

Teargas and Selfie Cams: Foreign Protests and Media in the Digital Age*

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of repression of foreign protests and the media source reporting the news upon American foreign policy preferences for democracy promotion abroad. We use two survey experiments featuring carefully-edited video treatments to show that perceiving foreign protests as violently repressed increases American support for targeted sanctions against the hostile regime, but does not translate into political action. Surprisingly, we do not find differences between reactions to mobile phone and TV news footage.

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1 Introduction

From Tahrir Square to the Maidan, in the last decade, protesters in every corner of the world have mobilized for greater democratic freedoms. Thanks to the digital revolution, their demonstrations quickly took on a global character – in 2019, an amateur video of police repression in the streets of Hong Kong went viral in Chile, inspiring tactical innovation; and diffusion of symbols and slogans gave a strikingly similar flavor to protests in places as different as Lebanon, Bolivia, or Sudan.¹ Contemporary protesters turn to social media not only to organize, or keep citizens informed when governments crack down on local media, but also to address – and win over – a global audience. This often includes sending images and videos of protesters being violently treated by police into the virtual ether to stoke outrage and increase awareness of their struggle.

How should we expect American audiences to react to such footage of overseas protests? Human rights scholars have shown that news stories of violent repression increase the likelihood of sanctions or other punitive actions against offending governments (Nielsen, 2013; Heinrich, Kobayashi and Long, 2018), and drive public support for such penalties (Allendoerfer, 2017). Much of this research measures reactions to news about human rights violations in print media. However, given the prevalence of broadcast and digital media sources, many Americans receive news of contemporary global protests not through words, but through a stream of photographs and videos. The political communication literature indicates that differential presentation of news yields differences in political learning (Graber and Dunaway 2017, Chapter 4); thus, in this paper, we explore the effects of video footage of repression on American foreign policy preferences.

We also seek to better integrate the robust literature on citizen journalism with research on rights violation and foreign policy responses. Communications scholars have argued that new technology has revolutionized the traditional media sphere (Gordon, 2007), and

¹See for example Wright, Robin. “The Story of 2019 Protests in Every Corner of the Globe.” *The New Yorker*. December 30, 2019; “What links 2019’s wave of global protests?” *BBC*. December 31, 2019.

that mobile phone cameras, in particular, allow activists to share their own “graphic testimony in a bid to produce feelings of political solidarity” (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). Nevertheless, scholars have debated whether selfie-cam footage is more or less credible than traditional news media (Carr et al., 2014; Swasy et al., 2015). Motivated by this area of inquiry, we test to see whether mobile phone footage or traditional TV news footage has a greater effect upon public support for sanctions against countries undergoing popular uprisings.

Through two survey experiments and text analysis of open-ended survey responses, we find that perceiving foreign protests as violently repressed increases American support for targeted sanctions against a hostile regime and that repression of protesters makes human rights issues more salient for respondents. However, it does not change viewers’ willingness to learn more about protests nor does it inspire political action on behalf of protesters. Finally, we find that changing the source of a media clip across all types of protest footage does not lead to statistically significant differences in support for sanctions or learning more about protests.

1.1 Repression, media, and public opinion

Social movement research shows that violent repression of protests may yield functional benefits to the protesters’ cause by spurring policy action – a process termed “functional victimization” (McAdam and Su, 2002). Repression can create public outrage, backfiring on a repressive government (Hess and Martin, 2006; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011) and rallying further mobilization (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2003; Martin, 2007). Once protesters win public support, they are more likely to see changes in attitudes of elected representatives (Wouters and Walgrave, 2017) and in public policy (Giugni, 2007; Agnone, 2007).

Similarly, research on foreign policy preferences shows that narratives of victimization shape public opinion. For example, Americans favor military humanitarian inter-

ventions in support of victimized populations (Jentleson, 1992; Eichenberg, 2005; Kreps and Maxey, 2017). They also support diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions (Brancati, 2014), and cutting humanitarian aid to punish human rights violators (Nielsen, 2013; Heinrich, Kobayashi and Long, 2018), even if the recipient is a strategically important country (Allendoerfer, 2017).²

Hence, we derive the following hypothesis:

H1: Public support for U.S. action to help foreign protesters and interest in learning more about the situation will increase if a movement is violently repressed.

Repressive states whose actions are widely publicized in the media are more likely to be penalized for human rights violations (Nielsen, 2013; Heinrich, Kobayashi and Long, 2018). But are these publicity effects robust to recent digital transformations in the media sphere? Research on “liberation technology” (Diamond, 2010) emphasizes how social media opened up opportunities for activists to expose human rights abuses (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Tucker et al., 2017). New technology has allowed activists to produce media content themselves, without reliance on traditional journalistic coverage, and to show, rather than tell, outside audiences their story. However, some scholars have argued that selfie-cam footage is less trustworthy than traditional media (Swasy et al., 2015). Others have shown that it can be more convincing to certain segments of the population, such as those disillusioned by the traditional media, and less convincing to others (Carr et al., 2014).

We contribute to this literature by testing whether movements can generate awareness and support for policy change through digitized citizen journalism. The premise of such

²Building on the research on humanitarian aid and democracy promotion, we focus on economic sanctions – a foreign policy tool frequently employed throughout US history and one which can effectively be used also against countries, where US does not have leverage as a major aid donor. For example, sanctions were enacted against the communist government in Poland, after it cracked down on the pro-democracy movement (Davies, 1986); against the apartheid government of South Africa (Carter et al., 2008); and against China after Tiananmen Square (Jing-Dong, 2003).

a claim is that mobile technology not only facilitates transmission of information, but also personalizes the audience's experience (Lynch, 2014; Tufekci, 2017), helping viewers identify and sympathize with the protesters and thus increasing support (Muñoz and Anduiza, 2019). This leads us to:

H2: Support for U.S. action to help protesters and interest in learning more about a situation will increase if a movement is violently repressed and the video source is a selfie cam.

2 Study 1

Our first study investigates Hypothesis 1 and delves into the question of how footage of repression affects public responses. It uses data from an Amazon MTurk survey experiment fielded on a sample of 1,010 respondents in May 2016. To mimic how most Americans consume the news, we used 30-second videos as treatments. The survey employed a 2×3 factorial design, and videos varied on two dimensions: violent or non-violent reaction of security forces, and location (Egypt, Hong Kong, Ukraine). The videos were cut from real-life footage about the Arab Spring, the Umbrella Movement, and the Maidan protests and edited to appear as similar as possible across locations. The first half of the violent and nonviolent videos was the same, but the clips differed in the reaction of the police in the second half. The study was designed to evaluate the effects of violent repression of protests across three geographical areas,³ and to see if increased support for sanctions might translate into political behavior.

Respondents in each experimental condition were instructed to watch a video showing a “recent pro-democracy protest” in a foreign country. We only presented respondents with protesters demonstrating peacefully because the use of violence by protesters often

³Previous work shows that Asians and Arabs are viewed as distinct from White individuals (Kurashige, 2016; Zopf, 2018). Further work might probe whether reactions to Black protesters or inter-ethnic repression produces substantively different results.

has consequences for the perception of the movement (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Huff and Kruszewska, 2016; Wouters, 2018). Respondents were not informed where the protests took place and in fact, we took measures to obscure the location so that results would not be driven by views of US policy towards specific countries. The sound on all videos was muted to prevent inferences based on the language and visual cues, such as flags and banners, were blurred. Ethnicity was cued visually through close-ups of protesters' faces. After the videos, participants were asked whether and why they would favor or oppose the U.S. government placing sanctions on the country's government. We also asked which forms of political action respondents were willing to engage in to support the protesters and how much money they would be willing to donate in support of protesters.

Subsequently, we used a Structural Topic Model to analyze open-ended responses to a question asking why respondents supported or opposed sanctions.

2.1 Results

2.1.1 Police Violence Increases Support for Sanctions

We find that violent repression of the protesters increases support for U.S. sanctions against the challenged regime, but this change in preferences does not translate into political behavior. On average, watching footage of a pro-democracy demonstration in which the police reacted violently increased support for sanctions by about 7% ($\bar{X}_0 = .379$, $\bar{X}_1 = .444$). However, repression had no statistically significant effect on declared willingness to donate money in support of the protesters or to take political action – such as signing a petition or calling a Congressional representative. In short, our violence hypothesis holds for attitudes towards U.S. foreign policy, but it does not extend to behavioral outcomes.⁴

⁴It is plausible that respondents would have taken action if they did not encounter these videos as participants in an academic study, especially given that time-constrained MTurk workers might be less likely to opt into additional work. However, in an experimental set-up participants may actually pay *more* attention to the videos than real-world audiences (McDermott, 2011), especially if subjects – as in our study – are

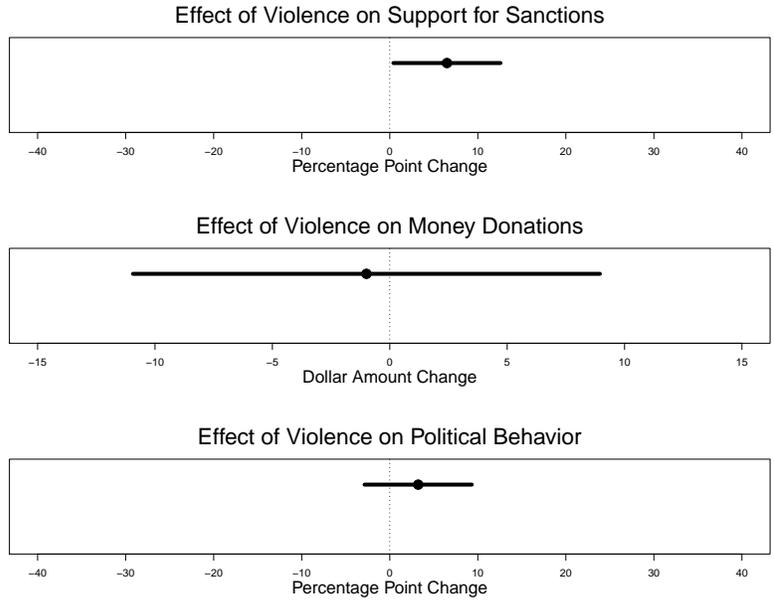


Figure 1: Marginal effect of police violence on foreign policy preferences and political behavior without control covariates. 95% confidence intervals. Top panel shows the effect on support for sanctions using a binary variable constructed based on a 7-point scale measuring how strongly respondents favor U.S. sanctions in support of the protesters. Middle panel shows the marginal effect on money donations in dollars, and bottom panel displays stated willingness to engage in action in support of protesters.

Figure 1 presents difference-in-means with 95% confidence intervals for all outcome questions, with all protester ethnicity conditions pooled together. All plots displayed in the paper use binary outcome variables.⁵ Results using ordinal outcome variables were consistent with these findings.

Balance testing confirms that our randomization prevented significant demographic differences across treatment groups. Nevertheless, adding control variables gives insight into how respondent characteristics overshadow the effect of violence. As shown in Model 3 of Table 1 in the Appendix, Republicans support sanctions on human rights offenders less than other groups. This is consistent with previous findings that Republicans are less

prevented from moving onto the next page too quickly.

⁵For the “sanctions support” outcome, support above the mid-point (“neither favor nor oppose”) was coded as 1. We constructed a binary “political action” DV indicating whether respondents showed willingness to take *any* of a list of political actions. This way of constructing the variable has an additional advantage of taking into account that respondents might perceive some forms of political action to be not just costly, but ineffective, and thus not worth attempting.

supportive of economic policies involving market intervention (Milner and Tingley, 2011) and that ideology affects preferred policy responses to democratic repression abroad (Faust and Garcia, 2014). However, the small sample size and complicated design of Study 1 may be underpowering our analysis of the violence effect. We thus replicate our violence manipulation in Study 2 with a simpler design and a larger sample.

2.1.2 Why does support increase when police repress the protest?

To explore why repression of protesters increases support, we analyzed the results of an open-ended question, which asked respondents why they supported or opposed sanctions, using a Structural Topic Model (Roberts et al., 2014; Lucas et al., 2015). We estimated the effect of experimental treatment – violent repression – on text written by survey respondents via a 3-topic model without additional covariates.

Figure 2 summarizes each of the three topics with the top 20 most probable and exclusive words (FREX). From these words, we inferred the following topic labels: “Non-Interventionism,” “Don’t Know/Not Enough Info,” and “Human Rights.” The first topic, with words such as “interfere,” indicates a focus on apprehension about U.S. involvement abroad. A response with the highest proportion of words drawn from the topic starts with: “Each country can and must resolve its inner political problems without any external interference.”

The second topic seems to focus on a lack of sufficient information, including words like “inform,” “decision,” and “know.” An exemplar response states: “I don’t know enough about the situation to make an informed decision.”

The third topic is characterized by words such as “rights,” “freedom,” and “oppression.” An exemplar response reads: “Later in the clip it showed law enforcement in riot gear spraying the crowd with what is probably pepper spray and beating unarmed protesters who appear to be shielding themselves with their arms. This isn’t the sort of reaction I’d support for any type of protest and it would be ideal if the US government did not support

it, either.” Others highlight the importance of human rights: “The oppression of these people and their fundamental right to protest is being threatened,” and, “It is important for all humans to be able to have a voice and have basic human rights.”

Whether respondents watched a video with a violent police reaction had an effect on topic prevalence in their written responses. Figure 3 presents difference-in-means estimates with 95% confidence intervals for the effect of seeing footage of a repressed pro-democracy movement on the proportion of responses dedicated to Topics 1, 2, and 3. On average, violent repression increased the proportion of responses discussing the “Human Rights” topic by nearly 5%. This indicates that repression of protesters might make the violation of human rights more salient for the respondents, leading them to feel more sympathetic towards the protesters’ cause, and lends further support to literature emphasizing the importance of moral public opinion in shaping foreign policy.

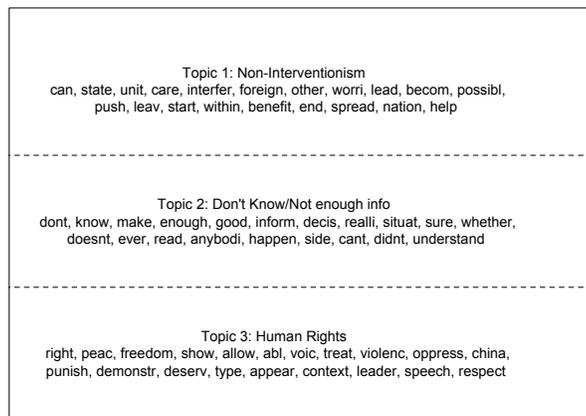


Figure 2: STM topics with Violence as Treatment

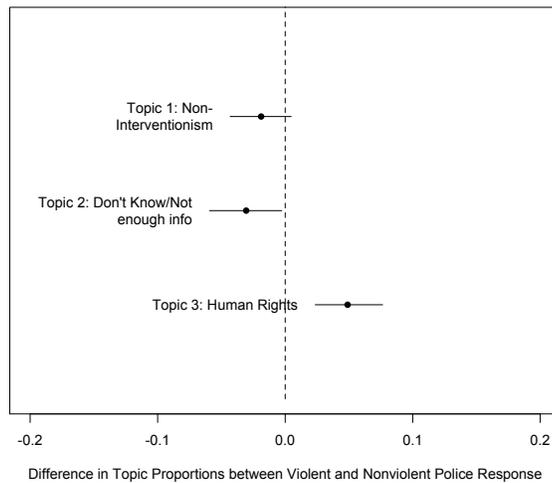


Figure 3: Effect of Violence as Treatment on Topic Prevalence

3 Study 2

For our second study, we fielded an MTurk survey in April 2018 with 1,748 respondents to replicate our violence findings and determine how media source affects public reactions to repression. The survey design was similar to Study 1, but this survey employed a 2×2 factorial design in which both the *source* of video and the *level of police violence* were manipulated. Manipulating *source* of the video means that respondents were assigned to watch either 1) footage with a TV newscast intro and full screen presentation or 2) the same video edited to look like cell phone footage through a filter that added thick black margins to each side of the video frame. Titles at the start of each video designated them as either “news report” or “mobile phone” footage.⁶ Once again, respondents saw either protests repressed by violence or protests without repression.

Respondents were told that they would watch a video showing a recent protest overseas calling for more democratic governance. This time, we used edited footage of the

⁶This manipulation allows us to isolate the effects of video source, which previous authors have argued affect the political effects of news (see [Graber and Dunaway 2017](#)). However, we also recognize that the content of mobile videos might sometimes differ from TV news – perhaps, for example, showing more blood or brutality. Testing the effects of such differences would be the basis for an excellent follow-on article.

2014 protests in Venezuela, though respondents were not informed of the protest location. Again, sound was muted and most visual cues (i.e., flags and signs) were blurred.

After watching the video, respondents were asked how much they favored the U.S. imposing targeted sanctions on elites in the country where the protests took place.⁷ This time, we specified that sanctions targeted elites to eliminate worries that sanctions could hurt the wider population (as shown in [McLean and Roblyer 2017](#)). Finally, respondents were asked if they would like to learn more about the protests. Given that respondents in Study 1 were unwilling to take more costly actions in support of protesters, we provided this option to measure whether treatments had an effect upon a very low-cost behavioral outcome.⁸

3.1 Results

We estimate the effects of the footage source and the repression treatment, as well as the interaction between the two treatment indicators for these two outcome variables with simple linear regression models using only the violence and mobile variables, and where appropriate, an interaction term.⁹

3.1.1 Violent Repression Increases Support for Sanctions

Figure 4 presents effects of violent repression with 95% confidence intervals on both outcomes of interest. Again, we find that on average, violent repression of the protesters increases support for the U.S. imposing targeted sanctions against the challenged regime by 7% ($\bar{X}_0 = .483$, $\bar{X}_1 = .552$). However, the effect on the “learn more” variable is very small, negative, and not statistically significant.¹⁰

⁷Respondents were provided a brief definition of targeted sanctions.

⁸Respondents who said “yes” were taken to a page with information about the situation in Venezuela at the end of the survey.

⁹Regression results incorporating demographic and attitudinal covariates for all analyses are included in the Appendix.

¹⁰Again, it should be noted that busy MTurkers may be less inclined to take action. However, media consumers are similarly busy, distracted, and unwilling to learn about issues they do not find important,



Figure 4: Marginal effect of violent repression treatment on support for targeted sanctions and interest in learning more about protests. 95% confidence intervals.

3.1.2 No Significant Effect of Media on Outcomes of Interest

We expected to find that mobile footage would have a positive impact upon sanctions support and interest in protests, but only *when repression occurred*. However, the marginal mobile effect is only positive for the sanctions outcome, and it is not significant in either case.¹¹ Figures 5 and 6 present treatment effects with 95% confidence intervals for these outcome questions. Both plots rely on a regression with an interaction term between the mobile and violent treatments.

The figures show that there is not sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that mobile footage of violently repressed protests has no effect on support for sanctions or interest in learning more about the protests.¹² Furthermore, levels of trust in the footage

which mitigates the threat to external validity. $\approx 30\%$ of respondents wanted to learn more in each condition, so we also might observe null effects because respondents find protests interesting regardless of violence.

¹¹Marginal effects are calculated by adding the coefficients on the mobile variable and the interaction term in the regression, and confidence intervals are calculated using the variance and covariance of the coefficients.

¹²The significant conditional effect depicted for violence in Figure 5 indicates that violence in the TV news condition has a positive effect on support for targeted sanctions when compared to support for sanctions in

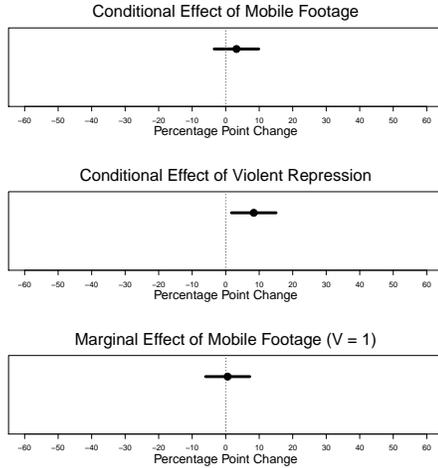


Figure 5: Effects on support for targeted sanctions. 95% confidence intervals.

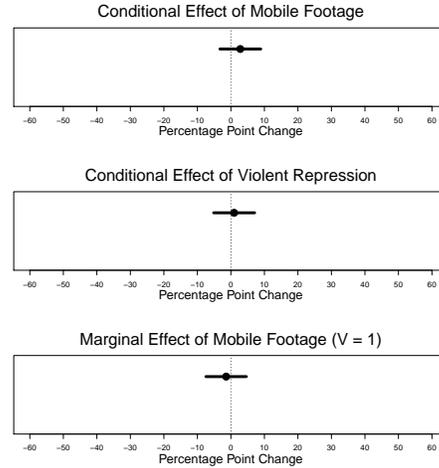


Figure 6: Effects on interest in learning more about protests. 95% confidence intervals.

did not vary across types: on a 6-point Likert scale from 0 to 5, with a 2 meaning that the clip was “somewhat untrustworthy” and a 3 meaning that the clip was “somewhat trustworthy,” the average trustworthiness of the TV news clip was 3.17 while the average trustworthiness of the mobile phone clip was 3.15. The 0.02 difference was not statistically significant.¹³ Thus, we did not observe a clear difference in the effects of video source.

Once again, Republicans were less likely to support punitive sanctions. Alternatively, voter turnout – a proxy for greater political engagement – and warmer feelings towards Latin America both increased sanctions support.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we use survey experiments to explore how the source of footage and level of police violence featured in news about protests abroad shape American preferences for the comparison group – the group receiving the non-violent, TV news condition. Given the interaction term in the model and the construction of our variables, the comparison group in this instance would be $violence = 0$; $mobile\ footage = 0$. Put simply, the portrayal of violence makes TV news footage more likely to encourage support for sanctions among viewers. The conditional effect of violence on mobile news is also significant, this time at the $\alpha = 0.10$ level. In other words, the violence findings hold across both the TV news and mobile conditions.

¹³Results for trustworthiness of footage are shown in Section E.2 of the Appendix.

U.S. action in support of protesters. Our results show that violent repression increases support for sanctions against the regime. However, the effect only holds for attitudes; it does not extend to even low-cost behaviors. Finally, media source does not have an effect on policy preferences. Future studies could test whether prolonged or repeated exposure is more likely to result in changes to preferences or behavior.

These findings indicate that by sharing their stories directly with the publics of countries like the United States, protest movements abroad may secure the sympathy of segments of the U.S. public and tip public opinion in their favor. While this increased support is unlikely to lead to political action by the U.S. public, it would ensure greater approval of U.S. government sanctions against foreign governments engaged in the repression of protesters.

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