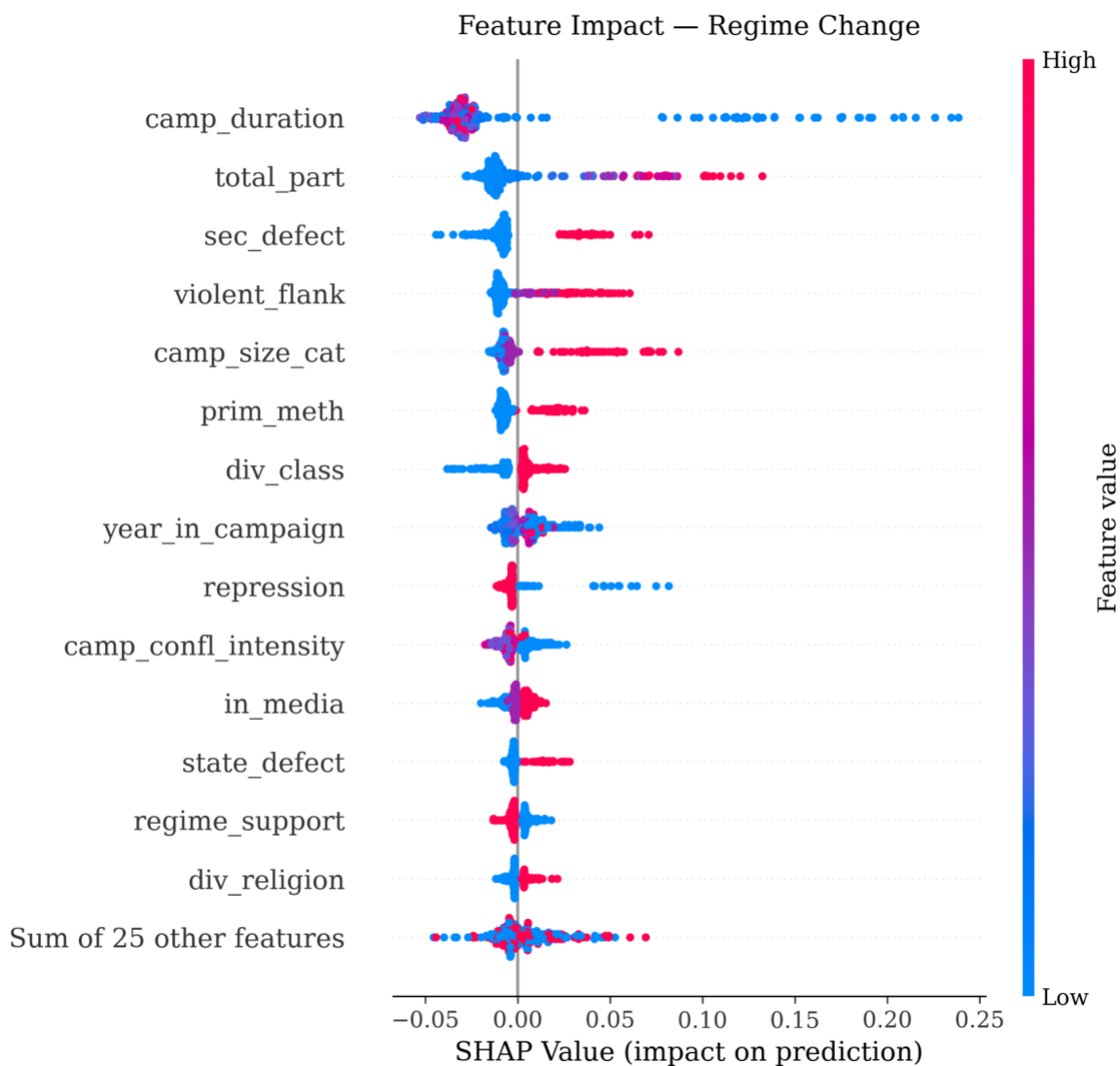
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<sup>38</sup> Anisin, Alexei. "Debunking the Myths Behind Nonviolent Civil Resistance." *Critical Sociology* 46, nos. 7–8 (2020): 1122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520913982>.

<sup>39</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. "Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1." *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 15. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

the role that security forces play. On both charts, security force defections, represented by `sec_defect`, have been one of the most consequential variables. When it occurs, both progress and success follow. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that if the security forces abandon the regime, it will fall. But what causes these defections, and should movements pursue this tactically?

**Figure 10**



These are difficult questions to answer from statistics alone, and is the topic of an entire field of research in peace studies. To add to the complexity, there are even differing manners in which security forces can officially defect. The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) identifies four different methods: “by following orders inefficiently, disobeying them altogether, demanding the dictator step down, or joining the opposition.”<sup>40</sup>

Whether or not violence leads to security force defections remains an open question. The following chart breaks down defections by the level of violence observed by the campaign. Though it appears that violent movements have the advantage in this metric, this may just be due to the fact that so many of the campaigns in the dataset were primarily violent (recall Figure 4).

Another aspect to consider, however, is whether or not security force defections are beneficial to the movements in the long term. The military may oust an autocratic regime, thereby achieving the goals of the movement, only to seize power for themselves in a dictatorship. Research actually suggests that security defections, though initially hugely helpful in instituting regime change, negatively influence the new regime’s degree of democracy.<sup>41</sup> This principle holds true whether the regime change occurred because the military directly overthrew the incumbent regime or negotiated a transition

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<sup>40</sup> “Explaining Military Coups and Defections—and What Activists Can Do With This Knowledge.” *CNCR*, n.d. Accessed February 23, 2026. [https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog\\_post/explaining-military-coups-and-defections-and-what-activists-can-do-with-this-knowledge/](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/explaining-military-coups-and-defections-and-what-activists-can-do-with-this-knowledge/).

<sup>41</sup> Rasler, Karen, William R. Thompson, and Hicham Bou Nassif. “The Extent of Military Involvement in Nonviolent, Civilian Revolts and Their Aftermath.” In *History & Mathematics: Political, Demographic, and Environmental Dimensions*, by Andrey Korotayev. Edited by Leonid Grinin. Uchitel’ Publishing House, 2024, 118. [https://doi.org/10.30884/978-5-7057-6354-2\\_05](https://doi.org/10.30884/978-5-7057-6354-2_05).

between regimes. Crucially, much of this backsliding happens years after the initial transfer of power, long after civilian mobilization has subsided.

<b>Figure 11</b>		
<b>Method</b>	<b>No Security Force Defection (%)</b>	<b>Security Force Defection (%)</b>
<b>Primarily Nonviolent with Violent Flank</b>	<b>63.8</b>	<b>36.4</b>
<b>Nonviolent without Violent Flank</b>	<b>65.8</b>	<b>34.2</b>
<b>Primarily Violent</b>	<b>52.7</b>	<b>47.3</b>

Taken as a whole, it is clear that security forces play a highly influential role in regime changes. But while a campaign may certainly want to gain the support of the military, it cannot risk becoming beholden to it. Ultimately, it must be civilians that lead the charge for change, or else it is highly likely that one dictator will be replaced by another. The second usurpation may not be immediate, and it may not be overt. But as political mobilization dies down and international attention turns elsewhere, the military may use its monopoly over force to dominate the political sphere, and years of brutal fighting could be all for naught.

### **Anti-Occupation**

Anti-Occupation campaigns differ substantially from regime change campaigns in that the individuals protesting often live in a separate place from the government they hope to impact. As such,

there are often geographical, religious, ethnic, racial, and linguistic differences between those pushing for change and those resisting it. These elements provide structural barriers less pronounced in domestic regime change campaigns that make it far more difficult to appeal to a shared sense of nationality, popular sovereignty, or moral obligation with those in power. The differences between the two groups also, unfortunately, often means a lack of empathy, as it is easier for the foreign occupier to justify atrocities on the local population, making anti-occupation campaigns especially brutal.

When compared to regime change campaigns, the role of security forces is entirely different, serving as the main oppressors of a foreign power. There is no desire to “flip” the allegiance of the security forces, but to instead expel them from the country altogether. Given the differences in power, this can be a rather difficult goal to accomplish.

In the NAVCO dataset, the vast majority of the anti occupation campaigns were protesting colonial powers, in particular France, the United Kingdom, and the USSR. One interesting phenomenon this caused was that a protest arising in one country very often sparked another movement against the same colonial power in a different country. This process of diffusion is not exclusive to anti-occupation protests but it is most visible here. About 25% of the campaigns of this category arose because another anti-occupation movement sprung up within 2000 km of it. This means that many of these movements directly influenced each other, and for the colonial powers, these were regional conflicts, not isolated incidents. As such, developments in one colony almost certainly affected expectations and strategies deployed in another, as the two movements evolved together.

Figure 12

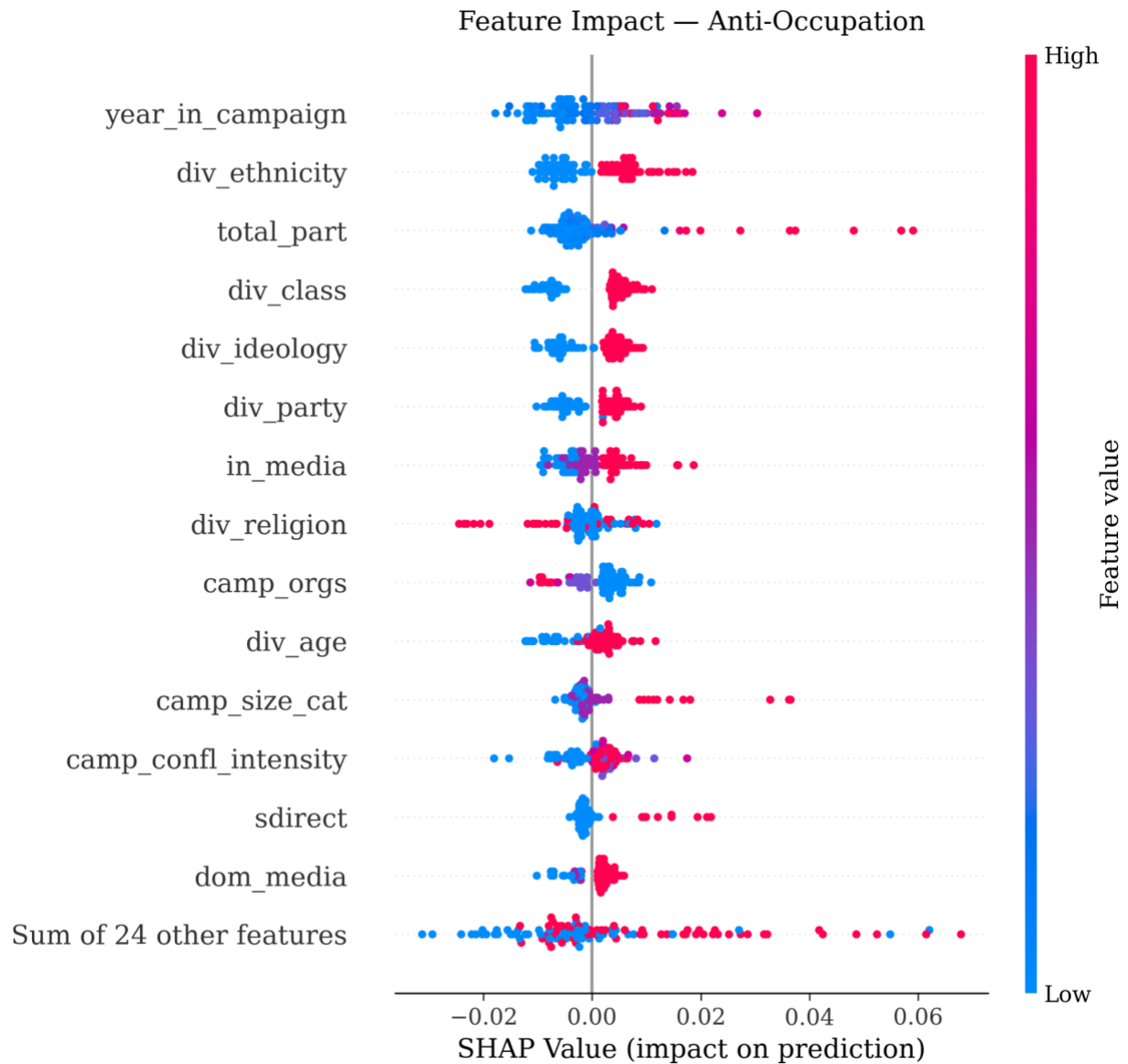


Figure 12 displays the results of a Random Forest algorithm on the anti-occupation campaigns with progress as the target variable. This chart provides extraordinary insight into the functioning of these campaigns and clearly distinguishes them as unique. Of the ten most important features listed above, six of them are concerned with the movement establishing a large coalition along different metrics of diversity, specifically amongst different generations, religions, ethnicities, classes, ideologies

and political parties. Adding to all of these metrics is that the total number of participants is hugely important as well.

In order to achieve such a broad constituency, anti-occupation campaigns rely heavily on the media to spread their message both domestically and internationally. This might be especially difficult, as the established domestic media is likely to be affiliated with the state and therefore hostile to the growing campaign. But beyond this, international media coverage is the key to success. One of the biggest problems for anti-occupation campaigns specifically is that the target audience they truly need to persuade lives abroad. Many of the campaigns in this sample occurred in parts of Africa and Asia, but the real power to end the occupation was overseas in France and the United Kingdom. As a result, anti-occupation movements face the dual challenge of overcoming domestic media hostility while attempting to project their grievances across international boundaries to audiences that are geographically distant, politically insulated, and often only weakly attentive to the costs of the occupation.

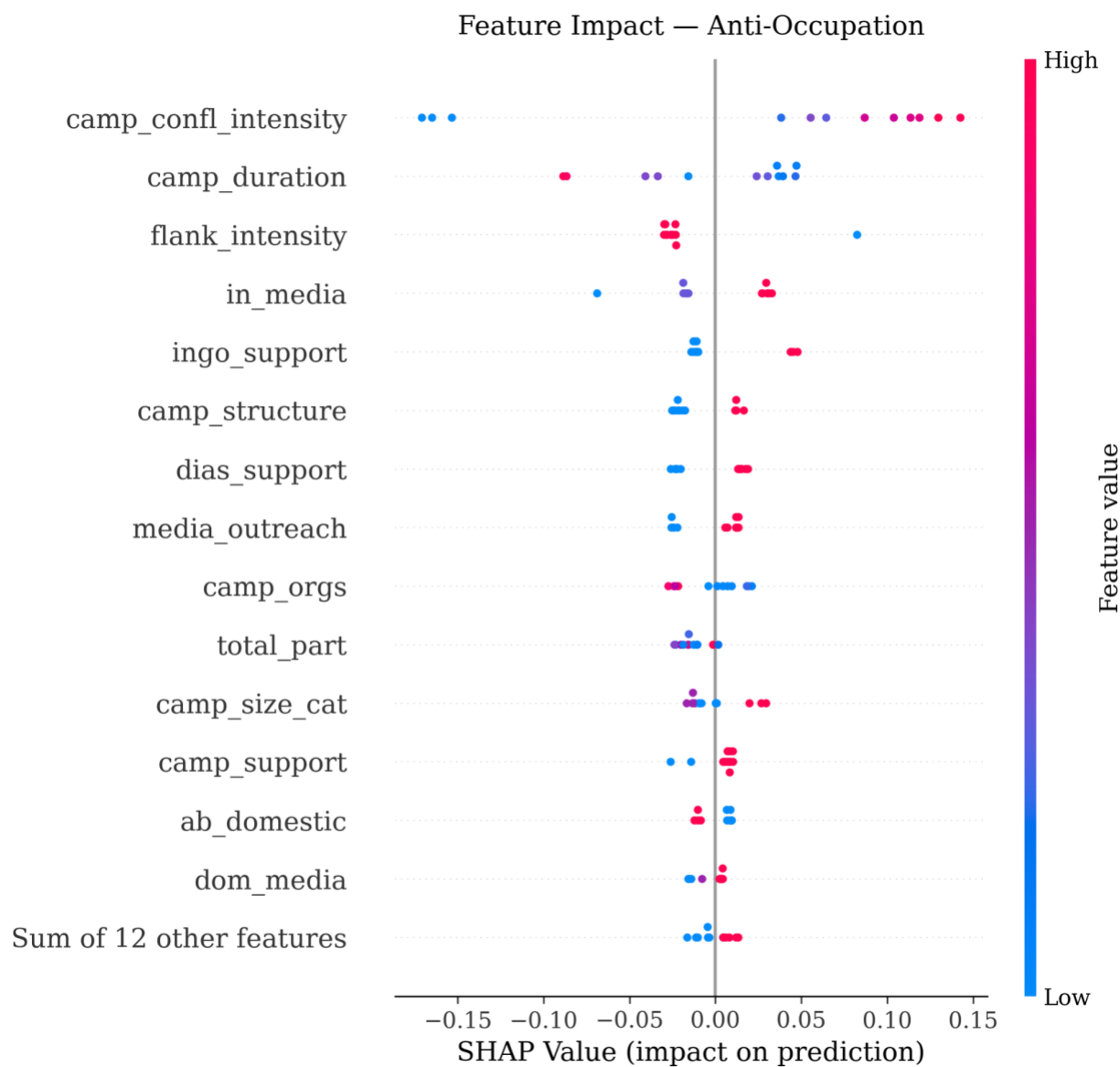
This is perhaps why the *sdirect* variable ends up being relatively important. The red dots on the chart in this category refer to international sanctions being placed on the regime for their actions against the social movement.<sup>42</sup> Though it may be hard to persuade an imperial nation of its moral failures, economically punishing it provides a different avenue of influence. Sanctions may make it economically untenable to continue the occupation or directly affect the political and economic elites who wield the power to stop it, rendering them a fantastic tool. The one caveat, however, is that the

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<sup>42</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. "Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1." *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 12. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

campaign cannot directly impose sanctions and must rely on a different foreign nation to champion their cause.

**Figure 13**



When adjusting the target variable to success, many of the findings from the prior figure remain the same. The international nature of the anti-occupation movements is further emphasized as the role of international media remains prominent, and support from international NGOs, diaspora

communities, and even other states is also highlighted.<sup>43</sup> This analysis also suggests that nonviolent movements tend to be more successful, as lower values of `flank_intensity` are associated with success.

Much of the rest of this chart is a confirmation of basic intuition: larger campaigns fare better, organized campaigns are more effective, and media attention is important. But the most influential variable on this chart, `camp_confl_intensity`, appears in a shocking way. In this case, this variable encodes the degree of unity amongst different groups working to end the occupation. The variable ranges in value from “seemingly united” to “active competition among groups with violence.”<sup>44</sup> Shockingly, the results of this analysis suggest that high degrees of competition are strongly related to success.

It is important to recall that anti-occupation movements need large, diverse coalitions in order to make meaningful progress. This diversity across ethnic, generational, ideological, and religious grounds means that there is naturally going to be some disagreement between the groups over what the country should look like after the occupying power is expelled. In the final year of the campaign when it is becoming clear that success is in reach, it is only natural that these tensions would increase. The groups are not just fighting against the occupying force, but also jostling against one another for primacy to fill the power vacuum. This is why it can be true that these groups engage in violent infighting while otherwise protesting relatively peacefully. To see that `camp_confl_intensity` is so high shows that it is strongly correlated with success, but it certainly is not a cause of success. In order to

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<sup>43</sup> Diaspora communities refers to individuals who share cultural ties to the occupied region but live abroad in a foreign country. The `camp_support` variable refers to foreign states officially supporting the campaign through some means.

<sup>44</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. “Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1.” *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 15. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

actually make the necessary progress to achieve success, it is still necessary for these groups to focus their attention on the larger goal of the movement and their common foe.

### **Territorial Secession**

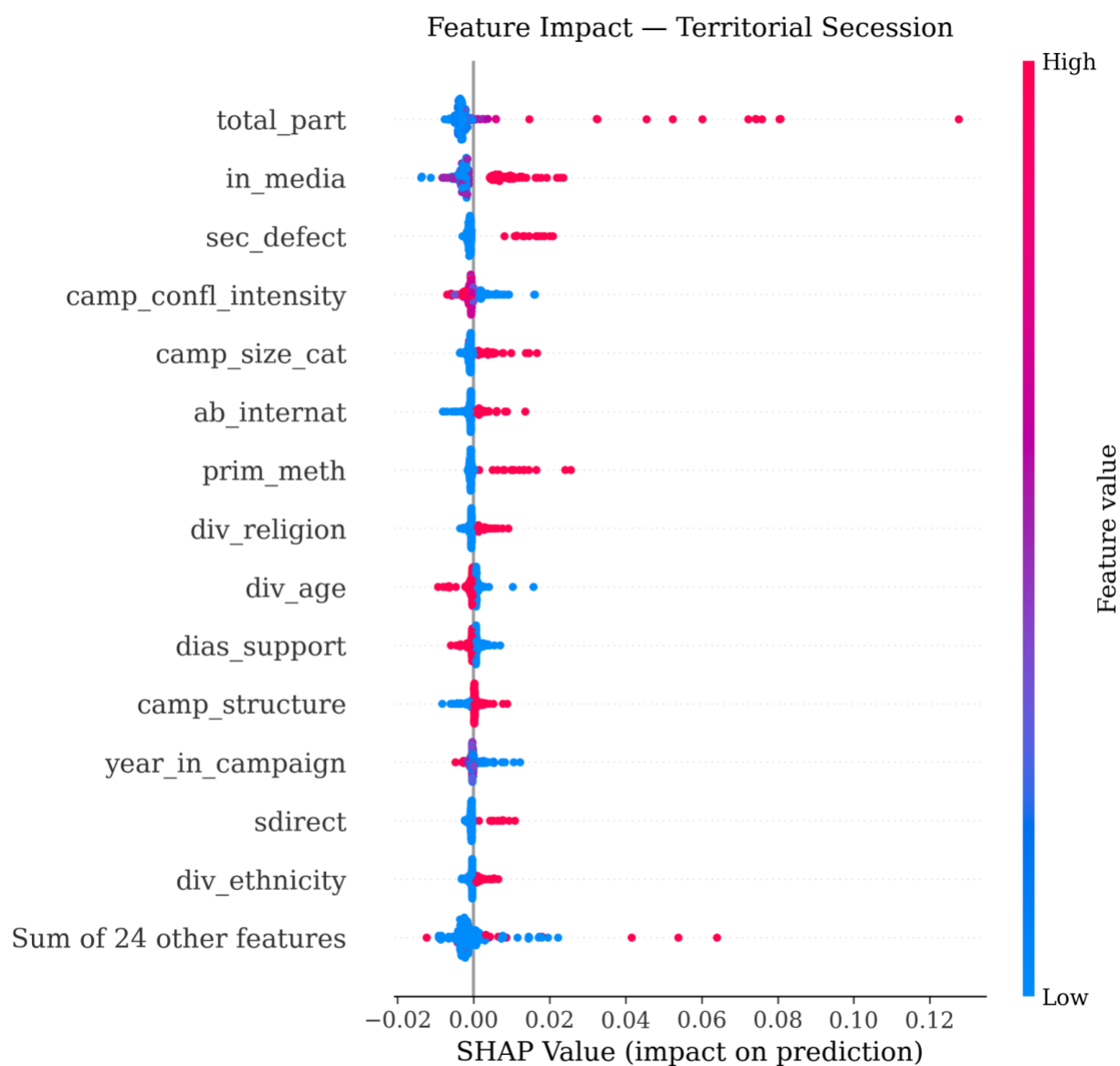
On the surface, territorial secession campaigns have quite a bit in common with their anti-occupation counterparts. In the NAVCO dataset, the distinction drawn between the two in the data is that anti-occupation movements are against a “foreign power” while territorial secession movements are not. However, this ends up being a rather arbitrary line to draw, as many territorial secession campaigns certainly frame themselves as quests for independence.<sup>45</sup> The Troubles, the conflict over Northern Ireland which is explored more in the next chapter, is coded as being a territorial secession campaign, but the individuals fighting against the British in that campaign considered themselves to be a colonized people with a different language, religion, and ethnic background. The entire dispute centered around British authority over Northern Ireland in the first place, and so labeling the movement a “secession” is an oversimplification that inherently recognizes the legal authority of one side over the other, even though the disagreement over this fact is the very issue at question.

Knowing that territorial secession movements bear many similarities to anti-occupation ones, it is easy to suspect that the two will have many of the same influential features. Looking at Figure 14, there is some evidence of this.

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<sup>45</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. “Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1.” *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 18. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

Figure 14



This chart demonstrates that the single most important factor for territorial secession campaigns is their size, with an effect so great that it seems to dwarf everything else. This chart seems to state very clearly that mass mobilization is the most important factor in determining whether or not territorial secession campaigns progress. Not only is their total participation important, but so is their perceived diversity across religious and ethnic lines. The chart also showcases the importance of the

international community in territorial disputes. The second most consequential feature is international media attention, and two more factors—*ab\_internat* and *sdirect*—are directly related to international support. All three of these factors certainly work in tandem with each other.

International media attention alerts the rest of the world to the cause, specifically focusing on the harsh repression of the campaign. This leads to international condemnation of the issue—which is what *ab\_internat* encodes—followed by formal sanctions being placed on those in power—which is what *sdirect* represents. In order to have these sanctions lifted, the government in question must make some concessions to the movement, which corresponds to measurable progress.

Nonviolence as the primary method of protest is also correlated with progress, as are security force defections. This adds evidence to the idea that nonviolent movements are better at securing security force defections, a result previously identified in regime change movements. But when considered in relation to international attention, these results may have a much darker interpretation. What really drives progress for these movements is an international outcry at the repression faced by peaceful protesters. Violent attacks against peaceful protesters sparks international outrage, which manifests in condemnation and pressure on the regime. Only in an effort to eliminate sanctions and quell this uproar will the regime willingly offer concessions. This effect is truly what drives progress, but it requires large groups of people to violently suffer for a cause, perhaps even sacrificing their lives. There is no guarantee that the movement even survives this level of repression, as all of its supporters are either too frightened to promote the cause or worse.

Additionally, this cycle relies on the international community being able to effectively pressure the target country into submission, which is also far from assured. Economic sanctions can have

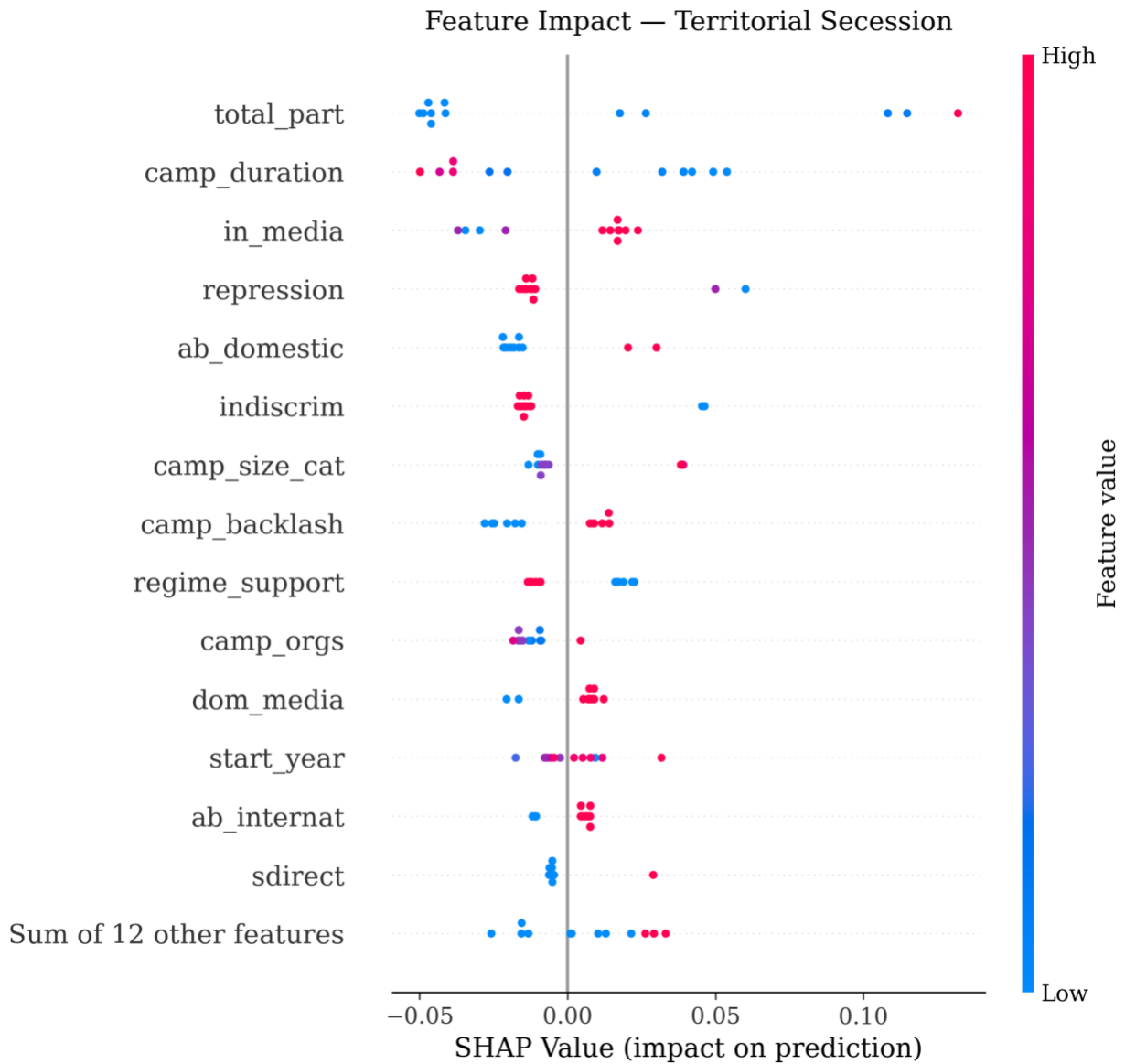
adverse results, hurting the target country's most vulnerable rather than its most culpable.<sup>46</sup> This could result in hurting the very people the international community wishes to help. Even when applied correctly, sanctions may struggle to coerce change from autocratic regimes, and oftentimes can be used for spreading nationalist propaganda instead, which would hurt the credibility of any region attempting to secede.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Choonara, Imti, Maurizio Bonati, and Paul Jonas. "Economic Sanctions on Countries Are Indiscriminate Weapons and Should Be Banned." *BMJ Paediatrics Open* 5, no. 1 (2021): e001350. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2021-001350>.

<sup>47</sup> Peksen, Dursun. "Autocracies and Economic Sanctions: The Divergent Impact of Authoritarian Regime Type on Sanctions Success." *Defence and Peace Economics* 30, no. 3 (2019): 253–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2017.1368258>.

Figure 15



This is not to say that international pressure on countries never works. It certainly can, which is why the effectiveness of sanctions has already shown itself several times in the above figures.

Sanctions against the companies and individuals who support the regime can be particularly effective at inducing pressure. But they are not a surefire mechanism at influencing a foreign government, and they should not be the only strategy the protesting group relies upon.

Figure 15 shows the results of the analysis when the target variable is changed to success. Unsurprisingly, total participation remains paramount, and the effectiveness of international pressure remains. In addition to international media attention, condemnation, and sanctions, a lack of formal support for the regime from other countries also appears as an influential variable, providing yet another metric by which the international community can effectively influence territorial secession campaigns. But domestic backlash and media coverage also emerge as two more factors of importance, indicating that consolidating domestic support is incredibly useful. This support appears to manifest in pressure against the regime by limiting the violence used against the campaign, as shown in the repression and indiscrim variables. Domestic backlash from violence likely leads to security force hesitancy to put down the movement, leading to reduced levels of repression and ultimately the success of the campaign.

This chart proves that while international attention is highly influential in territorial secession campaigns, garnering domestic support is still crucial to their ultimate success. Though sanctions and condemnation can pressure a regime, these may not actually sway support in favor of the campaign. To achieve total success, it is necessary to sway domestic institutions and individuals.

### **Greater Autonomy**

A region does not have to seek total secession from another through a mass movement.

It may be useful to have close military or economic ties with the rest of the country, but still seek some amount of self rule. In this situation, a campaign could be classified as seeking greater autonomy. It is also possible that some campaigns in the dataset are labeled with this goal in a

retroactive manner, as they originally pushed for total secession but declared victory after extracting some degree of autonomy. This is essentially what led to the establishment of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq in 1970, although this agreement later collapsed. This demonstrates the first major issue with analysing these movements. An autonomous region is oftentimes a temporary success. For the government combating the movement, establishing an autonomous zone allows them the opportunity to rebuild their forces while international attention shifts elsewhere. After a few years, they can once again push to reintegrate the autonomous zone into their country with renewed vigor.

The second problem comes from the NAVCO dataset itself. Likely because of this aforementioned issue, there is not a single campaign of this variety that is considered a success. As such, it is impossible to analyze what makes these movements successful in the first place, and only what contributes to them making progress. These metrics may be related, but they are not the same.

Figure 16

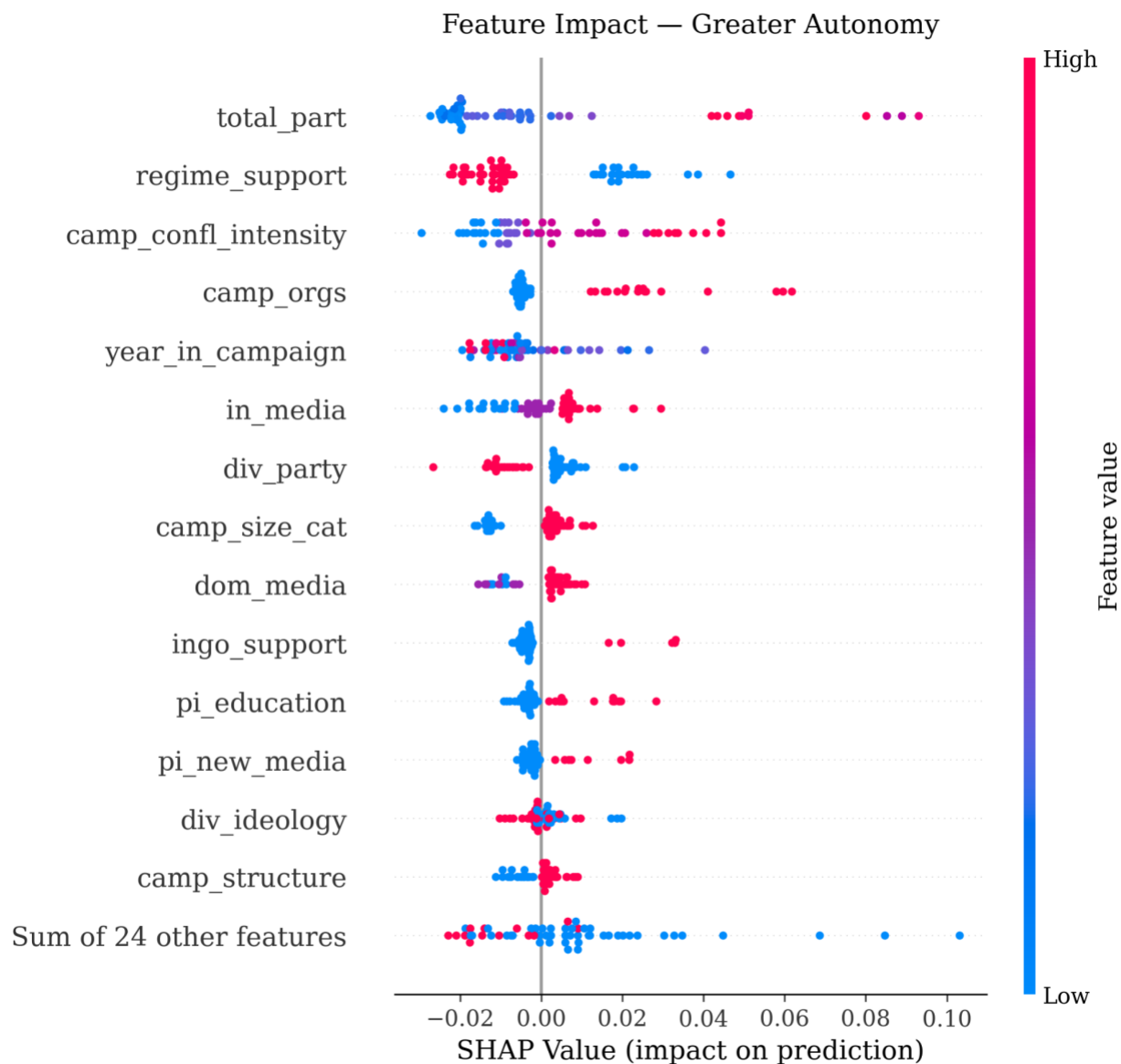


Figure 16 shows the results of this analysis. Once again, total participation remains the single most influential factor, with more people being equated with more progress. Similarly, several metrics for diversity also appear, indicating that a broader coalition is also important. Beyond those rather obvious conclusions, the international community appears to play a major role although interestingly this does not come through condemnation or direct economic sanctions against the state, as it had for

territorial secession campaigns. Instead, the only tangible contributions from international actors shown comes from NGOs, while foreign states themselves remain somewhat neutral, neither supporting nor punishing the regime directly.

Another avenue for progress comes from the movement establishing its own modern media and education institutions. Modern media refers to online blogs, websites, and social media that allow the campaign to broadcast its message globally in a way not subject to state interference. Educational institutions provide another way of recruiting members, and they do so by creating a common identity with which individuals can identify. It is worth noting that both of these endeavors are crucial to building a functioning state, and represent a step towards governance beyond mere protesting. Together, they help form a lasting legacy, one that will long outlive the movement itself.

The analysis also gives no indication on the role that violence plays in these situations, but it does illuminate several unexpected features. The encoding for `camp_confl_intensity` indicates that progress tends to be made when there are multiple organizations competing with each other, each with the same goal of greater autonomy. This provides a measure of the breadth of these movements, but the fact that active competition is associated with progress seems counterintuitive. Would a united organization composed of all facets of society not be more effective at achieving the goal?

The answer, strangely, appears to be “no,” and this is likely due to the radical flank effect. Research indicates that extreme tactics used by extreme factions can actually increase support for a more moderate faction with a similar agenda.<sup>48</sup> Thus a group that employs violence in an attempt to

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<sup>48</sup> Simpson, Brent, Robb Willer, and Matthew Feinberg. “Radical Flanks of Social Movements Can Increase Support for Moderate Factions.” *PNAS Nexus* 1, no. 3 (2022): pgac110. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgac110>.

form an independent state may make a peaceful group campaigning for greater autonomy appear more sympathetic to the domestic population, regime, and international community. This could lead to the primacy of the moderate group and strengthen their ability to extract concessions from the regime.

The fact that the dataset contains no examples of a greater autonomy campaign ultimately succeeding is peculiar. These campaigns may struggle to gain international support and may lack the clean argument of self-determination employed by anti-occupation and territorial secession ones, which ultimately leaves them isolated. Without the ability to fully sever ties with the regime they hope to leave, they find themselves constantly falling back into its influence. Progress comes in the form of fragile guarantees the regime can concede because it knows that it will eventually regain what is lost, given enough time. The only way for change to be permanent is for the movement to pursue—and achieve—full independence.

### **Policy Change**

Of all the categories in the NAVCO dataset, policy change might be the most difficult to define. These campaigns still had a maximalist goal that went beyond increases in civil liberties or economic rights, yet did not push for total institutional change in a way that would have significantly altered how the country operated.<sup>49</sup> They fall into a niche that is hard to define, as they are often better understood by what they are not than by what they are. Some examples in the dataset include The Bolivian Anti-Junta strikes, 1992-1993 Anti-Banda Malawi Protests, and Hundred Flowers Campaign

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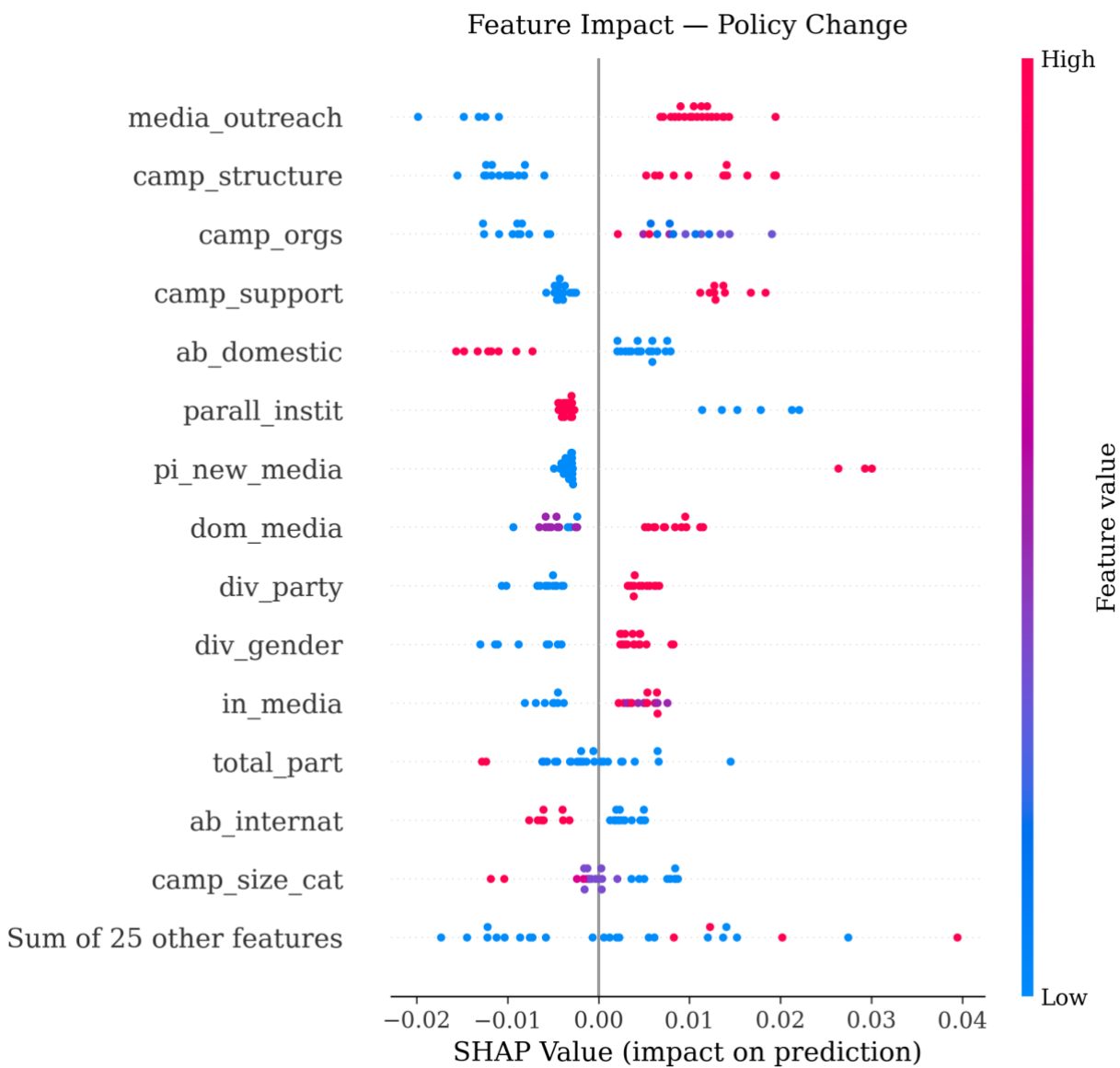
<sup>49</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. “Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1.” *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 7, 18. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

in China. It may be strange to see how all these movements fit together in some organized way, but all were mass movements that sought to greatly change their respective states. Some of these movements evolved over time as they grew, initially beginning as a policy dispute but growing until they desired to change regimes or secede entirely.

This analysis focuses on policy-oriented movements and the progress they made along that line. If the movement changed its goals to reflect a larger purpose, then it is only considered in regards to the time that its explicit goal was policy change. Figure 17 contains the results of this analysis, with progress as the target variable. Immediately, this chart looks like none of the others listed above. There is no mention of violence or campaign duration at all, and instead of being near the top of the list, total participation is near the bottom.

According to this analysis, `media_outreach` is the most consequential variable. This variable is rather self explanatory, referring to whether or not the campaign spent money and other resources on publicity. This variable provides significant evidence that media attention is what powers these campaigns, which is further bolstered by the fact that three other media-related variables—`pi_new_media`, `dom_media`, and `in_media`—also appear on this list. Clearly, media attention is what these campaigns live and die by. But the role of the media has been important in every other type of campaign seen so far, and there is no reason to think that policy change movements should be as unique as this chart suggests they are.

Figure 17



For instance, it is a bit surprising to see total participation be so far down on the list. Other metrics suggesting a broad coalition such as gender and party diversity are present, and the `camp_orgs` variable suggests that having multiple organizations campaigning for the same cause is also beneficial. The reason that total participation thus scores so low may be because these related metrics obscure its individual influence. Another explanation may be that as the ranks of policy change organizations swell, the movement's goal is shifted to something more radical, making it appear as if large numbers of participants are actually adverse to the movement. This would also explain why there is no mention of violence at all in the chart, as a shift involving more radical methods would only come with a more radical agenda.

Switching the target variable to success provides the answer to this conundrum, and Figure 18 looks much more familiar to past charts. Since this analysis is conducted based off of success, it does not include any campaigns that shifted to a different goal as they developed. And this explains why it looks so much more familiar than previous charts. Total participation rockets towards the top of the chart, distinguishing itself as the second most important feature. Violence also makes an appearance further down, with it appearing that primarily nonviolent movements possessing some sort of violent flank perform the best.

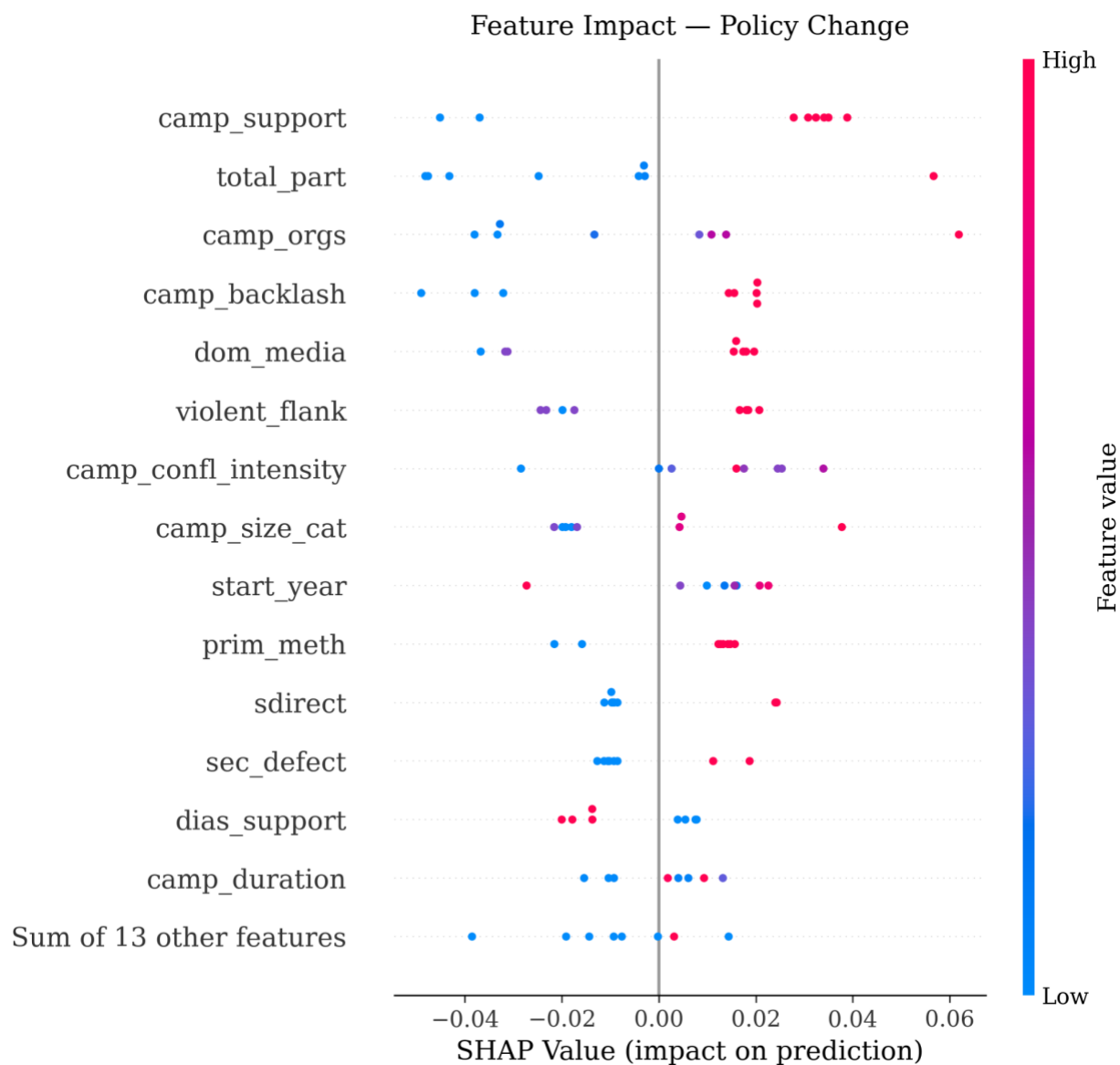
Additionally, the international community can play a major role in aiding movements. The most impactful variable in Figure 18 is `camp_support`, which measures whether or not foreign states directly supported the movement.<sup>50</sup> By providing the campaign with money and other resources, they

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<sup>50</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. "Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1." *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 12. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

aid in its ability to spread its message, stage protests, and establish its own media channels, all of which are vital for soliciting domestic and international support.

**Figure 18**



This analysis also reveals security forces to be playing an important role in these conflicts, which may be rather odd considering that these campaigns are not pushing for as extreme a goal as

others. This suggests that one manner in which governments try to avoid dramatic policy changes is through violently putting down protests, and if the military refuses to do this, the governments are forced to capitulate.

This is a conclusion worth emphasizing: when the people campaign for massive political change, even through legitimate legal avenues, the government will still employ security forces to violently put down the movements. But if the security forces can be swayed, success is very likely to follow.

### **Institutional Reform**

The final category in the dataset to explore is institutional reform, which represents “changing fundamental political structures to alleviate injustices or grant additional rights.”<sup>51</sup> This is a more complete form of policy change that tackles the governmental institutions themselves, not just their policies. It represents some in-between of policy change and regime change, as it does not seek to replace the government, yet still massively alter how it functions. Examples present in the dataset include the 1979 Taiwan pro-democracy movement, 2007 Southern Yemen Secessionist Movement, and India’s Anti-Indira Campaign of the mid-1970s.

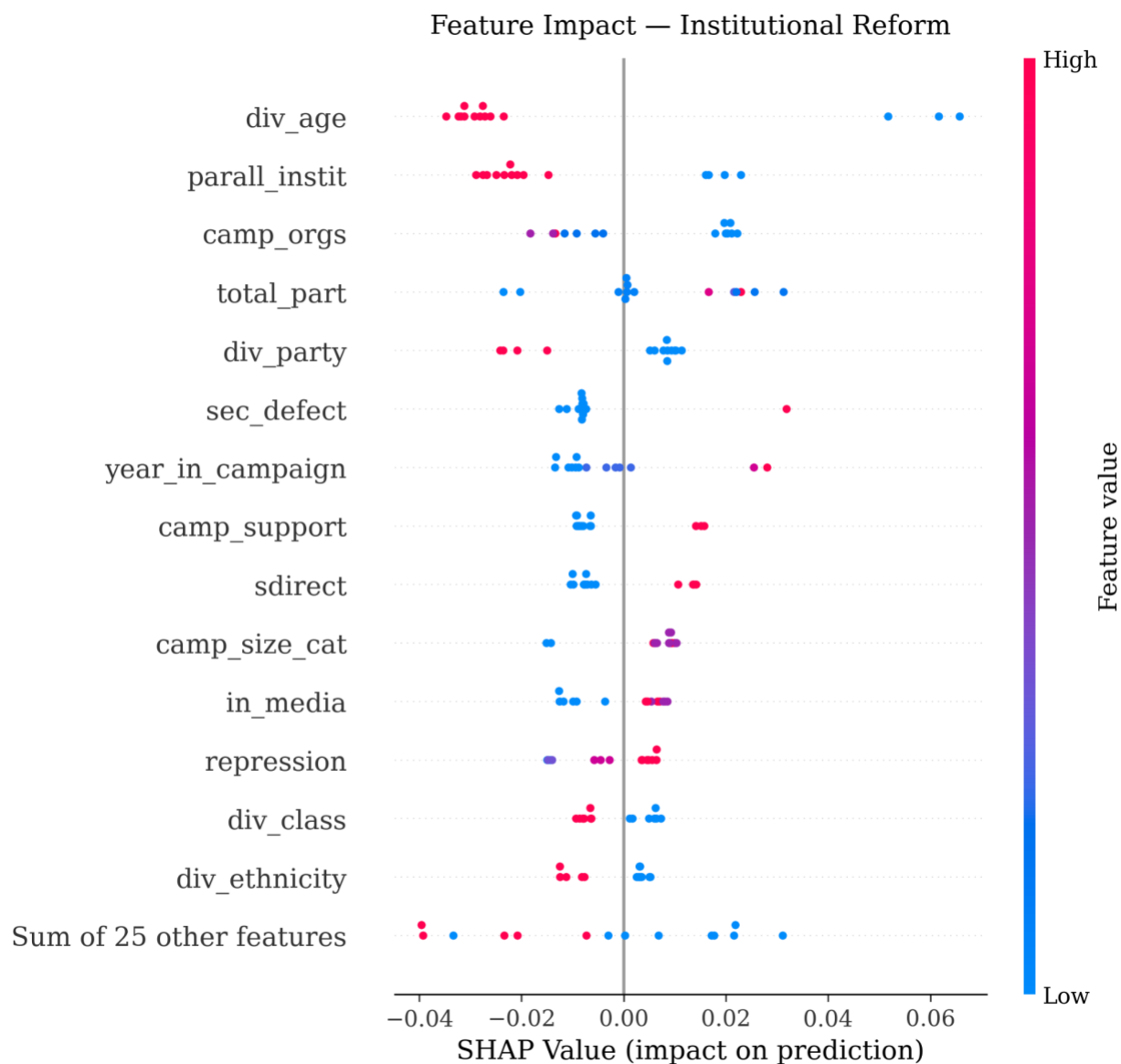
Much like policy change, some institutional reform movements can snowball as they progress and become more radical. Many protests emerge in opposition to those in charge of institutions, not just the institutions themselves, which means they easily morph into seeking regime change in addition

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<sup>51</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Christopher Wiley Shay. “Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project Version 2.1.” *Harvard Dataverse* (2019) 18. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV/WXVKGK>.

to institutional reform. Recalling Figure 1, the NAVCO data contains 1,232 campaign-years dedicated to regime change. There are only forty-four for significant institutional reform.

**Figure 19**



This lack of data means that it is not possible to model success with a random forest algorithm, and even the progress results should be treated with caution. Figure 19 displays these results, and some of its findings contradict what every other model has thus far said, making it immediately suspect. For

instance, the most influential result is supposedly a lack of diversity across generational lines, and diversity across social classes, political parties, and ethnicities are also considered detractors from the movement. It may be true that the campaigns that experienced the most progress towards institutional reform lacked these features, but it is hard to believe that diversity would be adverse to progress, especially when it has proved hugely important in every other type of campaign already examined.

Other conclusions from this analysis seem much more plausible and in line with prior findings. It does seem likely that international media attention, international sanctions, and foreign support for the movement can each contribute to progress. It also seems plausible security force defections would lead to progress. But one conclusion does stand out in this analysis: the size of the campaign.

Every other analysis thus far run has highlighted that larger campaigns lead to more progress and success. This chart does the same. But unlike past figures, this one specifically displays that it is not just the biggest campaigns that succeed, even small and medium sized ones can be impactful. Change does not come in a single day. Success is not instant. Progress is more than the product of overwhelming numbers—it represents persistence, strategy, and the bravery to begin. Even a small ripple is enough to alter a current. And as it builds and builds, it only becomes more unstoppable.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis was designed to identify underlying patterns influencing social movements in an effort to better understand which factors most contribute to their success. And while it is rather effective at this task, it does not constitute a perfect blueprint for the future. For one, the model is not

perfectly accurate, and individuals should not risk their lives over an issue due to the findings of a computer program. But even if it was, some of its most important features are variables that a social movement has no control over. No guide to protesting yet created provides a foolproof way to compel security forces to defect or to influence the degree of repression utilized by the state. Even the “ideal” tactics may not be suitable, let alone feasible, for every movement given its unique circumstances. Troubles—highlighted in the next chapter—provides an excellent example of this. This movement could never have garnered support across religious divides because that was the very issue at stake. The Arab Spring is another example. Many different movements, each with the goal of establishing democracies, broke out almost simultaneously in neighboring states. Yet despite their similar origins, their fates ended up rather varied. Tunisia successfully overthrew its regime and established a democracy. Egypt did as well, but suffered a coup in 2013. Several states such as Syria and Libya are still entrenched in civil war, and Bahrain violently crushed its movement.

Social movements are complex processes shaped by shifting political environments, institutional restraints, and international interference. Even movements with similar goals, timing, and tactics can have radically different outcomes based on dozens of factors. Quantitative models can illuminate the structural conditions under which movements are more or less likely to succeed, but they cannot collapse this complexity into universal prescriptions. Their value lies instead in clarifying why success is uneven, why failure does not imply irrationality, and why collective action remains fundamentally contingent on context rather than reducible to tactical optimization.

To paraphrase another scholar, protesting should not be treated as a recipe, where properly combining the ingredients leads to a near certainty of success.<sup>52</sup> There is too much history, symbolism, and emotion combining to develop a concise, rational theory that applies nicely to all movements across all time. Social movements are more akin to a sporting match, where endurance, strategy, and strength clash. And just like a sporting event, a well-prepared team can still lose if pitfalls occur at critical moments, or if outside forces manipulate the match.

To understand how social movements actually develop and the complexity of the situations they create, the next chapter provides a case study example of The Troubles, a thirty-year long conflict from Northern Ireland. The Troubles lie at the crossroads of many themes touched on already—the role of security forces, international support, and political violence—but reveal something much deeper that goes beyond the capabilities of any algorithm: the human beings behind it all.

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<sup>52</sup> Case, Benjamin. “Molotov Cocktails to Mass Marches: Strategic Nonviolence, Symbolic Violence, and the Mobilizing Effect of Riots.” *Theory in Action* 14, no. 1 (2021): 22. <https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.2102>.

## Chapter 2: Bloody Sunday

“When I told the people of Northern Ireland that I was an atheist, a woman in the audience stood up and said, ‘Yes, but is it the God of the Catholics or the God of the Protestants in whom you don’t believe?’”

- Quentin Crisp (1908-1999)

Northern Ireland is the political manifestation of a tinderbox. The region has seen several hundred years of violence, to the point that being a freedom fighter has at some points in time been almost a family business.<sup>53</sup> This chapter seeks to analyze one of the most recent outbreaks of sectarian violence, The Troubles, to contextualize the quantitative findings provided in the last section. In particular, this section utilizes extensive archival research surrounding Bloody Sunday to reveal the human element at the heart of protest movements, and how the imperfect decisions of individuals evolve conflicts and shape movements.

The last chapter explored what factors contributed to the success of protest movements throughout the last seventy years. For territorial secession movements, a variety of factors were found to be important, including movement size, large degrees of media attention domestically and internationally, international support from a variety of sources, diversity within supporters of the movement, and security force defection. This section now aims to show how these factors work together in practice, and how many of the most momentous events occur when political pressure,

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<sup>53</sup> Keefe, Patrick Radden. *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*. (London: William Collins), 2018, 14.

uncertainty, fear, and time pressure all compound together. Bloody Sunday provides a devastating but powerful example of this. The shooting radically transformed Northern Ireland politically, elicited massive international support for the Catholic community, and led directly to the most violent phase of The Troubles.

Before beginning with an analysis of Bloody Sunday, a brief summary of British-Irish history is needed. The British and Irish have been entangled for over 800 years. In 1169, the British first invaded Ireland.<sup>54</sup> Yet due to intense Irish resistance, for four hundred years British rule was limited to a small part of the island known as the Pale, confined to the area around Dublin. During the 16th and 17th centuries, however, Britain—now a Protestant nation—renewed efforts to colonize Catholic Ireland by implementing a policy known as Plantation. This Plantation policy “planted” British individuals in Ireland and gave them vast land grants, and was particularly effective in the northern region of Ulster.<sup>55</sup> In 1798, the United Irishmen movement, which contained both Catholics and some Protestants, rebelled against the British government, but was quickly repressed. As a consequence of this rebellion, the British government passed the Act of Union, which transferred direct authority over the island to the British Parliament.<sup>56</sup> All the while, Irish resistance continued, demanding the right to self government. The northern region of Ulster, however, now had a pro-British Protestant majority that wanted to remain in union with the British government, and battled against the Irish resistance.

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<sup>54</sup> The British invasion began in 1169. Sinn Féin, “*Freedom Struggle in Ireland*,” Stacks Unit Four, call no. 11-000035382, Irish Collection, Box 15, pg. 2 Burns Library, Boston College.

<sup>55</sup> Sinn Féin, “*Freedom Struggle in Ireland*,” 2.

<sup>56</sup> Sinn Féin, “*Freedom Struggle in Ireland*,” 2.

In the early twentieth century, the idea of Irish self governance seemed to gain support in Britain and Ireland, and a pro-independence political party called Sinn Fein formed in 1905. But ideas of home rule came to a halt after the outbreak of WWI. Frustrated, a group known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) formed in 1914, which (depending on who one asks) was either a paramilitary or terrorist group that employed violence to achieve its ends. The IRA began a campaign of violence against the British, which ultimately led to a 1921 partition of the island. Britain maintained control over the predominantly Protestant region of Ulster in the newfound state of Northern Ireland, while the rest of the predominantly Catholic island became the independent Republic of Ireland.

At this point, accounts begin to diverge. Catholics remaining in Northern Ireland decried discrimination and repression, and wished to unify with the Republic of Ireland in the south. The IRA persisted in carrying out acts of violence and the British began a policy of “internment”, which allowed them to imprison individuals indefinitely without trial. A violent Protestant paramilitary police force called the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) also emerged in Northern Ireland which worked alongside and received support from the British military.

This was the state of Northern Ireland throughout the 1960s, when the US Civil Rights movement inspired a new wave of mass protests alongside the violence of the IRA and RUC. A new loyalist paramilitary group known as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) also emerged quite literally with a bang, bombing a Catholic pub in May 1966. Tensions at this time were incredibly high. Both Catholics (often referred to as “republicans” or “nationalists”) and Protestants (“loyalists” or

“unionists”) regularly took to the streets to voice their opinions, to say nothing of the gunfire and bombs being exchanged in the streets.

October 5, 1968, is commonly cited as the beginning or a major precursor to the Troubles. On that day, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) held a march in Londonderry to protest discrimination against Catholics. Unionists announced they would counter demonstrate, and the government banned public protests to avoid the two groups fighting.<sup>57</sup> The NICRA defied the ban and protested anyway, leading to a violent confrontation on Duke Street. In the official report issued by the Northern Ireland government, police attempting to halt the march at one end of the street “broke ranks and used their batons indiscriminately on people.”<sup>58</sup> The protestors then fled down the street, only to find themselves trapped by another group of police behind them. Even though the crowd was attempting to disperse, this second group of police did not allow them to pass, and “also used their batons indiscriminately.”<sup>59</sup> This was already a very violent affair, which only became worse as the police began spraying the marchers with water cannons.<sup>60</sup>

As the sun set, the police attempted to remove a political banner in a different part of Londonderry, and these two events enraged the republican elements in the city, leading to rioting that lasted throughout the night and much of the following day.<sup>61</sup> Northern Ireland officially entered the era of the Troubles.

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<sup>57</sup> Derry March, Main Events of the Day, Martin Melaugh

<sup>58</sup> Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission Appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland*, chaired by Lord Cameron (Belfast: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1969), Cmd. 532, ch. 4, paragraph 51.

<sup>59</sup> Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland* (Cameron Report), ch. 4, paragraph 51.

<sup>60</sup> Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland* (Cameron Report), ch. 4, paragraph 51.

<sup>61</sup> Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland* (Cameron Report), ch. 4, paragraph 52.

The Northern Irish Government tried desperately to quell the violence, to no avail. They continued to ban all public demonstrations and redrew electoral boundaries to better represent both religious groups. Following another violent clash in August 1969 known as the Battle of Bogside, the British army was even called in to reestablish order. But even with the official military presence, bombings, shootings, and rioting continued throughout Northern Ireland.

By early 1971, faith in the government had declined to such an extent that Prime Minister Major Chichester-Clark was forced to resign. On March 23, Brian Faulkner was sworn in. There was a general feeling that if Faulkner could not restore the rule of law quickly, Britain would dissolve the Northern Irish government and rule the country directly from London, which would only serve to enrage Irish Catholics and provide some legal justification for the actions of the IRA.<sup>62</sup>

Many major news outlets stated this directly: The Dublin Irish Times wrote, “He [Mr. Faulkner] takes up office as Prime Minister knowing well that if he is not almost immediately successful, direct rule may not be far away.”<sup>63</sup> The Daily Mail concurred, “Mr. Brian Faulkner is Ulster’s last and best chance to run its own affairs...For we all know—and every Ulsterman who isn’t blind or deaf must also know—that if he fails, Britain will have to take over.”<sup>64</sup>

Yet under Faulkner, the violence continued to rise, and it became indiscriminate in nature. Anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time could be a target. A tragic example of this came at the

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<sup>62</sup> In December, 1969 the IRA split into two groups, the Provisional IRA, which utilized violence, and the Official IRA, which was committed to nonviolent civil disobedience. Though initially a radical wing, by early 1972 the Provisional IRA was the dominant faction.

<sup>63</sup> Northern Ireland Government Information Service, *Northern Ireland Weekly News Summary, 21 March 1971–27 March 1971* (Belfast: Stormont Castle, 1971), MS-2007-020, Box 1, Folder 27, p. 5, Burns Library, Boston College.

<sup>64</sup> Northern Ireland Government Information Service, *Northern Ireland Weekly News Summary, 4.*

end of the year. On December 4, the loyalist UVF bombed the Catholic-owned McGurk's Bar in Belfast, killing fifteen Catholics, two of which were children.<sup>65</sup> The bombers had been ordered to strike a different bar affiliated with the IRA—believed to be one called The Gem—but were unable to because it was guarded. Upon encountering this complication, however, the bombers did not go home. The UVF had an unofficial policy best articulated by its Belfast leader Augustus Spence: “if you couldn't get an IRA man you should shoot a Taig [a slur for Catholic], he's your last resort.”<sup>66</sup> It is clear the bombers only chose McGurk's because it was a Catholic establishment and it was nearby.

Knowing this, it is unsurprising that 171 people died as a result of The Troubles in 1971, a massive increase from the 26 of the previous year.<sup>67</sup> The new government's attempt to restore law and order had utterly failed, and everyone knew it. The first opinion poll on The Troubles, conducted in September, indicated that a majority of the British public supported military withdrawal from Northern Ireland.<sup>68</sup> But this desire to withdraw militarily did not necessarily mean that the British people felt sympathetic to the Catholic cause or wished to abandon Northern Ireland to its own devices. The sentiment came from too many stories of British soldiers dying rather unnecessarily, including one of a seventeen-year-old soldier who was shot after having an off-duty drink.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> “House of Commons Hansard Debates for 14 July 2008 (Pt 0018).” March 4, 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304001100/http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080714/debtext/80714-0018.htm>.

<sup>66</sup> Dillon, Martin. *The Shankill Butchers: The Real Story of Cold-Blooded Mass Murder*. Routledge, 1999. xxi

<sup>67</sup> Malcolm Sutton, “Annual Deaths Related to the Northern Ireland Conflict (The Troubles),” survey by University of Ulster, published July 2023, Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1401907/ni-troubles-deaths-annual/>

<sup>68</sup> Dixon, Paul. “‘A real stirring in the nation’: Military families, British public opinion and withdrawal from Northern Ireland”. In *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain*, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2016) accessed Mar 8, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526108494.00012>

<sup>69</sup> Carthew, Anthony. “The Red and the Green —The Divided I. R. A.” Archives. *The New York Times*, March 28, 1971. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/03/28/archives/the-red-and-the-green-the-divided-ira-the-irish-republican-army.html>.

Faced with mounting political pressure and rising levels of violence, the Faulkner government turned to drastic measures. They began imprisoning suspected IRA members without trial in August, reintroducing the internment policy.<sup>70</sup> This further enraged republicans as a blatant abuse of civil rights, but also because it seemed that no unionists were ever interned.<sup>71</sup> Many of the men were arrested seemingly because of their general support for republicanism or because they were a family member of someone believed to be tied to the republican cause. As a result, most of the arrested individuals were released back into the community over the following months, and they brought back with them stories of the torture they had suffered.<sup>72</sup>

In cities such as Derry, this new policy sent Catholics over the edge. There were no longer just “no go” areas for Catholics and Protestants in Derry; there were areas where the British military could not even venture.<sup>73</sup> A government document postulated that recapturing the Derry neighborhoods of Creggan and Bogside, which only contained about 200 extremists, would require up to five British battalions and several months of work.<sup>74</sup> The document also mentioned that recapturing the neighborhoods would involve casualties on both sides and would so enrage the Catholics that it could

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<sup>70</sup> Katherine S. Thomas, “Legal Remedies to Collective Trauma in Northern Ireland,” 34 *Duke Journal of Comparative & International Law* 109-137 (2024) 113.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/djCIL/vol34/iss1/3>.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas, “Legal Remedies to Collective Trauma in Northern Ireland,” 112.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas, “Legal Remedies to Collective Trauma in Northern Ireland,” 113.

<sup>73</sup> Burke Trend, “Top Secret Report (CAB 164/881) regarding the security situation in Northern Ireland,” attachment to email from Greg McCartney to John Tate, June 21, 2002, Saville Inquiry Correspondence, 2001–2002, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, pg. 1, Burns Library, Boston College.

<sup>74</sup> Burke Trend, “A Military Appreciation of the Security Situation in Northern Ireland at 4th October 1971,” attachment to email from Greg McCartney to John Tate, June 21, 2002, Saville Inquiry Correspondence, 2001–2002, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, pg. 6, Burns Library, Boston College.

only be considered as a dire political decision and not a military one.<sup>75</sup> This would turn out to be quite the prescient report.

It is probably true that the majority of the population in Northern Ireland—both Protestants and Catholics— simply wanted peace, and their political leaders were aware of this. In a top secret document from September 23, 1971, the Cabinet Secretary, Burke Trend, acknowledged that “The concept of a deal between Paisley [a Protestant MP] and the Roman Catholics is clearly gaining ground.”<sup>76</sup> But those in power did not appear particularly receptive to the will of the people, as even peaceful marches had been banned by the Public Order Act.<sup>77</sup>

This became one of the inciting incidents behind Bloody Sunday. Catholic civil rights groups wished to hold protests, which were prohibited, but still decided to march anyway. This angered Protestants, as they were respecting the ban on marches, and they called on the government to do more. One Protestant political party officially condemned the Faulkner government for not halting a Catholic march on Christmas, and its leader met with government officials on December 31, 1971 to demand that firmer action be taken against the Catholics in the future.<sup>78</sup> At this point, protests in Northern Ireland, or more specifically the government’s mishandling of them, became a matter of concern to high level UK officials, including the Prime Minister, Home Secretary, and Secretary of

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<sup>75</sup> Burke Trend, “A Military Appreciation of the Security Situation in Northern Ireland at 4th October 1971,” 5.

<sup>76</sup> Burke Trend, “Top Secret Report on Northern Ireland,” September 23, 1971, attachment to email from Greg McCartney to John Tate, Saville Inquiry Correspondence, 2001–2002, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, pg. 1, Burns Library, Boston College.

<sup>77</sup> Bloody Sunday Inquiry (Saville Inquiry), *Draft Report, Part 3: Planning and Authorization—Responsibility for Bloody Sunday*, Box 2, Folder 2, p. FS4-35, Saville Inquiry Correspondence, 2001–2002, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Burns Library, Boston College.

<sup>78</sup> Saville Inquiry, *Draft Report*, FS-36.

State for Defence.<sup>79</sup> With London looking on and Protestant support for the Northern Irish government diminishing, Faulkner and his ministers decided in a meeting that more aggressive action was needed, particularly in the Bogside and Creggan areas of Derry.<sup>80</sup>

A few days after that meeting, General Robert Ford, the Commander Land Forces and one of the highest ranking military officers in Northern Ireland, issued a memorandum that scolded local commanders and called for the shooting of teenage rioters.<sup>81</sup> This was not the first time that Ford had suggested a dramatic violent response from the military. A few weeks prior, in a separate memorandum, he had written, “Much will be made of the invasion of Derry and the slaughter of the innocents.”<sup>82</sup> He would be right.

The NICRA planned a march in Derry to protest internment for January 30, 1972. At this time, eighty Catholic men of Derry had been interned, and the town was small enough that most people knew at least one of them.<sup>83</sup> The government became aware of the plans for the march weeks in advance and gathered ample intelligence, including the proposed route to be taken and expected number of participants.<sup>84</sup> They held numerous meetings discussing how the matter would be handled, and finalized these plans in the Joint Security Council on January 27.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Saville Inquiry, *Draft Report*, FS-38.

<sup>80</sup> Saville Inquiry, *Draft Report*, FS-38-39.

<sup>81</sup> Saville Inquiry, *Draft Report*, FS-40-41.

<sup>82</sup> Greg McCartney, Kevin Casey, and Mark Reid, “Allegations Against Senior Military and Political Figures,” email to W. J. Tate, Solicitor to the Inquiry, January 15, 2001, Correspondence to W. J. Tate, Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Transaction No. 43264, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, p. 3, Burns Library, Boston College

<sup>83</sup> Saville Inquiry, *Draft Report*, FS-35.

<sup>84</sup> Saville Inquiry, *Draft Report*, FS-44-45.

<sup>85</sup> Greg McCartney, Kevin Casey, and Mark Reid, “Allegations Against Senior Military and Political Figures,” email to W. J. Tate, Solicitor to the Inquiry, January 15, 2001, Correspondence to W. J. Tate, Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Transaction No.

Before continuing, it is necessary to reflect on the sources this analysis is built upon. Much of the archival evidence comes from the William F. Stout Collection at the Burns Library at Boston College. This collection contains many excellent resources on The Troubles, such as photographs, complaints against the police, speeches, and secret internal government documents. In particular, it contains the minutes from the Joint Security Committee meetings. This would not have been the forum at which military leaders planned their operations, but it would have been the place where the ministers of Northern Ireland and England were informed of these plans and could have halted them. Yet rather surprisingly, these meeting notes are barred from public display until 2048, as are several other parts of the collection.

Fortunately, the collection also contains documents from lawsuits brought by the families of victims of Bloody Sunday. The solicitors representing these victims seem to have been granted access to the restricted documents, as they frequently quote and refer to them. These documents are thus extremely useful, but also biased. The quotes they issue are specifically picked to show wrongdoing on the parts of the British government, Northern Irish government, and military. Yet without access to the restricted documents, it is impossible to paint a more holistic picture. It is also worth noting that the Saville Report (a draft of which is also in the collection), in which the British government investigated itself, the British military, and the government of Northern Ireland in regards to Bloody Sunday, found the use of lethal force to be “unjustifiable,” but it did not attribute any of this

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43264, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, p. 3, Burns Library, Boston College

wrongdoing to either government.<sup>86</sup> The British Prime Minister nevertheless apologized for the incident on behalf of the government.

In regards to the military, the report murkily placed blame on the paratroopers present at the scene, never identifying any by name. It does “criticise”—and that is the official term used—two lieutenants, whose names are hidden, as well as Lieutenant Colonel Wilford, as he disobeyed an order from a superior officer and sent his soldiers into unfamiliar territory.<sup>87</sup> However, the report also concluded that every other military officer involved with Bloody Sunday could not fairly be criticised, and certainly should not be held accountable for the deaths of fourteen unarmed protestors. In other words, Bloody Sunday was a very tragic, very unforeseeable accident.

For the families of the victims, the Saville Report offered resolution.<sup>88</sup> One woman, Kate Nash, who lost her father and brother, felt proud that the world finally knew that her family was innocent.<sup>89</sup> The report also opened the door for legal action against the individual soldiers accused of wrongdoing, though their names remain hidden due to a court order.<sup>90</sup>

It does seem a rather strange fact that individual soldiers could be the targets of prosecution, albeit with their names still hidden, but that the commanding officers who gave them orders could not be. It seems even stranger considering that the military unit that committed the murders had a reputation for “excessive physical violence,” putting into question why they were even deployed in the

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<sup>86</sup> Hoyt, William L., Mark Oliver Saville, and John Toohey. *Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry*. TSO, 2011, 90.

<sup>87</sup> Hoyt, William L., Mark Oliver Saville, and John Toohey. *Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry*. TSO, 2011, 94-98.

<sup>88</sup> Barker, Vicki. “Inquiry: Bloody Sunday Killings Were Unjust.” *NPR*, June 15, 2010.

<https://www.npr.org/2010/06/15/127862934/inquiry-bloody-sunday-killings-were-unjust>.

<sup>89</sup> Barker, “Inquiry: Bloody Sunday Killings Were Unjust.”

<sup>90</sup> Dooley, Brian. “Explainer: Soldier F on Trial for Bloody Sunday Murders.” *Human Rights First*, September 16, 2025. Accessed March 9, 2026. <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/explainer-soldier-f-on-trial-for-bloody-sunday-murders/>.

operation in the first place, a fact which is specifically highlighted in the Saville Report.<sup>91</sup> Various solicitors also made note of the January 27 meeting of the Joint Security Council, where the plans for dealing with the march would have been finalized. Instead of taking proper minutes for the meeting, as was standard practice, all that survived were a few sentences.<sup>92</sup> The solicitors for the families of the victims found this to be rather suspicious.<sup>93</sup>

The full list of JSC meeting notes, as mentioned above, is censored until 2048, making it impossible to compare the brevity of the January 27 minutes with others. But even this might be rather suspicious: why censor the meeting notes if there is nothing to hide?

It is indisputable that the government felt pressured by the loyalists to respond strongly against the Catholics for marching in defiance of the ban. It is indisputable that trust in the Faulkner government was also dwindling and home rule by the British was under consideration. It is indisputable that confidence in the military had also diminished due to the “no-go zones” that existed in Derry.

Bloody Sunday had been planned as an attempt to correct all of these wrongs at once. It was meant as a mass arrest operation that would have reestablished British military control over Catholic neighborhoods, shoring up support amongst local Protestants and onlooking British ministers. That is

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<sup>91</sup> Hoyt, William L., Mark Oliver Saville, and John Toohey. *Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry*. TSO, 2011, 92.

<sup>92</sup> Greg McCartney, Kevin Casey, and Mark Reid, “Allegations Against Senior Military and Political Figures,” email to W. J. Tate, Solicitor to the Inquiry, January 15, 2001, Correspondence to W. J. Tate, Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Transaction No. 43264, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, p. 2, Burns Library, Boston College

<sup>93</sup> Greg McCartney, Kevin Casey, and Mark Reid, “Allegations Against Senior Military and Political Figures,” email to W. J. Tate, Solicitor to the Inquiry, January 15, 2001, Correspondence to W. J. Tate, Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Transaction No. 43264, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, p. 2, Burns Library, Boston College

why General Ford deployed an elite military unit for what otherwise could have been a relatively quiet and peaceful task. However, this operation went awry due to clearly demonstrated prejudice against the protestors, gross negligence, or a combination of the two. It is clear from surviving documents that General Ford felt very little sympathy for the republicans in Derry, emphasized by his willingness to shoot teenage rioters dead. If that was not proof enough, when questioned after the fact about Bloody Sunday, he stated he had “No regrets whatsoever.”<sup>94</sup>

Those involved in planning the operation were wary of its legality from the very beginning. General Harry Tuzo, the highest ranking military official in Northern Ireland and General Ford’s direct superior, said in a meeting on January 13 of the situation in Derry: “It was a very difficult problem to solve within the law.”<sup>95</sup> This may help explain why the minutes for the January 27 JSC meeting were suspiciously short: there was concern that the plan in question would not comply with domestic or international law.

It is possible that those in charge were truly ignorant of the risks they were taking. But without the full JSC minutes, it is impossible to know what was being discussed. There is certainly also the possibility of human error truly being at fault for Bloody Sunday, both in the meeting rooms and on the street; General Tuzo is quoted as describing a different member of the JSC as both an

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<sup>94</sup> Patrick J. Finucane and Peter J. Madden, “RE: Allegations Against Senior Military and Political Figures,” email to W.J. Tate, Solicitor to the Inquiry, February 15, 2001, Correspondence to W. J. Tate, Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Transaction No. 43264, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, pg. 14, Burns Library, Boston College

<sup>95</sup> Greg McCartney, Kevin Casey, and Mark Reid, “Allegations Against Senior Military and Political Figures,” email to W. J. Tate, Solicitor to the Inquiry, January 15, 2001, Correspondence to W. J. Tate, Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Transaction No. 43264, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, p. 2, Burns Library, Boston College

“embarrassment” as well as “foolish and reactionary.”<sup>96</sup> There is also no evidence that a direct order was given to the soldiers during the march to fire upon protestors. Instead, the soldiers had been given prior instructions on a card that gave them permission to fire their weapons if threatened by something like a bomb or firearm.<sup>97</sup> When questioned, many of the soldiers intentionally lied in an attempt to justify their killings.<sup>98</sup>

But the absence of a written order does not necessarily mean the absence of an expectation. Decades later, an English police officer named John Stalker would encounter a similar phenomenon while investigating allegations of a “shoot-to-kill” policy within the RUC. Reflecting on what he discovered, Stalker remarked:

“I never did find evidence of a shoot to kill policy as such. There was no written instruction, nothing pinned up on the noticeboard. But there was a clear understanding on the part of the men whose job it was to pull the trigger that that was what was expected of them.”<sup>99</sup>

Bloody Sunday may have been a tragic accident. But the actions the military engaged in were akin to lighting a match on top of a powder keg; it was hardly unforeseeable that tragedy would strike. At best,

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<sup>96</sup> Greg McCartney, Kevin Casey, and Mark Reid, “Allegations Against Senior Military and Political Figures,” email to W. J. Tate, Solicitor to the Inquiry, January 15, 2001, Correspondence to W. J. Tate, Bloody Sunday Inquiry, Transaction No. 43264, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, p. 3, Burns Library, Boston College

<sup>97</sup> Hoyt, William L., Mark Oliver Saville, and John Toohey. *Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry*. TSO, 2011. 77-78.

<sup>98</sup> Hoyt, William L., Mark Oliver Saville, and John Toohey. *Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry*. TSO, 2011. 78.

<sup>99</sup> John Stalker, quoted in Seamus Treacy, Karen Quinlivan, and Fiona Doherty, “*Particulars of Allegations against Senior Military & Political Figures*,” February 12, 2001, Saville Inquiry Correspondence, 2001–2002, William F. Stout Collection on Northern Ireland Politics, MS-2007-020, Box 2, Folder 1, pg. 15, Burns Library, Boston College.

gross negligence was at play. At worst, those in power knowingly chose to sacrifice civilian lives to advance their own agenda.

The previous chapter examined protest movements quantitatively. Yet no dataset can truly capture the complexities, miscalculations, prejudices, and absurdities at play in any individual movement. No matter how numerous the variables, no matter how advanced the methodology, numbers will never reveal the full story. In order to understand a social movement, it is necessary to study history, geography, religions, languages, and so much more. Only through archival research is it possible to reconstruct the closed-door conversations and plotting driving change; only through interviews can one grasp the fears and dreams governing the crowds. Statistics may provide interesting figures and broad patterns, but it cannot understand the human condition.

No model can explain a tragedy like Bloody Sunday because no model can sufficiently understand the humans responsible for it. The soldiers who fired their rifles, the officers who planned the operation, and the politicians who set the broader strategy all acted within a fog of uncertainty, shaped by their own assumptions, fears, biases, and ambitions. What appears in the dataset as a moment of extreme, indiscriminate repression was in reality the product of countless human decisions.

The real tragedy of Bloody Sunday—and of The Troubles at large—is how easily all of these decisions were to justify in the moment. The two sides were diametrically opposed, fighting not just for their respective countries, but in a larger sense, for their respective Gods. And as time went on, violence only gave birth to more violence. What was one more murder? One more bombing? Was it not revenge for what the other side had already done? Violence begets violence, leading to a vicious

cycle in which compromise appears as a betrayal of the fallen. Both sides begin to operate in absolutes, where total victory is the only option.

One of the most interesting conclusions from the statistical analysis is that social movements that achieve success tend to do it in relatively short amounts of time, no more than a handful of years. Because as conflicts drag on—particularly violent ones—the line between heroes and villains blurs. Virtue and vengeance become harder to discern. For an innocent civilian just trying to survive, their sympathies begin to lie more and more with whichever side will keep them safe.

Interestingly, The Troubles *did* almost end in early 1974. Both the Republic of Ireland and the British government had signed the Sunningdale Agreement in December 1973, which would have seen republicans and unionists share power in Northern Ireland.<sup>100</sup> This was accomplished in several different ways, such as allocating ministerial positions to ensure that both republicans and unionists would be represented. The agreement also created a Council of Ireland, composed of both members of the new Northern Irish government and the Irish government, to act in a consultative role.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland Executive, *The Sunningdale Agreement (Tripartite Agreement on the Council of Ireland)*, communiqué issued following the Sunningdale Conference, December 9, 1973, [United Nations Peacemaker](#).

<sup>101</sup> *Sunningdale Agreement*, 1973.



But the Council of Ireland proved fatal to the overall agreement, as loyalists were concerned that it would eventually lead to a united Ireland and their isolation.<sup>102</sup> A massive strike was called by the Ulster Workers' Council that crippled Northern Ireland, and almost every loyalist politician who supported the Sunningdale Agreement suffered defeat in the February 1974 general election. The Sunningdale Agreement collapsed, and the Troubles continued.

<sup>102</sup> The image can be found here: United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC), "Petition Signing Centre," 1974, BELUM.O183.1974, Ulster Museum, National Museums Northern Ireland. <https://www.ulstermuseum.org/digital-exhibitions/sunningdale-agreement>

When the Troubles finally ended following the passage of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, one Irish politician referred to it as, “Sunningdale for slow learners.”<sup>103</sup> Political scientists view that quote as an oversimplification, but it is true that Sunningdale was the blueprint on which the Good Friday Agreement was built.<sup>104</sup> Peace was possible twenty-five years earlier. And had that happened, 2,500 lives would have been spared.<sup>105</sup>

The story of Bloody Sunday is a microcosm for the story of The Troubles. It demonstrates how danger, secrecy, and fear governed Northern Ireland for thirty years, and how the ill-planned decisions of powerful individuals determined the fates of thousands. The previous chapter outlined many key features influencing social movements, but no dataset can capture the brutality of mass murder, the psychological effects it had on an entire country, or why the minutes of the most consequential meeting of the Joint Security Council that planned the day were reduced to a few suspicious sentences. Only archival evidence can answer that.

And the answer is rather damning. Bloody Sunday was a strategic catastrophe of the first order, one that achieved the precise opposite of everything it was intended to accomplish. General Ford deployed an elite military unit against a civilian march in order to reassert British control over Catholic Derry, shore up Protestant confidence in the Faulkner government, and signal to London that home rule could survive. Within weeks, Faulkner was gone, direct rule had arrived, and the IRA had

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<sup>103</sup> Hennessey, Thomas, ‘Slow Learners’? Comparing the Sunningdale Agreement and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement’, in David McCann, and Cillian McGrattan (eds), *The legacies of Sunningdale*, in David McCann, and Cillian McGrattan (eds), *Sunningdale, the Ulster Workers’ Council Strike and the Struggle for Democracy in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2017; online edn, Manchester Scholarship Online, 21 Sept. 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719099519.003.0012>, accessed 14 Mar. 2026.

<sup>104</sup> Hennessey, “Slow Learners?”

<sup>105</sup> Sutton, “Annual Deaths Related to the Northern Ireland Conflict (The Troubles)”

acquired a martyrology that would sustain recruitment for decades. In trying to extinguish the fire, those in command poured fuel on it. That Ford expressed no regrets is perhaps the most chilling detail in the entire episode—not because it reveals a monster, but because it reveals how completely the fog of prejudice and political pressure could obscure even the most catastrophic of miscalculations.

What makes The Troubles even more haunting is how close they were to ending. The Sunningdale Agreement was signed in late 1973. Peace was within reach. A quarter century of violence could have been avoided. But it was not to be. It would take many more years and many more lives before Northern Ireland would have another chance at healing.

This is a story too complicated for any model to capture. Numbers and variables can draw broad conclusions, but they have their limits. They cannot explain why General Ford felt no regrets for Bloody Sunday, why the JSC minutes were stripped bare, or why a loyalist worker's strike would unravel a hard fought peace agreement. Those explanations live in the archival record, in the closed-door conversations, in the fears and prejudices of individuals whose names are still hidden behind court orders more than fifty years later. Understanding a social movement means understanding the specific people who made the specific decisions that sent history down one path rather than another. These people were flawed, irrational, and human, operating not with omniscience but with what little knowledge they possessed at any moment. It can be easy to look back and criticize the past for the needless loss of life and belated end to the conflict. But it is hard to recognize the gravity of the moment in the moment. Opportunities for peace are rare and fleeting, and those with the power to seize them often do not recognize the chance until it has passed. The cost of that failure is not numbers in a dataset, but bodies in the ground.

## Conclusion

“Revolutionaries do not make revolutions. The revolutionaries are those who know when power is lying in the street and then they can pick it up.”

-Hannah Arendt, On Revolution

This thesis is the culmination of nearly two years of research. This project was incredibly instructive and greatly enriched both my computational abilities as well as my historical sensibilities. Pivoting between machine learning techniques and archival research was particularly difficult, but it was precisely that tension where the most meaningful insights emerged.

I began this thesis in hopes of bridging a divide between quantitative research and human narrative, to show that the two fields do not need to be divorced from each other. Statistical models reveal patterns that would otherwise remain hidden, while historical sources fill in the gaps and contextualize those patterns in their respective field. To combine them is to garner a fuller understanding of the dynamics behind collective action.

But as I conclude this project, I am leaving it changed in a way that could never have anticipated. This project revealed to me the unimaginable lengths that humans are willing to go –and the impossible burdens they are willing to undertake–for a cause that they believe in. I learned of stories of heroism that seem almost mythical, of individuals risking imprisonment, dismemberment, exile, and death so that others may be blessed by a freedom they would never see.

But studying social movements also revealed a darker evil in the world. Social movements are drowning in stories of torture and murder conducted indiscriminately on men, women, and children. All too often, this violence was so easy to justify, as a way of getting back for past crimes. But what struck me most was how the vilest acts were often not conducted by fanatics, but by individuals who never stopped to question their actions, callous and indifferent to the slaughter. Violence became mundane, and cruelty arose not out of hatred, but from obedience and disregard.

This uncomfortable truth is what makes the study of social movements so important. The study of social movements is ultimately the studying of people amid times of turmoil. It is the study of individuals pushing for great change, but also those resisting it. It is the study of the limits of human possibility. Collective action does not emerge as the result of abstract forces, but from the choices of countless individuals weighing fear against hope, loyalty against conscience, and survival against principle.

The statistical models used in this project revealed broad patterns governing collective action not easily seen by the human eye: the conditions that lead to success, the pressures that fracture them, and the structural forces shaping their trajectory. But understanding why individuals rise up requires turning to history, and telling the stories of the individuals who lived these experiences, shared in their successes, and suffered the consequences.

But the lessons gleaned from this project stretch far beyond the field of history. Social movements are a permanent feature of civilization that push society along the path of progress. By studying these events of the past, we gain not only a clearer understanding of history, but a deeper

appreciation for the extraordinary capacity of ordinary people to reshape the political order around them.

And perhaps that is the most important lesson of all: history is not just the story of kings, generals, or institutions. It is the story of individuals—people not so different from ourselves—who, when the moment arrives, decide whether to step aside or step up.

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