



George Melios

March 24th, 2025

The Power of Protest: Examining Mass Mobilization's Impact on Social Change

Introduction

Do protests matter? Can mass mobilisations truly drive social change? Recent events in Greece have reignited this longstanding debate about protest efficacy. Throughout history, mobilisations have been a defining feature of democratic processes. From civil rights movements in the United States to the Arab Spring and anti-austerity demonstrations across Europe, mass gatherings have played a critical role in shaping policy debates, shifting social attitudes, and driving meaningful change. Yet, the effectiveness of protests remains an open question in academic literature.

Some research suggests that protests drive political and social change by raising awareness and pressuring policymakers. Other studies indicate that demonstrations may fail to achieve tangible results or even produce a backlash, reinforcing opposition to their demands. This raises two crucial questions: What determines whether a protest succeeds or fails? And what insights can research offer in understanding the recent mass protests in Greece?

Do Protests Work?

The academic debate on the impact of protests is complex and multifaceted. Research highlights several key mechanisms through which protests might bring about change. First, large-scale protests can push issues to the forefront of political and media attention, effectively setting the agenda for public discourse. Second, they may influence policymakers directly by altering the perceived costs of inaction. Third, protests have the potential to reshape social attitudes, gradually transforming previously radical ideas into mainstream perspectives.

However, the extent to which protests succeed in achieving these goals varies significantly. A recent study examining multiple studies on protest effectiveness in the United States finds limited evidence that protests systematically lead to significant political change. While protests can

generate high levels of media attention and online engagement, their long-term effects on voting patterns and policymaking are often minimal or inconsistent.

One key takeaway from this meta-analysis is that protest size matters significantly. Large-scale mobilisations—such as the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020—were found to influence electoral outcomes, shifting votes towards the Democratic Party. In contrast, smaller protests had little to no measurable impact. This suggests that scale, visibility, and public resonance play a crucial role in determining whether a protest achieves its goals.

New Research on Protest Efficacy

But how significant are these changes and how do they materialise? In a recent study with Bouke Klein Teeselink (King's College London), we build on this literature by investigating how and when protests lead to meaningful change. While some previous research focuses on protests' immediate consequences, our findings highlight the importance of examining long-term effects.

We demonstrate that protests are more likely to bring about positive social change when they exhibit certain characteristics. Nonviolent protests tend to gain broader public support and legitimacy, whereas violent protests often provoke negative media framing and public backlash. Protests with clear, actionable demands prove more effective at influencing both policymakers and public opinion than those with vague or numerous objectives. Finally, the full impact of protests is rarely immediate. Short-term backlash is common, particularly when protests are associated with disruption or rioting. However, in the long run, peaceful protests tend to have a net positive effect on attitudes and policy discussions.

This temporal dimension is crucial for understanding protest efficacy. Some protests may initially provoke a conservative reaction, strengthening calls for law and order. Yet over time, they can fundamentally shift public debates and lead to substantial reforms, as we've seen with movements advocating for racial justice, labour rights, and environmental policies.

The Greek Protests of 2025: A Compelling Test Case?

On 28 February 2025, Greece experienced one of the largest protests in its modern history, following a tragic railway accident that led to widespread public outrage. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets across the country, demanding justice, accountability, and systemic reforms.

What makes these protests particularly relevant to the ongoing academic discussion is that they share characteristics with historically impactful movements. They were massive in scale—possibly the largest mobilisation in recent Greek history—suggesting they could have a significant impact on public debate. Unlike protests that lack a focused demand, these mobilisations centred around justice and government accountability. Additionally, while some isolated incidents of violence occurred, most demonstrations were nonviolent.

If our research findings hold, these factors suggest that the 28 February protests could have a lasting influence on Greek society. In the short term, riot parts might be more salient and drive public debates leading to polarisation. However, over time, the movement's emphasis on accountability and justice might significantly reshape public attitudes and political priorities.

About the author



George Melios

George Melios is a research fellow at the Department of Psychological & Behavioural Science at LSE and a Research Advisor at Gallup.

Posted In: Crisis



© LSE 2025

Bad Behavior has blocked 7544 access attempts in the last 7 days.