Abstract

The communication of grievances by citizens leading to an effective government response is one of the cornerstones of democracy. The institutionalized means for translating grievances into policy change include the formation of a party for electoral gain, direct lobbying, participating in interest groups and dissent. Nonviolent dissent is an intrinsic part of this regular communication between democratic governments and their citizens with democratic states providing licenses and police escorts for marches and demonstrations. Violent dissent, on the other hand, is a costly option for citizens. The puzzle for democratic regimes remains: if these governments provide several institutionalized methods to express grievances, why do their citizens choose violent protest in democratic states?

The focus here is on explaining the levels of violent and nonviolent dissent the variation in the frequency (how much), intensity (how severe) and types (violent and nonviolent) of protest directed at democratic states and state response. To explain this variation, I focus on the effects of institutional structures and the strategic interaction between dissenters and states. States respond with one of three strategies – repress, accommodation, no response. I concentrate on three institutions in particular: electoral systems, executive-legislative relations and unitary-federal arrangements. I argue that some institutional arrangements provide greater incentives for political parties to form and participate in government, reducing incentives for groups, who have access to institutional means for redress, to use the costly option of violent dissent. Democracies with more permissive institutions see higher levels of nonviolent dissent and lower levels of violent dissent.

The empirical tests of this theoretical framework are conducted on three levels of analysis: two cross-national tests using innovative events data and a test on data for India.
across three issue types: Kashmir, economic issues and cultural issues. The causal mechanisms are confirmed using three qualitative cases of autonomy movements in India – demands for Bodoland, Telangana and Uttarakhand. The findings from the cross-national tests highlight that large district magnitudes have the strongest reductive effect on violent protest. Accommodation has a dampening effect on violent protest and countries with a large numbers of veto players get locked into accommodative or repressive policies and find it quite difficult to change these over time.