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Repression, Group Threat, and the Threat Environment

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of Philosophy

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by

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ABSTRACT

Repression, Group Threat, and the Threat Environment

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How do governments contend with multiple sources of dissent? The Law of Coercive Responsiveness tells us that governments respond to threats to the status quo with repression, but this does not explain how governments choose to spend their limited resources when there are multiple targets. To answer this question, I extend our understanding of “dissident threat.” In addition to the two latent dimensions of Group Demand and Group Capability that the literature has identified, we also need to consider the larger universe of threats, the threat environment, when assessing the government’s repressive responses. Using a game-theoretic model, I demonstrate how the government’s repressive decisions are a function of the threat posed by the targeted group and the threat posed by the other groups around it. I then use the MAROB dataset to demonstrate this relationship empirically, showing that the threat posed by other groups has a significant influence on the government’s allocation of repression. In particular, I demonstrate that increasing the number of capable groups around a targeted group *decreases* the repression that targeted group will face. These results show that governments have a hierarchy of threat, prioritizing capable targets in an attempt to thwart immediate threats over ones that may become a problem in the future.

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Repression and Dissident Threat

When scholars write about contentious politics, they often frame their discussion around a back-and-forth process between two main actors: the government¹ and some dissident group². The government is often portrayed to be responding to some threat posed by the dissident group: the group is large and/or can mobilize the public quickly (Davenport 1995; Carey 2006; Carey 2010), may be willing to use violent tactics (Davenport 1995; Carey 2006; Carey 2010), the group is making an extreme demand (Davenport 1995; Danneman and Ritter 2014), or some combination of these factors. Our current understanding of the dissent-repression nexus reflects this framing, meaning that many of our theories implicitly assume that repression and dissent are interrelated, dyadic processes.

Advances in the literature have borne out the assumption that repression and dissent are endogenous to one another – a government’s repressive tactic fuel outrage and prompt a backlash from dissidents, dissidents express their dissatisfaction with the status quo and convince the government they need to be dealt with outside of politics-as-usual (Ritter and Conrad 2016). The assumption that repression and dissent are *dyadic* processes, however, requires re-examination. Depending on the research questions we ask, this assumption might be more or less useful. If we’re interested in how repression influences the internal dynamics of an organization (Davenport 2015; Sullivan and Davenport 2017), for example, this assumption makes sense: we’re concerned about how repression influenced a single group, and trying to use this interaction to generalize to the universe of dissident groups. For some questions, however, this assumption is less useful. Suppose we are trying to understand *why* the government repressed a group in the way it did. We could consider this interaction as a dyadic one solely between the government and the group, but that is often empirically not the case – far from a dyadic process, repression and dissent involve complicated webs of relationships, assessments, and strategy.

In this work, I present a theory of repression that explicitly engages the wider universe of dissident threats – what I call the “threat environment.” I propose that governments make their repressive decision based on the characteristics of their target *and* the threat posed by other groups in the *threat environment*. The government’s limited pool of resources forces it to make comparisons between groups, resulting in situations where a group may experience more (or less) repression than we might expect.

Since governments have finite resources, they must make their repressive decisions carefully. Investing time and effort into repressing one group leaves fewer resources for the government to use against other groups. As such, the government’s repressive decisions hinge on two main factors: the characteristics of the group they are

¹ In particular, I define “government” as the “current regime” as opposed to the state in perpetuity. This is important, as different regimes are going to have different policy priorities, which will in turn influence how they deal with dissent.

² A group of actors attempting to change the status quo.

considering repressing and the characteristics of all the other groups. Governments must weigh the benefit they receive from repressing the target group to the costs they may face if one of the other groups decides to act and the government does not have the resources available to stop them. As a result of this trade-off, governments rank the dissident groups based on their threat and make their repressive decisions accordingly. However, the “threat” posed by a group is subjective – it varies from country to country and regime to regime. There are groups that are major threats in some countries and minor annoyances in others not because of the characteristics of the groups themselves, but rather because the other groups *around them* are more or less threatening.

An Illustrative Example: Jordan, Syria, and the Muslim Brotherhood

For an example of this dynamic in action, we can look to how the various countries in the Middle East reacted to the Muslim Brotherhood post-Arab Spring. Even before the Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood was a relatively major player in politics throughout the Middle East. During the early 2010s, a wave of political dissent engulfed the region - the Arab Spring. Economic stagnation worsened the already tense political situation across a number of MENA nations, and small activist groups were able to seize the moment. The Muslim Brotherhood in particular emerged as a potent political force, using its established base of support to mobilize protesters quickly and effectively. The authorities, meanwhile, fought back with brutal repression - the protesters were pushing for political reform (if not outright democratic reform) that would likely result in the removal of autocratic regimes. This existential threat led leaders to quickly condemn the protests and fight back, though some governments eventually fell.

The Muslim Brotherhood was quick to try to fill the political vacuum - as a major participant in the protests throughout the region, it was uniquely situated to fill the void. While the Brotherhood was met with initial success - even going as far as winning elections in Egypt and forming the basis of the new regime - these victories were short-lived. For example, following the initial takeover by the Egyptian military, Egypt held democratic elections for the presidency. Mohammed Morsi, an Islamist affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, won the 2012 election and began reforming the Egyptian government. Unfortunately, the reforms that he was intent on implementing were far from the systems that the original Arab Spring protesters hoped for - instead of a democratic system with checks on power, Morsi utilized an Islamist majority in the legislature to pass a new constitution that allowed the president to legislate while insulated from the country’s Supreme Court. Tensions flared again, new protests arose, and the Egyptian military saw an opportunity. In 2013, little more than a year after gaining power, Morsi was deposed by the military and arrested on charges of killing protesters and political opponents as well as charges of espionage. These espionage charges are of particular note - according to the prosecution, the Muslim Brotherhood was working with Hezbollah and Hamas to train jihadists in Gaza which directly led to the uptick in violence in Egypt. This highlighted how far the Brotherhood had fallen: from heroes of the revolution consolidating their power to international conspirators who were plotting to sow chaos the entire time.

The goals of the Brotherhood were often antithetical to those of the regimes they operated within - even if the ruling elites were Islamists themselves, they were often unwilling to give up their lifestyles and political power to implement the Political Islam that the Brotherhood advocated. This was true throughout the region, and thus we might expect the different governments to treat the Brotherhood the same way. The exact details may differ, but the overall tenor of the response should be the same: putting the group at arm's length and actively working to delegitimize the group. This was true for *most* of the countries in the region; the Syrian government, for example, was in contention with the Brotherhood from the moment they were established in the country. As a result, we see the group face stiff opposition in Syria during the Arab Spring, directly leading to the Syrian Civil War. This was *not* the case, however, in Jordan. Instead of fighting against the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring and outlawing them in the following years, King Abdullah II negotiated with and offered concessions to the group. These were not minor concessions – King Abdullah II removed his Prime Minister, dissolved his cabinet, and began a process of transforming the government to a constitutional monarchy in response to demands made by the Brotherhood (Al Jazeera 2013).³ While relations cooled with the Muslim Brotherhood in the years following the Arab Spring, the fact remains that the Brotherhood was treated *categorically differently* in Jordan despite being *functionally the same group* facing similar types of governments⁴ in other countries.⁵ It did not face the same level of repression as its sibling groups throughout the region: while other iterations of the Brotherhood were classified as terrorist organizations and faced the associated violent repression, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan saw mild infiltration⁶ and criminalization⁷ (Jaber 2017; al-Sharafat 2021).

³ It is unclear how committed King Abdullah II was to this final concession (Al Jazeera 2013), but the fact that the Brotherhood was able to extract a verbal commitment to this type of political transformation is notable in-and-of itself.

⁴ The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, for example, saw the mobilizing power of the Brotherhood as an existential threat and began working to undermine them. Relations between the Brotherhood and Saudi royal family became strained following the first Gulf War: the Brotherhood, reacting to the regime's unwillingness to support Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, pushed for major political reform. In a similar fashion, the Brotherhood and its affiliates in the UAE sought to overthrow the regime, as they were dissatisfied with the regime's tolerance of Christian communities. Both of these countries, like Jordan, are (relatively) secular monarchies, all three faced significant pressure from the Brotherhood to change their political systems and give the Brotherhood more political power, but only Jordan made concessions.

⁵ The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan is its own separate organization from the Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere. However, in terms of the features that make a group *threatening* (see chapter 2), the different iterations of the Muslim Brotherhood are very similar: they advocate for Political Islam to have a larger role in government and have the ability to mobilize considerable support. In short, they are advocating for 1) extreme change to the status quo and 2) have the capability to execute that change, meaning that regardless of the minor differences between versions of the Muslim Brotherhood and the states they operate in, the Brotherhood should always, in theory, be a high-threat target for the state.

⁶ An attempt by the monarchy to take advantage of schisms within the organization (see Jaber 2017).

⁷ In 2015 the organization in Jordan was told that it would no longer be in compliance with Jordanian laws of association unless they distanced themselves from the Egyptian branch of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood appealed this ruling, but in late 2020 the Jordanian government declared the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan an illegal organization (al-Sharafat 2021).

How can we explain these different reactions to ostensibly the same group? In one situation, the group is criminalized and targeted for violent repression from the state. In the other, the group is treated with respect until pressure from the international community forces the regime to take a more hard-line stance. In order to reconcile these reactions, we need to delve deeper into the political context in both Syria and Jordan regarding the Brotherhood. By examining the universe of non-state political actors operating within the state, the state's *threat environment*, we can better understand how these differences arose.

Dissent in Jordan

To better understand this dynamic, we need to understand the political context in Jordan, its relationship to the Muslim Brotherhood, and how its political context compares to other states in the region. Throughout its history, the Brotherhood has advocated for a greater role for Islam in political life. Its founder, Hassan al-Banna, envisioned the Brotherhood driving out British colonial influences in the Middle East and eventually uniting all Islamic governments under one Caliphate (Davidson 1998). While the specifics of its mission have changed since the colonial era, the driving impetus has not: Political Islam in the Middle East.

The Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1945 and was almost immediately treated differently from other groups. The Jordanian monarchy had traditionally been hesitant to approve new political organizations, but given Jordan's proximity to Israel and the fighting that often spilled into its borders, the Brotherhood was given official political approval and allowed to operate (Bar 1998). Given the country's proximity with Israel, King Abdullah I often relied on the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups to combat the influence of Zionists. King Abdullah I's successors, particularly King Hussein, continued this trend - while King Hussein cracked down on civil society generally, the Muslim Brotherhood was given considerable latitude. While other organizations were forced to disband, the Brotherhood was allowed to continue to operate. King Hussein even tapped members of the Brotherhood to work in government and supported the Brotherhood's social work, like their literacy programs. While relations between the Hashemite Kings and the Brotherhood cooled as a result of Jordan's attempts at dialogue with Israel, the group continued to wield considerable power until 2013. Following the fall of the Morsi regime in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the region was in disarray. The Brotherhood in Jordan eventually splintered into multiple groups, and the political chaos caused by the break-up eventually convinced the regime to issue new regulations for political groups. The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan was eventually dissolved - not because of a targeted campaign of repression from the government, but because they did not renew their operating license.

Jordan's treatment of the Brotherhood stands in stark contrast to how the Brotherhood was treated throughout the region *and* how Jordan treated other Islamist groups within its borders. After the Six Day War in 1967, Jordan lost control of the West Bank to Israel. Palestinian fighters, the fedayeen, working under the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), abandoned their bases in the West Bank and quickly

moved to set up new bases in Jordan along the border with Israel. The Israeli military, concerned about the build-up of PLO forces along the border, raided a base in the Jordanian town of Karameh. The Jordanian military quickly intervened to support the PLO forces and were quickly able to repel the incoming Israelis.

This victory quickly soured for the Jordanian government, however. Following the attack, the fedayeen fighters were seen as heroes, and support for the PLO within the Arab population of Jordan skyrocketed. The PLO used this new-found support to eventually begin operating as a state-within-a-state, butting heads with the Jordanian government. Relations were especially tenuous since King Hussein of Jordan was attempting to build better relations with the Israeli government, much to the dismay of the PLO and their Arab supporters. In fact, this action caused significant fractionalization within the PLO, with some of the more extreme sects calling for the assassination of King Hussein.

Tensions came to a head following the Dawson's field hijacking incident in September of 1970. Members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), one of the pillar groups of the PLO, hijacked three commercial airliners and forced them to land in Zarqa, Jordan. The hijackers freed most to the passengers and crew of the flights, but kept the remaining Jewish passengers and crew as hostages, as well as several Western passengers they felt could be used as leverage. Their objective was to hold the hostages until the British government released several Palestinian prisoners, most notably Leila Khaled – a member of the PLFP. After attracting the attention of the international press, the hijackers blew up the airliners – highlighting the Jordanian military's inability to deal with the situation.

This served as a tipping point for relations between the PLO and Jordan. Fighting between the PLFP/PLO and Jordanian forces began around a hotel where a number of the hostages were being held, and quickly ballooned from there. The Jordanian military began shelling the cities of Amman and Irbid, specifically aiming for the Palestinian refugee camps where the fedayeen first established themselves. This drew the Syrian army into the conflict, intervening on behalf of the PLO and fighting against the Jordanian forces. The region looked to be on the brink of another interstate war, but fortunately pressure from the other Arab countries convinced King Hussein to sign an agreement with Yasser Arafat to regulate the fedayeen's presence in Jordan.

These events, later known as Black September, changed the political dynamic of Jordan – both internally and externally. Subsequent conflict with the PLO, most notably the Black September Organization, pushed Jordan away from Palestine and towards Israel and the West. US President Richard Nixon began shipments of aid to Jordan and King Hussein softened Jordan's policies regarding Israel. When the 1973 Yom Kippur War started, King Hussein kept Jordan out for as long as possible. When conflict could no longer be avoided, the Jordanian military sent relatively little aid to its Arab allies – a single armored brigade that assisted Syrian-Iraqi assaults on the Golan Heights (Rodman 2012). The PLO and the Black September Organization, meanwhile, continued to carry out reprisals against the Kingdom, including assassinating Jordan's Prime Minister Wasfi Tal (Becker 1984).

Dissent in Syria

Unlike in other countries in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood was far from the largest concern in Jordan. For a good portion of its time, the Brotherhood focused on social programs and eschewed violence – opting instead to pursue their goals through diplomacy. The PLO and the Black September Organization, on the other hand, committed violent acts against the Jordanian state, making them a priority threat for the regime. In comparison, the Muslim Brotherhood dominated the threat environment in states like Syria. Around the same time as Jordan was fighting the PLO, Syria began to see conflict with the Brotherhood. Syria, as a “free” nation, came into being following World War I. Ostensibly an independent nation, Syria was in actuality administered by France thanks to the Sykes-Picot agreement, and the elites in power often used their positions to corrupt ends. While the country became truly independent following the end of World War II, the elites remained the same and popular dissent kept growing. These tensions culminated in the 1963 Ba’athist coup, where military officers that were members of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party overthrew the government with the tacit support of the Ba’ath Party’s civilian leadership. The new government, however, was secular, concentrated power in the hands of the military, and was primarily run by the country’s Alawite minority. This resulted in a government that Syrian Sunnis, the majority faith, had little representation in.

This lack of representation further inflamed tensions in the region, especially amongst Islamist groups, until things reached a boiling point in the 1970s. Syria’s intervention into the Lebanese Civil War on the side of the Maronite Christians was the final straw for many of the Islamist organizations in the country, and they began to encourage violence against the government – assassinating prominent political figures and carrying out attacks against government locations like the Aleppo Artillery School. The government attributed these attacks to the Muslim Brotherhood, and while there is evidence that they were responsible for some of the violence during the Islamist insurgency in Syria (Talhamy 2009), it is likely that they represented a small part of a much larger popular movement. Regardless, the Syrian government chose to focus on the involvement of the Brotherhood. The government began a sweeping campaign of repression against the Brotherhood, making association with it punishable by death; this effectively turned into collective punishment, though it was still ostensibly targeted at the Brotherhood. While the insurgency culminated in a government-led bombing campaign that effectively wiped out the Brotherhood. Even though subsequent regimes softened some of their rhetoric towards the Brotherhood, they are still seen by the Syrian government as a pervasive and destructive force in politics.

By comparing the political environments in Syria and Jordan, we can see the differences that led to the differential outcome. In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood served as the face of Islamist violence, even when it was being perpetrated by smaller, more disorganized groups. This led to harsh repression of those perceived to be associated with the Brotherhood, and drove the organization in Syria into hiding. In Jordan, on the other hand, we see a Muslim Brotherhood that spouts largely the same rhetoric and is seen as a potentially destabilizing force worthy of suspicion, but we do *not* observe the Brotherhood engaging in political violence or the level of repression seen in Syria. Instead, we see the PLO bearing the brunt of the regime's repressive efforts – unlike the Brotherhood, they demonstrate a willingness to use violence and a desire to overthrow the state.

These two cases demonstrate how important it is to consider the wider political context when discussing the decisions of the government against a group. We see that both regimes were wary of the Muslim Brotherhood, but while the Brotherhood grew into a destabilizing threat in Syria that role was taken by the PLO in Jordan. Looking at simply the relationship between these governments and these groups on their own would paint an incomplete picture – trying to understand the Brotherhood's treatment in Jordan without understanding Jordan's relationship with the PLO leaves us with questions about *why* the government of Jordan handled its relationship with the Brotherhood so differently. Bringing in an understanding that it also had to contend with the PLO, which was a much more salient threat, allows us to understand that the resources we saw used in other countries, like Syria, against the Muslim Brotherhood instead went towards fighting the PLO in Jordan.

As Jordan, Syria, and the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrate, the repression-dissent relationship is more complicated than it might seem at first glance. Understanding these dynamics involves not just understanding who the main actors are, but also situating them in a *context* - it makes sense for the Jordanian government to be *laissez-faire* with the Muslim Brotherhood when they have groups like Black September to worry about. Understanding this political context - this *threat environment* - is key to understanding how governments make their repressive decisions.

Roadmap

In the next section, I will briefly summarize the literature on repression and dissent, as well as highlight some key takeaways and areas for improvement. I will be paying particular attention to how scholars think about dissident threat – the definitions they use and the concepts underpinning them. I will also briefly discuss existing literature that suggests dissident threat alone is not enough to understand the dynamics of repression.

To better illustrate this point, I will then present a simplified formal model that examines the repressive dynamic between the government and multiple groups. This particular model looks at two dissident groups: one is an active dissident group while the othering is a potential dissident group. Using this model, I highlight the strategic tension

the government faces when repressing – using resources to repress one group a certain way takes resources away from repressing other groups. The government bases its repressive decisions on the characteristics of both groups. I use this model to demonstrate an important implication of my theory: the repression a group experiences is not the sole consequence of that group's actions. The repression they experience is a function of their characteristics and the characteristics and actions of other groups around it. Given a different set of groups around it, the repression a group experiences would be considerably different.

In the penultimate section, I will use the models to derive testable empirical predictions and discuss some possible tests for them. One of the main challenges of doing work in this area is the observational nature of large-N data. Questions about missing data, data collection, and the various biases that go along with these questions make it difficult to claim causal leverage. I will discuss why these issues are particularly acute in the political violence literature, as well as some potential ways I can mitigate, though never fully resolve, these issues.

In the final section of this manuscript, I will summarize my findings and explain the real world implications of my work. What do my findings mean for dissident groups trying to enact real change in their countries? How can we use these findings to craft policy to respond to governments using repression in the face of popular dissent? Finally, what information do we need to have before we can reliably predict and respond to governmental abuse.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Development

Threat in the Literature

One of the most consistent findings of the repression-dissent literature is that governments respond to dissident threats with coercion. This is such a truism that the “law of coercive responsiveness” (Davenport 2007) receives a mention in almost every political science article written on repression. But what goes in to “dissident threat”? How does the state decide what groups are “threatening” enough to warrant repression? How does the state pick its repressive targets?

Much of the literature sidesteps this question by assuming that the leaders are dealing with existential threats: either the repression succeeds and the dissidents back down, or they are faced with the possibility that they are removed from office. For example, one of the key findings from Ritter (2014) is that the use of repression is contingent on *regime stability*: the more secure leaders feel in their position, the less likely they are to use political repression. This logic is echoed by several scholars (Regan & Henderson 2002; Young 2013; Christensen & Weinstein 2013; Escriba-Folch 2013; Ritter and Conrad 2016; Heffington 2021), and it makes intuitive sense: regimes should be threatened by movements that seek to topple them. However, repression gets used on dissidents who are seeking less extreme demands than regime change (Koren & Mukherjee 2021). Clearly, there must be something threatening about these groups that doesn't depend on their ability to overthrow the regime.

To better understand the roots of threat, we can break down “regime stability” into its component parts. First, we need to assess how stable the government is *on its own*. As Ritter (2014) argues, regimes that are less stable to begin with are more likely to be provoked by “threats.” Importantly, regime stability serves as a modifier to external threats – a regime on the verge of collapse is going to see every group, even weak ones, as a potential threat while stable regimes have more of an ability to pick and choose their targets. While regime stability influences the *set* of groups that a government finds threatening, every regime – stable or not – still has to decide how to deal with groups *within the set*. To that end, we need to understand what makes individual groups threatening outside of the latent stability of the regime to understand the government's repressive decisions.

The Nature of Threat

Though threat is a concept at the heart of most theories of repression and rights violations, it is most often discussed in terms of how it can be observed, not what the underlying concept is. For example, early work thought of threat as a count of dissident events: as the number of dissident events increases, the group is seen as more threatening, and the government represses more (Davenport 1995).

Some authors, like Davenport (1995), suggest a multidimensional definition of threat. Davenport (1995) states that we must go beyond a mere count of dissident events to capture the true nature of the threat a dissident group poses to the

government. He proposes a definition of threat that includes the number of protest events, whether these dissident events were violent, the variety of strategies employed by the dissidents, and how this behavior relates to the cultural norms. This is a definite improvement over the unidimensional definition of threat, as it incorporates the nature of the dissident action. The tactics of the group play a role in how threatening they seem, with violent dissidents being more threatening than nonviolent ones, and one being adept at multiple forms of dissident activity being more threatening than ones who seem to only be able to operate in one way. Unfortunately, even this multidimensional definition of threat is lacking. The previous definitions of threat all rely on *realized dissident actions*: the dissident group has taken some observable action and we assume that the government is deciding how threatening the group is based on these actions.⁸ However, we observe repression in situations where there has been little or no overt dissident action (Sullivan 2016b) – repression often serves an anticipatory function (Danneman & Ritter 2014, Ritter & Conrad 2016). Governments often repress before groups have a chance to mobilize for a single event, suggesting that threat is something more than the actualization of dissident events. If *governments* often act on the potential of threat, we require a conceptualization of threat that goes beyond realized actions.

The first steps taken towards incorporating this potentiality for threat often utilized group characteristics. Authors assumed that the demographics of the group could give them some leverage over how threatening they might be to governments without having to rely on observed dissident activity. Literature in the “threat approach” (Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003) uses group characteristics as a way to measure the threat a group poses to the government without necessarily relying on the activities of the group, giving a multidimensional definition of threat that allows us to account for instances of pre-emptive repression. These characteristics include group size (Carey 2006), the organization and beliefs of the group (Bob and Nepstad 2007), or the race of the participants (Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003; Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011).

While group characteristics give us a way to think of threat that does not rely on the activities of the group, a reasonable question would be “why are these characteristics threatening?” What is it about race, numbers, or the level of organization of the group makes it threatening? There has been relatively little work on this dimension, but two works that are particularly useful in this area are Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong (2011) and Earl, Soule, and McCarthy (2003).

⁸ In addition to this point, there is also the issue of *operationalizations* v. *conceptualizations*. Many of the “definitions” of threat in the literature are not *conceptualizations* of threat, but *operationalizations* – observable characteristics that are (relatively) easy to measure. While they give us a sense of what the important component factors of threat might be, they are not *in and of themselves* factors of threat. For example, some definitions of threat incorporate the group’s race and ethnicity. While the authors take pains to express that the ethnicities *themselves* are not what is threatening, they often fail to pinpoint exactly what it is about race and ethnicity that is threatening to a government and *how this threat would change* if it were put into a different context. Understanding this second part is key to understanding what the underlying characteristics of threat are.

Past work suggested that African Americans were targeted during protest because their race signaled weakness to police: these groups could be repressed because the police could get away with it. For example, the “weakness approach” to repression suggests that leaders will only repress if they are sure that they will succeed, otherwise they face public ridicule (Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003). As a result, elites target groups perceived to be “weak:” outgroups like racial minorities, the impoverished, etc. In this view, race is not threatening; rather, it serves as a signal that the group can be safely taken advantage of. Davenport et al. (2011) suggest that looking at instances of protest policing (and repression more broadly) this way misses that race may be threatening *in and of itself*. They point to two particular aspects of police culture that may give us some explanation for why race is threatening. First, police culture is designed to protect those who create and (assumedly) operate within the law from those who would subvert it. Historically, the group creating the laws has been the white elite, and people who break these laws have been black (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011, 155). Second, the police are trained to protect the interests of the political elite. This means that they effectively pledge to *uphold the status quo* when they pledge to uphold the law. Minorities, whether they operate within or outside the law, are threats to the status quo and political elites (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011). This undercurrent of dissidents being a threat to the status quo is an important one, and one I will return to shortly.

Earl, Soule, and McCarthy (2003) also offer some potential ways to understand the latent concept of threat to the government. In their article, the authors are trying to adjudicate between a number of approaches to answering the question of why governments repress. The authors describe four main approaches: the threat approach, the weakness approach, the interactive approach, and the police agency approach. The threat approach describes much of the work in political science on threat and repression. In this approach, group tactics and goals shape the level of threat they pose to the government, with groups who have more revolutionary goals and utilizing confrontational tactics being a larger threat. It is important to note that things like race or age, typically considered among the group characteristics that are important for threat, are not considered to be part of the threat approach here.⁹ Instead, these fall more within the weakness approach which, as explained above, states that the government targets those groups that are likely to be least resistant to repression. These are typically marginalized outgroups, which include all groups who are excluded from the government like racial and ethnic minorities and those below a certain age. This approach is divided into two parts: weakness-from-within and weakness-from-without. Weakness-from-within focuses on the members of the movement themselves, and how well they are able to withstand repression. If there are no mechanisms in place within the group to help the members

⁹ The threat approach, in this article, is specifically conceptualized as a combination of tactics, goals, and group capacity (Earl et al. 2003, 583). The authors operationalize this definition by using a logged count of the number of protestors at an event to measure protest size (and, by proxy, capacity), a group’s use of confrontational tactics like sit-ins, whether the group has radical goals like racial or ethnic power, the number of goals a group has, and the number of protest targets the group pursues (Earl et al. 2003, 591-593). Race and age, while they may play a minor role in areas like determining group goals, are less of a concern here than the organization itself. Race and age play a more direct role in what the authors term the “weakness approach.”

withstand targeting from the government, or if the members themselves cannot handle the pressure of being targets, it creates weakness within the group. Weakness-from-without focuses on society at large: how likely is the public to notice or care that this particular group is being repressed? The third approach is the interaction approach, which combines the threat and weakness approaches. Essentially, this approach suggests that the “weakest” groups that pose the highest threat get repressed. While not explicitly stated, the logic underlying this suggests that these groups are the most likely to be repressed because they have a greater ability to change the status quo, the will to do so, and a desired policy that is radically different from the current status quo.¹⁰

While the authors do not collapse all these different approaches into one coherent approach, Earl et al.’s (2003) theory and results suggest that all of these different factors can be synthesized into a conceptualization of threat. Importantly, these authors go beyond the group, showing us that the social and political contexts, as well as the characteristics of the regime itself, influence the perception of threat. Indeed, it makes sense that we would have to include regime characteristics when discussing how to conceptualize threat because threat is perceived by the regime; a conclusion that later literature bears out (Conrad and Ritter 2013, Ritter 2014). The societal context matters as well, as it sends signals to the regime about how likely it is that the group will receive outside support when the regime attempts to repress. If the group is marginalized by the society at large, repression is unlikely to be met with a backlash. If, however, the group has structures in place to insulate themselves against repression and has carried favor with the broader population, we might expect to see some type of backlash against repression (Francisco 1996, 2004, 2005; Franklin 2008; Siegel 2011; Daxecker & Hess 2013; De Jaegher and Hoyer 2019).

Putting these different ideas together, it appears that regimes are responding less to individual characteristics of the group and rather assessing how these characteristics would manifest in terms of changing the status quo. The regime has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo: it put them in power and keeps them there. Threats to the status quo are threats to their continued position as political elites. “Threat,” then, refers to how much the group would cause the status quo to change, how likely the group is to succeed at getting this change, and how well the elites would fare if this change were realized. The manifestation of this latent threat is multidimensional, combining group demographics, group capacity and tactics, the societal context, and the characteristics of the regime itself.

¹⁰ There is a final approach, police agency, which suggests that the level of threat is a consequence of the resources available to police. This approach states that police with more resources have a greater capacity to repress. Since this approach is so specific, it does not *directly* apply to my conceptualization of threat. However, the logic underlying it applies: as the police (or government) are better equipped to deal with dissent, it becomes less threatening to them overall.

Dimensions of Dissident Threat

Although often implicit, there are two latent dimensions underlying the current conceptualization: group demand and group capacity. Using these dimensions, we can break down the concept of “threat as regime change” and understand why authors find that governments use repression on groups with less extreme goals. First, consider a group’s demand – the goal they are working towards achieving. On the extreme end, we have a group that wants to replace the current regime. This threat can manifest in several ways (i.e., the leader having concerns over the type of exit they will make (Escriba-Folch 2013), concerns over what will happen to them after they are removed from office (Conrad & Ritter 2013, Ritter 2014), etc.), but the underlying factor here is that the group’s demand, if achieved, upsets the status quo.

Existing research finds that status quo maintenance as the reason behind government repression (Earl, Soule, & McCarthy 2003; Pierskalla 2010; Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong 2011; DeMeritt 2016), and we can see implicit calls for this in the literature that uses deviations from the cultural norm as a measure of threat (see, for example, Davenport 1995). The general underlying logic is that group demands represent changes to the status quo power structure, which the government wants to defend. At the extreme, the status quo the government is trying to maintain is their leadership position, tying this dimension in with the literature on repression as a response to stability threats. However, *any* changes to the status quo are negative, as they represent an erosion of the power structures that put the current government in charge (Earl, Soule, & McCarthy 2003; Davenport, Soule, & Armstrong 2011; Davenport & Inman 2012; Chang & Vitale 2013). The changes are not all equally negative – changing a few policies is less threatening than regime change – so these groups should experience different levels of dissent. It should also be noted that threat is subjective to the government: similar demands might get different responses depending on the government (Chang & Vitale 2013).

The second dimension of threat in the current literature is group capability. We can see this dimension implicitly invoked when authors refer to the tactics group use, their membership, and their organizational capacity (Davenport 1995; Moore 2000; Carey 2010; Danneman & Ritter 2014). This dimension revolves around the group’s ability to coerce the government into meeting its demands: Does it have the ability to generate enough costs on the government to make switching policies a less costly alternative? This makes intuitive sense when paired with the demand dimension. Groups may espouse extreme demands, but without the capacity to coerce the government these demands can be written off (Pierskalla 2010). This dimension covers everything from the group’s ability to get “boots on the ground” (Davenport 1995; Carey 2010) to their ability to learn from others and incorporate tactics that have worked before and ignore ones that failed (Danneman & Ritter 2014).

	Low Capability	High Capability
Moderate Demand	Lowest Threat	Moderate Threat
Radical Demand	Moderate Threat	Greatest Threat

Table 1: Demand, Capability, and their Relation to Threat

These two dimensions—a group’s intent to disrupt the status quo and their capability to do so—are useful for understanding when governments will expend scarce resources to repress dissident groups. However, there are aspects of repression that cannot be explained by these dimensions alone. Theoretically, if a group’s demand and capability remained constant, we should expect the government’s response to be constant as well.¹¹ Empirically, however, this is not the case – we observe the government’s repressive response to a group change over time, sometimes within a matter of days or weeks. This could be evidence of an initial miscalculation on the part of the government – perhaps their information about the group’s capabilities and/or demand was incomplete, and once they made contact by attempting repression, they were able to update this information and their response. This is a reasonable explanation for some of the cases, but it can’t be representative of all of them: some states have impressive intelligence apparatuses that are used to gather important information on group demand and capability before they can dissent, and even these governments change their repressive strategies over time (Cunningham 2005). The answer lies outside of the threat characteristics of any one group; rather, we can explain these changes in repression by looking at the wider universe of groups – the *threat environment*.

The Threat Environment

The literature often assumes, for the sake of convenience, that repression-dissent interactions are dyadic: a government represses a group, that group dissents against the government, and the interaction ends. While the assumption that these interactions take place in a vacuum has helped to streamline theory and narrow interactions down to basic elements, this simplifying assumption runs the risk of misattributing the reasons for both changes in the government’s strategy and the group’s response. This assumption discounts 1) the role of other groups and 2) the potential for future conflict in the government’s repressive calculus. In reality, both the government and dissident group operate in a broader system of threats, where the changing nature of this *threat environment* influences the actions of both.

We can see an early attempt to incorporate this logic into repression by looking at Walter’s (2006; 2009) work on reputation building in contentious politics. Walter specifically focuses on why some separatist conflicts are more violent than others – some

¹¹ Assuming the characteristics of the government do not change, as group “threat” is subjective to the government. Different governments have different ideal status quos and different abilities to weather the group’s coercive abilities, thus making it so the same group can pose a different level of threat to two different hypothetical governments.

governments accommodate separatists and make concessions; others violently repress the groups out of existence. If we look just at the *individual group* level, this story is puzzling – each of these groups are making demands that are guaranteed to disrupt the status quo and the government response does not seem to obviously correlate to the group’s capabilities. In short, group threat *alone* cannot explain the variation.

Walter suggests that looking at the dyadic government-group relationship is not enough. She points out that governments often have to deal with multiple dissident groups – perhaps even multiple separatist groups. We can see this looking at Walter’s case study of Indonesia, where there are a large number of ethnic groups that might be willing to press for autonomy. Walter looks at two in particular - the Ambonese of Maluku and the Papuans of Western New Guinea. Each of these groups sought sovereignty following the independence of Indonesia, but they differed in what their secession would mean for the state. West Papua was one of the largest and richest provinces, while Ambon was relatively small, economically weak province. Basing our logic on threat alone, the government should have focused its repressive efforts on the West Papuans and ignored or appeased the Ambonese. Instead, we observe the Indonesian government repressing both groups aggressively – a strategy that does not make sense *until we consider Indonesia’s threat environment*. Walter argues that by repressing these groups heavily when they pushed for self-determination, the regime developed a reputation that effectively deterred future challenges for autonomy. The regime, weighing the threat posed by the groups, the costs of repression, *and the topography of the threat environment*, decided it was better to repress these self-determination movements *regardless of their individual threat*.

My argument is a natural extension of Walter’s. While Walter limits her discussion to the specific domain of separatist movements¹², I argue that we can expand the underlying logic to the broader realm of contentious politics. *All* the groups in the threat environment have their own demands, their own capacity, and each pose a distinct threat to the government. Since repressive resources are not infinite, the government must weigh the benefits of repressing the target group right now against the possibility of not being able to stop the next group.

This threat environment changes the strategic calculus considerably. Expending too many resources on repressing the target group may get them back down but leaves the government open to other threats. Focusing too much on other potential threats may stop dissent from cropping up in the future but does nothing to address the current problem. *Changes* in the threat environment, then, can explain shifting government policies towards groups; even if the group and the government stay the same, groups entering and exiting the threat environment change the government’s strategic calculus, changing their repressive policy as a result.

¹² In particular, suggesting that reputations may be domain-specific, such that a reputation for repressing separatist movements might only matter to potential separatists.

Returning to the Muslim Brotherhood example, we can see this dynamic at work. The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan was far from the most threatening group throughout independent Jordan's history – that title belonged to Hamas and Black September. As time went on, however, the threat environment shifted. The Muslim Brotherhood began being perceived as a threat in other states, making it more threatening at home, too. While the Muslim Brotherhood itself remained largely the same, its *status quo threat changed* as it grew unpopular in other countries and threatened the international standing of Jordan. Faced with the prospect of a major change in the *international status quo* and the Brotherhood's consistent level of threat, the Jordanian government decided that they could no longer be ignored and began restricting their ability to act.

Chapter 3: A Model of Repression and the Threat Environment

3-Player Threat Environment Interaction

To illustrate the logic behind the threat environment, I create a formal model. In this model, a pair of dissident groups are making decisions about whether to act, and the government is trying to figure out how best to use its repressive resources. Since its repressive resources are limited, the government must make a strategic choice about which group to repress. The government is forced to weigh the threat posed by each group, in the form of their demands and capabilities, and decide how best to invest in repression. When the government is resource rich, it will repress with impunity. As resources dwindle, the government begins to carefully consider the threats posed by the different groups. Using various comparative statics derived from the model, I find that the repression faced by a group is a function of the threat posed by the other group – in particular, the other group’s demand and capacity interact to influence the likelihood of the government investing in repressing the target group fully.

The State of the System

This model looks at the interaction between three actors: a government, and a pair of dissident groups that I call the active group and the potential group. The government has some status quo policy that it derives benefit from and would like to maintain. The active group loses utility under the current status quo and has some different preferred policy it would enact. The members of the potential group would also like to change the status quo policy¹³ but first need to mobilize before they can mount a challenge. In this interaction, the government first sets its level of reactive and preventive repression from its limited budget, then the active group decides whether to dissent or back down, and finally the latent group decides whether to attempt mobilization. If the government can successfully get the other groups to back down, the interaction ends with the status quo maintained. Otherwise, the interaction ends in conflict, with the active group dissenting and/or the latent group attempting to mobilize.

The Government

The first of the main actors in this interaction is the government. I use the term “government” as shorthand for any political regime currently in power – the “government” actor is whoever currently controls the state. The government actor for any given state can change over time – when a regime is replaced, that new regime would be considered the government actor by my model. These regimes share one key trait, however: they all value the status quo¹⁴. The status quo represents the current structure

¹³ I am assuming they would prefer a different status quo from the active group. If they did not, they would choose not to mobilize, letting them keep the resources they would have otherwise invested.

¹⁴ Since the model I am presenting is a one-shot interaction, I am assuming a static status quo. If it were allowed to vary, groups would have to form probabilistic expectations about how it would vary, which is outside the scope of the current model. The relationship between a government and a group depends on that

that allowed them to rise to and maintain power (Earl et al. 2003; Davenport et al. 2011); as such, they value the status quo remaining intact and deviations from the status quo are all negative. Larger changes to the status quo hurt more than minor ones, but they all hurt. I formalize the government's benefit from the status quo as b , which is exogenously drawn from a uniform distribution that ranges from $(0, \infty)$.

The government uses the resources at its disposal to protect the status quo through repression. The government can employ reactive repression¹⁵ against the active group, raising the costs it faces, or employ preventive repression¹⁶ against the potential group, influencing its ability to mobilize. In this model, the government has the option to use one or both tactics – it can choose to only employ preventive repression, only employ reactive repression, or set some combination of both.¹⁷ The government's allocations to each type of repression are subject to a resource constraint: the government has a set budget it can spend on repression, and each dollar it invests in reactive repression is one less that it can invest in preventive repression.¹⁸ As a result, the government faces a trade off in any given interaction – does it want to invest more in dealing with the group in front of it at the expense of potential further dissent down the line, or does it allow the current group to operate with relative impunity so it can quell latent dissent?¹⁹ I formalize

government and the nature of the status quo; a different status quo may result in the same group being seen differently. The government might find the same group's demand to be more or less extreme depending on the current status quo. While this may be the case, this simplification does not reduce my ability to speak to the main dynamic of interest: the interaction between a government and a group that wants to change the status quo under the threat of further potential dissent.

¹⁵ This repression is “reactive” in that it is a response to the active group's imminent challenge. The government is mustering resources that are specific to this type of repression: mobilizing police or military forces, placing barriers, etc. While these may hinder the immediate activity of the potential group, they are assumed to be more clandestine than the active group and are thus able to work around these obstacles.

¹⁶ This repression is “preventive” in that it is designed to hinder the potential group's ability to mobilize. This type of repression involves investing in things like intelligence networks, embedding agents in the organization, etc. (Cunningham 2005; Davenport 2015). These resources are directed disruption and sabotage and are assumed to be better suited towards medium- and long-term goals – not the short-term repression needed to stop the active group's challenge.

¹⁷ Given the assumptions I make about the effectiveness of each type of repression, reactive repression only influences the active group in the model, and preventive repression only influences the potential group. If there were spillover between the categories, I would expect the government to invest in whichever type of repression “casts the widest net” – that is, is best at disrupting the mobilization of the potential group *and* stopping the active group's challenge. The equilibrium activity would likely be heavily reduced, with most likely resulting in the groups backing down.

¹⁸ Note that these two types of repressive spending are not equally efficient – stopping a group before it has a chance to form is better for the government than responding to the actions of a group. In the terms of the model, I assume that preventive repression influences the probability of successful group mobilization, while reactive repression takes the form of an additive cost on groups intending to act. Both strategies are effective in their unique use cases, but in a vacuum it would be more efficient for a government to invest everything in preventive repression and stop any group from forming in the first place.

¹⁹ In this model I am assuming that the government has a fixed budget that it can use for repression and that it *must use all of it*. The amount it invests in reactive repression and the amount it invests in preventive repression must sum to the total amount. Conceptualizing it this way highlights the trade-off that I believe is at the core of the interaction, but it does add artificiality – I am forcing the government to spend some amount on repression. While this is a strong assumption, it is not without some basis in reality. Governments often have budgets set out for specific purposes, and usually all of budget must be used or it

the Government's repressive resources as s , which exogenously set and drawn from a uniform distribution that ranges from $(0, \infty)$ ²⁰. The reactive repression the government directs towards the active group is denoted n , while the preventive repression directed at the potential group is denoted w . The government sets both of these terms and can pick a value ranging from $[0, s]$ ²¹. I assume that the government always fully divides its repressive resources between these two types of repression, such that $s = n + w$.²²

The Active Dissident Group

The second main player is a dissident group that is assumed to be active at the start of the interaction. This means that before this interaction began, this group solved the collective action problem, formalized its demands, and can make a claim on the government. The group has one decision to make: it can either dissent, challenging the government in the hopes that it can change the status quo, or it can back down and preserve the status quo. If it chooses to dissent, it enters a lottery where the group has a chance of getting their demand or a chance of being defeated and having the status quo prevail. I formalize the active group's demand as d_A , which is exogenously drawn from a uniform distribution ranging from $(0, \infty)$. This demand can be thought of as some redistributive cost the group would like to impose on the government. The group's probability of defeat is formalized as q , which ranges from $[0, 1]$. The government's current status quo policy imposes cost b on the group. We can think of d_A as how the group would want to be living under the different status quo, and b as the cost associated with not being able to under that idealized status quo.²³

While the group's probability of victory is exogenously determined in this model, we could think of it as a function of the group's capabilities: their resources, manpower, organizational structure, etc. As the group increases in capabilities, the probability that it is defeated decreases – making it more likely that the group will see its policy demand met. The group knows that if it attempts to dissent, it could face some repressive costs

might be reduced in the future. Combined with the fact that governments possess finite resources, this suggests there is at least some validity in conceptualizing the resource constraint in this way.

²⁰ If the government's resources were zero, it would not be able to act. This would result in the active group challenging the government and the potential group attempting to mobilize.

²¹ These terms are bounded by s , as the government cannot invest more resources in a type of repression than it currently has.

²² If I were to relax this assumption, it would allow the government to hold some resources in reserve. In the current model, this would defray some of the costs associated with a successful challenge or mobilization. In the case of repeated play, however, we might expect the government to hold some of these resources in reserve to prepare for future threats.

²³ As an example, consider a group that wanted to expand access to abortion rights. This group would like everyone to have ready access to abortion, but the government imposes some penalty b on getting one. Members of this group can still seek out the care they want, but it is more dangerous and costly than it would otherwise be if it were allowed under the status quo. Another example could be the right to same-sex marriage. This group might prefer a status quo where same-sex marriages had equal protections under the law, but the government imposes some costs in the form of not offering the same benefits and/or forcing same-sex partners to hide their relationships. They still have their relationship, but there is a cost associated that they would not otherwise pay under a new status quo.

from the government regardless of whether the group is successful. This factors into their expected utility as additive cost n , which is set by the government.²⁴

The Potential Dissident Group

The final actor in the interaction is a potential dissident group. The unitary actor in the model represents all the individuals in the population that are dissatisfied with the government and are interested in attempting mobilization. As such, while this group is modeled as a singular actor, it is more conceptually accurate to think of it as a loose amalgam of individuals who are working to solve the collective action problem and mobilize. Critically, this class of actors is distinct from those in the active group, meaning they face unique costs under the status quo and would make unique demands.

The group pools resources in an attempt to solve the collective action problem, which I call the group's mobilization potential. As the group's mobilization potential increases, they have more ability to overcome the collective action problem and successfully mobilize. Their mobilization potential also helps insulate the group against the government's attempts to thwart their mobilization²⁵. This mobilization potential is formalized as m and is exogenously drawn from a uniform distribution ranging from $(0, \infty)$.

This group must decide between backing down, which maintains the status quo but allows them to keep the resources they would otherwise use for mobilization, and attempting to mobilize where they have some endogenously determined probability of mobilization success. Under the status quo, the group gets to keep their mobilization potential m but the current status quo policies result in them paying cost b . Their mobilization benefit, l , can be thought of as the demand the group is expected to make on the government in the future. It is exogenously drawn from a uniform distribution ranging from $(0, \infty)$. The probability of mobilization failure, p , is determined by the group's endowment of resources and the government's investment in repression. The government's repressive strategy against this group is one of prevention: sabotaging the group while it is trying to form is likely to be more effective than challenging it in the future (Sullivan 2016a, 2016b). As such, preventive repression directly factors into the group's probability of successful mobilization, instead of being an additive cost.

²⁴ Conceptually, the government is repressing this specific repressive action – the dissidents that get beaten during the march still get beaten, regardless of whether they accomplish their overall goal. This guaranteed reprisal allows this type of repression to serve as a deterrent.

²⁵ We can think of the mobilization potential as the initial resources required to get a group up and running. These can be physical, like having a place to meet or liquid assets like cash, and conceptual, like access to information about the government, knowledge on how to identify other potential dissidents, etc. I simplify this concept for the sake of the model, but we could imagine these resources working differently in their ability to help a group mobilize: simply having money, for example, isn't likely to do much good if a dissident doesn't know where or how to spend it. This type of knowledge is likely more useful in helping the group survive than materiel alone.

A Note on Government Repression and the Two Dissident Groups

While I discuss repression in the context of the model generically, it is important to consider how repression against each group manifests. The two groups are at unique points in their lifecycle: the active group is on the verge of mounting a challenge against the government, while the potential group is trying to overcome the collective action problem to form a unified group in the first place. The government, for its part, has the same *end goal* for each group – get them to back down – but the tools it uses to accomplish this goal are going to be different for each group.

For the active group, the government is trying to get them to back down in order to stop an impending threat. The repression is serving a deterrent role here: the government is telling the active dissident group that there will be a cost for challenging them. Since the government is reacting to an imminent threat, the repression they use will reflect this – allocating additional police to potential protest sites, cracking down on current members of the group, making the group illegal, etc. (Sullivan 2016a, 2016b). Importantly, the government has *failed* to stop the mobilization activity associated with this group; as such, they are focused on making the dissent activity as costly as possible for the active group. Since the government is directly reacting to the group’s imminent challenge, I call this type of repression “reactive.”

The potential group is at a different place in its lifecycle, and the government’s strategy reflects this. Since the group is so young, it has not had a chance to solve the same collective action problems the active group has. For example, they have not established a consistent membership, codified their ideological positions, agreed on demands, agreed on tactics, etc. These collective action problems are difficult enough without government interference – it is entirely possible that a potential group will fail to overcome these problems without government involvement at all. As a result, the government has an incentive to focus on types of repression that are best able to disrupt these processes: by making an already difficult proposition harder, they can essentially ensure group failure with relatively minimal investment. As such, they focus on things like infiltration and disruption – distinct from the deterrent, reactive repression we observe being directed towards the active group, but repressive in its own right (Cunningham 2005; Davenport 2015; Sullivan 2016a, 2016b). Since this repression is designed to prevent the successful mobilization of the potential group, I call this type of repression “preventive.”

These strategies of repression are distinct from one another, and the model reflects this. Reactive repression is considered as an additive cost for the active group associated with challenging the government – if they decide to go through with their protest, for example, there will be police waiting for them at the protest site, members of the group will be arrested, etc. While this repression will directly impact the active group, it is unlikely to have a direct impact on the potential group – they would have to be at the same event at the same time to feel the costs of repression.²⁶ Moreover, this repression is

²⁶ There are situations where this might occur – for example, if the potential group and active group were ideologically aligned, members of the potential group might show up for the active group’s protest. The presented model does not cover these situations directly; however, we could imagine situations where the

not necessarily designed to hinder the success of the group – even if members of the group are beaten to the point where they go home, they may still accomplish the groups larger goals by, if nothing else, having a visible struggle against the government and generating coverage (Sullivan and Davenport 2017). As such, this repression does not influence the active group’s probability of failure q .

Preventive repression, on the other hand, operates differently. Instead of imposing a cost on the group for acting, it *directly influences their chances for success* – essentially, this type of repression is undercutting the potential group’s capabilities. As such, it directly factors into the potential group’s probability of failing to successfully mobilize p , instead of as a straight cost like reactive repression. We should also expect this type of repression to have minimal spillover to the active group. Since this repression is designed to destabilize the potential group, the only way it would directly impact the active group is if these two organizations were working closely together.

To summarize, I assume that the active group faces a distinct type of repression from the potential group, and vice versa. These types of repression do not overlap – repression directed towards the active group is *only* felt by the active group, and repression directed towards the potential group is *only* felt by the potential group. The reactive repression an active group faces is designed to act as a deterrent against challenging the government and is incorporated into their utility as an additive cost. The preventive repression faced by the potential group, on the other hand, is intended to sabotage their ability to solve the collective action problem. As such, it is incorporated into the potential group’s utility by directly influencing p – their probability of failing to mobilize.²⁷

A Note on Interactions Between Dissident Groups

It should also be noted that the two dissident groups have no *direct* impact on one another – rather, they influence each other through the government’s assignment of repressive resources. As such, the active group is not considering the potential group in this interaction, or vice versa. This is a strong assumption – in the real world, groups consider each other all the time.

repression faced by the active group (and members of the potential group) has a deterrent effect on potential group mobilization. In these situations, the members of the potential group directly observe the repression faced by the active group and the additional cost imposed on them causes them to forego mobilizing and instead keep their initial resources.

²⁷ This means that the model can essentially be thought of as a choice the government is making between two lotteries. One lottery, the active group’s, cannot be manipulated directly but can be avoided by paying some fixed cost. Regardless of their probability of success, there is some cost that is just too high for the active group to pay, and repressing to that level causes the active group to back down, allowing the government to avoid the active group’s lottery. The other lottery, the potential group’s, can be directly manipulated by the government through the use of preventive repression. Investing in this repression makes it more likely that this lottery will end up in the government’s favor if the potential group decides to go forward to mobilization. If the government influences this lottery too much, the potential group may simply back down and keep their mobilization resources instead of playing a rigged game.

In her work, Walter (2009) discusses one avenue these groups can impact each other – through their demands. Walter notes that repression can serve a dual purpose for the government by dealing with groups that are currently posing a problem *and* by deterring future dissent. If potential groups observe a similar group getting repressed, particularly a group with similar demands to them, they are likely to assume the government will treat them similarly and back down preemptively. Repression thus has a reputational component: by consistently repressing groups with certain demands, the government creates a reputation for treating that type of demand with extreme repression. As such, this dissuades potential dissidents from forming a group in the first place – they know that the government is likely to see them the same way it has other similar groups and will respond accordingly, so they back down before facing those costs.

In the terms of my model, then, we can think of the two dissident groups as having *distinct* demands from one another. The repression that one group faces should not, in theory, provide a meaningful signal to the other group – since they are worried about distinct issue areas, the government may treat them distinctly. If they did not have distinct demands (and the model allowed for repeat play and updated information), we could imagine repression serving the reputational purpose that Walter (2009) suggests. In this version of the model, the active and potential groups would have aligned demands. If this were the case, the government would have an incentive to repress the active group as harshly as possible – even if it does not have the resources necessary to get the group to back down, investing heavily in repression should send a signal to the potential group that any dissent they attempt down the road will be met with repression that is just as intense. The potential group, taking into account the government’s investment in repressing the active group, may then choose not to attempt mobilization or further dissent in subsequent rounds of the interaction and instead keep those resources for itself.

Another potential area where the groups influence each other would be in making decisions about whether to work together. A potential group that is ideologically aligned with an active group, for example, may choose to invest their resources into the currently existing active group instead of attempting mobilization and forming their own group. This decision likely depends on two factors: exactly how ideologically aligned the two groups are and how capable the active group is. If the active group is likely to be able to win on its own, the potential group may choose to free-ride: instead of paying the costs associated with mobilizing or investing in the existing group, they can keep their resources *and* enjoy the changed status quo. If the active group is likely to lose, the potential group may decide to go ahead with mobilization: if the active group loses, the potential group is there to pick up the struggle; if the active group wins, the potential group mobilized for nothing but gets to enjoy the new status quo. The interesting cases are likely to occur somewhere in the middle – where the active group has a moderate chance of success. Here, the potential group would face an interesting strategic tension: they can mobilize, they can free-ride, or they can donate some of their mobilization resources to the active group. Depending on how ideologically aligned the groups are, it might be worth it for the potential group to forego creating their own organization in favor of helping one that currently exists. As the level of ideological alignment decreases, however, there might be more incentive for the potential group to mobilize on their own.

The active group might also change its behavior if we allowed for direct interaction between the two groups. Again, how this interaction would influence the active group's behavior would likely depend on the level of ideological alignment between the active group and the potential group, as well as their respective level of capabilities. If the groups are not ideologically aligned, we have the model I present here: they have no incentive to work together, and the active group considers its decision to challenge the government independently of what the potential group is likely to do. If they are ideologically aligned, however, they may have an incentive to work with one another to achieve their preferred policy outcome. If the active group is likely to succeed, I assume they will challenge the government regardless of the actions taken by the potential group. Since they are ready to challenge the government now and have a high likelihood of succeeding, there is no reason to wait on the potential group to form – waiting only serves to defer getting the status quo they would have likely attained *without* the potential group. There are more interesting dynamics that would likely be at play as the active group gets less likely to succeed. First, if the active group is moderately likely to succeed, they may be incentivized to try to absorb some (or all) of the members of the potential group. The members of the potential group might be willing to invest some or all of their mobilization resources if they would boost the capabilities of the active group to the point where they are likely to win, and the active group has an incentive to recruit these dissidents.²⁸ We might also see a situation where the active group acts as a “sacrificial lamb” for the potential dissident group – draining the government's resource now as a way to help the potential group get its preferred policy down the road.²⁹

To summarize, I am assuming a situation where the goals of the active group are completely separate from the goals of the potential group. As such, they make their decisions independently from one another. If we allowed for the groups to be ideologically aligned, we should expect a number of changes to group and government behavior. Governments would likely be repressing with their reputation in mind, hoping that intense repression against the active group now causes the ideologically aligned potential group to back down in expectation of suffering a similar fate. The two groups, on the other hand, would have differing incentives depending on their relative capabilities and ideological alignment. For the potential group, this might take the form of free-riding

²⁸ Depending on how ideologically aligned the groups are, we could imagine an “ideological purity” cost associated with absorbing members of the potential group. For example absorbing a lot of members might greatly increase the active group's capabilities, but the new membership might want different specific policy outcomes from the active group. This would result in a situation where the active group is weighing a moderate chance of getting their preferred policy outcome against a better chance of getting policies that are not ideal but better than the current status quo. The actual decision would likely be based on comparing how likely the group is to win unaided against the policy losses they would incur if they sought the potential group's help.

²⁹ This sort of behavior is likely only going to be observed in situations of incomplete information – particularly when the government does not know the likelihood of the challenge failing q . In this situation, there is likely a pooling equilibrium where some less capable types of the active group challenge as if they were highly capable in order to get the government to invest resources into fighting it. Doing so reduces the resources left to fight the potential group, who can then mobilize, become active groups in their own right, and challenge the government for their own preferred status quo (which the current active group prefers to the government's status quo).

(when the active group is capable and there is high ideological alignment), mobilization (when there is low ideological alignment and low likelihood of active group success), or partnership (when there is high ideological alignment and low likelihood of active group success). For the active group, this might take the form of ignoring the potential group entirely (when the active group has a high likelihood of success on their own, the groups are not ideologically aligned, and/or the potential group is likely to fail on its own), partnership (when the groups are ideologically aligned and the potential group is likely to fail on its own), or sacrifice (when the active group is likely to fail but can trick the government into investing resources that would have otherwise been directed toward the potential group).

Sequence of Moves and Payoffs

The interaction begins by drawing values for the active group's demand, probability of success, and costs under the status quo; the potential group's mobilization potential, mobilization benefit, and costs under the status quo; and the government's status quo benefit and resource endowment. The government then sets levels of reactive and preventive repression using all its allocated repression budget. Once the government has set its desired levels of repression, the active group decides whether to dissent. If the group backs down, they get their status quo payoff since their preferred policy is not put into place. If the group chooses to dissent, both actors enter a lottery where the government has some probability of defeating the group, which is a function of the group's capabilities. Recall that the repression this group faces is deterrent – this is represented as a cost set by the government that the active group incurs if it attempts to dissent regardless of the outcome of its attempt. Finally, the potential group must decide whether it will invest its mobilization potential and attempt to mobilize.³⁰ If the potential group chooses to refrain from attempting mobilization, it gets its status quo payoff but gets to keep its mobilization potential. Consider the resources that the individuals would sacrifice to attempt mobilization: their time, money, anonymity, etc. If the group does not attempt to mobilize, its members get to keep these resources for potential investment another day. If the group does attempt to mobilize, it enters a lottery where the mobilization has some probability of being successful, which would grant the group some mobilization benefit; this probability is a function of the group's mobilization potential and the government's investment in preventive repression.

To clarify this interaction, consider the following utility functions. If the interaction ends with the status quo (that is, the active dissident group backs down and the latent group refrains from attempting mobilization), the active dissident group gets the following utility:

$$U_A(SQ) = d_A - b$$

³⁰ While this is written as following the active group's dissent decision, it could happen at any time after the government makes its repressive decision.

Where members of the group continue to pay associated with being unable to live in the status quo they would prefer. They still get some benefit for acting consistently with their preferred status quo, but they pay some cost b .³¹

The potential group gets the following utility:

$$U_P(SQ) = m - b$$

Where they also pay some cost associated with living under the status quo, but they are not far enough along in the mobilization process to have an idea of what their ideal status quo looks like. As such, they are only comparing keeping the resources associated with mobilization to the cost of persisting under the status quo.

Finally, the government gets the following utility:

$$U_G(SQ) = b$$

Utilities are slightly more complicated when conflict arises. First, assume that the active group dissents while the potential group refrains from mobilization. In this case, the potential group simply gets their status quo payoff.³² The active group's utility for dissent is a lottery where they have probability q of being defeated by the government and receiving their status quo cost plus some additional costs of repression or probability $1-q$ of succeeding and implementing their demands. This can be denoted as the following utility function:

$$EU_A(Dissent) = q(d_A - b - n) + (1 - q)(d_A - n)$$

The government's utility for dissent when there is no mobilization is a function of their current status quo benefit, the resources they invested in reactive repression, and the active group's demand. The government does not agree with the active group's preferred status quo policy, and seeing it put into place would impose a cost of the government similar to the current status quo cost for the group actors. This leads to the following utility function:

$$EU_G(Dissent|No Mobilization) = b - (q * 0 + (1 - q)(d_A - n))$$

The government attempts to avoid this imposed cost using reactive repression. Unlike preventive repression, reactive repression's purpose is to impose costs on the active group. As such, it does not directly impact the group's ability to implement the new status quo (it does not directly impact probability q); rather it makes achieving their goal

³¹ Algebraically, if $d_A > b$, the active group will have a positive utility for the status quo. We might consider these situations where the active group is more ideologically aligned with the government – while they are still chafing against some of the laws the government puts in place, they are generally content under the status quo. This would lead them to back down, as they have no interest in changing the current arrangement.

³² It is assumed that the payoffs for the active and potential groups are independent of one another, in that the actions of one group does not influence the other outside of how they influence the government's repressive decision.

less attractive via the imposition of costs. This imposition of costs also makes the realization of the group's demand less costly for the government.

Next, assume that the active group backs down and the potential group attempts to mobilize. Here that active group simply gets its status quo payoff. The potential group has the following expected utility for attempted mobilization:

$$EU_p(\text{Mobilization}) = -b + p * 0 + (1 - p)l$$

Since the group is not ready to challenge the government, they will pay their status quo cost regardless of whether they successfully mobilize. If they successfully mobilize, however, they can offset some of this cost through their mobilization benefit l . We can think of this as the potential group's potential demand: now that they have solved the collective action problem, they have a better idea of what their preferred status quo policy would look like. Recall that the probability of the group failing to mobilize is an endogenous function of the group's mobilization potential, m , and the government's investment in preventive repression, w , leading to the following:

$$p = \frac{w}{w + m}$$

Meanwhile, the government's utility for mobilization but no dissent from the active group is determined by the group's mobilization benefit and their probability of failure. If the group successfully mobilizes, we can assume the government has some idea what the group would ask for, causing them to factor in the group's potential demand l . The utility function is as follows:

$$EU_G(\text{Mobilization}|\text{No Dissent}) = b - p * 0 - (1 - p)l$$

Finally, assume that the interaction ends in full conflict: the active group dissents and the potential group attempts to mobilize. In this situation, the active group gets its expected utility for dissent and the latent group gets its expected utility for attempted mobilization. The government gets an expected utility that is a combination of the two previously discussed utility functions:

$$EU_G(\text{Conflict}) = b - (1 - q)(d_A - n) - \frac{l * m}{w + m}$$

The Active Group's Decision to Dissent

The active group will back down from dissenting if their utility for the status quo is greater than or equal to their expected utility of dissent:

$$U_A(SQ) \geq EU_A(\text{Dissent})$$

Or

$$d_A - b \geq q(d_A - b - n) + (1 - q)(d_A - n)$$

The active group is choosing between maintaining the status quo unrepressed or attempting to upset the status quo knowing that 1) they might fail and 2) they will face some costs whether they are victorious or not. Solving algebraically, we get the following inequality:

$$n \geq b(1 - q)$$

I denote this critical value of reactive repression n^* . The group will back down and maintain the status quo if $n \geq n^*$, and will dissent otherwise.

The Potential Group's Decision to Mobilize

The potential group will not attempt to mobilize if their utility for the status quo is greater than or equal to their expected utility of attempted mobilization:

$$U_L(SQ) \geq EU_L(Mobilization)$$

Or

$$m - b \geq -b + p * 0 + (1 - p)l$$

The choice for the potential group is between “investing” its mobilization potential to form a group versus maintaining the status quo and keeping these resources. Practically, we can think of this as the resources of the members of the potential group: their time, money, connections, and anonymity. If they stay quiet, they get to keep all these resources and save them for another day. If they attempt to mobilize, they make themselves known to the government and use up these resources. Solving this algebraically, we get $w \geq l - m$; I denote this critical value of preventive repression w^* . The potential group will back down if $w \geq w^*$, and will attempt to mobilize otherwise.

The Government's Repressive Decision

The government's desired repressive outcome is deceptively simple: repress enough to get both groups to back down. The decision is complicated by the fact that the government has a limited repressive budget, meaning that investment in one type of repression leaves fewer resources for the other type. To examine this further, I divide the following section into four scenarios. These scenarios vary the government's repressive endowment: sufficient resources to repress both groups to their critical points, more than enough resources to repress both groups fully, only enough resources to repress one group, and finally too few resources to repress either group. By looking at these scenarios, we can understand how the government decides where to allocate repression and how changes in the government's resource endowment and threat environment change how the government responds to these groups.

Scenarios 1 & 2: Sufficient & Abundant Resources

In this first scenario, the government has exactly enough repressive resources to repress both groups to their critical point. Formally, this is denoted as $s = n^* + w^*$. Unsurprisingly, in this scenario, the government sets the levels of preventive and reactive repression at their critical values. The government has no incentive to deviate from this strategy – setting one level of repression above the critical value means that the other falls below the critical value, inviting dissent or mobilization. As a result, there is only one equilibrium in this scenario: the government sets the levels of preventive and reactive repression at their critical values, the active group backs down, and the latent group refrains from mobilization.

*Sufficient Resources Equilibrium*³³: When $s = n^* + w^*$, Government sets $n = n^*$ and $w = w^*$; Potential Group backs down; Active Group backs down.

This second scenario is an extension of scenario 1: instead of having just enough resources to repress the groups, the government has more than enough to repress both. Formally, this can be represented as $s > n^* + w^*$. Like the above scenario, the government always prefers setting the levels of repression at the critical value as opposed to below them, ensuring both groups back down. However, the government is now indifferent between setting a level of repression at the critical point versus setting a level above it as long as the other level of repression clears the critical point. For example, consider the government setting reactive repression at n^* versus some value greater than n^* . If w does not fall below w^* , the government is indifferent between these distributions – they all result in the status quo being maintained. As a result, instead of there being a single equilibrium in this scenario, there are a class of equilibria: every combination of n and w are valid providing both n and w clear their critical points and $s = n + w$. In every one of these, the active group backs down and the latent group refrains from attempting to mobilize.

Abundant Resources Equilibrium 1: When $s > n^* + w^*$, Government sets $n = n^*$ and $w = s - n^* > w^*$; Potential Group backs down; Active Group backs down.

Abundant Resources Equilibrium 2: When $s > n^* + w^*$, Government sets $n = s - w^* > n^*$ and $w = w^*$; Potential Group backs down; Active Group backs down.

Scenario 3: Dwindling Resources

In this scenario, the government has enough resources to repress one group to its critical point, but not both. Formally, this can be represented as $s < n^* + w^*$ but $s \geq n^*$ or $s \geq w^*$. This is the first scenario where the government faces an important strategic decision about its resource allocation, as reaching the critical point for one group automatically means that the other group will dissent/mobilize. The government decides on how to invest in repression by comparing the expected utility for reaching the critical

³³ My equilibrium concept is the subgame perfect equilibrium, which requires actors to make logically consistent decisions at each subgame.

point of the active group to the expected utility of reaching the critical point of the potential group. The government will prefer reaching the active group's critical point if:

$$EU_G(n = n^* | w < w^*) \geq EU_G(n < n^* | w = w^*)$$

Which is equivalent to:

$$b - \frac{lm}{w' + m} \geq b - (1 - q)(d_A - n')$$

Where $n' < n^*$ and $w' < w^*$. Since the government is assumed to use all its repressive endowment, $w' = s - n^*$, or $s - (b - bq)$. Similarly, $n' = s - w^*$, or $s - (l - m)$. This leads to the following inequality:

$$b - \frac{lm}{s - b + bq + m} \geq b - (1 - q)(d_A - s + l - m)$$

Solving this for d_A we get the following:

$$d_A \geq m + s + l \left(-1 - \frac{m}{(-1 + q)(m + b(-1 + q) + s)} \right)$$

Or

$$d_A \geq d_A^*$$

If the active group's demand is about the critical value d_A^* , the government will repress the active group to the point it backs down while allowing the potential group to attempt mobilization. This inequality can also be solved for l , the mobilization payoff. The government sets $n = n^*$ if:

$$l \leq - \frac{(-1 + q)(d_A - m - s)(m + b(-1 + q) + s)}{b(-1 + q)^2 + mq + (-1 + q)s}$$

Or

$$l \leq l^*$$

This tells us that, in general, as d_A increases (or l decreases), the government is more likely to set $n = n^*$. As l increases (or d_A increases), the government is more likely to set $w = w^*$. This leads to the following equilibria:

Dwindling Resources Equilibrium 1: When $s < n^* + w^*$, $s \geq n^*$, and $d_A \geq d_A^*$ OR $l \leq l^*$, Government sets $n = n^*$ and $w = s - n^* < w^*$; Potential Group mobilizes; Active Group backs down.

Dwindling Resources Equilibrium 2: When $s < n^* + w^*$, $s \geq w^*$, and $d_A < d_A^*$ OR $l > l^*$, Government sets $n = s - w^* < n^*$ and $w = w^*$; Potential Group backs down; Active Group dissents.

Importantly, the government's strategy is *not* solely determined by the characteristics of the active dissident group. It is also shaped by the latent group. This shows that the government's repressive choice is not simply a function of the characteristics of the group they are repressing: the same active group, for example, might be treated differently in different threat environments (generated by the latent group). An active group with a weak latent group is more likely to get repressed to the point of backing down than if that same group occupied a threat environment with a stronger latent group, regardless of that active group's demands. The inverse relationship is also true: a latent group trying to form is likely to get repressed less when they occupy a threat environment with a strong active group versus one with a weak active group.

The following figures demonstrate how the cutpoint d_A^* change with respect to the potential group's mobilization capacity and potential demand/benefit to mobilization. In Figure 1, we see how the cutpoint moves with respect to the mobilization capacity of the potential group at differing levels of potential demand.

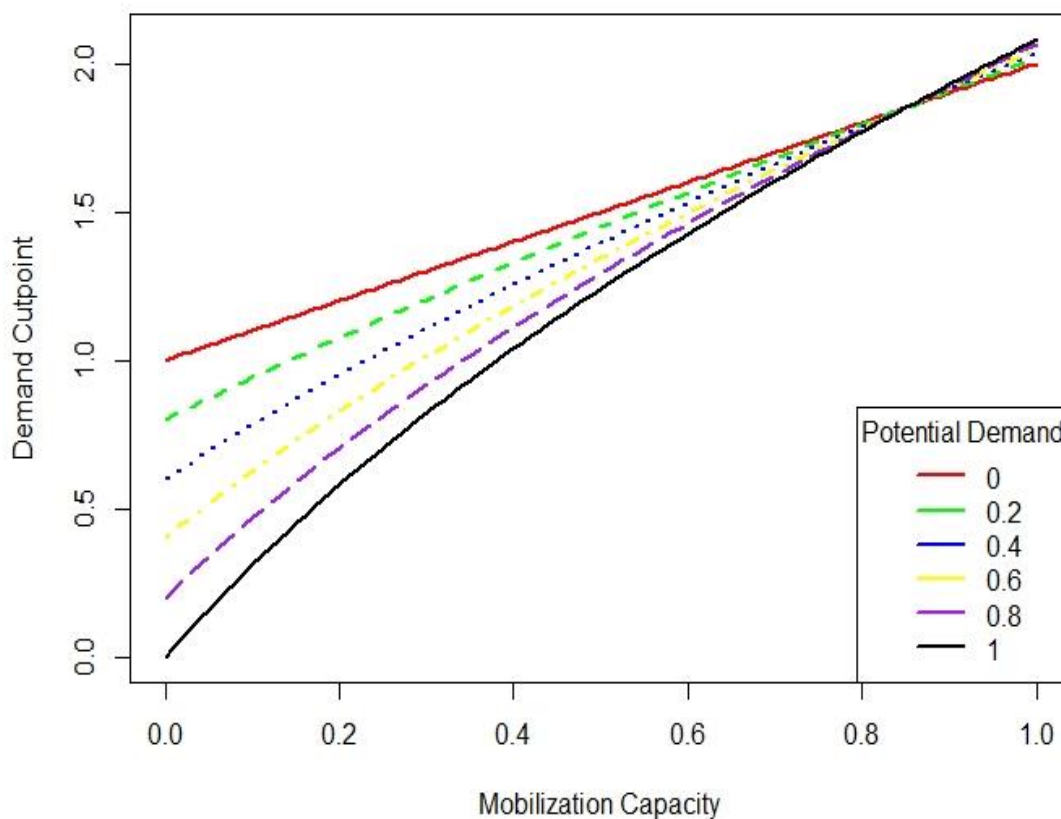


Figure 1 - d^* as a function of the Potential Group's Mobilization Capacity

For any given line in Figure 1, the space above the line represents a situation where the government will set $n = n^*$, repressing the active group to the point where they will back down. The space below the line represents situations where the government will set $w = w^*$, fully repressing the potential group but allowing the active group to mount a challenge. Thus, if the active group has a demand d that is above a line the government considers it threatening enough to fully repress, and if it has a demand d that falls under the line the government will focus its attention elsewhere.

Figure 1 demonstrates an interesting relationship between the potential group's mobilization capacity and the government's willingness to repress the active group fully. We can see that as we increase the potential group's mobilization capability m , there are fewer demands by dissident groups that would cause the government to repress the active dissident group. This then leads to my first implication:

Implication 1: As the potential group's mobilization capability increases, the government is less likely to repress the active group to the critical value n^* , all else equal.

Figure 2, meanwhile, looks at how the cutpoint changes with respect to the potential group's potential demand – the benefit they receive from mobilization and the costs the government faces from successful mobilization. The Figure is read the same way as Figure 1: area above a line represents equilibrium space where the government represses the active dissident group (by setting its expenditures on deterrent repression $n = n^*$), and area below it represents equilibrium space where the government represses the potential group (by setting $w = w^*$). This Figure demonstrates an interesting interactive effect between the potential group's demand and capability – at high levels of mobilization capability, increases in the potential group's demand make it *less* likely that the government will set $n = n^*$, but at low levels of capability increases in the potential group's demand make it *more* likely that the government will set $n = n^*$. This leads to my second set of implications:

Implication 2a: At high levels of mobilization capability, increases in the potential group's demands make the government less likely to repress the active group to the critical value n^* , all else equal.

Implication 2b: At low levels of mobilization capability, increases in the potential group's demands make the government more likely to repress the active group to the critical value n^* , all else equal.

These implications demonstrate that the government is thinking differently about the dimensions of threat. Increased dissident capability seems to be threatening to the government no matter the demand attached to it, while demand appears to be differentially threatening depending on the capabilities around it. In the model, this is due to the construction of the different dimensions – capability influences the probability of success, while demand is the additive cost to the government of dissident success. Thinking in terms of expected utilities, the expected utility for the government of losing to a highly capable group with a moderate demand is much lower than the expected utility of losing to a group with extreme demands but without a low capability. Outside of the context of the model, this difference makes sense – demand should matter to governments, but only if the governments believe the group can follow through and accomplish their goals.

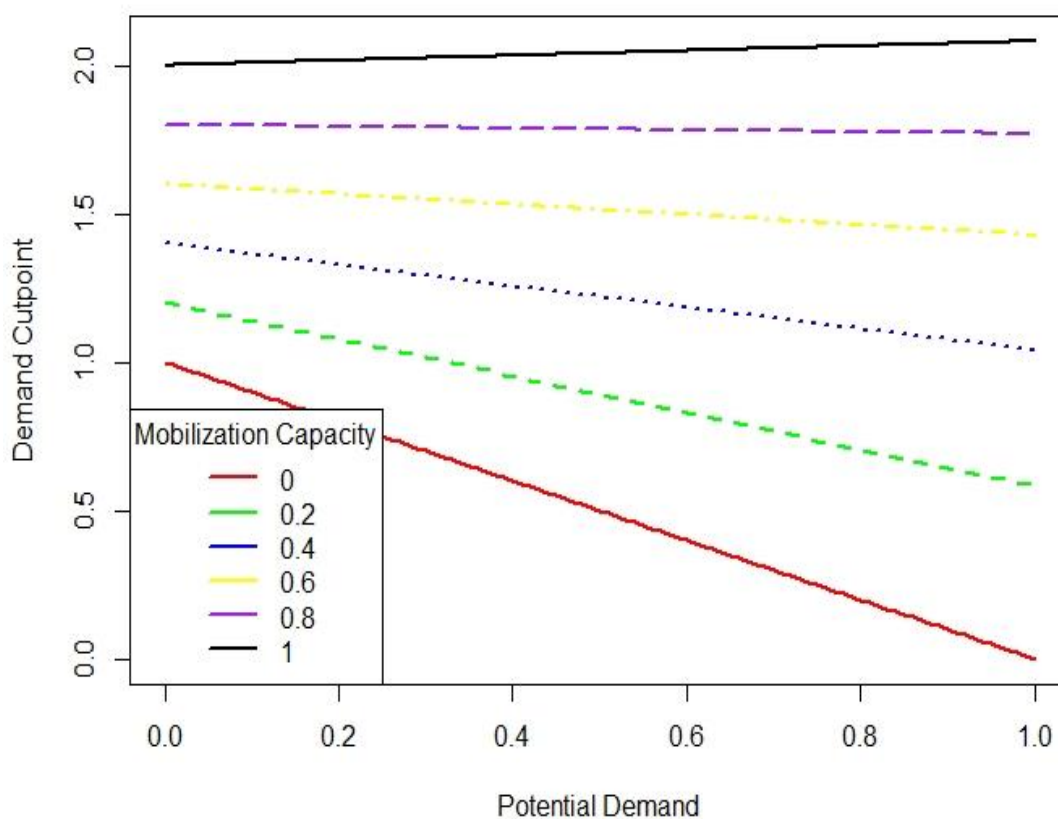


Figure 2 - d^* as a function of the Potential Group's Potential Demand

Scenario 4: Scarce Resources

In the final scenario, the government's resources are severely restricted – it no longer has the resources to repress either group to the critical point. Formally, this can be expressed as $s < n^* + w^*$, $s < n^*$, and $s < w^*$. Since there is no way the government can reach the groups' critical points, the government invests its resources to maximize its full conflict utility:

$$b - (1 - q)(d_A - n') - \frac{lm}{w' + m}$$

Where $n' < n^*$ and $w' < w^*$. This expression is twice differentiable and is concave down when:

$$n = m + s - \frac{lm}{\sqrt{-lm(-1 + q)}}$$

$$\text{Or } n = n''$$

And

$$w = m \left(-1 + \frac{l}{\sqrt{-lm(-1 + q)}} \right)$$

$$\text{Or } w = w''$$

Implying that these are maxima. Under these conditions, the government maximizes its utility by setting $n = n''$ and $w = w''$. Assuming the government has enough resources to hit these points, there is an equilibrium where the government sets $n = n''$ and $w = w''$, the active group dissents, and the latent group attempts to mobilize:

Scarce Resource Equilibrium 1: When $s < n^* + w^*$, $s < n^*$, $s < w^*$ but $s \geq n'' + w''$, Government sets $n = n''$ and $w = w''$; Potential Group mobilizes, Active Group dissents.

Under the conditions where the government cannot set $n = n''$ and $w = w''$ (for example, too few repressive resources), the government is deciding between setting one value for repression at zero and using all its resources for the other. The government will set $n = s$ and $w = 0$ if:

$$EU_G(n = s|w = 0) \geq EU_G(n = 0|w = s)$$

$$b - (1 - q)(d_A - s) - l \geq b - (1 - q)d_A - \frac{lm}{s + m}$$

Which is true if:

$$l \leq -(1 - q)(m + s)$$

$$\text{Or } l \leq l''$$

This leads to the following equilibria:

Scarce Resource Equilibrium 2a: When $s < n^* + w^*$, $s < n'' + w''$, and $l \leq l''$,
Government sets $n = s$ and $w = 0$; Potential Group mobilizes; Active Group dissents.

Scarce Resource Equilibrium 2b: When $s < n^* + w^*$, $s < n'' + w''$, and $l > l''$,
Government sets $n = 0$ and $w = s$; Potential Group mobilizes; Active Group dissents.

Figures 3 & 4 show how n'' change with respect to the potential group's mobilization capacity and potential demand, respectively; Figures 5 & 6 show the same but for w'' . These graphs indicate an unsurprising trend: as the potential group gets more threatening, the government sets a lower n'' and a higher w'' . As the potential group becomes less threatening, we observe the inverse.

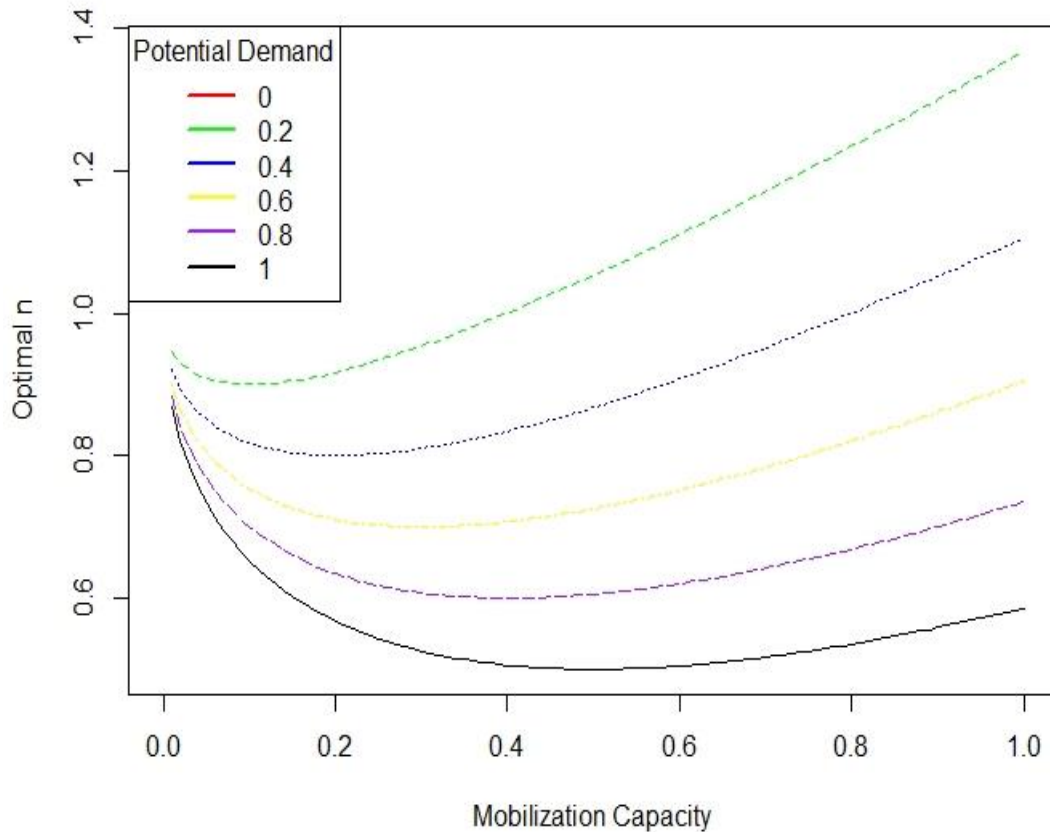


Figure 3 - Optimal n as a function of the Potential Group's Mobilization Capacity

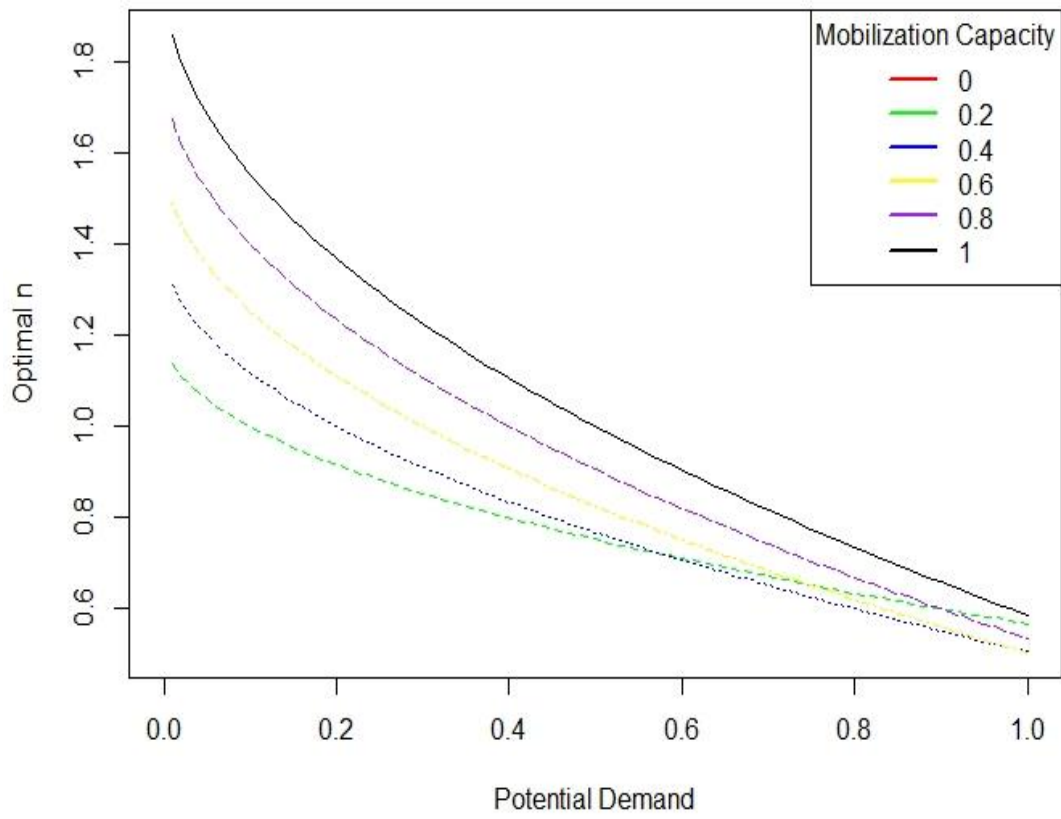


Figure 4 - Optimal n as a function of the Potential Group's Potential Demand

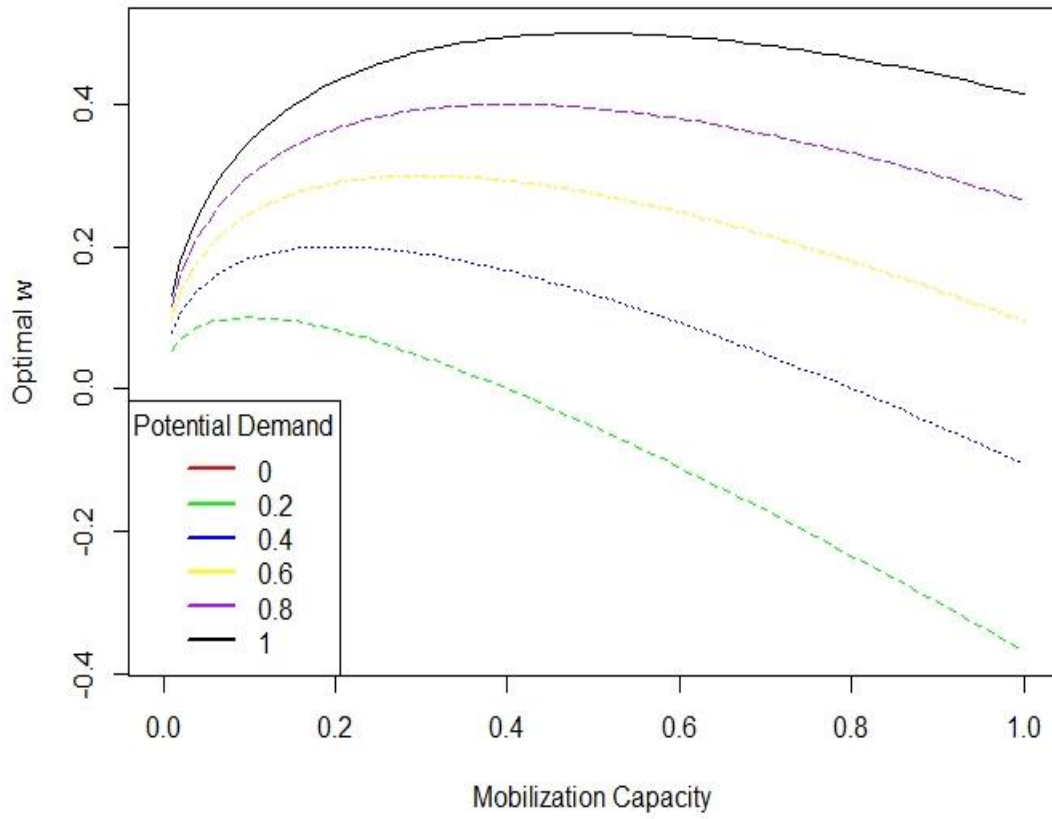


Figure 5 - Optimal w as a function of the Potential Group's Mobilization Capacity

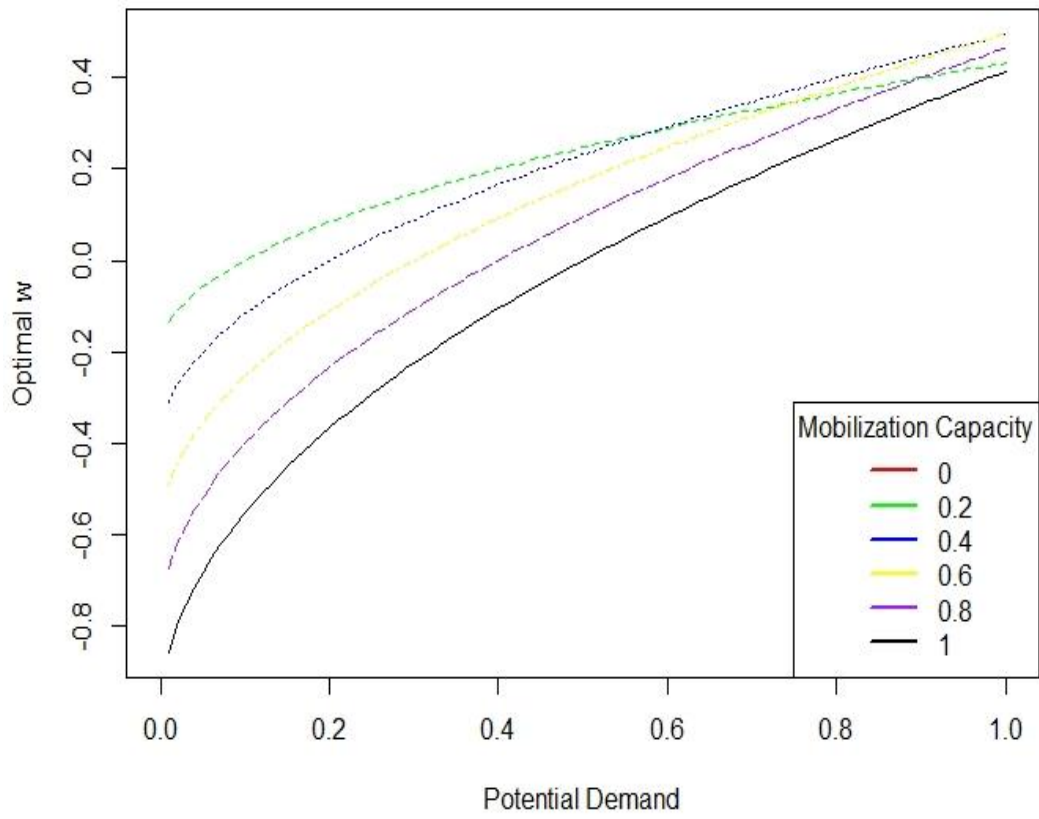


Figure 6 - Optimal w as a function of the Potential Group's Potential Demand

Chapter 4: Model Assumptions and Extensions

As we know, models are not perfect recreations of the world – we make a number of assumptions to make our theories more tractable and easier to understand. While all models make assumptions, it is important to be aware of *what* we’re assuming and *how* changing these assumptions influence the conclusions of the model. By thinking carefully about our assumptions and their implications, we gain a better understanding of what the current model can and cannot say as well as generating ideas for extensions and refinements to the current model and theory.

For the purposes of structure, I group the assumptions of the model into three types – Assumptions about the Government, Assumptions about Groups in general, and Assumptions about Individual Groups. Note that these categories are arbitrary, and there is no difference in the kinds of assumptions that are being made between them. Rather, given the nature of the model and how the assumptions shape the conclusions, it makes sense to group sets of assumptions together under these broad categories.³⁴

Assumptions about the Government

Recall that the base model assumes there is a unitary government actor that has a limited repressive budget. It uses this budget to set its repressive policies, and it must use its whole allotment. There are three major assumptions here: the government being unitary, the government having a limited repressive budget, and the government being forced to use its entire repressive budget. These are major assumptions to make, but I do not believe relaxing them will change the key insight from the model (governments rank order threats and use these rankings to assign repression) for the reasons I highlight below.

First, perhaps the most contentious assumption is the unitary actor assumption. While this is generally a standard assumption in the conflict literature, research has consistently shown that principal-agent problems can arise when governments want to use repressive tactics. Leaders cannot repress alone, so they delegate these tasks to their repressive apparatus. Since the repressive apparatus is made up of individuals, however, there is no guarantee that the actual agent of repression (i.e., the one carrying out the repressive act) views the situation the same as their leader does. In certain cases, this leads to *less* repression than we might otherwise expect: the threat of outside sanctions causes agents to defect (Conrad & Ritter 2013, DeMeritt 2015, Hill 2010), shifting norms cause repression to become unconscionable (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998, Sikkink 2011),

³⁴ Note that the model also makes process and state-of-the-world assumptions. The most notable of these is that the government and both groups have *perfect and complete information* – everyone knows everyone’s preference structure, choice sets, and the history of interactions. While these are, admittedly, major assumptions, the main effect of relaxing them would be to make errors in play more likely – the government sets some suboptimal level of repression and/or the groups make the “wrong” choice as a function of their beliefs about how the government allocates resources. While these assumptions undoubtedly have an effect on the government’s final repressive policy, they would not influence the logic used to make that decision.

or the agents do not expect their compatriots to follow through on the repressive order (Dragu & Lupu 2018). This principal-agent relationship can work the opposite way, too. For example, Conrad and Moore (2010) show that the decision to torture (and to what intensity) is largely a function of the agent's beliefs about torture. If the agent believes torture to be effective, they are more likely to employ it *regardless of their principal's preferences* (Conrad & Moore 2010). As such, we need to seriously consider how the unitary actor assumption influences our models.

While relaxing the unitary actor assumption would change the results of the model, it would not change how governments determine their repressive targets. Let's assume a direct principal-agent relationship; that is, there is one principal who designates repressive targets and an agent that puts the repressive policies into practice. As the literature suggests, we should expect the agents to act independently from their principals based on their preferences vis-à-vis the individual groups – agents might be less likely to target co-ethnics, invest more in repressing groups they personally don't agree with, etc. The principal is likely to take this into account when assigning repression, altering their preferred policies to take the expected actions of the agent into account. While this is likely to result in a different final repressive policy in terms of actual resource allocation, *the basic strategic logic would be the same* – the principal is still concerned with targeting the greatest threats, but they must now filter this ranking through their perceptions of their agent. As such, we should still expect governments to rank groups based on their threat (and the *principal* would still rank them in the way the base model suggests), but their final policies (in terms of resource allocations and personnel assignments) may vary slightly³⁵ based on the characteristics of their agent.

There might also be concerns about the assumptions made regarding the government's repressive budget. I assume the government has a finite repressive budget that cannot be refilled and must use all of it. First, the assumption that the budget is finite – this assumption mirrors reality, where governments rarely have every resource they need (or want) at their disposal. The consequences of relaxing this assumption can be seen by looking at the scenario where the government has access to what I call “abundant resources” in the base model. Here, the government has access to enough repressive resources to repress both groups at their critical value, getting both to back down; having access to unlimited resources would generate the same result. More interesting is the assumption that the government *must* use its entire budget. This means that any repressive resources not applied toward one group *automatically* go toward repressing the

³⁵ Assuming that potential agents and principals are being strategic in their decisions about entering the candidate pool and hiring from the candidate pool. We should expect agents with roughly similar preferences to the government to apply for these types of positions – one does not become part of the repressive apparatus without understanding that there is a possibility you will be employed to combat enemies of the state. With this in mind, we should expect people with preferences diverging significantly from the principal to avoid entering the candidate pool in the first place. As such, even if the government actor were to pick from the candidate pool at random, *in expectation* the agent should have preferences approximating the principal's. Governments do not hire at random, though, so we should also expect there to be some sort of candidate screening process. All of this implies that as the pool of agents gets smaller and smaller through selective entrance and screening, the average preferences of the agents should begin to resemble the preferences of the government.

other. This has two main consequences for how the government acts. First, it means that the government *cannot* ignore a group. In the real world, governments often choose to ignore or even *accommodate* dissident groups – this allows them to a) avoid investing resources into repressing a group they believe is doomed to fail/guaranteed to win and b) pay off strong challengers and avoid the externalities (backlash, bandwagoning, etc.) associated with repression. Relaxing this assumption would open these possibilities up for the government, allowing them to deal with potential threats in ways other than repression. Second, it would give the government the option to keep some of their resources as a payoff³⁶ or they can roll over to the next round of play³⁷.

Like relaxing the unitary actor assumption, relaxing these assumptions would result in wildly different policy outcomes from the base model, but the *underlying mechanisms* would still operate in the same way. As mentioned above, giving the government unlimited resources gives them the freedom to respond to any challenger with overwhelming repression. Since we're assuming that *any* deviation from the status quo is bad for the government, regardless of direction, we can assume that governments with unlimited resources will repress everyone to their critical points. Relaxing the "full use" assumption similarly changes the resulting final repressive policy, but the strategic logic at work remains the same. Instead of ending up with a policy of overwhelming repression, however, we would expect more equilibria where the government spares one or more of the groups, leading to less overall repression in the aggregate. The logic that the government uses to determine which group(s) get repressed and to what extent, however, remains largely unchanged – governments still need to identify and rank threats, but now they have the option of ignoring lesser threats. We might imagine a scenario where the government is facing a high-threat group and a low-threat group. In this scenario, (depending on the groups' specific dimensions of threat) the government is likely to invest in repressing the high-threat group while its decision regarding the low-threat group would be more nuanced. The government would still be considering the low-threat group's demand (how much the status quo would change) and capability (the probability of the change happening), but now they'd be weighing it against the payoff they get if they have some repressive resources leftover.

Depending on how much repression the government needs to get the high-threat group to back down, the government may decide to keep the remainder of its repressive resources. There are a few possible situations here, but they all stem from the same place – putting the remaining resources into repression simply isn't worth it. First, it could be that combating the first group simply left them with too little to repress the second group; this is similar to the "dwindling resources" scenario in the base model. In the base model, this scenario results in an equilibrium where the government invests exactly enough resources into repressing the higher threat group to get them to back down and then invests whatever is leftover into repressing the lower threat group with the knowledge that it will not be enough to dissuade them from acting. Putting aside the "full use" assumption, an *ad hoc* explanation of this outcome is that even if repression is not intense

³⁶ Whatever they do not use can be appended to their final utility as an additive bonus.

³⁷ Assuming also that we have multiple rounds of play, unlike the basic one-shot model.

enough to discourage dissident activity it can still have a destabilizing effect – making collective action problems harder to resolve, adding costs to dissident activity, etc. makes dissent less attractive overall. In a version of the model where the “full use” assumption is relaxed, the government would be weighing this destabilizing effect against the benefit it receives from not using the resources. If the government believes the low-threat group will likely fail on its own thanks to low capability, it will be more likely to keep the resources instead of using them for repression. Similarly, if it thinks that the group is extremely likely to succeed and/or their demand is relatively minor, the government is also more likely to keep the resources to offset whatever costs it will incur from the group’s success. If, however, the government is facing a “low-threat” group that is actually quite threatening (i.e., the group is only “low-threat” in relative terms) *and* it believes that repression has a significant chance to stop the group, they will invest in repression. As we can see from this discussion, then, giving the government more resources to work with or more freedom to use the resources as it wishes expands the set of possible policy outcomes but does *not* significantly alter the strategic dynamic at play.

Assumptions about Groups in General

I also make a number of assumptions about the groups the government must face off against. Recall that the model involves two groups of dissidents – a potential group trying to overcome the collective action problem to mobilize, and an active group that is ready to take action against the government. Nested within this setup are a number of assumptions about the nature of dissident groups that are worth discussion. The assumptions I will discuss here have to do with 1) the total number of groups in the threat environment, 2) the “types” of groups that exist, and 3) how the government deals with these groups through repression.

First, the model assumes a limited number (specifically two) groups. I limited the number of groups to two for tractability and to ensure both “types” of group are represented in the model, but this is an arbitrary limitation. In reality, there are often more (and sometimes fewer) groups operating at any given time – the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior Dataset, or MAROB (Wiklenfeld, Asal, & Pate 2011), lists as many as 28 organizations active in a single country-year.³⁸ As such, we need to seriously consider how limiting the number of groups in the model influences our ability to theorize about the government’s repressive strategies. Fortunately, this is another area where relaxing the assumption does not change the overall intuition of the model. The main effect relaxing this assumption would have on the model is that the government would have more repressive targets. This makes it more likely that the government is in some sort of “Dwindling Resources” scenario, where they have the repressive resources required to repress some groups to their critical value, but not all. As such, we would expect them to act in a similar manner to governments in the current model – figure out how the groups compare to one another on their threat and assign repression accordingly.

³⁸ Cyprus in the mid-1980s, following the Greek military junta and the Turkish invasion and occupation.

Related, the model also assumes that there are only two “types” of groups. Recall that the model assumes there is one potential group that is attempting to solve the collective action problem and establish itself and an active group that is prepared to challenge the government in some way. This dichotomy is already, by necessity, a simplification – these “types” are meant to represent distinct points in the continuous dissident group lifecycle. A group begins with a collection of individuals with similar interests and concerns finding one another, agreeing that something needs to be done, and agreeing that they are the ones that need to do it. Once a group has been established, they attempt to (surreptitiously) recruit and grow their organization. This process is difficult enough on its own thanks to the collective action problem, and governments have an incentive to sabotage these types of activities when they find them (Sullivan 2016a, 2016b). While all these steps involve important strategic decisions on the part of the individuals, the model as written is not meant to focus on dissident group formation. As such, I reduce this portion of the dissident group lifecycle to focus on the government’s main strategic decision – assigning repression to disrupt the group’s collective action.³⁹ Once the group overcomes this initial collective action problem, it then considers how best to challenge the government. Again, there are a number of important strategic decisions implicit here – specifically the choice of group demand – but I generalize these choices to focus on the government’s repressive choices. Adding more groups at various stages of the dissident group lifecycle would be more realistic, but it would not change the intuition of the model in and of itself.

A group’s stage of development influences how repression will affect it, and thus what tactic a strategic government will use. For potential groups, I assume the government’s objective is to prevent their formation, and they go about this by disrupting their attempts at collective action. Younger, less established groups are more likely to be destabilized by these actions, while more mature groups are likely to be able to withstand them.⁴⁰ The act of becoming a mature group makes it easier to target, however. At very least, these groups will have a stable “core” of members – people who have been involved in the organization for a constant period of time. This level of stability makes it easier for the government to find out who is in the group. Another issue is that the groups become more geographically stable – people need to know where to meet if you want them to join. All of these factors make it so that a mature group is easier to find and repress in the more traditional ways we think about repression – police action,

³⁹ Note that even this description is extremely reductive: nested within the government’s assignment of resources is the decision of what resources to assign. We often observe governments attempting to infiltrate groups – planting agents among the group’s membership to provide the government with information and destroy the group from the inside (Cunningham 2005, Davenport 2014, Sullivan 2016a, 2016b).

⁴⁰ There is an implicit screening process along the dissident group lifecycle – those that are able to make it to maturity, for whatever reason, are likely to be categorically different from those at the start of their lives. As such, we should expect them to be better equipped to deal with disturbances that would destabilize less mature groups. See, for example, Ritter and Conrad 2016.

roadblocks, etc. These tactics work to increase the *cost* of dissident action, making repression a deterrent for these groups.⁴¹

In summary, repression has a differential effect depending on how and to whom it is applied – it destabilizes potential groups, making them less likely to successfully overcome the collective action problem, and it raises the costs of action for more mature groups, giving repression a deterrent effect.

In the real world, however, it is likely that repression serves a dual purpose for both types of groups. It is likely that, in addition to destabilizing the potential group, repression will result in any surviving members being less likely to take action in the future. On the other side, it is likely that repression will make it harder for established groups to organize action for reasons other than the increased costs – the groups might lose key members, destabilizing what was once a solid group. As noted above, however, it is unlikely that each group experiences these effects *equally* – it is unlikely for repression to have a 50% deterrent, 50% destabilizing effect for either group. The potential group is likely acting covertly, making it difficult for the government to target it as a group, while the mature group has weathered collective action problems in the past, making it unlikely for repression to be destabilizing. Moreover, relaxing this assumption would not change the government’s strategic calculus significantly. The government will still be assigning *amounts* of repression based on how the group compares to the rest of the threat environment, and this assessment would factor in the differential effect of repression (as the current model does as well. While relaxing this assumption would make the model more realistic, it would not change the *intuition* of the model in a meaningful way.

Assumptions about the Individual Groups

Next, I will address some of the assumptions about the individual groups. The active group has fairly standard assumptions, both in terms of models of repression and dissent and the theory I present in the previous chapters. In particular, I assume that the active group has chosen a coherent demand, has some set amount of capabilities, derives utility by comparing its preferred policy to the status quo, and acts as a unitary actor. As I have either discussed these assumptions in the previous sections or took them directly from established models, I will move on to discussing the assumptions of the potential group. The potential group departs from standard assumptions, and mapping the theory on to the model requires specifically defining and translating terms.

First, the potential group does not have true “demand” in the way the active group does. Instead, it has a purposely vague, exogenously set “benefit to mobilization.” This term is a way to approximate the group’s expectations for the future – an *expectation* of their demand. This idea is consistent with the literature and the theory put forward earlier.

⁴¹ I assume repression does not have the same effect on the potential group – instead of imposing costs, repression influences probabilities. Substantively, this is because younger groups are harder to find, and by extension harder to deter.

As Walter (2009) notes, groups are aware of one another and can use information about how the government responds to similar groups to make decisions. Even if the group does not have a clear set of demands, the process of forming a group involves meeting like-minded individuals, meaning they often have a concept of the demands they'll make before the group is fully formed and the manifesto is finalized. For Walter (2009), this allows potential separatist groups to look at how the government responded to earlier attempts to secede. For the purposes of the model, it allows the group and the government to have some idea what the group will demand in the future.

The more problematic assumption here is that the group's mobilization benefit is *exogenously determined*. The model as written simply assigns the group some mobilization benefit, when the reality is far more complex and strategic. As Walter (2009) points out, groups pay attention to how governments treat similar groups. They may observe a group with similar demands being repressed and decide to advocate for less extreme changes to the status quo or avoid entering into the sphere of contentious politics in the first place. As such, a group's true demand, even in expectation, is a function of a group's strategic choices in light of an existing set of strategic choices by the government and similar groups. This process has significant implications for which groups get involved in contentious politics, what these groups demand from their governments, and how governments respond to these demands. While the scope of the current project means that the first two are not of major concern, the fact that the process of choosing a demand influences a government's strategic repressive decision means we must at least understand how relaxing this assumption changes the implications of the model.

Relaxing the assumption of exogenous demands would involve making a number of changes to the model. The biggest of these assumptions is the “state-of-the-world” assumption regarding perfect and complete information mentioned at the beginning of this section. Allowing group demands to be endogenously determined requires the model to allow for group *learning*, in that the groups must be able to observe the government’s behavior and modify the demands they make accordingly. Using the logic laid out by Walter (2009), we can assume that these groups observe the government’s reaction to various policy demands and modify their actions accordingly – asking for smaller changes when they feel repression is likely or asking for larger changes if they believe their policy area is not a governmental priority. While this model would be a more realistic version of the model presented here and would be useful for answering questions about the demands dissidents make on their governments, it is unlikely that this would change the logic behind the government’s repressive choices. This version of the model would allow them to essentially make deterrent threats, which would likely lead to more extreme repression when we observe it (Ritter and Conrad 2016), but the groups that the government chooses to repress will remain the same. There’s no reason to believe that governments would abandon the strategy of “targeting the biggest threat” – doing so allows them to eliminate impending threats *and* prevent new threatening groups from forming around this policy area.⁴²

⁴² The factor that would have the most impact on the government’s behavior in this model would be their *expectations of future groups*. We can imagine a scenario where the government is facing a high-threat group and a low-threat group; the current model predicts that the government should target the high-threat group at the expense of the low-threat one. However, depending on the government’s value for future payoffs, we might see a deviation from this. If the government believes that groups in the future are more likely to be similar to the low-threat group, it is possible that there will be equilibria where the government is willing to repress the *low-threat* group to get the benefits of reputation over stopping the high-threat group in the present. The conditions where this equilibrium would arise intuitively seem rare (requiring the government to sincerely believe that the cumulative threat posed by similar low-threat groups is larger than the threat posed by the high-threat group in the present), but they are possible..

Chapter 5: Empirical Analyses

Theoretical Empirical Hypotheses

The model gives us several implications that can be translated into testable, empirical hypotheses. Note that the implications listed below are particular to states with moderate repressive capacity. As discussed above, these implications arise from the scenario where the government has dwindling resources for repression – they have enough resources to repress one group to the point they back down, but not both. This resource scarcity is what drives the shift in repression; if the government had abundant resources, it would simply repress everyone (i.e., the first scenario).

Implication 1 states that as the potential group's mobilization capability increases, the government should be less likely to repress the active group to the point where it will back down. This tipping point for the active group can be thought of as severe repression – targeting enough repression at the group to get it to back down. From this implication, we get my first hypotheses:

Theoretical Hypothesis 1: As the Potential Group's Capability increases, the severity of repression faced by the Active Group decreases.

Hypothesis 1 can be considered as looking at the main effect of Other Group Capability – increasing the Other Group's Capability should result in less repression directed towards the Target Group *regardless of the Other Group's Demands*. As such, we can assess this hypothesis without the need for an interaction between the Other Group's Demand and Capability.

The second set of implications states an interactive relationship between the potential group's capability and demand: at high levels of capacity increases in demand lead to a decrease in the probability that the government sets $n = n^*$, but at low levels of capacity increases in demand lead to an increase in the probability that the government sets $n = n^*$. Again, thinking about that tipping point as the severity of repression faced by the active/target group, we get the following set of hypotheses:

Theoretical Hypothesis 2a: At high levels of Potential Group Capability, increases in Other Group Demand will result in a decrease in the severity of repression faced by the Active Group.

Theoretical Hypothesis 2b: At low levels of Potential Group Capability, increases in Potential Group Demand will result in an increase in the severity of repression faced by the Active Group.

While Hypothesis 1 could be considered as testing the main effect of Potential Group Capability, Hypotheses 2a & 2b are looking at the component effects of Potential Group Demand – the effect of Potential Group Demand *is conditional on the Potential Group's Capability*. As such, testing these hypotheses requires investigating the interaction between Potential Group Demand and Capability, and the empirical model should reflect this by including an interaction term.

Data

I use measures taken from the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (Wilkenfield, Asal, & Pate 2011) dataset to operationalize my key dependent and independent variables. This dataset looks at ethnic organizations active in the Middle East between the years 1980 and 2004⁴³. The groups included in the dataset are political groups making explicit claims about representing the interests of their ethnic groups. The data is coded at the *group-year level*, meaning that each unit in the data is a specific group in a specific year.

The dataset's focus on the demands, tactics, and organization allows for several potential operationalizations of group demand and capability. I chose to operationalize *group demand* using MAROB's *NATORG* variable, which is a binary variable that codes whether a group is a nationalist organization. These groups are advocating for autonomy for their ethnic groups – either through increased political autonomy within the state or outright independence.

Measuring Demand

Theoretically, the threat behind a demand is how much it is going to change the status quo. In more concrete terms, the threat of a demand can be thought of as the difference in policy between the demand and the government's current status quo, with larger shifts in demand being seen as more threatening. While this is a useful theoretical definition for demand, it runs into practical problems when trying to find an empirical equivalent. Most notably, this definition implies that the threat of demand is *subjective* – the threat conveyed by any one demand is going to vary depending on how it relates to the current status quo. Some demands that seem mild in one context will look extreme in others.

While this poses an issue for trying to measure demand as some kind of continuum, we can discretize it. Some demands, by their very nature, are going to be extreme no matter what political context they're made in – some threats shake the status quo so much that it doesn't really matter where the pre-threat status quo is in relation. These threats usually target the existence of the state, threatening to remove the incumbent regime from power or directly threatening the entity of the state itself.

One example of this kind of extreme demand is a demand for autonomy or independence. These demands imply massive changes to the status quo – losses of territory, population, and resources – that make them threatening to even ideologically-aligned governments. These types of demands help solve the relativity problem of threat: because these are such large changes to the status quo, we can be sure that *any* type of government would consider these groups “high demand.”

⁴³ Codebook Version 9/2008

Measuring Capability

Like demand, there are several potential ways one could measure capabilities. In the model, capability simply refers to the group's ability to effect change. The *form* this ability takes is irrelevant – all that matters is that the group can make capable, credible threats. There are a number of forms this capability could take – the ability to muster large groups of people, the ability to field weapons, the ability to effectively use media, etc. For the purposes of measurement, however, I decided to use the leadership structure of the group.

MAROB's *LEAD* variable codes the type of leadership for an organization, splitting leadership structures into four distinct categories: factionalized/competing leadership, weak or decentralized leadership, strong ruling council, and strong single leader (MAROB Codebook Ver. 9/2008, 4). For the purposes of this project, I assume that having strong, centralized leadership (whether in the form of a council or single leader) makes a group more capable. While the exact utility of having a strong, central organizing structure can be debated, it is generally accepted that effectively organized groups are going to be able to weather the complex process of collective action (Bob and Nepstad 2007). Groups with strong leadership should be able to more effectively organize and utilize available resources, making them more effective at achieving their goals. This is particularly the case given how I've chosen to code demand: a group with centralized leadership is more likely to make credible claims towards autonomy than a group with decentralized or conflicting leadership.

Repression

I assume that the intensity of repression faced by a group corresponds to the government's investment in repression. To assess the intensity of repression faced by a group, I use MAROB's *STORGREPRESS* variable. This variable focuses on the group's legality (legal, illegal) in the eyes of the state and the frequency of the repression the group faces (none, periodic, ongoing). This creates 5 categories for repression.⁴⁴ While the frequency of repression is straightforward to rank, it is unclear how to consider legality – is an illegal group facing no repression better or worse off than a legal group that faces periodic repression? I collapse these categories based on the frequency of repression, such that groups that are legal and groups that are illegal but tolerated are coded as facing the least amount of repression, those subjected to periodic repression are facing a moderate amount of repression (regardless of their legal status), and those that face ongoing repression are coded as facing the highest amount of repression.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ 1) The organization is legal; 2) the organization is legal but faces periodic repression from the state; 3) the organization is illegal but tolerated; 4) the organization is illegal and faces periodic repression; 5) the organization is illegal and faces ongoing repression (MAROB 8).

⁴⁵ There are no *legal* groups facing ongoing repression in MAROB's coding scheme, otherwise I would have grouped them into this category like I did for moderate levels of repression.

Incorporating Government Characteristics

In the model, the key tension for the government is its limited resources – if resources are tight, there can be too many threats for the government to effectively handle. Given this, our empirical model needs to take the government’s level of resources into account. In the formal model, governments that have an abundance of resources can effectively repress any group in their threat environment – the trade-offs I am theoretically interested in should only occur in states where the governments have limited resources. I deal with this in a few ways – first, by leveraging the nature of MAROB dataset itself and second, by incorporating direct measures of governmental resources into the empirical model.

First, the MAROB dataset, by its nature, is limited to Middle Eastern countries experiencing some type of civil conflict. Many of these states are considered Middle Income Countries – they fall into the middle of the per capita income distribution (World Bank 2023). As such, they fit neatly into the theory’s need for a country that has the resources to effectively repress some *but not all* of the dissident groups active in their threat environment. Second, we want to account for varying resources *within* this sample of countries; I do so by incorporating measures of the state’s GDP and military personnel into the model.

I use a measure of output-side real GDP from the Penn World Tables (Feenstra, Inklaar, & Timmer 2015) to account for the state’s general ability to produce. This specific measure looks at the country’s economic output at constant prices across time, allowing us to compare “productive capacity across countries and across years.” I standardize this variable by taking the z-score, allowing me to preserve the shape of the distribution.

While this GDP measure gives us a broad idea of the government’s repressive capacity, there are a number of things that go into calculating GDP that might not necessarily map on to the government’s repressive capacity. To more specifically account for the government’s capacity for violence, I also look at the country’s military. I incorporate data from the Correlates of War Project’s National Material Capabilities Data project, specifically data on country’s Military Personnel.⁴⁶ This is a more direct measure of the government’s repressive capacity, as the government often incorporates military assets into its repressive infrastructure. This does not capture all the repressive tools at the government’s disposal – local police, for example, are often tools in the repressive toolbox – but I believe this measure in combination with the country’s GDP give us a reasonable accurate assessment of the government’s capacity for violence. I again standardize this variable by taking the z-score.

One final governmental characteristic I account for is the government’s regime type. While the government’s regime type plays no direct role in the model, the empirical reality is that this greatly influences the government’s use of repression. All governments use repression, but repression takes many forms (Davenport 2007). Differential

⁴⁶ There is also a measure of Military Expenditure that would be appropriate for my purposes, but I do not use it due to poor data coverage.

governmental pressures create incentives to use different strategies of repression. Democracies, for example, are less willing to use methods that leave visible scars, favoring “clean torture” that gives the regime plausible deniability (Conrad & Moore 2010; Conrad, Hill, & Moore 2018). This differentiation means that regime type likely plays some type of moderating role in the relationship between the threat environment and repression. For example, different regimes are likely to interact with the threat environment in different ways on an institutional level. Authoritarian regimes that can afford to be seen conducting repression might be quicker to respond to increased threat with repression; their repression would likely be more visible, too. Democracies might have different tolerances for changes to the status quo, as regular status quo changes are built into the peaceful transfer of power. All of these suggest that regime type should be accounted for in the empirical model. I utilize Polity 5’s Revised Combined Polity Score (Marshall 2020) to measure regime type.

Issues with the Theoretical Hypotheses

In the model, the active group is assumed to be an established group that is ready to challenge the government, while the potential group is still in the process of mobilizing. Moreover, these are the only two groups in the model - since there are only two groups in the model, changes to one group represent changes to the threat environment as a whole. Unfortunately, the empirical reality is much more complicated.

There are several issues that arise when testing the Theoretical Hypotheses. First, due to the nebulous and clandestine nature of the potential group, *true* potential groups are unlikely to show up in any systematized dataset. These groups are not taking the sort of concrete action that would get them noticed by the sources that repression datasets rely on. Moreover, this is early enough in the group’s life that, even if they were to show up in sources, they might end up getting ignored. For example, MAROB’s codebook notes that organizations are coded based on “longevity” – if it is mentioned in sources for three consecutive years, it gets included in the dataset starting the first year it appears (MAROB Codebook, 1). As such, there are unlikely to be any potential groups present in the data.

Second, the threat environment is a complex place, and there are rarely only two groups operating at any given time. In the MAROB data, for example, the number of organizations active during any given country-year ranges from 1 to 28, with numbers potentially getting much higher if we were able to count potential groups in the data. While Chapter 4 presents an argument why this should not be a theoretical concern, it is important to think about the implications of this assumption for empirical tests - particularly in combination with the first concern.

Scaling the model up from the two-group version requires imagining a threat environment with y number of active groups and z number of potential groups. Each of these groups would have their own critical value of repression (i.e., unique n^* s and w^* s), meaning that the government wanted to repress every group to the point it would back down, it would have to have a resource endowment $s = n_i^* + w_i^* + \dots + n_y^* + w_z^*$. If we

consider the Dwindling Resources scenario, where the government does *not* have this level of resources, the government is forced into a similar strategic choice to the base model: given its current resource endowment and the characteristics of the different groups, who does it choose to repress.

In the base model, the government's choice is based on d_A^* and l^* , which both directly compare the demands of the active group and their probability of success to the mobilization benefit of the potential group and their probability of success. The same basic principle should apply to the expanded model – while the amount of inputs into the government's strategic decision would increase, the underlying logic of the government's decision should remain the same. The government is still going to base its decision on whether repressing a certain group to the point it backs down is worth more to it than repressing some other group – except instead of comparing one group to the only other group, the government must compare it to all other potential permutations of repressed groups.⁴⁷

Finally, we must consider that there are likely no potential groups in the data, and if there were, they would be extremely difficult to identify. This means I'm making an empirical model that solely looks at how governments would compare active groups to one another. In the existing model, the active group can be thought of as a lottery from the perspective of the government – with some probability $1-q$ they impose cost d_A on the government, and the government can pay cost n^* to avoid participating in this lottery. In a world with only active groups, then, the government is comparing these lotteries against each other, and only paying cost n^* when it is worth it to avoid a lottery. I predict that governments will still make this decision using the same underlying logic that they would if they were facing a mix of active and potential groups – that is, governments should still prioritize capabilities over demands. This can be thought of as weighing the choice between a 99% chance of losing \$10 against a 1% chance of losing \$100 – while the second demand is clearly more extreme, the low probability of it occurring makes it less of a concern than the (essentially) sure thing.⁴⁸

While the theoretical model is difficult to test, we can make some assumptions about extensions to the model that will allow us to test the underlying logic. First, government will treat N groups the same way it will treat 2 groups – by ranking them against one another and targeting the largest threat. Second, the way the government does this is consistent with the specific logic of the theoretical model – it prioritizes capable groups (that is, groups that are likely to succeed) over groups that are simply demanding (groups that would make large changes but are unlikely to succeed). With these caveats in mind, I amend my Theoretical Hypotheses into Operational Hypotheses and note that while this is not a clean test of the formal model, it is a test of the underlying logic of the

⁴⁷ As an illustration, consider a situation where the government faces three generic (i.e., typeless) groups – 1, 2, and 3 – and it only has the resources to repress one of them. It's repressive decision, then, is determined by which combination of dissidents gets it the highest expected utility: facing groups 1 and 2 versus facing groups 1 and 3 versus facing groups 2 and 3.

⁴⁸ This logic does imply that there are demands that are so extreme that the government would prioritize them even if the group is not capable, but it is unclear how to conceptualize these situations.

theory – 1) that governments consider other groups in making their repressive decisions, 2) governments make these decisions with respect to resource constraints, 3) they base these decisions off the characteristics of these groups, and 4) these characteristics are not weighed equally.

I account for there being more than two groups by looking at the dimensions of threat *throughout the system*. When Theoretical Hypothesis 1 predicts that increasing one group's capabilities, I interpret this as the threat environment around the reference group changing – the groups *around* the reference group are becoming more capable, so the government shifts resources away from the reference group and towards the capable groups. I represent this empirically by constructing a measure of the *proportion of capable groups, excluding the reference group*. Say, for example, there are 10 groups active in Country X during Year Y. 5 of these groups are highly capable, meaning the total proportion of capable groups is 0.5. Reference group Z is one of these highly capable groups, so we'd say the proportion of *other* capable groups (that is, not including reference group Z) is 4/9, or 0.44. Constructing the measure in this way allows me to assess how much repression a group faces is due to it being capable versus other groups being capable, as both factor into the government's repressive decision. I assume that, like in the theoretical model, governments will prioritize capability generally – whether the groups is demanding or not, a capable group is a threat. Thus, as the groups around some reference become more capable, they become more attractive targets to the government. Since it has limited resources, the government is likely to pull repressive resources off the reference group and direct them to the other capable groups. This results in the following Operational Hypothesis:

Operational Hypothesis 1: Increasing the proportion of other capable groups results less severe reference group repression. This is true regardless of the other capable groups' demands.

Theoretical Hypotheses 2a & 2b similarly focuses on the *demands* of other groups, with the effect of the other group's demand dependent on their level of capability. I account for the demands of all the other groups in the threat environment by constructing a *proportion of other high demand groups* variable. This variable, like its capability counterpart, looks at the proportion of other high demand groups (that is, excluding the reference group) in a given country-year. I assume that, like the theoretical model, demanding groups without capabilities are not priorities, while demanding and capable groups are. As such, increasing the number of demanding groups around some reference group *without* changing their capability should cause the government to direct these resources towards the reference group, since it is likely a higher threat. As the groups around the reference group become demanding *and* capable, however, these threats take priority, causing the government to shift resources away from the reference group. This results in the following Operational Hypotheses:

Operational Hypothesis 2a: When their capabilities are low, increasing the proportion of other demanding groups results in more severe reference group repression.

Operational Hypothesis 2b: When their capabilities are high, increasing the proportion of other demanding groups results in less severe reference group repression.

To illustrate how the proportions work, consider an example from the data. For this example, our reference group will be Organization ID 6920101 – Al Wefaq, a Bahraini Shi'a organization. It is present in the data from 2002 to 2004. MAROB codes Al Wefaq as non-nationalist organization (*NATORG* = 0) with a strong leadership council (*LEAD* = 3), making them a capable but not demanding group; this is true in every year it is present in the data. In 2002, Bahrain had a total of 3 active groups, including Al Wefaq – none of the groups were nationalist, and 2 of the groups were capable. This means that the *total* proportion of demanding groups for Bahrain in 2002 was 0, while the *total* proportion of capable groups was 2/3, or 0.667. The proportion of *other* demanding groups, relative to Al Wefaq, remains 0. Since Al Wefaq is a capable organization, however, the proportion of *other* capable groups, relative to Al Wefaq, is 1/2, or 0.5. Contrast this with Organization ID 6920101 – the Bahrain Freedom Movement, which in 2002 is coded as being non-nationalist (*NATORG* = 0) and having weak or decentralized leadership (*LEAD* = 2). The proportion of *other* demanding organizations would again be zero, but the proportion of *other* capable groups, relative to the Bahrain Freedom Movement, would be 1 – both of the other groups are capable according to the coding scheme.

Testing Operational Hypothesis 1

Recall that Operational Hypothesis 1 predicts that increasing the proportion of capable groups around a reference group should result in less severe repression against that reference group, and that this is true regardless of the other groups' demands. If we think of demand and capability as *interacting* in threat, which is what the theory suggests, this hypothesis is testing the *main effect of capability* – regardless of the level of demand, increasing capability should have a consistent effect. While we could test this using a model with an interaction term, it is not necessary given the predictions of the theory and would make interpretation of the models more complicated than necessary.

As such, when testing Operational Hypothesis 1, I use the following empirical model:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \textit{Intensity of Reference Group Repression} \\
 & = \textit{Proportion of Other Capable Groups} \\
 & + \textit{Proportion of Other Demanding Groups} \\
 & + \textit{Demanding Reference Group} + \textit{Capable Reference Group} \\
 & + \textit{Demanding} * \textit{Capable Reference Group} + \textit{Polity Score} + \textit{GDP} \\
 & + \textit{Military Personnel} + \textit{Total Population} + \textit{Lags} + \textit{Intercept}
 \end{aligned}$$

This is an Ordinary Least Squares Model, and I also utilize country-year fixed effects to account for country characteristics not already captured by the equation.

There are number of important components to this model, and it is worth walking through them separately. First, Operational Hypothesis 1 is specifically testing the main effect of the capabilities of other groups on the repression faced by a reference group. As such, we need to be able to separate out this effect from the effect that other groups' demands have on repression *and* the repression that is the result of the reference group's characteristics themselves. The key independent variable here is the proportion of other capable groups relative to the reference group, and Operational Hypothesis 1 predicts that its effect should be significant and *negative* – as the number of capable groups increase around it, the government is expected to pull repressive resources off of the reference group and redistribute them to the capable groups around it. All other variables in the model essentially serve as controls in an attempt to isolate the effect of increasing the proportion of capable groups has on the government's use of repression.

There are several key things one must account for to isolate the effect of the capability of other groups on the severity of repression faced by the reference group. First, we must account for the *demands* of the other groups. While the effect of capability is theoretically separate from the effects of capability, it still plays a role in how the government sets its repressive policy. As such, we want to ensure that the changes in repression we're observing are due to the capabilities of the other group and not directly tied into their demands. Including the proportion of highly demanding groups in the model allows me to separate these effects for the test of Operational Hypothesis 1.

Second, we must account for the characteristics of the reference group itself. Recall that the theory predicts that the repression a group faces is a function of its own threat and the threat posed by the groups around it. As such, we need to account for the individual characteristics of the reference group to ensure any changes in repressive policy we observe are due to the groups around the reference group. I incorporate the characteristics of the reference group into the empirical model explicitly using an interaction:

*Demanding Reference Group + Capable Reference Group + Demanding
* Capable Reference Group*

Where “*Demanding Reference Group*” is a binary variable that takes a value of 1 if the reference group is a nationalist organization and “*Capable Reference Group*” is a binary variable that takes on a value 1 if the reference group has strong, centralized leadership. The interaction term allows me to account for reference groups that are “high threat”; that is, they are both highly capable *and* highly demanding.

Next, we want to account for the repressive capacity of the government itself. As discussed above, the sample itself helps ensure we are looking at governments operating in a Dwindling Resources Scenario (that is, they do not have enough resources to repress every group they come across), but even then there are likely to be differences in behavior across government types and resource endowments. I account for these by looking at the government’s regime type, their GDP per capita, the military personnel they have at their disposal, and the total population of the nation. I also account for the government’s policy stickiness by incorporating 1-year lags of the variables into the model. Finally, I attempt to account for any unobservable effects of specific government-years by utilizing country-year fixed effects. The results can be seen in Table 2, below.

Test of Hypothesis 1 - Main Effect of Capability

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Original Model	Country-Year Fixed Effects
Prop. Otr. Capable	-0.286* (0.155)	-0.320** (0.151)
Prop. Otr. Demanding	0.237 (0.275)	0.340 (0.263)
Lag Prop. Otr. Capable	-0.141 (0.154)	-0.035 (0.151)
Lag Prop. Otr Demanding	-0.586** (0.269)	-0.255 (0.256)
Demanding Reference Group	0.233 (0.351)	-0.046 (0.318)
Capable Reference Group	-0.043 (0.092)	-0.154* (0.084)
Demanding * Capable Reference Group	0.103 (0.088)	0.212*** (0.082)
Lag Demanding Reference Group	-0.067 (0.343)	0.117 (0.311)
Lag Capable Reference Group	-0.034 (0.086)	-0.071 (0.078)
Polity	0.049*** (0.016)	0.027* (0.016)
GDP per Cap.	-1.526 (1.192)	1.286 (1.151)
Military Personnel	-0.003 (0.055)	-0.186*** (0.053)
Total Pop.	0.199 (3.625)	-6.095* (3.355)
Lag Polity	-0.037** (0.017)	-0.006 (0.018)
Lag GDP per Cap.	2.273* (1.239)	0.190 (1.221)
Lag Military Personnel	0.330*** (0.056)	0.285*** (0.053)
Lag Total Pop.	-0.372 (3.682)	-2.788 (3.400)
Constant	1.961*** (0.684)	
Observations	1,221	1,221
R ²	0.299	0.170
F Statistic	30.178*** (df = 17; 1203)	14.359*** (df = 17; 1192)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2 - Test of Operational Hypothesis 1

The first thing to note is that increasing the proportion of capable groups around the reference group corresponds with a decrease in the severity of repression faced by the reference group. This effect is consistent across the base model and the country-year

fixed effects model. This lends support to Operational Hypothesis 1 – having more capable groups around the reference group appears to result in the group facing less repression overall. While the model predicts that this is because the government is shifting repressive resources away from the reference group and towards other targets, I cannot demonstrate this specific mechanism using this empirical model. As such, these results should be taken as a compelling plausibility test for Operational Hypothesis 1 rather than direct causal evidence.

Increasing the proportion of other demanding groups does not seem to have a significant impact on the repression faced by the reference group. Given that the theory predicts countervailing effects of demand depending on the capabilities of the other groups, we must be careful what we conclude about this relationship from this test. I will discuss the effects of the other group demand in more detail when discussing the test of Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b.

As expected, individual group characteristics do seem to influence the repression a group faces, and the pattern of this effect lends some credence to my argument that group threat is a function of both the group's demands and capabilities. We can see that the effect of having a demanding but not capable group (that is, the coefficient for the variable *Demanding Reference Group*) is not significant, suggesting that being demanding on its own is not enough to change the government's repressive strategy towards a group. Interestingly, being capable but not demanding seems to result in a *decrease* in the repression faced by the reference group – the coefficient for *Capable Reference Group* is negative and significant. Being a high threat group, on the other hand, seems to result in a slight but statistically significant increase in the repression faced by the reference group, lending support to the argument that group threat is a function of the group's demands and capabilities. There are some important caveats to keep in mind before drawing conclusions from these results, however. First is that this test is primarily about assessing the effect of other groups on the repression a reference group receives, *not* assessing the effect of the group's characteristics themselves. As such, there are likely theoretically important variables that are not being taken into account in the current model. Second, while the overall theory and the theoretical model state that both demand and capability factor into a government's assessment of threat, the theory does not make explicit predictions about what form that interaction takes. This empirical model assumes a linear interactive effect, which may not be the correct functional form (Hainmueller et al. 2019). Finally, this model is likely underpowered when looking for interactive effects (Gelman 2018), limiting what we can conclude here.

In conclusion, this model offers some compelling preliminary evidence for Operational Hypothesis 1. The model suggests that as the proportion of capable groups increase around a reference group, the repression faced by that particular reference group will *decrease*. Theoretically, this is because the government is moving those resources away from the reference group and towards the capable groups around it. This effect is independent from the effect of the demands of other capable groups and from the threat posed by the reference group itself – this change in repression is caused specifically by changes in the capability environment.

Test of Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b

Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b are directly concerned with how the demands of the groups in the threat environment impact the repression directed towards the reference group. Recall that Operational Hypothesis 2a predicts that when the capabilities of the groups in the threat environment are low, increasing their demands results in *increased* repression directed at the reference group, as the government directs resources toward the more capable groups (in this case, the reference group). Operational Hypothesis 2b, on the other hand, predicts that when increasing demands are paired with increasing capabilities, we should expect to see a negative impact on the repression directed towards the reference group. Theoretically, this is because the government is diverting resources away from repressing the reference group and towards repressing the highly threatening groups that make up the threat environment. These hypotheses are specifically looking at the *interactive effect* of demand – increasing the proportion of other demanding groups should have different effects depending on those groups’ capabilities. As such, I use the following empirical model:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \textit{Intensity of Reference Group Repression} \\
 & = \textit{Proportion of Other Capable Groups} \\
 & + \textit{Proportion of Other Demanding Groups} \\
 & + \textit{Prop High Capability} * \textit{Prop High Demand} \\
 & + \textit{Demanding Reference Group} + \textit{Capable Reference Group} \\
 & + \textit{Demanding} * \textit{Capable Reference Group} + \textit{Polity Score} + \textit{GDP} \\
 & + \textit{Military Personnel} + \textit{Total Population} + \textit{Lags} + \textit{Intercept}
 \end{aligned}$$

This is, again, an Ordinary Least Squares Model, and I again utilize country-year fixed effects to account for country characteristics not already captured by the equation.

The general set up and logic for this model is the same as the model used for the test of Operational Hypothesis 1, with the only difference being the interaction between the two proportion variables. I account for the reference group’s level of threat using the same set of interactive variables as I did in the test of Operational Hypothesis 1, and I account for the characteristics of the government using the same strategies presented in the test of Operational Hypothesis 1. The results of the test of Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b can be found in Table 3, below:

Test of Hypotheses 2a & 2b - Interactive Effects of Demand

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Intensity of Repression	
	Original Model	Country-Year Fixed Effects
Prop. Otr. Capable	-0.206 (0.167)	-0.334* (0.177)
Prop. Otr. Demanding	0.399 (0.303)	0.314 (0.312)
Otr. Capable * Otr. Demanding	-0.202 (0.161)	0.033 (0.214)
Lag Prop. Otr. Capable	-0.148 (0.154)	-0.035 (0.151)
Lag Prop. Otr. Demanding	-0.571** (0.269)	-0.257 (0.256)
Demanding Reference Group	0.220 (0.351)	-0.044 (0.319)
Capable Reference Group	-0.049 (0.092)	-0.154* (0.084)
Demanding * Capable Reference Group	0.105 (0.088)	0.213*** (0.082)
Lag Demanding Reference Group	-0.048 (0.343)	0.114 (0.312)
Lag Capable Reference Group	-0.042 (0.086)	-0.071 (0.078)
Polity	0.048*** (0.016)	0.027* (0.016)
GDP per Cap.	-1.480 (1.192)	1.272 (1.156)
Military Personnel	-0.009 (0.055)	-0.186*** (0.053)
Total Pop.	0.151 (3.624)	-6.131* (3.364)
Lag Polity	-0.039** (0.017)	-0.005 (0.018)
Lag GDP per Cap.	2.361* (1.240)	0.191 (1.221)
Lag Military Personnel	0.327*** (0.056)	0.285*** (0.053)
Lag Total Population	-0.585 (3.685)	-2.756 (3.408)
Constant	1.797*** (0.353)	
Observations	1,221	1,221
R ²	0.300	0.170
F Statistic	28.602*** (df = 18; 1202)	13.552*** (df = 18; 1191)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3 - Test of Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b

First, note the lack of significance on the coefficients for the proportion of other demanding groups and the interaction term. This seems to suggest that increasing the proportion of other demanding groups does not have an impact on the repression faced by the reference group,

regardless of the capabilities of those other groups. Moreover, the coefficients themselves differ from what is predicted by the Operational Hypotheses. Increasing the proportion of other demanding groups while the proportion of other capable groups is zero seems to have an effect similar to what Operational Hypothesis 2a predicts – the coefficient for the proportion of other demanding groups is positive (though insignificant) in both the original and fixed-effects model. The interactive effect, however, is different depending on which model one evaluates – the coefficient for the interaction term is negative (as Operational Hypothesis 2b predicts) in the original model, but positive in the fixed-effects model. While these results would appear to contradict the predictions of Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b, I am again limited in my ability to draw conclusions about interactive effects from the theoretical model. In general, the concerns are the same as trying to interpret the effect of reference group threat on repression in these models: the empirical models assume a linear interactive effect and they are likely underpowered (Gelman 2018; Hainmueller et al. 2019).

The effects of the other variables in the model are consistent with the results of the test of Operational Hypothesis 1. The effect of increasing the proportion of other capable groups (when the proportion of other demanding groups is 0) is negative and significant in the fixed effects model. As the proportion of demanding groups increases, this negative effect is attenuated somewhat, but likely not to the point of insignificance. The effect of the reference group's characteristics is also consistent with the test of Operational Hypothesis 1 – the effect of a demanding reference group by itself is negative but insignificant, the effect of a capable reference group by itself is negative and significant, and the interactive effect is positive and significant. Finally, the results of the government variables are consistent with those from the test of Operational Hypothesis 1.

The results offer mixed support for Operational Hypotheses 1, 2a, and 2b. The test of Operational Hypothesis 1 shows that increasing the proportion of capable groups around a reference group results in *decreased* repression directed towards the reference group. While it is unclear if this is directly due to the mechanism laid out by the theoretical model (i.e., the government is moving resources around to account for the capable groups), it *does* demonstrate that the other groups *have a significant effect* on the repression faced by the reference group. This effect persists even when we account for the characteristics of the reference group itself – regardless of the threat posed by the reference group, some of the repression directed towards it is product of the threat environment. The results for Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b, on the other hand, run contrary to the theory – far from having an interactive effect, it seems that the demands of the other groups have no (significant) effect at all. However, I am limited in my ability to reject or fail to reject Operational Hypotheses 2a & 2b, as these tests are likely underpowered for evaluating interactive effects.

Chapter 6: Future Work & Conclusion

Conclusion

Governments do not make their repressive decisions in a vacuum. Rather, their decisions represent their subjective understanding of their current political reality: who the threats are, how they stack up against one another, and how to best deal with them. Understanding how the government perceives these threats and weighs them against each other is thus crucial for understanding repression writ large.

First, governments are responding to dissident threats, but not all threats are created equal. They vary based on how much of a change to the status quo they want (their demand) and their ability to follow through and get what they want (their capabilities). Every government is going to assess every threat subjectively, as each government has its own preferred status quo that it would like to maintain. Thus, groups that might seem extreme in some contexts are relatively minor threats in others. This is what we saw with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria v. Jordan: in Syria the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the most threatening groups, while in Jordan the Muslim Brotherhood was a relatively minor threat when compared to the PLO.

This demonstrates the second major point: threat is relative. As stated, it's relative to the government as each government is going to react differently to different demands, but it's *also* relative to other dissident threats. Governments use the information they have about all the groups operating within their borders to compare the groups to one another, creating a threat hierarchy. A group's position on this threat hierarchy is a function of their own innate demands and capability *and* the threat posed by all the other groups around them. If the groups around it a highly demanding and highly capable, a single group may be able to operate free from repression while the government is busy dealing with more attractive targets.

With these two features in mind, we should expect governments to prioritize threats based on their perceived relative threat, with those posing the highest threat getting the lion's share of the government's repressive resources. Governments will further prioritize capable threats over ones that can only make demands. While tough talk can be threatening, governments tend to focus on immediate threats over potential ones.

The empirical evidence offered in this project suggests that this theory is plausible and serves to directly show that the government is considering other groups when determining the level of repression faced by any one group. The test of Operational Hypothesis 1 shows that as the proportion of capable groups around a reference group increases, the repression faced by that reference group decreases. This is consistent with the predictions of the theory, suggesting that governments are moving resources to deal with the capable threats, and its consistent with the broader argument presented in this work – any evaluations of repression and dissent must consider the entire threat environment to get a complete picture of the relationship between a government and a dissident group.

Future Work

This work demonstrated that the threat environment plays an important role in a key interaction between governments and dissidents, and there's no reason to believe its influence would not be felt in other areas. For example, this theory considered dissident groups as somewhat atomized: they work on their own, and their actions only influence each other through how they influence the government. Common sense, the Muslim Brotherhood example, and the MAROB data show this is not the case, however – groups influence each other constantly.

Groups can have a positive or negative influence on one another – the demands that make them threatening to the government can bring groups together or tear them apart. Groups with similar ideological goals, for example, might be best served by pooling their resources; essentially taking two demanding but incapable groups and turning them into one highly capable, highly demanding, highly threatening organization. These same mechanisms may push them apart: generating that much threat may come at too much of a risk for government reprisals. Groups that are ideologically opposed, meanwhile, may actively fight against one another. Counterprotests are common occurrences, and usually one set of protestors has the implicit, if not explicit, backing of the government.

This is not the only area for potential extension, however. The two group types, particularly the concept of the potential group, have implications for the internal operations of the groups, as well. I assume in the model that the groups are unitary actors, but that is not the case, and these internal dynamics are likely to affect a group differently depending on how far along it is in the lifecycle. Disagreements over the future of the group could lead to mobilization failure at the beginning of the lifecycle and splintering later in the lifecycle.

Finally, the model should be extended to account for more of the government's strategic options. The current model assumes that the government's only tool is repression, but even within this simplified model the government is using different strategies of repression. Reactive repression is useful for the active group because there is a specific course of action the government is trying to deter, while preventive repression is useful for the potential group because the government is instead trying to sabotage the group instead of directly fight them. Outside of repressive options, however, the government has a suite of tools at its disposal. It can try to appease groups by making minor changes to the status quo. It can try to co-opt groups into the government apparatus, giving the groups *de jure* political power while limiting their ability to affect change (Woo & Conrad 2019). It can even ignore a group, allowing it to keep those resources for future use.

Intergroup Dynamics

The most obvious place the threat environment would play a role is in intergroup dynamics. The characteristics of the individual groups are going to (largely) determine whether they cooperate, compete, enter conflict with, or ignore each other. Ideologically aligned groups, for example, may be incentivized to pool resources. The advantage of cooperation here is obvious: combining resources makes the coalition of groups more capable than either group on their own. However, there could be disadvantages - if the groups are not completely ideologically aligned, they may disagree on what specific demands to make on the government, potentially sabotaging the coalition. Ideologically similar groups are also likely drawing from the same pool of recruits, potentially leading to competition for resources.

Ideologically opposed groups, on the other hand, may enter into open conflict with one another, engaging in demonstrations and counterdemonstrations against their ideological opponents. The level of engagement is likely going to be determined by both groups' ideological distance from the government and their relative capabilities. Governments routinely use ideologically proximate groups as tools of deniable repression, and their choice of group is likely driven by the group's perceived level of capability. This may have additional benefits for the government – they can pit two threatening groups against each other and reduce the capabilities of both.

For the potential group, this would add a new consideration before they mobilize: how likely is the active group to succeed? If the active group is likely to succeed and the two groups are ideologically aligned, the potential group may have an incentive to free-ride on the active group. A capable active group would allow the potential group to keep its mobilization resources *and* enjoy a status quo that it prefers to the current one. If the active group is more moderately capable, the potential group might be incentivized to invest its resources in helping the active group than trying to mobilize on its own – helping the active group would allow the potential group to enjoy the new status quo now instead of having to face the government again in the future. If the active group is extremely unlikely to succeed on its own, then the potential group is likely to ignore it when considering mobilization.

The active group would also likely change its behavior depending on how aligned its goals are with the potential group. If the active group is likely to win, they have an incentive to ignore the potential group entirely – this would mean they face the government on their own, but they get to change the status quo in exactly the way they want. At middling levels of capability, the active group might have an incentive to try to attract members of the potential group. This might look like explicit partnership, or might look like the active group directly competing with the potential group over the finite pool of recruits. Finally, an active group that is likely to lose might still have an advantage to dissent in order to divert government resources away from the potential group. If the active group thinks the potential group has a better chance at succeeding in the future, it would have an incentive to challenge the government even if it knew it was going to lose. Doing so would likely force the government into investing some resources into reactive repression, leaving fewer resources for the government to fight the potential group.

Intragroup Dynamics

The threat environment can influence *intragroup* dynamics and characteristics, as well. The entire lifecycle of a dissident group is touched by the threat environment – from formation to action to dissolution. First, the initial formation of a group is likely a function of the groups around it. If groups exist that are already advocating for the changes a dissident would want to see, it might make more sense for a potential group to join the existing group than to try to form a new one. If a group has multiple demands they plan to make on the government, they may choose to prioritize different ones based on the groups the government is already facing. For example, we can imagine a situation where a group decides to deprioritize certain demands because they are already being advocated for by other capable groups. Doing so allows the group to “free ride” on some of their demands, relying on the other capable groups to coerce the government in some policy areas while the reference group focuses on changes that are not already being demanded.

Groups may also strategically build capabilities based on the threat environment. The model and empirical evidence shows that governments are willing to ignore (or at least deprioritize) threats that are not seen as capable. This could give a group an incentive to remain incapable – or give the government the impression they are incapable – for as long as possible to avoid the government’s attention. This strategy is only effective as long as there are other, more capable groups to provide cover, since if there is only one group the government is likely to target it regardless of its capabilities.

This version of the model would see the unitary actor assumption relaxed for the potential group. Instead of being a group that is trying to form, there are a pool of dissidents that are dissatisfied with the status quo in some way. They can choose to endure under the status quo, suffering the costs associated but also keeping whatever resources they might invest in dissent and (potentially) avoiding the government’s attention, they can try to join an existing group, or they can try to form a new one. Choosing whether to join an existing group or form a new one is going to be a function of the existing group’s demands and capabilities – the dissidents have little incentive to join a group that is not ideologically aligned or likely to lose, so we should expect to see new groups being formed when existing groups are weak *or* they are focused on a policy area that the pool of dissidents is not concerned with. Choosing to form their own group comes with different perils, however – as the current model demonstrates, collective action problems are difficult and open to manipulation. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that each individual dissident is going to have their own preferred policies and resources they can bring to the table – forming a group would involve choosing between these dissidents to maximize both capabilities *and* demands. As this potential group transitions into an active group, it would need to explicitly set a policy demand. This process could put tension on the group, potential causing members to leave or form their own splinter groups.

Government Strategies

Finally, I would like to expand the strategies available to the government when dealing with dissident groups. While the current model differentiates conceptually between reactive repression and preventive repression, the model essentially treats the decision as a choice between repressing the active group or the potential group, and there is no real “choice” of strategy. In the real world, however, governments can try to use both of these tactics throughout the lifecycle of dissident groups. The choice of these tactics depends on the problem the government is facing, and these tactics likely cannot serve as substitutes for one another. Preventive repression requires the government to make investments in intelligence gathering – in order to disrupt the collective action of group, it needs to know who the dissidents are in the first place. The preventive repression seen in the model, then, is actually the downstream result of a long, likely expensive intelligence gathering process. Reactive repression, on the other hand, is easier to do with the tools the government has on hand – specifically its military and police forces. Since this repression is responsive, there’s less up-front cost – there’s little need for intelligence gathering when the protestors are already marching.

Moreover, both tactics are likely to have spillover effects between the groups. While the current model assumes that reactive repression *only* impacts the active group, it is likely that members of the potential group may be hindered by police roadblocks, be arrested at rallies (particularly if the groups have aligned goals), etc. Gathering intelligence on the potential group, meanwhile, might give the government insight into the plans of the active group (again, especially if the groups are aligned), allowing the government to utilize its reactive resources more effectively. If the two groups are actively working together, sabotaging the collective action ability of one may hinder the ability of the other to operate. Future versions of the model should look into these spillover effects to get a better idea of how the government chooses between and combines these tactics.

In addition to further exploring the government’s choice of repressive strategy, future versions of the model should also allow the government to have options outside of using repression. In the real world, ignoring a dissident group is a valid tactic – especially if the groups is not particularly threatening. In fact, repressing a weak group harshly may have the opposite effect by leading to backlash and increased mobilization. Future iterations of the model should at least give the government the option to ignore one or more of the groups – this would also allow the government to keep some its repressive resources in reserve to deal with future problems.

Governments also regularly appease or outright co-opt dissident movements, particularly if they do not find the groups threatening or are ideologically aligned with them. Appeasement allows the government to pay some minimal cost to get the group to go away without (majorly) altering the status quo or risking the backlash effects associated with repression. Co-optation brings the group into the government, giving the government greater leverage over the actions of the group going forward. They can then utilize these aligned groups to repress and harass other dissidents without directly repressing the dissidents themselves, giving the government plausible deniability.

This version of the model would see the government choosing which groups to ignore, which to fight, and which to buy off. Regardless of the group's demands, a low capability group is likely to be ignored by the government – the group is likely to fail anyway, and those resources could be used elsewhere. Groups that are capable and ideologically aligned with the government are likely to get appeased, since the government can likely offer them a status quo that is less than the group's ideal, but still palatable to both the government and the group. Finally, the government is likely to fight groups that are capable and unaligned with the government – these groups are likely to succeed if they are ignored, and there is no credible bargain that the government can make with these groups to satisfy their demands.

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