**Protest and Institutional Change**[[1]](#endnote-1)

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**Abstract:** This article studies how social protest contributes to institutional reforms in both new and established democracies. The author evaluates the effect of social protest on changes in the protection of workers’ rights, women’s political rights, and the ability of other branches of government to constrain chief executives. Three important findings emerge in this regard: strikes promote worker’s rights while general strikes advance women’s political rights in the presence of an independent judiciary. Additionally, anti-government demonstrations constrain executives while riots empower them when the government is cohesive. Regarding the mechanisms behind these changes, the analysis reveals that whereas the effects of strikes on workers’ rights are not institutionally mediated, general strikes can affect women’s political rights indirectly through the institution of an independent judiciary. Antigovernment demonstrations and riots can likewise affect executive constraints indirectly, through the behavior of actors in other branches of government.

Keywords: social protest, institutional reforms, democracy

Protest is a familiar manifestation of political behavior in modern democratic settings (Dalton et al. 2010; Johnston 2011). Some time ago, scholars coined the term “modular” to refer to its use by multiple constituencies with diverse objectives (Tarrow 1998, 37-40). While protesters may not have to fear for their personal integrity (political imprisonment, torture, disappearance, or extra judicial killing) in most democracies today, many new democracies do not live up to their full potential in the areas of representativeness, accountability, equality and participation (Foweraker and Krznaric 2000, 2003, 314-315; Freedom House 2012; Lijphart 1993, 149). Instead, some are far from attaining the ideal of a political system that, in perfecting these attributes, creates the conditions for broad and equal citizenship among its subjects (Tilly 2007).[[2]](#endnote-2)

This article looks at how social protest contributes to institutional reforms in both new and established democracies. Scholars interested in social movements have for decades debated democracy’s effect on dissent—that is, whether democracy increases or dampens protest. Comparatively speaking, less has been written about how protest affects democracy (Giugni 1998, 1999).[[3]](#endnote-3) While social protest is linked with measures of good governance (Welzel et al. 2005, 140), little is known about how precisely protest activity results in institutional reforms.[[4]](#endnote-4)

It is by now well established that social movements can change their environment in three different ways: by elevating the status of challengers vis-à-vis third parties and authorities; catalyzing changes in policy; and bringing about transformations in society, the political system, and/or prevailing beliefs (Kitschelt 1986; Giugni 1998, 1999). Social movement scholars have particularly focused on changes in government policy as a measurable outcome of protest activity since these changes can be more easily measured and explained than the whole range of movement outcomes (Giugni 1999, xxii). This article examines systemic changes instead, both because they matter in their own right, and because they can alter power relations between social movements and their surroundings.

I define reforms as changes to the rules governing society that transcend discrete policies, leading to “behavioral regularities” (Greif and Laitin 2004, 635). While these changes need not be permanent or formal, it is important that they go beyond the expression of norms or expectations that may not be properly enforced. Consequently, we speak of reforms when changes in the polity “motivate, coordinate, and enable individuals to follow particular regularities of behavior.” (Greif and Laitin 2004, 635). As markers of institutional reform, the article evaluates the effect of social protest on changes in the protection of workers’ rights, women’s political rights, and the ability of other branches of government to constrain chief executives. Three important findings emerge in this regard: strikes promote worker’s rights while general strikes advance women’s political rights. Additionally, anti-government demonstrations constrain executives while riots empower them when the government is cohesive. Regarding the mechanisms behind these changes, the analysis reveals that whereas strikes affect workers’ rights directly, general strikes affect women’s political rights indirectly through the institution of an independent judiciary. Antigovernment demonstrations and riots likewise constraint the executive indirectly, through the behavior of actors in other branches of government.

I begin the article by discussing how to conceptualize and measure democratic governance and institutional reforms. I then offer some observations on the kinds of protest activities that are most likely to take place in democracies and the mechanisms linking these protests to institutional reforms. The fourth section presents an analysis of democratic governance followed by a study of the determinants of democratic reforms in 78 countries from 1994-2007. The final section concludes with some ideas for shaping policy.

**Markers of Democratic Reform**

The most expansive definitions of liberal democracy sketch a vision of society where individuals enjoy certain rights or freedoms in both the private domain and the political arena (Welzel 2013). These freedoms should result in a great deal of individual and collective representation, meaningful participation, vertical accountability, and equality of opportunities for citizens. For the purposes of this article, I take the existence of many imperfect democracies—particularly in the developing world—as a reality and argue that changes that result in a more accountable and participatory political system can be considered indicators of institutional reform. I make the assumption that guaranteeing and protecting certain rights helps democracies become more equitable and representative, but the analysis I present is more definitive with respect to changes that make democracies more participatory and accountable.[[5]](#endnote-5) Political scientists tend to focus on representation and participation, the two processes that serve to minimally distinguish democratic regimes from their alternatives, but how governments create political accountability is equally important. I have selected three measures of reform for consideration: the protection of workers’ rights; the protection of women’s political rights; and more constrained executives.

Workers’ rights refer to the freedom of association at the workplace and the right to bargain collectively with employers, as well as “the prohibition on the use of any form of forced or compulsory labor; a minimum age for the employment of children; and acceptable conditions of work with respect to minimum wages, hours of work, and occupational safety and health” (Cingranelli and Richards 2010).[[6]](#endnote-6) Women’s political rights refer to women’s right to vote, run for political office, hold elected and appointed government positions, join political parties, and petition government officials (Cingranelli and Richards 2010). Executive constraints include “the extent to which the executive can make decisions unilaterally, can be held accountable” (Converse and Kapstein 2008, 136), and have its proposals defeated by other branches of government (Kapstein and Converse 2008, 55).

These measures of reform are clearly related to questions about the quality of democracy. Beginning with Dahl (1971, 3), political scientists have conceived of democracy as a system that provides certain institutional guarantees: the freedom to form and join organizations; freedom of expression; the right to vote; the right to compete for political support; the existence of broad eligibility for public office; alternative sources of information; free and fair elections; and institutions for linking government policies to votes and other expressions of citizens’ preferences. [[7]](#endnote-7) As we can see, five of these guarantees invoke the words “freedom,” “free,” or “right”. Historically, the freedoms Dahl enumerates also went hand in hand with increased representation and participation (Diamond 1999; Zakaria 2004). In the last few decades, however, many new democracies demonstrated severe deficiencies in their ability to guarantee and protect various human rights (e.g., Foweraker and Krznaric 2002). In some countries, the government is technically chosen through popular contests, but civil liberties may not be fully guaranteed or extensively protected (Freedom House, 2012). This phenomenon has led some to refer to these countries as “illiberal democracies” (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 440; Diamond 1999, 4).[[8]](#endnote-8)

Dahl clearly intended democracy to be synonymous with a broad and equal exercise of citizenship. His eight institutional guarantees, however, are not broad enough to encompass what some refer to as economic and social rights. As some scholars have argued, high quality democracies not only protect rights, but also establish equality of opportunities (Franceschet and Macdonald 2004). To the extent some individuals and groups have inherited disadvantages that make it difficult for them to realize their true potential, the state can enact policies to compensate for these disadvantages (Welzel 2013, 45). [[9]](#endnote-9) An important question then is whether social protest helps protect or guarantee certain social and economic rights such as women’s political rights and workers’ rights. This is different from trying to identify particular outcomes that can be seen as indicators of the existence of these rights (e.g., generous social spending). The objective therefore is to focus on the medium- and long-term *consequences* of social movement activities rather than their immediate outcomes (Giugni 1998).

Dahl’s framework is minimalist, that is, it includes as few elements as necessary to make it possible to use analytically. In this conception, democracy is simply a set of procedures that are certain (known to all) for arriving at outcomes that are uncertain and collectively binding (Przeworski 1991). Dahl’s framework, however, begs asking to what extent regime definitions should include characteristics of the political system that transcend the process of forming a government. As Munck (2009, 124-5) persuasively argued, empowering the demos to have a periodic say in the making of state policies does not guarantee that these contests will result in policies that are congruent with the wishes of a majority or even a plurality of the population. The government should, thorough its actions, remain accountable to the people, particularly in the middle of the electoral cycle when the citizens are not able to use the ballot box to pass judgment on their elected representatives (Powell 2004).

The second set of reforms to be evaluated concerns then not human rights, but changes in political institutions or their operation. Western democratic theory has a strong normative preference for polities where the executive has parity with or is subordinate to a legislature, the assembled representatives of the people.[[10]](#endnote-10) The presence of strong presidents that do not seem very accountable to other branches of government or their electorates, particularly in Latin America, has led some to contrast these systems, which O’Donnell (1994) referred to as “delegative democracies,” with truly accountable ones.[[11]](#endnote-11) Along with O’Donnell, I see delegative democracies as lacking horizontal accountability. Consequently, I ask to what extent checks on the executive are empirically related to Dahl’s regime dimensions and examine the possibility that political protest may push democracies in the direction of more horizontal accountability. The following section describes the measures of political protest used in the analysis and their expected effects.

**Predictors of Democratic Reform**

Two factors are likely to matter in studying the effects of protest activity on institutional reforms. Both have received extensive treatment since their effects seem to depend on the societal context. The first concerns social movement tactics and the likelihood of success, that is, which types of activities lead to success from the movement’s standpoint and why. Specifically, I compare peaceful rallies or demonstrations and strikes on the one hand, and violent riots on the other. The second concerns the presence of allies in the political and other arenas that could mediate the activities of social movement organizations.

Previous research has drawn a clear distinction between political challenges that aim to overthrow the ruling regime and those that attempt “to affect policy and leadership, usually through nonviolent means” (Schatzman 2005, 298). The two types of challenges are usually referred to as “rebellion” and “protest,” with anti-government demonstrations, general strikes, and riots constituting the protest dimension.[[12]](#endnote-12) Some classic studies viewed violence as a symptom of success, not a cause of it. That is, movements were more likely to use violence once they had achieved some notoriety (Gamson 1990). But scholars have not spent as much time comparing the outcomes of violent versus nonviolent protest. The question of movement tactics, however, is likely to affect whether publics and elites come to support and/or identify with the goals and tactics of social movement actors.

To distinguish between different social movement tactics, I rely on yearly counts of three indicators of mass political protest—anti-government demonstrations, general strikes, and riots—all derived from Banks (2007) Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive (CNTSDA). Not only is the CNTSDA one of the most widely used sources of political data; [[13]](#endnote-13) these three indicators are also common in studies of social protest, regime change, and political conflict (e.g., Schatzman 2005). Anti-government demonstrations are peaceful rallies of at least 100 participants; general strikes are coordinated campaigns of disruption involving at least 1,000 workers and more than one employer; and riots are violent demonstrations by more than 100 citizens.[[14]](#endnote-14)

In a world where “the effects of social movements are often indirect, unintended, and sometimes even in contradiction to their goals” (Giugni 1998, 386), the indicators of protest used here are proximate enough to the outcomes we want to assess—democratic reforms – to enable us to draw valid causal inferences. At the same time, and where possible, I exclude rallies whose primary targets are third parties. Demonstrations and general strikes, for example, refer to actions that target the national/central government explicitly. Riots may or may not target the national government, and workers and their unions typically target employers, with significant political implications. Consequently, I use a measure of strikes and lockouts (as opposed to general strikes) in the model for workers’ rights.[[15]](#endnote-15)Conveniently, these protest indicators are not too proximate to the outcomes in question to render the analysis tautological. The measures, that is, do not reduce dissidents’ goals to their participation in one of these events, as in the case of other contentious events coded by Banks, such as guerrilla warfare and revolutions.

Finally, the fact that these events are high profile, and that consistency in coding has been maintained across time and space, means that bias resulting from underreporting of events not deemed newsworthy by the media is not likely to be very large.[[16]](#endnote-16) Since all the countries analyzed are democracies, the reported event counts should also be fairly accurate. Nevertheless, this does not mean media reports are completely free of bias and as such I take certain precautions (which I detail in the empirical section) to ensure that the results are robust to these potential problems.

The literature is clearer with respect to the role political and other elites play in channeling direct action in the direction of the political system, economy, or society (Giugni 1998, xxi; Koopmans 1999, 105). Social movements tend to benefit from the presence of these allies. These actors can be seen as part of the political opportunity structure, the “consistent-but not necessarily formal or permanent dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (Tarrow, 1994, 85).

While scholars agree that political opportunities matter, they disagree on how precisely they do. The answer depends, inter alia, on whether one is interested in how a movement fares over time, or how different social movements fare at a given point in time. The end result, however, is that “opportunity variables are often not disproved, refined, or replaced, but simply added” (Meyer 2004: 135). My intention is not to add yet more complexity to this discussion, but simply to find indicators of variation in the political opportunity that are likely to be valid within countries and reliable across them. The article evaluates two variables that can be validly and reliably coded for different countries: the partisan alignment across and within different branches of government, and judicial independence.[[17]](#endnote-17) A few paragraphs are in order about the choice of these variables.

Social movement success may depend critically on how cohesive ideologically and institutionally the government is (Johnston 2011, 39-40). The measure of cohesion I use, the Political Constraints (POLCON) index, is based on a spatial model of congruence in party control within and across branches of government (Henisz and Zelner 2010). The index, which ranges from 0 to 1 (0 being the most cohesive, 1 the least), can be used to indicate how far particular branches of government deviate from an existing policy regime.[[18]](#endnote-18) Since higher values indicate less alignment, I label this alignment within and across different branches of government *partisan nonalignment*.

The second political opportunity structure I examine is the presence of an *independent judiciary*, which some see as central to the idea of equal protection before the law (Carothers, 2006). Judicial independence is the institutionalized isolation or protection of the judiciary from outside influences, giving judges the capacity to think and act independently (Russell 2001). When the judiciary has the right to rule on the constitutionality of legislative acts and executive

decrees, judges at the highest level enjoy lengthy tenures, the executive cannot directly appoint or remove judges, and actions of the executive and legislative branch can be challenged in the courts, the judiciary is generally regarded as independent. Yet as Helmke and Rosenbluth (2009) have argued, it is precisely in those countries where the rule of law and an independent judiciary seem to be most needed where they are harder to find. For data on this institution, I rely on Cingranelli and Richards (2010), who provide a measure of judicial independence that seems to be inspired by *de jure* considerations of what a fully independent judiciary would look like while distinguishing between *de facto* partial and no judicial independence (Ríos-Figueroa and Staton 2011, 10).

Although an independent judiciary seems to be part of the definition of a constrained executive (Marshall et al. 2011, 24), the pairwise correlation between these two variables for the sample of countries I analyze is actually not large (*r*=0.45; *p*<0.000). As Helmke and Rosenbluth (2009, 358) make clear, many poor and newer democracies are characterized by a great deal of judicial instability even after consolidating their democratic regimes along other dimensions. The notion of judicial independence also appears to be logically connected to the fragmentation of power expected of highly competitive political systems and its attendant manifestation—partisan nonalignment. While the correlation between *judicial independence* and the *partisan nonalignment* indicator in the sample analyzed is statistically significant, it is not very high (*r*=0.25; p<0.000). Consequently, I make use of both as mediators of the effect of political protest on institutional reforms.

**A Descriptive Analysis of Political Regimes**

I look at the determinants of institutional reforms in 78 democracies from 1994 to 2007. Data availability does not allow me to include recent episodes of mass protest in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Nevertheless, 1994 can be considered a suitable starting point for the analysis since it marks the beginning of a post-Cold War world in which numerous countries that had transited to democracy in the previous two decades had begun to consolidate their democratic gains. The approach I follow is to first derive a series of indicators of political regimes that can be used as a baseline in the subsequent analysis of institutional reforms. Following Dahl (1971), I conceive of regimes as exhibiting a certain number of dimensions that are empirically verifiable and that make some countries minimally democratic. Individual components of these dimensions can be identified as institutional variables and variation in these variables modeled as institutional reforms. My approach is heavily inductive as I seek to build on the theoretical and empirical work of scholars that have thought about how best to conceptualize and measure political regimes.

Dahl claimed that the eight institutional guarantees he enumerated made it possible to distinguish between two regime dimensions —contestation and inclusiveness. Contestation refers to the existence of parties and politicians from which citizens can choose the one(s) most closely aligned with their preferences. Inclusiveness refers to the ability of as many citizens as possible to participate in the selection of their leaders and policies. In a widely cited study, Coppedge et al. (2008) confirmed the existence of Dahl’s (1971) two regime dimensions for the post-World War II period. Using exploratory factor analysis, the authors examined the most commonly used indicators of political regimes and found that for most years, they indeed clustered in two clearly distinct yet correlated empirical dimensions, which they identified as “contestation” and “inclusiveness.” Their analysis, however, did not include measures of social and economic rights.

The most recent time period Coppedge et al. (2008) examined, 1981-2000, overlaps to some extent with the time period in my analysis (1994-2007), but one of the variables they factor-analyzed, Bollen’s *extent of the suffrage*—an index of the percentage of the population twenty years or older that has the right to vote in national elections—did not extend past the year 2000. Nevertheless, I created a similar measure by calculating the voting age population as a percentage of the overall population, and was indeed able to reproduce the results in Coppedge et al. (2008) using all fourteen variables they included.[[19]](#endnote-19) Similar to Coppedge et al. (2008), who were able to explain 71% of the variance in their data, the overall variance explained by my analysis was 69%.

I then made a few adjustments to their analysis. First, I dropped one of the variables they used, the ordinal indicator of *civil liberties* from Freedom House, and added Freedom House’s indicator of *freedom of the press*. My rationale for doing this is that the civil liberties measure goes beyond the basic freedoms Dahl enumerated to include institutions designed to uphold these freedoms such as an independent judiciary and the rule of law. Freedom House also includes in this measure property and other rights that are best examined separately. The adjustments, however, should not change the results too much since the civil liberties indicator includes information on freedom of expression, association, and assembly that is already coded separately.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Next, I added to this list a number of variables tapping into other freedoms that, if upheld and protected, should render democracies more representative, participatory, accountable, and egalitarian. These rights probably matter as much to the quality of democracy after the Third Wave as the basic civil and political rights Dahl enumerated. These include the *rights to physical integrity* aggregated as an index, *worker’s rights*, *women’s social rights*, and *women’s economic rights*, all derived from the CIRI Human Rights Data Project (Cingranelli and Richards 2010). Although these rights are all enumerated in the Freedom House ordinal measure of civil liberties, it is important to analyze them separately since Dahl himself did not draw links between particular freedoms and his two regime dimensions.

To explore how many latent factors give rise to these variables, I rely on confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). CFA allows us to test hypotheses about the structure of factors, add covariances between pairs of observed and latent variables, and derive various measures of model fit. Compared to the principal components factor analyses Coppedge et al. (2008) performed, CFA also models each variable’s random error (Acock 2013: 12). Table 1 presents the factors, their loadings (or coefficients) and standard errors for the eighteen variables examined.

**Table 1 Dimensions of Political Regimes, 1994-2007**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Variable* | *Component* | *Coefficient* | *Source* |
| Freedom of the press | Human rights | 0.907\*\*\* | Freedom House |
|  |  | (0.005) |  |
| Political rights | Human rights | -0.978\*\*\* | Freedom House |
|  |  | (0.002) |  |
| Freedom of speech | Human rights | 0.728\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.013) |  |
| Freedom of assembly and association | Human rights | 0.725\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.013) |  |
| Freedom of electoral self-determination | Human rights | 0.804\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.010) |  |
| Physical integrity rights index | Human rights | 0.583\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.017) |  |
| Workers' rights | Human rights | 0.536\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.019) |  |
| Competitiveness of participation | Political | 0.783\*\*\* | Polity IV |
|  | competition | (0.011) |  |
| Executive constraints | Political | 0.937\*\*\* | Polity IV |
|  | competition | (0.004) |  |
| Regime type | Political | 0.831\*\*\* | Cheibub |
|  | competition | (0.009) |  |
| Competition indicator | Political | 0.826\*\*\* | Vanhanen |
|  | competition | (0.009) |  |
| Competitiveness of executive recruitment | Political | 0.885\*\*\* | Polity IV |
|  | competition | (0.006) |  |
| Openness of executive recruitment | Political | 0.496\*\*\* | Polity IV |
|  | competition | (0.020) |  |
| Suffrage | Inclusiveness | 0.803\*\*\* | IDEA |
|  |  | (0.014) |  |
| Women's political rights | Inclusiveness | 0.512\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.022) |  |
| Participation indicator | Inclusiveness | 0.752\*\*\* | Vanhanen |
|  |  | (0.016) |  |
| Women's economic rights | Inclusiveness | 0.649\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.019) |  |
| Women's social rights | Inclusiveness | 0.770\*\*\* | CIRI |
|  |  | (0.014) |  |
| N | 1505 |  |  |
| Countries included | 149 |  |  |
| CFI | 0.930 |  |  |
| RMSEA | 0.091 |  |  |
| CD | 0.997 |  |  |

Note: Variable variances and intercepts not shown. Standardized coefficients reported.

As Table 1 indicates, three factors I have named “Human rights,” “Political competition,” and “Inclusiveness,” are clearly recognizable in the data.[[21]](#endnote-21) The first factor, for example, groups most of the civil and political rights that serve to distinguish democracies from autocracies such as the freedoms of *speech*, *assembly and association*, and *electoral self-determination*, as well as the *physical integrity* rights index and *workers’ rights*,. The results indicate that social and economic rights such as *worker’s rights* are important to the measurement of political regimes, although the coefficient on this variable is smaller than those of other indicators. The high loading of *freedom of the press* on this factor indicates that a free press helps guarantee and uphold human rights.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Component number two, which I have labeled “Political competition”, correlates highly with features of the political system that help make governments more competitive, such as having the smaller parties capture a greater share of the votes cast in parliamentary or presidential elections (witness the high loading of the *competition* indicator on this factor), or an executive that is subordinate to or faces parity with other branches of government (*executive constraints*). The variable indicating whether the regime is democratic or authoritarian – regime type – and *competitiveness of executive recruitment* also load highly on this factor.

Finally, the third factor groups the variables *suffrage*, *women’s political rights*, *participation*, *women’s economic rights*, and *women’s social rights*. The latter two are social and economic rights not loading in the “Human rights” dimension and it is noticeable in this regard that they correlate strongly with other measures of participation. We live in times when suffrage restrictions based on gender, race, educational or other ascriptive qualifications have become increasingly rare. As a result, my interpretation of this factor is that by granting women economic, social, and political rights, countries elevate their status vis-à-vis men and help secure greater and perhaps qualitatively more meaningful political participation.

Since no variable has a low loading, i.e., a coefficient below 0.4 (Davidov 2009, 67), all variables seem relevant to the analysis. The CFA, moreover, fits the data well according to the model diagnostics. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is 0.091 when a value of 0.08 or lower is recommended (Acock 2013, 24). It is important to note, however, that the global scope of the analysis – 149 countries of all regime stripes – would make it difficult to obtain less noisy results. Furthermore, the comparative fit index (CFI), a measure of how much better a model does compared to a model in which indicator variables are assumed to be unrelated, is 0.93. This statistic should be greater than 0.9 (Acock 2013: 23), with a maximum possible of 1 and a minimum of 0. Finally, the coefficient of determination (or CD), which is akin to an R² in regression analysis, is 0.997, indicating that most of the variation in the indicator variables is accounted for by the latent factors.

This initial phase of the analysis allows me to verify the validity of selecting an individual component (*workers’ rights*, *women’s political rights*, and *executive constraints*) from each factorfor more in-depth analysis. Collective labor rights are considered a special kind of human right (Mosley and Uno 2007, 924) even though democracies should uniformly guarantee them. Of particular interest to us then is the extent to which some countries also provide other employment-related protections to workers.[[23]](#endnote-23) *Workers’ rights* is originally coded as an ordinal variable with three categories: “[a] score of 0 indicates that workers’ rights were severely restricted; a score of 1 indicates that workers’ rights were somewhat restricted; and a score of 2 indicates that workers’ rights were fully protected during the year in question” (Cingranelli and Richards 2010).

*Executive constraints* is a seven-point categorical variable, but our analysis of institutional reform relies only on three of these categories: 5, 6, and 7. Category 5 is reserved for countries in which “the executive has more effective authority than any accountability group but is subject to substantial constraints by them”; level 6 is an intermediate category, and 7 is reserved for countries in which there is executive parity or subordination to other groups or branches of government (Marshall et al. 2011, 25). Recent work has demonstrated how important executive constraints are for democratic consolidation. Kapstein and Converse (2008, xv) claim, for example, that “young democracies must put into place institutions and policies that disperse political and economic power if they are to survive.” Svolik (2014) shows that democracies never really consolidate against the risk of an incumbent takeover.

Finally, *women’s political rights* is a variable with four categories ranging from rights not being codified in the law (a score of 0) to rights being guaranteed in both the law and practice (a score of 3). Recent work has persuasively demonstrated “the critical avenue of policy influence” social movements represent for women and workers in established democracies (Weldon 2011, 1). The following section evaluates the effects of protest on these outcomes.

**Explaining Institutional Reforms**

In determining the population of countries suitable for the analysis, I decided to employ a qualitative judgment of what countries would at least qualify as minimally or procedurally democratic. Cheibub et al. (2010, 69) define a democracy as a country where the chief executive is chosen “by popular election or by a body that was itself popularly elected,” the legislature is popularly elected, there is more than one party competing in elections, and “an alternation in power under electoral rules identical to the ones that brought the incumbent to office must have taken place.” According to the Polity IV codebook, “5” is the ﬁrst value at which there are substantial limitations on executive power. To be a democracy then, a country had to have a value of “1” in Cheibub et al.’s dichotomous coding of democratic regimes and a value of “5” or more in Polity’s measure of executive constraints.[[24]](#endnote-24) Finally, I also excluded those observations where authority characteristics are not stable due to civil war, foreign occupation, or a protracted regime transition. If a Polity score of “6” or greater, a commonly used metric, is used instead to delineate the relevant population, the sample only increases by four observations, providing confidence in the procedure used to select the population. Appendix A presents a list of countries included in the analysis. Appendix B provides a brief description of the control variables included in the regression models.

Turning now to the empirical analysis, I estimated three regression equations using multinomial ordered probit models. The choice of model is dictated by the nature of the dependent variables, which in all cases consist of limited categorical outcomes that are given in ascending order, but where one cannot presume that a change from category 1 to 2 is equivalent to a change from category 2 to 3. Coefficients reflect the decrease/increase in probability attributed to a one-unit increase in a given predictor. However, the exact increase in probability depends on both the starting value of the predictor as well as on the values of the other predictors.[[25]](#endnote-25)

An argument could be made that protests, rather than the cause of more or less protection for workers and more or less constrained executives, could be a response to a lack of rights or heavy-handed executives. I address this endogeneity by employing both contemporaneous and lagged versions of *anti-government demonstrations*, *general strikes*, and *riots* in the model for *workers’ rights*. Social protest most probably affects *executive constraints* with a considerable lag. Consequently, I exclude contemporaneous measures of protest from this model. Finally, I use lagged versions of the two political opportunity structure variables (*partisan alignment* and *judicial independence*)in the model for *executive constraints*. This also controls for the possibility that, in response to a heavy-handed executive, the judiciary acts less independently or citizens vote in a divided government.

If political opportunity variables are seen as mediating the effect of social protest on institutional reform, it is important to enter these variables individually as well as interacted with the measures of social protest. Table 2 presents the results of the three regression models estimated.

**Table 2 Determinants of Institutional Reforms in Democracies, 1994-2007**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Independent variable** | **Workers’ Rights** | **Executive Constraints** | **Women’s Political Rights** |
| Left executive/Political competition | 0.514\*\*\* |  | 2.639\*\*\* |
|  | (0.199) |  | (0.586) |
| Durability | 0.004 | 0.010 | -0.009\* |
|  | (0.003) | (0.008) | (0.005) |
| Fractionalization | -1.016\*\*\* | 1.901\*\*\* | -0.642 |
|  | (0.358) | (0.481) | (0.509) |
| GDP per capita | 0.000 | 0.000\*\*\* | 0.000\*\*\* |
|  | (0.000) | (0.000) | (0.000) |
| Inequality | -0.003 | 0.025\* | -0.005 |
|  | (0.012) | (0.015) | (0.018) |
| Oil rents | -0.035 | -0.063\*\*\* | -0.017 |
|  | (0.033) | (0.010) | (0.023) |
| Globalization | -0.021\* | 0.030\*\*\* | 0.028\*\*\* |
|  | (0.011) | (0.007) | (0.009) |
| Demonstrations | 0.142 |  | -0.023 |
|  | (0.262) |  | (0.279) |
| (General) strikes | 0.000 |  | -1.765\*\*\* |
|  | (0.002) |  | (0.454) |
| Riots | 0.304 |  | 0.282 |
|  | (0.670) |  | (0.431) |
| Partisan nonalignment | 2.349\*\* | 0.454 | 0.680 |
|  | (1.022) | (0.410) | (1.260) |
| Partisan nonalignment\*demonstrations | -0.291 |  | 0.502 |
| (0.428) |  | (0.617) |
| Partisan nonalignment\*strikes | -0.001 |  | 0.149 |
|  | (0.004) |  | (1.108) |
| Partisan nonalignment\*riots | -0.119 |  | 0.069 |
|  | (0.912) |  | (0.882) |
| Judicial independence | 0.306 | 0.291 | -0.600\*\*\* |
|  | (0.196) | (0.204) | (0.207) |
| Judicial independence\*demonstrations | -0.071 |  | -0.216 |
|  | (0.111) |  | (0.139) |
| Judicial independence\*strikes | 0.000 |  | 1.160\*\*\* |
|  | (0.000) |  | (0.269) |
| Judicial independence\*riots | -0.236 |  | -0.155 |
|  | (0.248) |  | (0.157) |
|  |  | 0.374 |  |
|  |  | (0.599) |  |
|  |  | -0.154 |  |
|  |  | (0.167) |  |
|  | 0.009 | 0.175\*\*\* |  |
|  | (0.063) | (0.062) |  |
|  | 0.001\*\*\* | 0.368 |  |
|  | (0.000) | (0.323) |  |
|  | -0.065 | -0.401\*\*\* |  |
|  | (0.091) | (0.150) |  |
|  |  | -0.004 |  |
|  |  | (0.015) |  |
|  |  | -0.399\* |  |
|  |  | (0.233) |  |
|  |  | -2.574\*\*\* |  |
|  |  | (0.686) |  |
|  |  | 1.101\*\*\* |  |
|  |  | (0.333) |  |
|  |  | -0.022 |  |
|  | (0.062) |  |
|  |  | 0.264 |  |
|  | (0.161) |  |
|  |  | 0.013 |  |
|  |  | (0.080) |  |
| Number of countries | 58 | 78 | 76 |
| Number of observations: | 567 | 1411 | 742 |

Notes: Strikes and lockouts are used to model workers’ rights, general strikes to model executive constraints and women’s political rights. Coefficients imply probabilities. Robust standard errors to adjust for any pattern of heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation are given in parentheses. All models include a constant (not reported) and random effects for countries.

As Table 2 indicates, the results for the most part support the hypothesized relationships, particularly for the stock variables expected to control for the historical tendency of certain countries to be more democratic than others. As expected, left governments and political competition increase workers rights and women’s political rights respectively. Table 2 also reveals that *strikes and lockouts* in the previous year help promote workers’ rights in the current one.

When a continuous variable is interacted with another continuous variable, the coefficient on the individual variables return their effect when the other variable is “0.” Considering the statistically significant coefficients for *anti-government demonstrations* and *riots* in the model of *executive constraints*, and the significant interactive effects between these two variables and *partisan nonalignment*, the individual coefficients on the protest variables reveal their effect when *policy nonalignment* is “0,” that is, when the government is cohesive. As a result, we are able to conclude that *demonstrations* in the prior year constrain executives the following year when the government in the prior year is also cohesive. When the government is divided, they instead empower the chief executive. The opposite pattern holds for *riots*,empowering chief executives when the government is cohesive, constraining them when there are competing power centers.

Partisan actors in the government matter then not only because they can channel grievances into the political system (Rice 2012, 20), but also because they shape the cohesion of the government. In Latin America from 1978 to 2003, for example, minority presidents were more likely to be challenged in the streets and to fall than majority executives (Hochstetler 2006). We also know that the proportional representation electoral rules common in Latin America tend to yield governments where the president’s party is in the minority in parliament. An important question then is why government cohesion functions differently depending on the form of protest dissidents use.

Dahl’s (1971) distinction between the costs of toleration and repression helps clarify these findings, as governments, in the face of overt dissent, have to choose from a spectrum of responses that ranges from yielding to protesters’ demands to going on the offensive against them. Peaceful rallies confer more legitimacy on protesters than violent ones. Consequently, chief executives may be more willing to accept constraints when protesters behave peacefully, particularly if other government branches are ideologically congruent with the executive and hence do not pose a threat to its agenda. A riot on the other hand can begin as a peaceful demonstration and then turn violent. We have no way of knowing whether *riots* occurred because protesters or the government used violence first, but we can reason that riots would be less legitimate in the public’s eye than demonstrations and that this would embolden executives that do not face political competition. By looking at *riots* and *partisan nonalignment* a year prior to the observed behavior of executives, we are thus more certain that our data is not simply picking up the reverse effect of protesters resorting to violence in response to a heavy-handed executive; most likely, executives became more constrained in response to rioters and other actors in the government.

Finally, it is important to note that *general strikes* are detrimental to *women’s political rights*, but not in the presence of *judicial independence*. Some have noted that a favorable political opportunity structure promotes high levels of women’s representation in the

executive and parliament (Waylen 2007, 522). A more independent judiciary serves to ensure that governments do not trample on the political rights of women.

**Conclusion**

This article has systematically examined the contribution of social protest to institutional reforms in democratic countries. As expected, other variables seem to matter for the quality of democracy around the world. Nevertheless, in at least two areas, social protest is having profound effects on the quality of democracy: respect for human rights and executive constraints. Strikes are prompting countries to increase respect for workers’ rights and peaceful protests forcing executives to behave less heavy-handedly, particularly in democracies with more cohesive governments. General strikes also seem to be spurring countries to uphold the rights of women in the political arena, particularly in countries with independent judiciaries. Not surprisingly, riots can sometimes diminish the quality of democratic governance by prompting executives to behave more heavy-handedly. The upside is that partisan non-alignment can significantly constrain executives in the presence of riots.

With respect to the political opportunity variables that can be expected to condition the effect of social protest on democracy, the results augur well for the future of democratic governance. Our findings reveal in this regard that countries become more democratic, that is, they guarantee and protect workers’ rights more, the less cohesive their governments. Somewhat expectedly, the effects of demonstrations and riots on executive constraints seem to depend on the cohesiveness of the government. It would not be realistic to expect the cohesion or fractiousness of political institutions and the availability of potential allies for social movements to have a uniform effect on executive constraints. Nevertheless, the results presented in this article demonstrate that social protest is helping countries deepen their democracies. They also call for more attention to the precise mechanisms linking social protest to more respect for human rights and more constrained executives.

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 **Appendix A: Countries included in the analysis**

|  |
| --- |
| Albania |
| Argentina |
| Armenia |
| Australia |
| Austria |
| Bangladesh |
| Belgium |
| Benin |
| Bolivia |
| Brazil |
| Bulgaria |
| Canada |
| Chile |
| Colombia |
| Costa Rica |
| Croatia |
| Czech Republic |
| Denmark |
| Dominican Republic |
| Ecuador |
| El Salvador |
| Estonia |
| Finland |
| France |
| Georgia |
| Germany |
| Germany West |
| Ghana |
| Greece |
| Guatemala |
| Honduras |
| Hungary |
| India |
| Indonesia |
| Ireland |
| Israel |
| Italy |
| Jamaica |
| Japan |
| Kenya |
| Korea South |
| Kyrgyzstan |
| Latvia |
| Lithuania |
| Macedonia |
| Mexico |
| Moldova |
| Mongolia |
| Nepal |
| Netherlands |
| New Zealand |
| Nicaragua |
| Nigeria |
| Norway |
| Pakistan |
| Panama |
| Papua New Guinea |
| Paraguay |
| Peru |
| Philippines |
| Poland |
| Portugal |
| Romania |
| Senegal |
| Slovakia |
| Slovenia |
| Spain |
| Sri Lanka |
| Sweden |
| Switzerland |
| Thailand |
| Trinidad and Tobago |
| Turkey |
| Ukraine |
| United Kingdom |
| United States |
| Uruguay |
| Venezuela |

**Appendix B: Control variables used in the regression analyses**

­- *Political competition*, a variable built from the factor scores for the second factor in the CFA, is included as a control in the model for women’s political rights. It stands to reason that more competitive political systems should be more likely to uphold women’s political rights.

- *Left executive*, a dummy variable indicating whether the party of the chief executive is left leaning or not, is only included in the model for workers’ rights. A voluminous literature suggests that countries with left governments do a better job enacting and protecting worker’s rights.

*- Durability* controls for the possibility that older democracies score higher in all empirical measures of reform. Durability is a measure of the length of time since the last regime transition derived from the Polity IV project (Marshall et al. 2011).

- Ethnic domination has long been seen as detrimental to democracy. Societal pluralism can cause different ethnic groups to struggle for control of the state (Alesina et al. 2003, 173), which can result in lower inclusiveness, less constrained executives, and less respect for human rights. I use an index of *ethnic fractionalization* based on ethno-politically relevant groups from the Ethnic Power Relations dataset (Weidmann et al. 2009).

*-* The most economically developed countries also tend to be the most democratic (Alemán and Yang 2011). Countries that are more developed also have populations that are more urbanized, educated, and self-expressive, all variables that have been found to lead to a greater incidence of mass protests (Dalton et al. 2010). Large urban concentrations, for example, make dissidents easier to recruit and organize, thereby facilitating the formation of opposition movements (Tilly 1978, 82). Citizens of more developed and urbanized environments are in turn more educated and autonomous. In so doing, they not only possess the capacity to engage in more frequent and visible forms of collective action, but also the identities that place a premium on presenting demands to the government and third parties for consideration. Although I am concerned with the effects of protest on democracy once protest has occurred, it is important to control in the analysis for the tendency of certain countries to be more democratic.

I use two measures of development derived from the World Development Indicators: *per capita GDP* in current international dollars, and *per capita GDP* in constant international dollars. The first measure is preferred whenever possible, as citizens not always experience the economy in inflation-adjusted terms. O’Donnell (1994), however, attributes the phenomenon of delegative democracy in part to the severity of the socioeconomic problems that newly installed democratic governments have inherited. To control for the possibility that presidents usurp more powers in response to adverse economic conditions, I introduce a measure of lagged economic growth in the model for *executive constraints*. Since this measure is adjusted for inflation, I model *executive constraints* using *GDP per capita* in constant terms. Both versions of this variable are given in purchasing power parity (PPP) units.

*- Inequality* in pre-tax, pre-transfer income has long been considered detrimental to democratic governance (Solt 2008). Great gaps in the income different classes receive may create grievances that make the wealthy less prone to tolerate equal and broad-based citizenship. As a result, market inequality could make institutional reforms more difficult to propose and implement. The measure of inequality used is the pre-tax, pre-transfer Gini coefficient from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt 2012).

*-* Countries that depend on natural resource wealth have long been considered inauspicious for democratic rule (Ross 2012). The unusually large rents oil generates reduce the need to tax the population, thereby depriving it of collective representation. Oil rents should also reduce accountability since the recipients of these rents tend to be state owned enterprises (with the exception of oil companies in the United States, which are in private hands). I use an indicator of *oil rents* from the World Development Indicators database that measures the difference between the value of crude oil production at world prices and total costs of production (as a percentage of GDP).

*-* There is no scholarly consensus on the effect of trade and capital flows on democracy (Coppedge 2012, 301-2). More openness to trade is known to improve labor conditions in particular (Flanagan 2006), but less is known about its effects on other aspects of democratic governance. I use a measure of economic *globalization* developed by Axel Dreher (2006) that weighs financial and trade flows as a percentage of GDP.[[26]](#endnote-26)

**Notes**

1. I would like to thank Moisés E. Arce, Mona El Ghobashy, Desmond King, Olena Nikolayenko, Roberta Rice, Bogdan Vasi, participants at the Fordham Politics brownbag, participants at the Politics and Protest Workshop at the CUNY Graduate Center, the 2013 Western Political Science “Violence and Protest against States” panel participants, and participants at the 2013 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting panel on “Protest and Democracy” for substantive comments. I would also like to thank Ida Bastiaens and Sophia Rabe-Hesketh for help with the regression models specified. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a regime to be truly democratic, citizens also have to be protected from arbitrary state action and engage in binding consultation on state policies and personnel. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Since 1974, political protest has helped bring democracy to a greater number of countries than ever before. Witness, for example, the color revolutions in the post-communist world (Diamond 2008, 191) and the Arab Spring that began in North Africa in 2011 and is still being felt throughout the Middle East. Once a new democratic regime has been installed, the expectation is that violent challenges will decline while nonviolent protest flourishes (Schatzman 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. As Weldon (2011, 3) remarks, “democracy tends to be a ‘dependent variable’ for sociologists. As a result, few scholars of social movements have assessed these movements in terms of their potential contribution to democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Social movements have not traditionally been seen as fulfilling a representative function. As Weldon (2011, 1) compellingly argues, however, “social movements are important avenues of political representation, especially for excluded and disadvantaged groups”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The complete definition of this and other human rights examined here can be found at: <http://ciri.binghamton.edu/documentation/ciri_variables_short_descriptions.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dahl used the term polyarchy—rule by the many—as a synonym for democracy, which he regarded as an ideal political regime. Democracies, Dahl implied, must “have substance, quality, and meaning. They must, over time, hear people’s voices, engage their participation, tolerate their protests, protect their freedoms, and respond to their needs” (Diamond 2008, 292). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The distinction between illiberal and liberal democracies originated from the observation that during the latter part of the Third Wave, “human rights violations have become widespread in countries that are formally democratic” (Diamond 1999, 34). Countries where competition to determine who rules does not ensure outcomes such as “high levels of freedom, equality, transparency, [and] social justice” (Diamond 2008, 23) are also referred to as formal or electoral democracies (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Munck 2009). Some refer to democracies that ensure these outcomes as “liberal democracies” (Freedom House 2012). Others go still further when they claim that corruption can prevent a government from being institutionally effective and hence accountable to the people (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, 154). They thus speak of “effective democracy” as a combination of liberal democracy and an environment free of corruption. For a full definition of the term “electoral democracy” and a comparison with “liberal democracy,” see the methodological appendix in Freedom House’s “Freedom in the World 2012” report; available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2012/methodology>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Whenever equality of opportunities is not the outcome of market activities, democratic governments can meet basic needs for food, shelter, education, and income security for every individual. See: <http://www.nesri.org/human-rights/economic-and-social-rights>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This is evident in how one of the most popular indicators of political regimes, the Polity IV project, codes countries on one of their authority characteristics, executive constraints. See Polity IV Project: Political Regimes Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2010 Dataset Users’ Manual, page 25; available at: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/p4manualv2010.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Other terms used to describe this phenomenon are hyper-presidentialism and “caesarism” (Casper 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Since we are only dealing with democracies that remain constitutionally intact (which excludes non-democracies and episodes of regime change), rebellion is not so relevant a behavior except when it overlaps with social protest. Nonviolent rebellions, scholars have found, tend to be more successful than violent ones (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See: <http://www.databanksinternational.com/> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For precise definitions of these variables, see: <http://dss.princeton.edu/access_data/codebooks/banks.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. I thank Desmond King for bringing this point to my attention. The source for annual counts of strikes and lockouts per country is the International Labour Organisation’s LABORSTA dataset, which can be accessed at http://laborsta.ilo.org/. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Annual counts of strikes and lockouts are based not on news media accounts, but on reports by each country’s labor ministry or other statistical agency. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Political opportunity “structures” and their effects tend to be considered in the aggregate, not individually. I thank John Krinsky for this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. More precisely, the index is calculated using the number of independent branches of government with veto power over policy change combined with measures of heterogeneity in party composition within the legislative and executive branches and congruence in party control across branches. A veto player is an individual, party, or political institution that can stop a change in policy from the status quo. See Henisz and Zelner (2010) for a more in depth discussion of this index. One of these veto players, the legislature, has been identified as a crucial explanator of cross-national variation in protest across Western European democracies (Nam 2007). According to Kitschelt (1986: 63), “the capacity of legislatures to develop and control policies independently of the executive” is a critical measure of its power. Since a weak legislature is unable to act as an intermediary between citizens and the government, dissidents in countries with a weak legislature cannot easily expect access to the government for the purposes of making their demands. Therefore, they are more inclined to protest than citizens in countries with a strong legislature. Although sympathetic to this view, it is important to remember that the power of legislatures vis-à-vis executives and their role in motivating social protests cannot be divorced from the larger question of the effect of executive constraints on the quality of democracy. Furthermore, since executive constraints are correlated with policy nonalignment among and within the different branches of government, I use the latter to try to explain variation in the former. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. My data on voting age populations comes from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA 2012); available at: <http://www.idea.int/vt/>. In the interest of saving space, I do not include definitions of the other thirteen variables. For descriptions of the remaining variables, see Coppedge et al. (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Cingranelli and Richards’ (2010) Human Rights Data Project. Freedom House’ indices of political rights and civil liberties are also very highly inter-correlated, causing problems if introduced in the same model simultaneously (Coppedge et al. 2008, 632). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Coppedge et al. (2008) label their first factor, which resembles factor 2 in my analysis, “Contestation.” Although the competitive aspect is common to both, *Political Competition* differs from “Contestation” in that the latter also includes the civil and political rights that are thought to make democracies competitive political regimes. In my analysis, these rights cohere separately in a third dimension or factor. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The political rights index is negatively signed because higher values imply fewer rights. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Surprisingly, out of the 730 country-year observations in my dataset, 83 belong to countries that do not provide the most minimal protection for workers’ rights according to Cingranelli and Richards’ (2010) coding. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Kapstein and Converse (2008, 56) similarly draw a distinction between countries with weak constraints on executive power (a value less than 5) and those with strong constraints on the executive (a value of 5 or greater). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Since the models include many stock variables, most of the variation they explain is cross-sectional rather than time-series. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See: <http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/> [↑](#endnote-ref-26)