Trends in
Cognitive Sciences

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Review

When Are Social Protests Effective?

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Around the world, people engage in social protests aimed at addressing major societal problems. Certain protests have led to significant progress, yet other protests have resulted in little demonstrable change. We introduce a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of social protest made up of three components: (i) what types of action are being considered; (ii) what target audience is being affected; and (iii) what outcomes are being evaluated? We then review relevant research to suggest how the framework can help synthesize conflicting findings in the literature. This synthesis points to two key conclusions: that nonviolent protests are effective at mobilizing sympathizers to support the cause, whereas more disruptive protests can motivate support for policy change among resistant individuals.

Importance of understanding the effects of social protest

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence in **social protests** (see Glossary) across the globe. Some have called the 2010s a decade of protest, beginning with the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement[i,ii] [1] (Figure 1). It seems that in the 2020s this trend has only accelerated, illustrated by massive Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests following the death of George Floyd, antiregime protests triggered by the murder of Mahsa Amini, and increasingly disruptive climate protests worldwide (e.g., Just Stop Oil protesters throwing soup on famous paintings). The dramatic increase in social protests necessitates a clear understanding of their role in driving social change. Indeed, both laypeople and scholars have begun to ask when social protests (Box 1) are effective, and to debate whether peaceful, more disruptive, or even violent protests are most effective for advancing social change[iii–v] [2–10]. However, the literature has not arrived at a conclusive answer to such questions.

Across fields, there are many findings indicating that **normative** and **nonviolent protests** generally tend to be most effective [5,9,11,12]. However, there is also empirical evidence that social protests are more effective when they are **nonnormative** but still nonviolent [7], involve violent **radical flanks** [8,13,14], or are even entirely **violent** [4,15–17]. While some may see such findings as conflicting, we contend that these disparate findings highlight the need for an integrative framework that defines what it means for collective action to be effective. Researchers may be operating based on different working definitions of effectiveness in terms of the outcome variable and target audience assessed to measure effectiveness. Thus, including these in a unified framework can help address gaps in the literature and advance our understanding of this important social process.

We offer a tailored approach to understanding the effectiveness of collective action and apply it to the literature through a review that organizes conflicting findings. Our approach is premised on the need to identify three critical components when evaluating when social protests will be effective: (i) the type of social protest; (ii) the type of audience; and (iii) the type of social change outcome. We outline this approach and then, to demonstrate why it may be useful to scholars of social protest, we use it to organize and review the literature in an attempt to make progress toward resolving seemingly contradictory findings. This Review suggests that normative

Highlights

Around the globe the amount and frequency of social protests have been increasing. However, we do not fully understand when such protests are effective. This is in part due to conflicting findings in the literature, and the lack of a framework that can integrate these divergent findings about why types of social protests are effective.

We introduce a framework for evaluating effectiveness of social protest made up of three components: (i) what types of action are being considered; (ii) what target audience is being affected; and (iii) what outcomes are being evaluated?

We apply our framework to organize the literature, and in doing so find a pattern that suggests that normative nonviolent forms of action may be most effective in mobilizing sympathetic target audiences, and more extreme disruptive action may be effective at motivating policy concessions from resistant target audiences.

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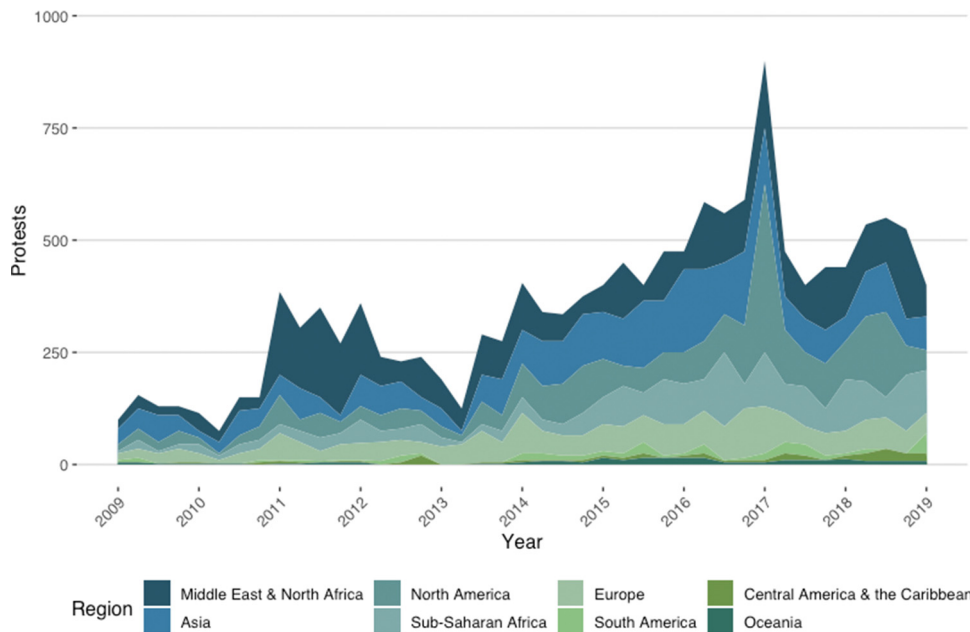
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Figure 1. Number of social protests over the past decade. Source for data used in graph: Brannen *et al.* (2020) [1]. These data track the number of annual protests rather than the number of people participating in each protest. They are useful for assessing the frequency of protest but not the size of protest movements.

nonviolent forms of protest tend to be more effective on the outcome of mobilization for sympathetic target audiences, while more nonnormative protests and sometimes even violent protests tend to be effective on the outcome of policy change among more resistant target audiences (Figure 2, Key figure).

A tailored approach to the effectiveness of social protest

Given our background in social psychology, we suggest that how we evaluate effectiveness needs to be tailored to the features of the situation, the social actors involved, and their interaction. Therefore, we argue that to understand whether social protest will be effective, we need to answer three questions: (i) what type of social protest; (ii) who is the target audience; and (iii) what is the outcome variable? These are not the only factors that determine the effectiveness of social protest, but we drew them from key features identified for evaluating the effectiveness of psychological interventions [18]. In addition, these factors represent the bare minimum specifications because when research is conducted some specific form of protest is being studied, evaluating effectiveness requires some sort of metric (i.e., outcome variable), and those effects must be observed among some population (i.e., target audience).

Types of social protest

Different types of protest can be categorized based on the tactics the protest group deploys. In political science and sociology, the focus has mostly been on comparing whether a social protest is nonviolent or violent, with violence typically defined as any action that causes direct harm to people or property. In addition, some scholars identified tactics that generate social disruption or involve active noncooperation with social systems [19,20] as a unique type of protest. Social psychologists have primarily categorized protest based on whether a protest abides by (normative protest) or violates the norms of the dominant social system (nonnormative protest) [7,21,22].

Glossary

Collective action: any action that individuals undertake as psychological group members and with the subjective goal to improve their group's conditions.
Nonnormative protest: a form of protest that violates the dominant norms of a society for expressing disagreement and discontent and disrupts typically cooperative interdependent relations in society.
Nonviolent protest: a form of protest that does not cause direct harm to people or property.
Normative protest: a form of protest that conforms to the dominant norms of a society for expressing disagreement and discontent.
Radical flank: a group that is more radical than the movement's moderate body in regard to their (i) tactical choices; (ii) political demands; or (iii) beliefs, choice of words, and openness to compromise.
Social movement: an organized effort by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspect or aspects of society.
Social protest: a form of political expression that seeks to bring about social or political change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public or the policies of an organization or institution.
Violent protest: a form of protest that causes direct harm to people or property.

> **Box 1. Terminology of social protest**
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> Sociology, political science, and psychology use a wide variety of terms with different shades of meaning to discuss the general phenomenon of social protests aimed at achieving social change. We chose the term social protest, because it is used frequently across disciplines, and it serves as a basic unit of analysis that can bridge the different perspectives of these disciplines. Social protest is defined as 'a form of political expression that seeks to bring about social or political change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public or the policies of an organization or institution' [66].
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> Research in psychology most often uses the term **collective action,** referring to 'any action that individuals undertake as psychological group members, and with the subjective goal to improve their group's conditions' [67]. While this term originated in philosophy and economics to describe issues where collaboration and coordination were required [68], in psychology it became embodied in the social identity approach and thus focuses on the individuals acting on behalf of a collective (with whom they identify). Because of the emphasis on the psychological connection an individual feels to a group, this definition includes any action an individual might take to improve the situation of the group. Thus, although this broad definition certainly includes social protests, it could refer to many other actions not conventionally thought of as protest. On the other hand, sociology and political science take a more organizational focus and thus usually put more of an emphasis on social movements, defined as an 'organized effort by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspect or aspects of society' [69]. Social movements thus refer to an organized series of protests (and perhaps other actions) over a long period of time. We use social protest here as a term that bridges these two literatures: a protest is a form of collective action, and it is also the basic unit of events that make up a larger social movement. It is also still general enough to include all different types of action (i.e., demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience, riots, are all specific examples of protest).

To effectively review and integrate these literatures, we propose a common terminology by combining the two systems of categorizing protest to produce three types of social protest [7]. First, normative nonviolent protest refers to any protest that is within socially accepted and legal norms of society and is also nonviolent, such as peaceful demonstrations, rallies, or petitions. Second, nonnormative nonviolent protest refers to forms of protest that are not societally normative but remain completely nonviolent, such as civil disobedience, strikes, sit-ins, and blocking roads, that violate norms or laws in order to disrupt usual cooperative relations. Thus, we use nonnormative to capture disruptive and noncooperative tactics highlighted by political scientists and sociologists. Using nonnormative to capture disruptive tactics fits well with the psychological conception of nonnormative protest, as these tactics violate the norms of the dominant social system, which usually serve to maintain the smooth functioning of society. Third, nonnormative violent protest refers to action that is violent such as riots or property destruction (hereafter, violent protest). Beyond these three types, larger **social movements** can also combine protests with different tactics. One specific example of this are radical flanks (movements that contain larger moderate, nonviolent groups, in addition to smaller more radical violent groups). Because this specific form of organizing attracted considerable research attention [13,14,23], we also include it in our Review (for real world examples of each type, see Box 2).

In addition, we want to make two notes regarding this typology. First, an additional type could theoretically be differentiated, namely normative violent action. However, as the normative use of violence is usually related to the use of force by the government or military, this tactic is less relevant to social protests. Second, there has been research suggesting that the differentiation between normative and nonnormative action [24,25], and even nonviolent and violent action [26], is subjective and depends on who is making the judgement and who is protesting. While we acknowledge that different people may make different judgments on these categories, to systematically understand the effects of different types of protest tactics, we have tried to use clearer more objective criteria that reflect the general average understanding of what is or is not normative/nonnormative or nonviolent/violent. However, there will always be some disagreement over specific actions that may sit on the margins of these categories.

Key figure

Summary of tailored approach and conclusions drawn from organization of the literature
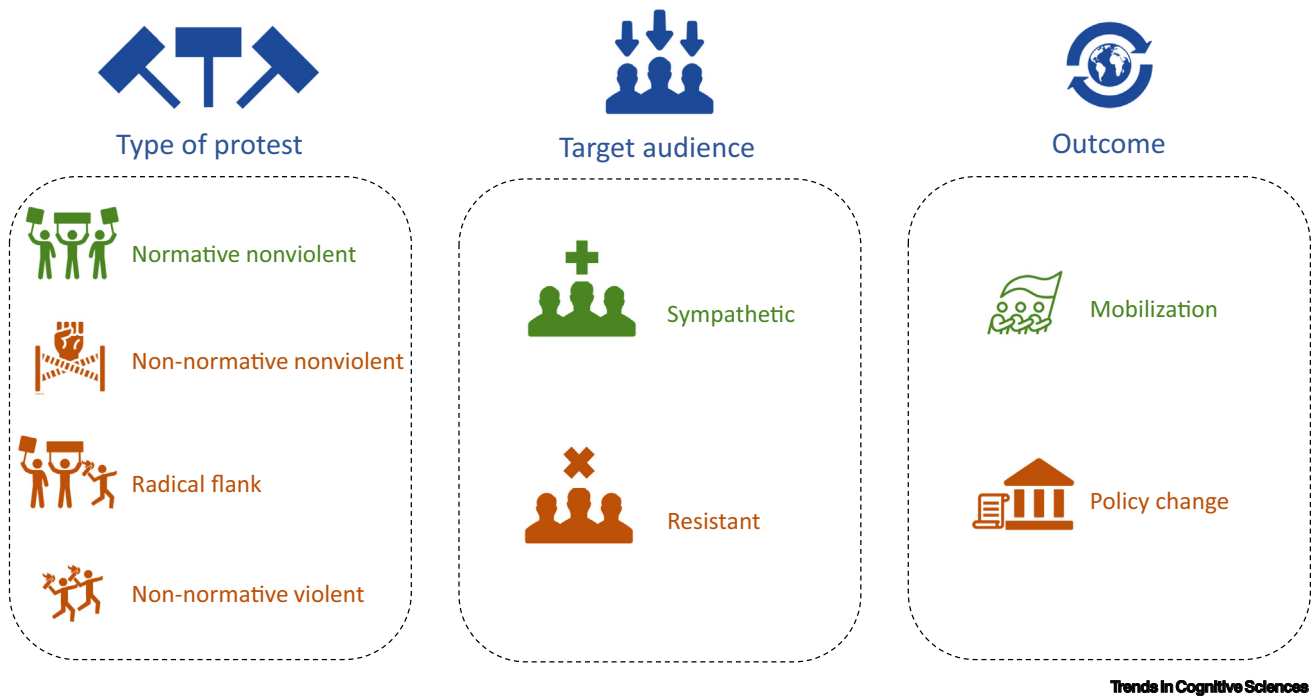

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Figure 2. Characteristics displayed in the same color reflect the pattern of conclusions drawn from our review of the literature (see 'Using a tailored approach to organize and integrate previous findings' section).

Types of target audience

Although not all research considers the potential target audience when examining the effectiveness of protest, those that do have used several different measures to delineate different target audiences within the general public (although governments or outside actors could also potentially be target audiences). Several studies differentiate target audiences based on political ideology [8,27,28], as conservatives and liberals tend to differ in their pre-existing support for many social movements [29]. Other studies differentiate target audiences based on their levels of identification with relevant social groups [12,30], whereas others have used pre-existing attitudes about a certain group or issue to identify different target audiences [7,31]. Despite the seeming variability in focus in terms of target audience, researchers are most often using these measures as indicators of people's openness or resistance to the social change sought by the protests. For example, political ideology is often used to identify target audiences because conservatives are generally more resistant to social change relative to liberals [32]. Similarly, researchers use group identification because being strongly identified with a group that benefits from the current status quo tends to make people more resistant to changing the status quo. Indeed, these measures are often used as proxies for pre-existing support for versus resistance to social change.

Just as the empirical literature often identifies target audiences based on their resistance to social change, so too do theoretical discussions of potential target audiences. For example, a recent

Box 2. Real-world examples of the types of social protest

To make the types of protest to which we refer more concrete, we wanted to provide real-world examples for each type of protest. Normative nonviolent protest is likely the most common form of protest as it is the most socially acceptable type of action, especially in democratic contexts. Recent examples include the Women's March in 2016, which consisted entirely of peaceful demonstrations spread throughout the USA, and the Global Climate March before the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference, which consisted of 2000 peaceful demonstrations around the globe.

Nonnormative nonviolent protest refers to nonviolent protests that violate norms of the dominant social system and disrupt cooperative interdependent relations but remain nonviolent. Perhaps some of the most famous examples of nonnormative nonviolent protest come from the civil disobedience that characterized the US Civil Rights Movement, including the Mont-gomery Bus Boycotts, sit-ins across the South organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other groups. A more recent example of nonnormative nonviolent action are the protests in Israel against a proposed ju-dicial reform. While these protests began as peaceful demonstrations, they later morphed to include more nonnormative action, which included reserve soldiers refusing to appear for duty, nationwide days of disruption that involved large demon-strations blocking roads, and nationwide strikes.

Violent protest involves direct harm to people and property aimed at drawing attention or making change. Notable examples of this include the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, following the police beating of Rodney King, and the police officers' subsequent acquittal. Soon after the verdict's announcement, a series of violent and destructive incidents in south central Los Angeles; a predominantly African American neighborhood. Over the course of days, the area suffered freeway shutdowns, disruption of municipal services, racially targeted violence, and property destruction. By the end of the riots, 63 people had been killed, over 2000 injured, more than 12 000 had been arrested, and estimates of property damage were over $1 billion.

In addition to purely violent social protests, social movements often contain a mix of both nonviolent and violent groups, often referred to as movements involving radical flanks. One famous historical example of radical flanks is the Black Pan-ther Movement, which differed from the broader Civil Rights Movement in its embrace of armed struggle. More recent ex-amples of a radical flank can be seen in the modern-day environmental movement where some groups have begun embracing more radical tactics, including sabotage and property destruction.

theoretical chapter on the psychology of effective activism discusses supporters, bystanders, and opponents as important target audiences for collective action efforts based on their pre-existing attitudes toward the social change sought by a given protest or movement [33]. Similarly, older theoretical approaches categorized target audiences for mobilization based on whether they agreed with the goals of the protest [34]. We, therefore, suggest that the most common and relevant way for defining target audiences in the current literature is based on whether they are sympathetic versus resistant to the social change sought by social protests, though there may be other important target audiences to consider.

Type of social change outcomes

Which outcome is targeted to advance social change? Research has considered a wide variety of potential outcomes ranging from passing legislation [35] to parenting practices [36]. Nevertheless, the most commonly studied outcomes fall into two broad categories: (i) can social protests attract people to directly support/join in the protest (which we term mobilization) [5,12]; and (ii) can pro-tests advance desired changes in policy (which we term policy change) [4,17]. The two outcomes are also often assessed at rather different levels, and we use the terms here as broader categories to refer to many different specific measures used in the literature. Mobilization has been assessed in terms of attitudes and willingness to participate in collection action (e.g., I support the protest, I would be willing to attend a demonstration, etc.) [5] as well as actual participation in collective action [37]. Policy change similarly has been evaluated at a more individual level in terms of public opinion supporting proposed policy changes [8] and actual policy change and implementation [35]. While measures focusing on support (e.g., I support the protest) may seem to have some conceptual overlap with measures of public opinion supporting proposed policy changes, we place these measures in the mobilization category because papers mix support items with items tapping willingness to participate [12] or name items tapping willingness to participate support [11,38],

suggesting a view in the literature that these measures are tapping into a similar construct. This makes the general question of whether social protest is effective highly contingent on the type of measured outcome. Which outcome is most important to measuring effectiveness is a topic for future scholarly debate, we simply aim to highlight that any conclusions about effectiveness depend on the outcome used to evaluate effectiveness.

Using a tailored approach to organize and integrate previous findings

There is clear disagreement in the literature over whether social protest needs to be normative and nonviolent to be effective, or if nonnormative, or even violent protests can sometimes be effective [39–41]. When we apply our tailored approach to organize the literature, this disagreement may become easier to resolve. This is because our approach asks how different types of protests may interact with characteristics of the target audience (e.g., sympathizers vs. resistors) to influence different types of intended outcomes (e.g., mobilization vs. policy change). We therefore conducted a narrative review to organize recent literature around the tenets of our proposed framework. This Review provides intriguing first evidence of a pattern that normative nonviolent forms of action are more effective on the outcome of mobilization for sympathetic target audiences. In contrast, more disruptive forms of protest, including nonnormative nonviolent protest, radical flanks, and sometimes violent protests seem to be more effective on the outcome of policy change among more resistant target audiences, although there is also variance in the effectiveness of these more specific types.

Effectiveness of normative nonviolent protests

Many papers demonstrating the effectiveness of nonviolent normative action use mobilization as their main outcome variable [28,42–53]. For example, a series of papers that conducted studies in both the USA and Iran found that nonviolent protests were more effective in mobilizing support than violent protests were [11,38]. Similarly, a recent large-scale examination of this effect and its mechanisms found that normative nonviolent protests increase identification with the protesters and thus drive increased participation compared to more disruptive or violent protests [54]. Conversely, action that was nonnormative or violent (or involved violence from radical flanks within the movement [5,12,14,40]) decreased mobilization. For example, research on participation in nonnormative action (compared to normative nonviolent action) that was not supported by the broader group led to disidentification with the group [55] (for more discussion of psychological mechanisms, see Box 3). Additionally, research using machine learning algorithms to identify violence in pictures tweeted at protests found that protester violence (assessed with the pictures) predicted lower attendance at subsequent protests across several contexts (Hong Kong, Pakistan, South Korea, Spain, and Venezuela) [37].

Box 3. Psychology of sympathizers and effectiveness of social protest

Sympathizers, by definition, generally want the movement to succeed and thus are likely already supportive of the movement's policy goals, thus the more relevant goal for a movement is to mobilize these people to join the movement. Psychologically speaking this can be best achieved through increasing the motivations while lowering the costs for that goal [70]. Nonviolent normative protest is thus effective because it can generate identification with the protesters and lower costs for participation in the movement. Indeed, a large literature has (i) found that group identification is a key motivator that galvanizes other psychological motivations and increases participation in protest; and (ii) found that people most easily and strongly identify with normative nonviolent protesters, as they are seen as more reasonable, moral, and similar to people who are not already participants [5,11,13,45]. Similarly, nonviolent normative protests often have lower costs of entry for people who are not already involved as they often do not involve illegal actions [71], are less likely to face police repression, and make it less likely that potential participants will be seen as radical activists by their peers [51]. In fact, seminal work [39] on the effectiveness of nonviolence has highlighted the ability of nonviolent campaigns to recruit more participants because they are less costly than participation in violent movements as one of the key factors in their effectiveness. Taken together, this offers a clear psychological explanation of why normative nonviolent action would increase mobilization among sympathizers.

In cases where studies examined specific target audiences, these mobilization effects were usually found among sympathizers [27,28,38,49–52]. For example, in a study where participants were randomly assigned to read about a climate protest that was either normative nonviolent, nonnormative nonviolent, or violent found that normative nonviolent was most effective at increasing support, but only among Democrats and Independents (i.e., those more likely to be sympathetic to the climate movement) [27]. However, some studies have not found moderation by target audience [5,11]. For example, research that compared normative nonviolent protests to more radical and violent protests found that normative nonviolent protests were more effective in mobilization compared to more radical and violent protests across several political contexts (e.g., animal rights, anti-Trump, and antiabortion), but found no moderation by political ideology.

Effectiveness of disruptive protests: nonnormative nonviolent, radical flank, and violent

When policy change is the outcome variable of focus, the literature suggests that protests that involve some level of social disruption, whether by using nonnormative (but still nonviolent) tactics or involving some amount of violence (radical flanks, violent protests), can be effective, particularly for more resistant target audiences. For example, in support of the effectiveness of nonnormative nonviolent action, when participants were randomly exposed to normative nonviolent, nonnormative nonviolent, and violent protests, nonnormative nonviolent protests were most effective in increasing support for policy change among those who were more resistant [7]. Similarly, the nonnormative nonviolent protests triggered by former US President Trump's Muslim Travel Ban, which included the occupation of airports and blocking roads, shifted public opinion against the ban, particularly among more resistant, highly identified Americans [30]. As this paper focused on real-world events, however, there was no comparison to other types of protest. Another paper focused on nonviolent nonnormative protests (namely sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement) and looked at whether it was more (or less) effective in changing policy, as a function of whether voters in the region were resistant to the movement's cause [56]. This work did not include individual-level measures of resistance, but rather resistance was assessed via a county-level measure of resistance (i.e., past voting for segregationist policies in the county). While sit-ins were least effective in changing policy when segregationist voting was extremely high, they were effective in regions where there were medium-high levels of resistance (where 58% voted in support of segregation). Given the culture of the American South at the time and the widespread opposition to desegregation, this seems to be evidence that this kind of action can be effective for resistant target audiences, although this effect may be limited if target audiences are extremely resistant.

In terms of radical flanks, there is similar evidence of effectiveness in motivating policy change: a quantitative analysis of a large number of social movements found that movements involving a violent radical flank were more likely to achieve their policy goals than wholly nonviolent movements [14]. Similarly, an analysis of cases where terrorist and violent groups shared goals with a larger nonviolent movement found that violent flanks make it more likely for governments to make policy concessions to the more moderate flank of the movement [57]. In addition, there is also evidence that violent radical flanks can amplify the effectiveness of normative nonviolent protests in generating mobilization [13,58]. In these studies, the presence of a radical flank (compared to its absence) increased mobilization for the normative nonviolent group. A recent paper on the same topic found this effect particularly among sympathizers [59]. So, radical flanks may be a means to constructively affect both target audiences. The disruption produced by the radical flank may increase the likelihood of policy concessions, while also increasing the ability of normative nonviolent protests to mobilize sympathizers. However, further research is needed on this point.

Somewhat related, other studies involved a mixture of nonviolent and violent protests (rather than two separate nonviolent and violent groups, such as in the case of radical flanks). This is exemplified by studies of the BlackLivesMatter movement, which while overwhelmingly nonviolent also involved significant incidents of violence, for example in Ferguson in 2014 and during the summer of 2020. While many of these studies examine the effects of the movement as a whole (e.g., research documenting that the BLM protests during the summer of 2020 led to police reform policy changes at the state level [35]), some examined exposure to these different types of protest. For example, one study leveraging the geographic diffusion of violent protests found that living in areas where there were both nonviolent and violent BLM protests (compared to areas with nonviolent or no protests) increased conservatives' support for the policy goals of the movement [8], indicating that at least within the context of a larger nonviolent movement some disruptive, even violent protests can increase its effectiveness for advancing support for policy change among resistant target audiences. However, this paper also points to potential limits to the effectiveness of disruptive, particularly violent, action, as these effects on resistant target audiences were only found in relatively liberal counties, indicating that such effects may only occur in favorable political opportunity structures (for more discussion, see Box 4).

Finally, there is some, although more mixed, evidence that even entirely violent protests can sometimes be effective for policy-related outcomes [4,16,17,60]. For example, research on the violent 1992 Los Angeles Riots increased support for local policy reforms when policy referenda came up for a vote soon after, particularly among people who were more proximally exposed to the disruptive violence (although target audience in terms of resistance was not examined) [4]. Another study that did examine moderation by target audience found that physical proximity to Palestinian violence increased support among Israelis for making policy concessions, and that this effect was stronger for traditional right-wing, hawkish, groups. However, there is also conflicting evidence [9,61,62]. For example, similar research found that exposure to political violence led to harsher policy attitudes among Israelis (although moderation by target audience was not assessed) [63]. Similarly, research focused on voting rather than policy found that the outbreaks

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Box 4. Psychology of resistant target audiences and effectiveness of social protest

Resistant target audiences do not share the goal that protests should succeed and are unlikely to be mobilized. Their primary goal is to end the protests, so movements need to find a way to leverage this to their advantage; for example, by motivating these target audiences to grant policy concessions as a means to calm the protests. We suggest that generating this support for policy change involves two processes: First, protests must motivate resistant target audiences to respond to their protest. Resistant target audiences have little to no incentives to make changes, so the easiest response is to simply ignore the protests. The disruptive nature of nonnormative, radical flank and violent protest can help meet this challenge, as the social disruption they generate demands a response. Scholars and theories of disruptive protest argue that the ability to withdraw cooperation from the relationships that maintain and sustain social hierarchy can incentivize powerful groups to make concessions [7,19,20]. This is because the disruption produced can make target audiences feel that something must be done in response to end the disruption [72,73].

However, protesters must both generate pressure to respond, while ensuring that if they do trigger a response, it is one that helps further their goals, rather than eliciting aggression and defense of the status quo. The literature on this issue is scarcer but does indicate that a key is maintaining some constructive element. Research on nonnormative nonviolent protests found that they were effective because they generated disruption but also maintained perceptions of the protesters as constructive actors who would end their protests if their demands were met [7]. Moderate and radical flanks may work in an analogous way. The radical flank generates disruption, while by contrast the moderate protest group is seen as a potential partner for compromise that can then bring an end to the protests [57,58]. However, violent protests typically lack this more constructive positive element, and thus it may be that they are only able to achieve positive outcomes in favorable political opportunity structures, such as more liberal cities [4] or where minorities have electoral power [16], where political concessions are seen as a viable way to end and prevent future violence. Taken together, it seems that while the disruption produced by these kinds of protests (nonnormative, radical flank, or violent) generates pressure for action, there also must be some constructive element of the protests or political context to help ensure this action advances policy change.

of violence during the Civil Rights Movement increased support for social control framing of the issue and Republican vote share [9].

The evidence reviewed suggests that disruptive forms of action (nonnormative, radical flank, and somewhat violent) can sometimes be effective for driving policy change, particularly among resistant target audiences. That being said, there seems to be stronger evidence for the effectiveness of disruptive actions that maintain some nonviolent element. This can be achieved either by engaging in nonnormative but nonviolent tactics or through the use of radical flanks (and similar movements) while also maintaining a significant portion of nonviolent protests. Regarding the use of violence, these findings indicate that if it is ever effective, it is more likely to influence policy change. However, there is also evidence to suggest it will not always be effective, and that normative nonviolent action seems to consistently have an advantage in driving mobilization. The preliminary conclusions drawn from this Review raise the question of which psychological processes can explain why normative nonviolent protests appear to be more effective in mobilizing sympathizers, while more disruptive protests seem to be more effective in bringing about policy change among those who are resistant. We believe the answer lies in the different goals and psychologies of sympathetic target audiences (Box 3) versus resistant target audiences (Box 4).

Concluding remarks and future directions

We introduced a tailored approach for addressing the question of when social protests are effective. When we applied this framework to the recent relevant literature, our Review revealed an intriguing pattern: whereas normative nonviolent protests seemed to be effective at increasing mobilization among sympathizers, nonnormative protests or protests involving violence seemed to be more effective at advancing policy change among more resistant target audiences. This synthesis of the existing literature on social protest highlights the importance of being more precise in terms of the types of protest, target audience, and outcome variable when making conclusions about effectiveness. Moreover, this synthesis fits with the different psychological processes we reviewed to explain this pattern.

Adopting this framework has important implications. The framework explicitly encourages researchers to consider different types of action, outcomes, and target audiences when theorizing, designing studies, and drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of social protest. Namely, we suggest that researchers should always specify which type of protest was found to be in/effective among which audience on which specific outcome. This aligns with a more general shift towards the importance of a tailored approach when considering influence and attitude change in intergroup relations [18,64]. The conclusions generated by this approach can also provide practical information for social actors involved in or reporting on social change efforts, such as organizers of social protest, politicians, policy-makers, and journalists. For instance, one potential implication is that more normative peaceful protests are important for growing and building a movement, but the movement may need to use more disruptive tactics to ensure its goals are implemented into policy.

Future research should seek to both apply and further develop this tailored approach and the conclusions and explanations it generated. First, more direct evidence is needed to corroborate the two main conclusions of our Review, which can serve as testable hypotheses in an integrative research program. These conclusions are limited by a number of factors. For example, we group many different outcome variables together in two broad categories, but findings on one specific measure within a category (e.g., public support for policy change) may not always translate to another measure (e.g., actual enactment of policy change). In addition, little research has tested

Outstanding questions

While nonnormative protests, radical flanks, and violent protests all involve some level of disruption, they vary greatly in the extent of disruption – is there some optimal level of disruption a protest should achieve to be effective for increasing support for policy change among those more resistant? Does the level of disruption vary depending on contextual factors?

What are the effects of other types of action not reviewed here? The research literature and thus this review has focused primarily on types of protest as defined by the tactics they use (e.g., nonviolent, nonnormative, etc.). However, recently interest has been growing in the effectiveness of action that involves allies from other groups than the one directly suffering from injustice or inequality (often referred to as joint action). More research is needed to understand the effectiveness of these other types of protest interaction. For example, does involving allies increase the effectiveness of action? If so, for which kinds of protests are allies most effective?

Do online versus offline protests differ in their effectiveness? Another significant feature of modern social protests is that they often play out in part or sometimes even primarily online (e.g., the #MeToo Movement). There is not yet a large body of research examining how this online component of social protests impacts their effectiveness, and so we do not yet know when or how the online aspects of these movements can hurt or help their effectiveness.

Are certain types of action more effective for different outcomes and target audiences at different points in the life of a movement? While we can make some inferences about this question based on our conclusions (e.g., because normative nonviolent protests are more effective in mobilization, they may be more effective earlier in the life of the movement), how protest dynamics unfold over time and how this impacts their effectiveness merit much more extensive research.

both of the categories of outcome variables we describe in the same study. Second, there are a number of other factors which conceivably could fit into our framework that we did not consider here given their relative lack of coverage in past work. For example, actions could be categorized into types not just based on their tactics but also in terms of what social groups its participants belong to, the extent to which a movement plays out on social media vs. in offline demonstrations, or whether the protest seeks to change or maintain the current social system, and other target audiences and outcomes could be considered (see Outstanding questions). Third, additional insights can be gained by examining how effects occurring at different levels of analysis (e.g., within individuals, within groups, or within societies) are interrelated and build upon one another [65]. Finally, it is worth noting an important limitation of this framework, namely that most of the research it was based on has been conducted in Western democratic contexts. Whether social protests occur in more open democratic societies or more authoritarian and repressive ones will almost certainly impact how they can be effective. Future work should seek to integrate this larger contextual perspective into theorizing about the effectiveness of social protest.

In closing, we regard our tailored framework as a first step toward a more nuanced and realistic approach to a highly complex and consequential phenomenon. As more scientific research begins to identify the types of social protest effective for different outcomes among different target audiences, we can begin to ask broader and even more integrative questions about what a roadmap to social change looks like. Such a roadmap likely includes the outcomes deemed most important to achieve at different stages of a broader social change trajectory, and how different social actors interact with and influence each other in their negotiation of social reality. We are excited about the many avenues for additional research in the field and hope that our tailored social-psychological framework can serve as a stepping stone to a better and more integrative understanding of the effectiveness of social protests to advance social change.

Resources
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