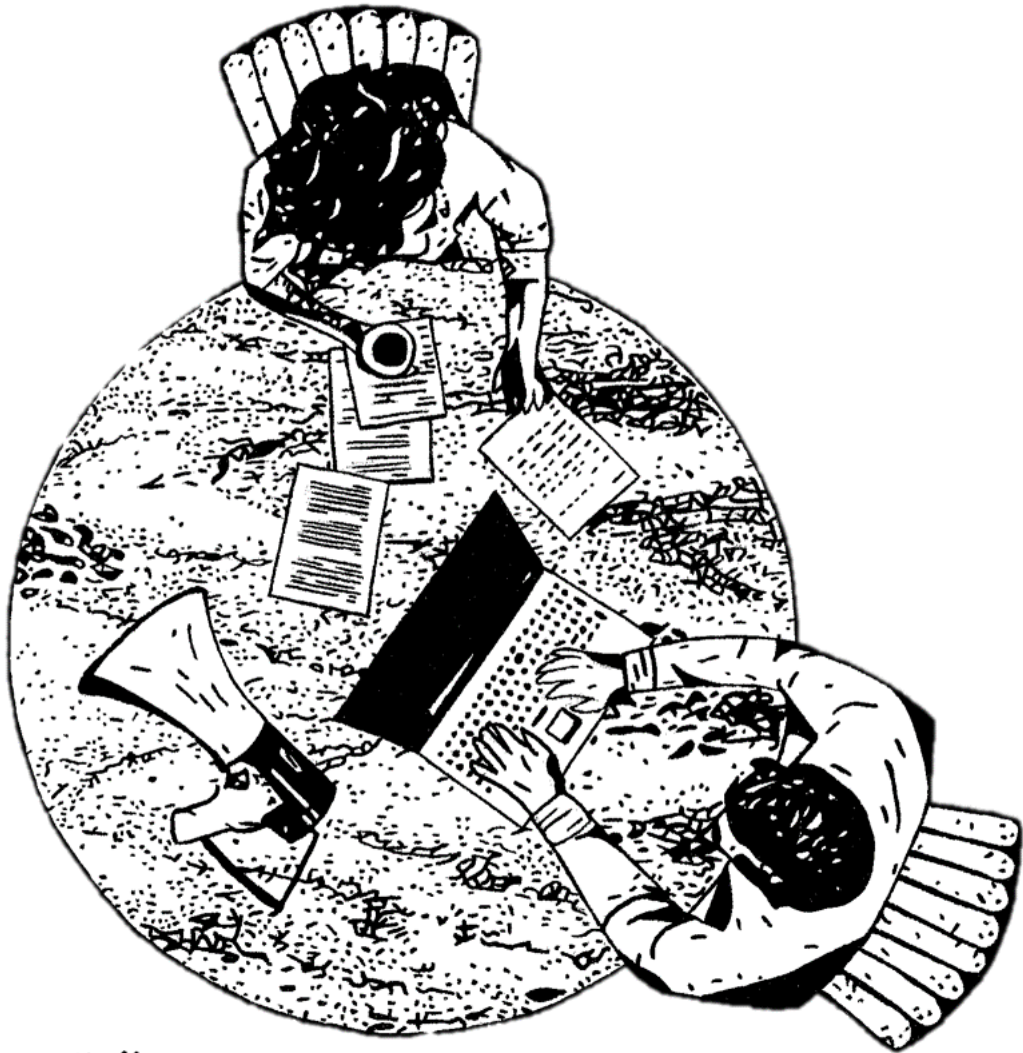


**What the Experts Say:  
Structure/Agency, Disruption/Moderation  
and Social Movement Success**

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## Introduction

Does protest matter? Does it have any impact? Or, put differently and more precisely, what can be considered ‘movement success’, and which factors facilitate it? These are key questions that not only laypersons consider when protesters hit the streets, but that have also—and still continue to—puzzle scholars of social movements. The answers to these questions are fairly complicated. Naturally, there are many different outcomes that can be considered as movement success. Whether it’s the achievement of previously stated political goals, public position taking by elected officials, the mobilization of a large number of engaged protesters, realizing sustained wall-to-wall media coverage, or facilitating a shift in the attitudes of the broader public: many different metrics allow to gauge movement impact and all potentially contribute to ‘success’. Similarly, a wide variety of factors could potentially explain these different manifestations of movement impact, and certain factors may be more or less relevant for particular outcomes than others.

Some scholars argue that the success of a social movement is largely dependent on external factors, like the political system and societal structures in which protest emerges and with which it interacts (Jenkins, 1983). Scholars of political opportunity or political process theories stress that outside forces can either limit or enhance activists’ ability to mobilize, to exercise influence, to use effective strategies and to “affect mainstream institutional politics and policy” (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). These scholars primarily stress that social movements do not hold absolute freedom of choice when it comes to making tactical or strategic decisions, and that they are to a high degree shaped by preexisting external, systemic factors. At the same time, other scholars emphasize the importance of large numbers of resources available to social movements as well as activists’ own agency—be that in their ability to persuade elite allies, to interact with the media and sympathizers, or to foster “inter-organizational competition and cooperation” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Next to this discussion on the relative importance of the internal versus external drivers of success, another key debate in the literature relates to whether strategies of disruption or rather ones of moderation prove more effective. For instance, are the persistent determination, large numbers, or displayed worthiness of peaceful climate demonstrators of Fridays for Future the drivers behind advances in public consciousness and political action? Or is it the disruption caused by groups such as Extinction Rebellion, who block oil company distribution centers, occupy the tarmac of private jet airports, and glue themselves to paintings, that shakes things up and advances societal change?

In this report, we revisit these key debates on structure/agency, disruption/moderation and movement success. We do so by means of an expert survey. We consider this a relevant instrument for several reasons. First, enormous empirical progress has been made over the course of the last three decades when it comes to scrutinizing the impact of movements and protest (Giugni, 1998; 1999; Amenta, Caren, Chiarello & Su, 2010; Amenta, Caren & Andrews, 2018). Whereas before the turn of the century, movement scholars were primarily occupied with studying movement emergence and mobilization, a steep increase in works on protest impact has occurred since then. We consider surveying experts as one way to take stock of the progress in the field. Interestingly, whereas for long movements and protest were pet topics of sociologists, with the turn to the outcome questions, the neighboring fields of political science, psychology and communication have also shown rising interest. Second, social movement research is often centered around case studies. Although case study work allows for in-depth analyses, a major downside is that it leaves researchers with a fragmented body of results that is hard to bring together. By asking movement scholars to complete the exact same set of questions, we sought to add a counterweight to this fragmentation. In doing so, we hoped to more systematically strike a balance in the abovementioned debates and to determine where the lines of conflict in the field are. To what extent, and for precisely which pieces of the puzzle, are experts on the same page, and at which points do they disagree?

In total, 120 social movements experts from a diverse set of disciplinary and methodological backgrounds, academic and national environments, as well as theoretical frameworks completed our survey. What movement and contextual characteristics matter according to them? How do they define

'movement success', and which trends do they see amongst recent successful movements? Besides the uniform set of close-ended questions, the survey also included a large number of optional open-ended text questions, where experts could balance out any potential oversimplifications by providing context or nuancing their answers. These open-ended questions, too, will be taken into account for this report. We believe that it is in this combination of the closed questions, where experts were forced to pick sides, and the open-ended ones, where experts could substantiate and nuance their position-taking, that the true added value of the survey and this report lies.

The report is structured in five separate sections. In a first section, we introduce the expert survey and its methodological details. In the following three sections, we deal with three key debates in the scholarly literature. We tackle the issue of structure versus agency—is movement success driven by external or internal factors, and how do those interact—; we revisit the debate on disruption versus moderation; and we wrap up with the experts' takes on what have been the most successful movements of the past decades. This latter part allows for the integration and application of the forementioned debates to specific, real-life cases. We end this report in the final section with a conclusion featuring its main findings.

## Methodology

This report relies on an original survey designed by the Social Change Lab in collaboration with Ruud Wouters (Tilburg University) and Apollo Academic Surveys, conducted in May of 2023.<sup>1</sup> The survey was sent out to experts doing scholarly work on social movements, with the aim of recruiting a hundred experts. These experts ranged from PhD students to full professors, working in disciplines varying from sociology and political science to history and psychology. Respondents were recruited in two ways: targeted and untargeted. The initial pool of experts that was directly targeted was created in two ways as well. First, based on a literature review, a list was compiled of scholars of prominent works within social movement studies. This list was expanded to include academics with strong publication records and Google Scholar citation numbers for works on relevant topics such as social movement emergence or the impact of protests (N = 122). Second, scholars who served as members of the editorial boards of the prime social movement journals *Mobilization* (N=41) and *Social Movement Studies* (N=55) were directly contacted too. Next, untargeted mass recruitment was done, again, in two ways: we contacted the chairs of social movement related sections of academic networks asking to distribute the call to their members. This was done by the ECPR standing group “Participation & Mobilization, the ASA section “Collective Behavior & Social Movements”, and the ESA research network on “Social Movements (ESA RN25). Finally, each recruitment e-mail included a sentence encouraging the contacted expert to distribute the survey in their own network. This untargeted recruitment effort resulted in 77 experts starting the survey. The recruitment e-mail is shared in the appendix (A).

Altogether, the survey garnered 166 responses. 46 participants were not included in the result sections due to their large number of missing answers, or the fact that they filled in the survey more than once. In total then, 120 experts from 25 different countries located in the Global North and South, ranging from Ecuador and Tanzania to Germany or Lithuania (see the full list in the appendix, B), were included in the results. All experts were based in democratic political systems, although the legitimacy of protest varied a little for different national contexts, with thirteen survey participants (10,8%) ranking protest in their country as only somewhat legitimate versus thirty respondents (25%) who classed it as completely legitimate. Protest visibility, too, varied among different national contexts, as thirteen participants noted that protest was becoming somewhat or much less visible in their country (10,8%), whereas a further 62 saw it become somewhat or much more visible.

Of the 120 experts, however, by far the largest group (45%, 54 experts) were based in the United States. The second largest group consisted of fourteen scholars (11,7%) from the United Kingdom. When asked about their methodological background, 41,7% answered that they primarily focused on qualitative research, 35% mainly conducted quantitative research and 12,5% spent an equal amount of time doing quantitative and qualitative research. The vast majority of our experts came from the field of sociology (55,8%, 67 scholars), with political science forming the second largest group at 23,3% (28 scholars). 62,5% of all experts primarily study movements and protest occurring in the Global North, as the others were split almost equally among those who study the Global South (15%) and those who look at both contexts (14,2%). As of April 2024, the mean number of citations of Google Scholar of the entire expert pool is 4.303,78. The experts hold positions in all levels of academic seniority, from (retired) full professors to postdocs and PhDs, and have published works on topics ranging from movement mobilization to movement impact. Only thirteen scholars had never participated in a social movement or protest (10,8%). Most experts considered themselves somewhat involved in activism (53,3%), and 16,6% described themselves as very active (attending regular meetings of an action groups and volunteering with them). In sum, the net we cast—although being a convenience sample—is broad and diverse, and well passed our initial target of a hundred respondents. A full descriptive overview of all

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<sup>1</sup> The full survey, as well as a short overview of its results, can be found at the website of Apollo Academic Surveys: <https://www.apollosurveys.org/social-change-and-protests/>. The analysis by the Social Change Lab can be found here: [https://www.socialchangelab.org/files/ugd/503ba4\\_8c5aafc9708a405988c8d9e6801345f2.pdf](https://www.socialchangelab.org/files/ugd/503ba4_8c5aafc9708a405988c8d9e6801345f2.pdf).

experts who wanted to be publicly recognized and their answers on every single question, close and open-ended, can be found at the website of Apollo Academic Surveys.<sup>2</sup>

The survey itself was split up into four different sections, revolving around questions on the importance of internal and external factors for the success of a social movement, the case of the climate movement, the case of animal rights activism, and a subset of questions on the characteristics of our experts (i.e., their academic position or discipline). For the scope of this report, the set of questions specifically related to the animal rights movement will not be taken into account (see Apollo Academic Survey's full report on the expert survey for more details on that).<sup>3</sup> Almost all questions were answered along a scale. For questions on the importance of a series of organizational factors on a social movement's success, for example, participants could rate factors such as 'decentralized decision-making' or 'high levels of internal unity' from 'not at all important' (value 1) to 'very important' (value 5). Other times, they were presented with statements and asked to signal their support for each statement along as scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. For the questions regarding their own political beliefs and methodological lens, the experts could drag a slider along a 0-10 or 0-6 scale.

For the results section (see below), much of the analysis depended on the creation of several dummy variables, splitting expert responses into binary categories such as 'not important to moderately important' (original values 1, 2 or 3) or 'at least quite important' (values 4 or 5). Similar dummy variables were created for questions where survey participants could agree or disagree with statements, or judge internal and external values based on their perceived effectiveness or counterproductive nature. After each subset of questions, participants were given the space to add comments or expand on their answers. These open-ended questions also formed a space for experts to reflect on the context-specific nature of their answers, as well as the limitations of their own research focus. In total, the questionnaire consisted of 40 questions. Participants were invited via a Survey Monkey link, and could choose between varying levels of anonymity (ranging from the opportunity to remain completely anonymous to the possibly of having specific responses on both the general and open-ended questions linked back to them personally). We want to thank all respondents and e-mail distributors for their efforts; the names and affiliation of the non-anonymous respondents are listed in the appendix (C) as a sign of our gratitude. Of course, they bear no responsibility whatsoever in terms of the contents of this report.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.apollosurveys.org/social-change-and-protests/>, under the header 'participating experts'.

<sup>3</sup> Once again, see <https://www.apollosurveys.org/social-change-and-protests/>. Section 3 (questions 15-19) revolve around the animal advocacy case study.

Part I: Structure/Agency



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### 1.1 Importance of Internal and External Factors

Some scholars within the field of social movement studies have argued that the ability of a social movement to succeed in achieving its goals is largely due to external factors, such as the social structures or political system in which it takes place (Jenkins, 1983). At the same time, others have focused on the internal factors that determine movement success, relating to activists' agency or available resources (Gamson, 1991). For the first section of this paper, survey participants were therefore asked to reflect on the importance of several internal and external factors in facilitating social movement success.

Ranking Internal and External Factors of an SMO's Success

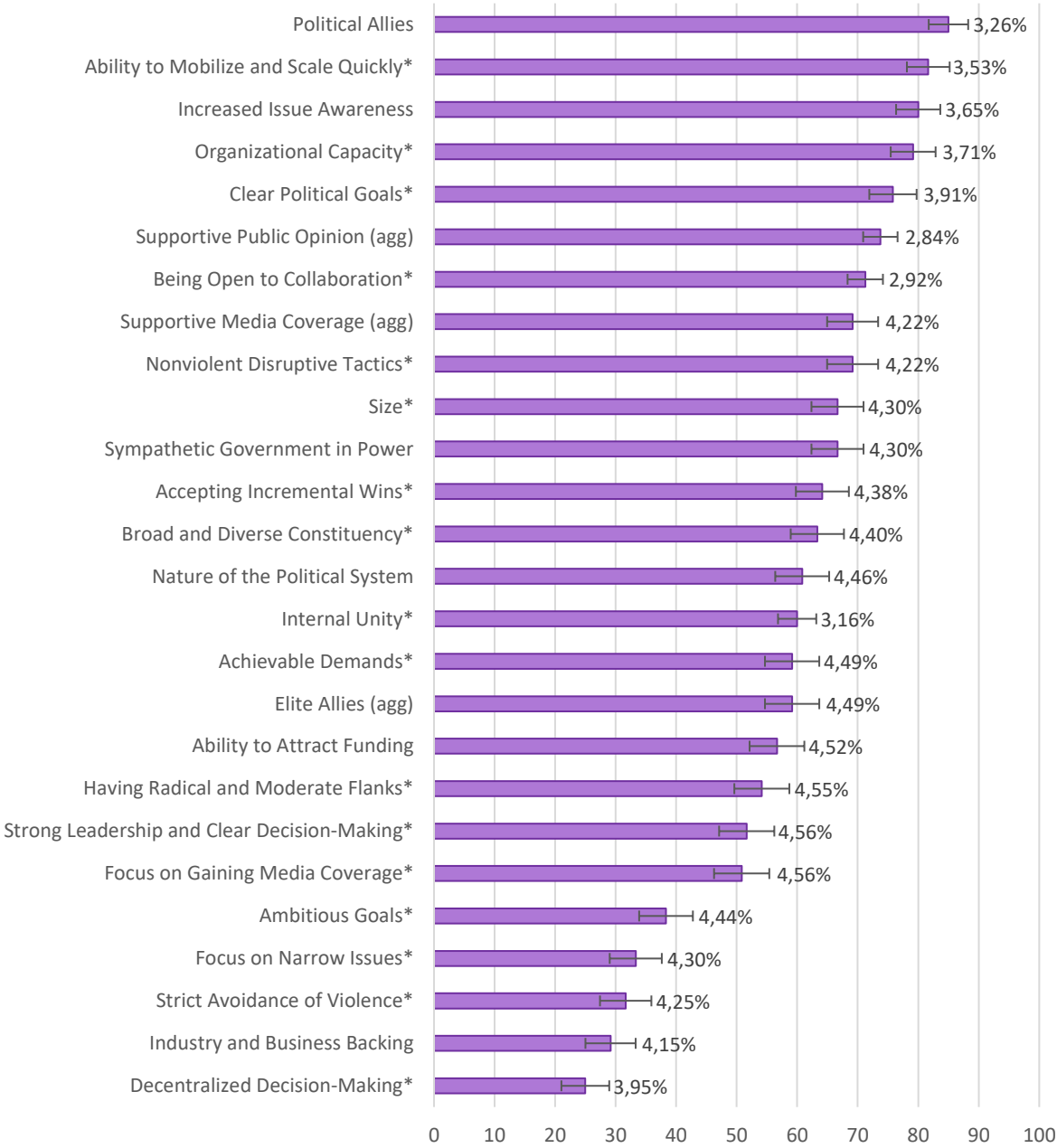


Figure 1: The importance of internal (\*) and external factors for a social movement's success. The standard deviation is measured as a percentage and included after each factor.



Figure 1 (previous page) shows the complete list of 26 factors (17 internal and nine external) that impact the potential success of a social movement, as ranked in order of importance. Internal factors are followed by an asterisk, external factors are not. Internal factors in this case relate to the characteristics of a social movements (for example its size or constituency) or factors within the activists' **agency**, such as the articulation of goals or the choice of action tactics. External factors relate either to the social or political **structures** inside which a movement takes place, such as the presence of a sympathetic government in power, or the response of outside actors to a movement (e.g., level of media attention or elite allies). The ranking is based on the answers given by the experts on four survey questions; on the importance of achieving a variety of intermediate goals (e.g., increased issue awareness), the importance of internal factors such as a strict avoidance of violent tactics, of external factors such as supportive media coverage, and of a number of organizational characteristics (e.g., a movement's ability to mobilize and scale quickly in response to external events). The complete question set (questions 3, 5, 6 and 7 of the survey) can be found on the website of Apollo Academic Surveys.<sup>4</sup> Although originally positioned along a 1-5 scale, ranging from 'not at all' to 'very important', the answers were divided into two main groups: 'not at all to moderately important' and 'quite to very important'. Responses to three factors, which were featured several times as part of two different survey questions, were aggregated (see "supportive public opinion, agg", "supportive media coverage, agg" and "elite allies, agg" listed in figure 1). Standard deviation for all factors ranged between 2,84% (for supportive public opinion, agg) and 4,56% (for focus on gaining media coverage\* and strong leadership and decision-making\*), showing that there was a relatively high level of consensus amongst the expert panel.

As figure 1 shows, our experts ranked the external factor of gaining political allies as the most important influence on a social movement's success. 102 experts, or 85% of our expert pool, considered the need to have political actors as allies of a movement to be quite or very important for its overall success. Yet, of the top ten, six factors refer to the internal characteristics of a movement, for example its organizational capacity or willingness to collaborate with other movements and societal actors. Only four factors in the top ten focus on external influences, such as the existence of favorable public opinion on an issue. At the bottom of the list, we find both internal and external factors, for example gaining 'industry and business backing' or having a 'focus on narrow issues' rather than broader, more systemic matters. Decentralized decision-making was generally seen as the least important factor of an SMO's success, as only 30 experts (25%) considered it somewhat or strongly important and a further 88 (73,3%) experts deemed it moderately or even not at all important. In sum, the simple descriptive quantitative take on the structure versus agency debate shows that the experts adhered to the notion that both internal and external factors are key for movement success. An additional t-test (result: 0,31) using the averages of both internal and external factors showed that there is no significant difference between the perceived importance of those two groups by our panel of experts.

### **Open-Ended Questions Responses**

After each of the survey's subsets of questions, our pool of experts were presented with the opportunity to freely expand on their answers, provide context or point towards relevant factors that were not previously included. In the case of the aforementioned ranking of various aspects of an SMO's success, the responses to the open-ended questions taught us four things: the balance between internal and external factors, in-depth insights into specific factors, issue awareness as a potential double-edged sword, and the role of violence and disruptive action.

First, some experts started off by questioning the **balance** between internal and external factors. They stressed that what a movement needs in order to become successful depends largely on what the activists involved aim to achieve. Or, as Winnifred Louis (University of Queensland) remarked: "*What is important for a movement that seeks to raise awareness in the face of apathy is not the same as*

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.apollosurveys.org/social-change-and-protests/> or simply <https://www.apollosurveys.org/questionnaires/social-change.pdf>.

*what is important for a movement that is facing a mobilized countermovement*". Right-wing activism, for example, was often mentioned as an example of a type of movement that does not require a shift of public opinion or sympathetic media coverage, but instead might focus on gaining business support or political allies. At the same time, external factors such as the formation of a new government that is inherently more or less sympathetic to a movement's goals, or more sensitive to public pressure, might alter the outcomes of activism regardless of a movement's active strategy. Other responses highlighted that movement success is never reliant on just one or two different factors. One anonymous expert noted for example that *"you do not need all of these things, but you do need some combination of them"*, whereas Lisa Mueller (Macalester College) stressed that in many cases one factor could influence a next, as for example *"media coverage can change issue awareness amongst the general public, which can influence voter behavior, which in turn affects who wins office, which in turn determines which political allies need to be won over."* As a result, some of the experts noted that without extra details on the nature of the movement in question, or its sociopolitical context, they were inclined to rate many factors as equally valuable, thus resulting in some uniformity across their responses.

Secondly, our pool of experts also provided some in-depth insights into the workings of several **individual factors**. Supportive public opinion, for example, can be found as sixth from the top of figure 1's ranking, yet was not universally considered an important point of focus for all kinds of movements. As Colin Davis (University of Bristol) stressed, *"sometimes the weight of public opinion already favors the movement's demands"*, instead leaving an SMO's activists with the task of drawing *"attention to the mismatch between public opinion and policy"*. Contrasting this idea, one anonymous scholar argued that the relation between public opinion and policy change is perhaps not that straight-forward, or that a *"wide gap"* between the two might suggest that creating a shift in public opinion is not actually *"the cornerstone of change"*. The importance of media coverage, too, formed a topic of debate. On the one hand, one anonymous respondent stressed the complicated nature of the relationship between the media and various social movements. As they remarked, *"media coverage has significant power to hijack and contradict the direct efforts of the movement to increase public awareness and sympathy"*, thus potentially weakening an SMO's position. Using the classic adage *"negative coverage is much better than no coverage at all"*, Michelle Beyeler (University of Zurich) argued that media attention of any kind, positive or negative, could serve as an important intermediate goal. By increasing the amount of attention given to a social movement and its demands, even negative media coverage might serve as a way of mobilizing new groups, be that the general public, elites or potential political allies.

Various other internal and external factors were also featured in the open-ended question remarks. Increased issue awareness, for example, was considered a **"double-edged sword"**, holding the potential to generate public support, but also to backfire and provide opportunities for the mobilization of countermovements. The relative importance of elite allies, too, was characterized as highly context-specific and fluctuating depending on a movement's goals and strategies. As Mattias Wahlström (University of Gothenburg) noted, SMOs focusing on *"backstage lobbying"* might require less public support or awareness, but instead are *"more dependent on elite allies"*. The focus on narrow issues was touched upon as more of an intermediate goal, rather than an end in and of itself. As one fully anonymous expert wrote, a movement might aim to solve broad, systemic issues, whilst at the same time *"strategically focusing on narrow issues which work towards addressing the effects of systemic characteristics."* Or, according to Matthew Williams (Loyola University Chicago), movement success also depends on activists' ability to think both at the grand scale, envisioning *"deep social change"*, whilst also being able to develop more concrete strategies on how to achieve this broad social change through a series of smaller, more narrow reforms.

The use of violence or disruptive actions were both listed as tactical and strategic factors in the survey. However, no clear descriptions of neither **'violence'** nor **'disruptive'** were given, leaving our pool of experts to contemplate the limits of acceptable or effective movement action tactics. In the survey, for example, participants were asked to consider the importance of a *"strict avoidance of violent tactics"*.

This emphasis on the avoidance of violence, however, raised some questions. As one anonymous expert wrote in their open-ended question reply:

*“You only queried on avoiding violence, but whether we like it or not, the history of social change is also a history of political violence and disruption. As that is often the most potent way to receive attention and visibility and to make political elites compromise and change the status quo.”*

Additionally, groups that benefit from state support can use violence with a reduced risk of repercussions, whereas the use of violent means of action come at a higher risk to stigmatized minorities, who might only resort to violence when they feel they lack the resources or social and political weight to otherwise make their voices heard. The importance and effectiveness of disruptive tactics, too, was characterized as not only highly context-specific, but also reliant on the level of disruption or the target of an action. Disruptive action aimed at industry targets, for example, might increase an action group’s ability to make demands and put pressure on specific companies. At the same time, large-scale, highly disruptive action that take place in the public sphere run the risk of minimizing public support.

**1.2 Threats to Social Movement Success**

Ranking Internal Threats to an SMO's Success

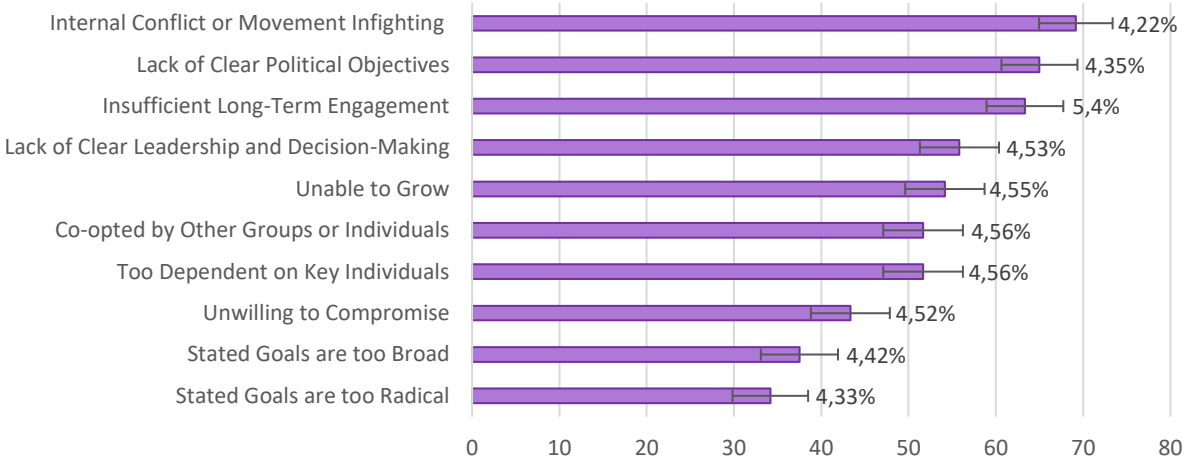


Figure 2: Importance of internal factors on a social movement’s risk of failure. The standard deviation is once again measured as a percentage and included after each factor.

In order to gain a better understanding of which factors social movement experts believe can make or break an SMO’s success, they were also asked a series of questions relating to the potential threats that might hinder activists in reaching their goals. Figure 2 shows these factors once again ranked from the most to the least important. All the threats listed related to the internal qualities of a movement, such as its goals and its leadership and decision-making processes. Standard deviation for all factors lies between 4,22% (internal conflict or movement infighting) and 4,56% (for both being too dependent on key individuals and being co-opted by other groups of individuals) again indicating little dispersion within factors. As the figure demonstrates, our pool of experts considered the risk of internal conflict or movement infighting to have the greatest negative impact on a movement’s success (83 out of 102 experts, or 69,2%, ranked this as a quite to very important threat). On the opposite end of the graph, however, we find the risk of having stated goals that are too radical or simply too broad. Seeing as both these issues are relatively easy to reframe and adjust, certainly compared to more structural problems such as a lack of long-term engagement, these factors rank the lowest as potential threats.

Comparing figure 2 to the ranking of factors that influences an SMO’s success (figure 1), we see that some factors may work both ways, greatly benefiting a movement when things are running smoothly,

but also running the risk of **jeopardizing** a movement's success when the roles are reversed. It is for example interesting to note that whilst internal conflict is considered the most prevalent threat to a movement's ability to succeed, internal unity is ranked towards the bottom half of figure 1, at the seventeenth place. The negative impact of internal contention, and thus the potential risk of fragmentation, has a more direct impact on a movement's immediate future. Both the choice to focus on a narrow issue (place 24 in figure 1) and having stated goals that are too broad (place 9 in figure 2) can be found at the bottom of the list, indicating that the scope of a social movement's goals is perceived to have only a limited effect on a movement's success, be that positively or negatively. The existence of clear political goals, on the other hand, is seen as a more relevant indicator of an SMO's success, as experts ranked them as the fifth most important factor of success, and their absence as the second most likely threat. Perhaps the experts believed that clear political goals are vital both in attracting political allies as well as giving activists a real-life target to work towards. Whereas being open to collaboration is generally seen as favorable, ranking eighth in figure 1, the survey's experts were weary of this collaboration turning into co-optation by other groups or individuals (ranking sixth in figure 2). This might be an indication that although working together with other groups is essential in expanding the reach and social or political weight of an action group, it is important for activists not to lose sight of their own goals and in-group bonding.

### **Open-Ended Questions Responses**

Similar to the previous section, the pool of experts were given the opportunity to elaborate on the threats to social movement success via an open-ended question. Their responses were centered on three major points: the context-dependent nature of their answers, the difference between the level of individual action groups and the movement writ large, and the importance of long-term versus short-term engagement.

Once again, the experts noted that much of their responses were highly **context-dependent**. Kevin Gillan (University of Manchester) wrote for example that he had not submitted an answer for the effect of broad or radical goals, because the effectiveness and feasibility of those is *"really so context-dependent as to be unanswerable."* Another respondent anonymously added that the list of threats proved quite difficult to generalize about, and that typically *"external factors [not included in the lists of threats used for the survey] are often more important"* than internal ones. One last participant expressed difficulty answering the questions at the movement level. The organizational scale of a movement has a lot of influence on the importance of various internal factors. As they argued, for example, **individual groups** may suffer greatly from indecision or internal conflict, yet the **larger movement** as a whole might benefit from the *"splinter groups which diversify the movement, potentially increase the radical flanks, potentially grow the leadership base, etc."* The creation of new splinter groups might for example help create more inclusive sub-movements, where marginalized groups can raise their concerns without being overpowered by a larger movement's internal majority. Should these new groups succeed in working together towards shared, broad goals, this process can in turn create high levels of *"intersectional solidarity"*.

A lack of sufficient **long-term engagement**, listed at number three in the ranking of important threats (see figure 2), sparked some contrasting opinions amongst the experts. Cristina Flesher Fominaya (Aarhus University) noted that a lack of continued high-level and intensive support by individuals could be softened to the creation of a *"vibrant sustainable movement community and culture"*, without expanding on how this could be achieved. Other respondents, on the other hand, argued that for many movements the fundamental problem lies in their inability to maintain a united group of diverse actors, and that movements should aim to get *"what you can where you can"* whilst making slow and steady progress. Lastly, one expert stressed the importance of flexibility and movement learning, arguing that even failed campaigns offer valuable insights that can be used as vital teaching moments during future rounds of movement activism.

### 1.3 Dependence on Internal and External Factors

Social movements can achieve their goals, for example systemic change or shifts in public opinion, in a variety of different ways. Sometimes activist groups might require the support of external allies, such as elites or industry players, to help reach their goals. Other times, protesters might focus their efforts on increasing the general public’s awareness of a specific issue in a bid to win more support. A movement’s ability to achieve such things, in turn, might depend on a variety of both internal and external factors, ranging from sympathetic media coverage to its relationship with political elites. We therefore asked our experts to evaluate the importance of the following external factors not only according to their impact on a movement’s overall success, but also based on their **dependence** on both internal and/or external factors. Or to put it simply, does a social movement for example gain its political allies (ranked as the most important indicator of success in figure one) through internal factors such as its goals or diverse constituency, or is this rather based on external factors such as the nature of the political system? To evaluate this, the expert pool was presented with a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from all internal factors (value 1) to all external factors (value 7). They were also given the opportunity to indicate that something was to an equal extent dependent on both internal and external factors (value 4). In figure 3, the responses are divided amongst three different groups, namely ‘mostly dependent on internal factors’, ‘equally dependent on internal and external factors’, and ‘mostly dependent on external factors’.

Dependence of the Following Factors on Internal and External Characteristics

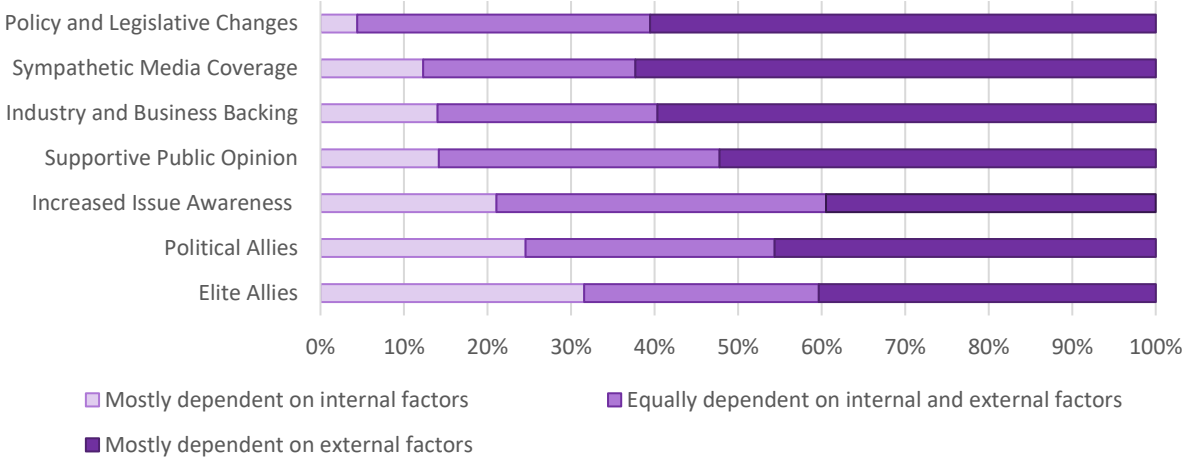


Figure 3: Different factors’ dependence on the internal and external characteristics of a social movement.

At first glance, the answers depicted in figure 3 look fairly homogenous. Whereas figure 1 on the ranking of internal and external factors of an SMO’s success showed a minor slant to prioritize internal features, figure 3 indicates a shift towards external factors or both internal and external factors. It is however important to keep in mind that all the goals listed are external goals, thus making it more likely that social movements would require certain external factors to achieve them. A movement’s ability to gain sympathetic media coverage, for example, was considered to be the aspect that was the most likely to depend on external factors (71 participants, 62,3%), with only 14 experts (12,3%) favoring the importance of internal factors. Clearly, activists are not in the driver’s seat when it comes to their media representation. Where the existence of elite allies could perhaps be considered an important external factor towards policy change, the ability to connect with political allies itself was also deemed more likely to rely on external factors. As figure 3 demonstrates, 46 experts (40,4%) deemed the external circumstances an important influence on political ally creation, whilst 32 respondents (28,1%) believed internal and external factors to be of equal importance.

### Open-Ended Questions Responses

Once again, the experts mainly used the space in the open-ended question to reflect on the context-specific nature of their answers. Some argued that perhaps it would have been better to focus on the conditions under which specific internal or external factors might be important. Others simply highlighted that in the real world, there is a substantial amount of **interaction between both internal and external aspects** of a movement's success. Looking at the overall relevance of internal versus external factors, however, some of the experts were less hesitant to pick a side. Leaning more in favor of the general importance of internal aspects, Louisa Parks (University of Trento) wrote:

*"These seem quite on the fence answers, but I believe wherever there is a relation in question, the balance is between both actors/sets of actors. On winning policy/legislative changes, I have found that external factors are key, but without internal qualities that allow a movement to create and exploit external factors of different kinds they are never enough (or at least not enough to then attribute the change to a movement)."*

In general, the majority of open-ended question replies stressed the importance of **external over internal** factors. One anonymous expert noted that external factors, specifically mentioning the growing relevance of public opinion and cancel culture, as well as long-standing established social and political structures, predominately impact a movement's strategy and functioning. They argued that internal factors, whilst important, are always shaped in response to the external circumstances in which a movement takes place, thus allowing for external factors to hold the majority of the weight. Similarly, another anonymous respondent remarked that the *"whole point of strategy and tactics is to respond to the particular external conditions in a way that leverages them to achieve the greatest chance of success."* Matthew Williams (Loyola University Chicago) simply noted that movement success is often largely dependent on factors that are beyond their control, forcing activists to adapt to their environment and to *"play their cards strategically"*.

## Part II: Disruption/Moderation



## 2.1 Effectiveness of Disruptive Tactics

The second part of the survey focused on the effectiveness of two different action strategies, namely moderate and disruptive protests. The section not only looked at the importance of public support and public awareness on the **effectiveness** of disruptive action, but also offered a real-life case as an example by including several questions on the advantages and downsides of both moderate and disruptive tactics for climate activism (section 2.2). Although the expert pool generally seemed to appreciate questions that focused on the contextual moderators of social movement action tactics, the lack of a clear-defined definition of ‘disruptive action’ evoked quite a few responses. This led our expert pool to be hesitant to take strong positions on the impact and appropriateness of disruptive and moderate tactics. As one anonymous participant admitted:

*“I think we overall do not know the answer to these questions. Not even as experts. Or at least not in a way that we can make generalizable claims about this. I’m quite uncomfortable answering these questions, knowing that the results will be presented as ‘this is what experts say’ and knowing that experts don’t know (again, at least not in such a generalizable sense).”*

Nevertheless, the questions provide an interesting insight into the different factors social movement experts take into account when considering the potential for **movement backlash**. Lastly, the following section of the report also briefly looks into the impact of disruptive action tactics when compared to moderate action strategies.

The importance of disruption as a protest tactic has been well established since the works of Gamson (1979) and perhaps especially Piven and Cloward (1977). And, over the past few years, the field of social movement studies has seen an increase in works focusing on the effects of moderate and disruptive action tactics for movements such as Black Lives Matter and the climate justice movement. Existing works on disruptive activism have argued that disruptive action tactics can be a powerful tool for smaller, **marginalized groups**, who lack both the means and support to let their claims resonate amongst society writ large, thus making them “more tempted to resort to extreme tactics” (Wang & Piazza, 2016). Similarly, disruptive protests can be effective in reaching their goals, as people may “shoot the messenger” but are generally open to hearing the message (Davis, 2022). Disruptive or even violent action tactics tend to receive more media attention than moderate, conventional action strategies such as the organization of a point-A-to-point-B march. Their “newsworthiness” helps them reach a larger audience, thus spreading their protest messages quickly and effectively as part of the social debate (Bugden, 2020). At the same time, disruptive actions are typically considered to be **less legitimate** when compared to moderate protest forms. As a result, they run the risk of reducing public support for a cause by scaring of potential sympathizers.

Stemming from an interest to see how our expert panel balanced the potential downsides and advantages of the use of different action tactics, this section of the report features a series of questions testing the differences between disruptive and moderate strategies. First, the survey participants were asked to indicate the level of effectiveness of the use of disruptive means of action for a variety of social movement types, ranging from those with low public support and low public awareness to those with high awareness and support. Effectiveness in this case was measured as the ability to have overall positive outcomes and the ability to achieve stated goals, for example through policy shifts or changes in individual or industry behavior.



## Effect Use Disruptive Action for SMO's with Varying Levels of Public Awareness and Support

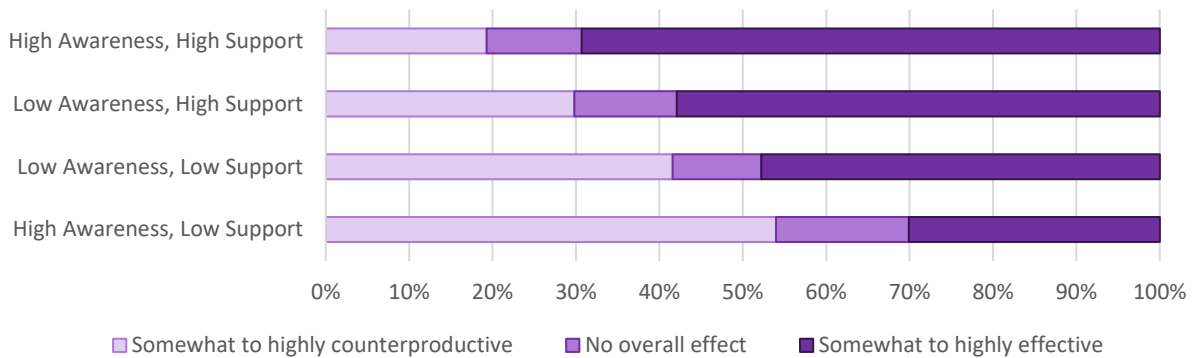


Figure 4: Effectiveness of disruptive tactics for different types of social movements.

As shown by figure 4, the experts generally believed that disruptive action is most likely to have a positive impact for movements that have pre-established high levels of **public support** in combination with high levels of **issue awareness** amongst the general public. For cases like these, 79 out of 120 experts (65,8%) believed that disruptive action would be a somewhat to highly effective means for activists. Movements with high levels of awareness but low public support, by contrast, were believed to benefit the least from disruptive action tactics. For such movements, only 34 experts (28,3%) considered it a generally positive effect, and a further 61 respondents (50,8%) indicated that disruptive action would mostly likely prove to be counterproductive. Movements that were described as having low levels of public awareness, yet high levels of support, were considered to benefit more from disruptive tactics than those with low support. This result, along with the ranking of ‘high awareness, low support’ movements at the bottom of the list, might indicate that to our experts, the choice of disruptive or moderate means of action should depend more heavily on an SMO’s amount of support than its level of public issue awareness.

Contrary to the theory that tends to stress the effectiveness of disruptive action for marginalized groups with limited public awareness and support, the expert panel seemed to believe that disruptive protest primarily works in cases with sufficient public support. High levels of public support might lead to a certain amount of leniency, as people that empathize with a certain goal or ideology are more likely to consider disruptive action as a legitimate and necessary violation of the status quo. Movements with limited support, on the other hand, are more easily perceived as troublemakers, as people relate less with the aims of the activists involved. In either case, disruptive action might serve as a ‘catalyst for awareness’, quickly and effectively drawing in a lot of attention by creating conflict and/or spectacle, and can be considered legitimate in case of high support for the movement’s goals.

### Open-Ended Questions Responses

Some experts used the open-ended questions section to note that the term ‘**disruptive**’ has been used to describe a wide variety of different protests, ranging from traffic blocks and vandalism, to acts of arson or sabotage. Benjamin Duke (University of Leicester) provided his own definition of disruptive tactics, noting that those were “*non-criminally damaging and non-violent*” designed to “*raise awareness of the cause*”. As such, he argued, disruptive action was an appropriate action strategy to bring forth long-term behavioral and policy changes along with “*discussion, debate and peaceful protests*”. By contrast, a second anonymous respondent wrote that they were “*always weary of demonizing disruptive tactics*”, but recognized that these were typically not employed to increase public support for an issue, but rather as a means of forcing both the general public and policy makers to acknowledge the issue at hand, and to listen to an SMO’s demands.

One survey participant remarked that they could not think of a single instance of real-world activism that relied solely on disruptive tactics, making it impossible to separate the effectiveness of disruptive action strategies from other more **moderate tactics**. Disruptive action groups, they argued, are primarily effective when they commit to *“full throttle direct action”* alongside more moderate groups pushing for the same or similar goals. As Colin J. Beck (Pomona College) noted, disruptive action can be highly effective in attracting attention, from the media, general public or policy makers, but this attention can be either positive or negative depending on *“a host of external factors”*. Pre-existing high levels of public awareness and support, for example, could spark **backlash** if public reactions follow the logic of ‘I agree with the cause, but I don’t approve of the method’. At the same time, cases of high awareness yet low support may also prove counterproductive if simply drawing attention to an issue does not succeed in shifting people’s level of support. In spite of these potential risks, one expert wrote that they felt moderately confident arguing that in general, there was not much to *“gain from disruption unless the public is also very frustrated, or has the strong potential to be.”* They noted that only in rare cases, disruptive social movements have the potential to gain public support from a large enough section of the population to actually be effective. Two other experts, on the other hand, were of the opinion that activists might feel like *“without disruption nothing changes”* and that disruption therefore *“tends to be more effective than not in most situations.”*

## 2.2 Climate Subsection

As the results of section 2.1 show, our expert panel believed that disruptive action tactics are most likely to be effective in cases of movements with pre-established high levels of both public support and public issue awareness. In order to take a more thorough look into what the precise effects of such disruptive protest are, the survey also included a series of sub-questions of a specific example of a movement with high support and high awareness, namely that of the climate movement. The quick rise of action groups such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion all over the world, as well as their ability to mobilize large masses of activists, has shown that collective civil disobedience and disruptive protest have become *“increasingly normal aspects of political life”* (Hayes and Ollitrault, 2019). Although, disruptive action strategies are credited with *“achieving more with less activists”*, as well as attracting large amounts of media attention for climate activism and thus increasing public issue awareness, there are also risks and downsides (Berglund, 2023). Aside from potentially scaring off part of the public through the use of actions that negatively impact ordinary social life, disruptive action strategies have also led to the increased marginalization and even criminalization of protests writ large (CIVICUS, 2023). Delving deeper into the effectiveness of both moderate and disruptive actions for the climate movement specifically, the next section looks into the potential for a **backlash effect** as well as the impact of different action strategies on factors such as public opinion, support from influential individuals and government policy change. A ‘backlash effect’ in this case was explained as the circumstance in which a movement does not achieve its goals, and instead has generally negative results (e.g., reduced public support or lower chances of policy change). For the case of disruptive climate action, no definition of what constitutes disruptive protest was provided.

### Moderate Climate Action

Which factors influence a difference in the perceived effectiveness or potential for backlash of both moderate and disruptive action tactics for the climate movement? As mentioned previously, much of the existing works on the impact of different action strategies tend to focus on either the amount of media attention gained or on changes in public opinion regarding an issue. Going one step further, the survey included two sets of questions on the impact both moderate and disruptive climate protest, presenting the expert pool with a list of eight different factors to take into account. These questions invited the survey participants to reflect on the impact of action strategies on for example corporate behavior and supportive media coverage, but also on processes internal to a social movement’s development, such as movement-building.

## Impact of Moderate Climate Action

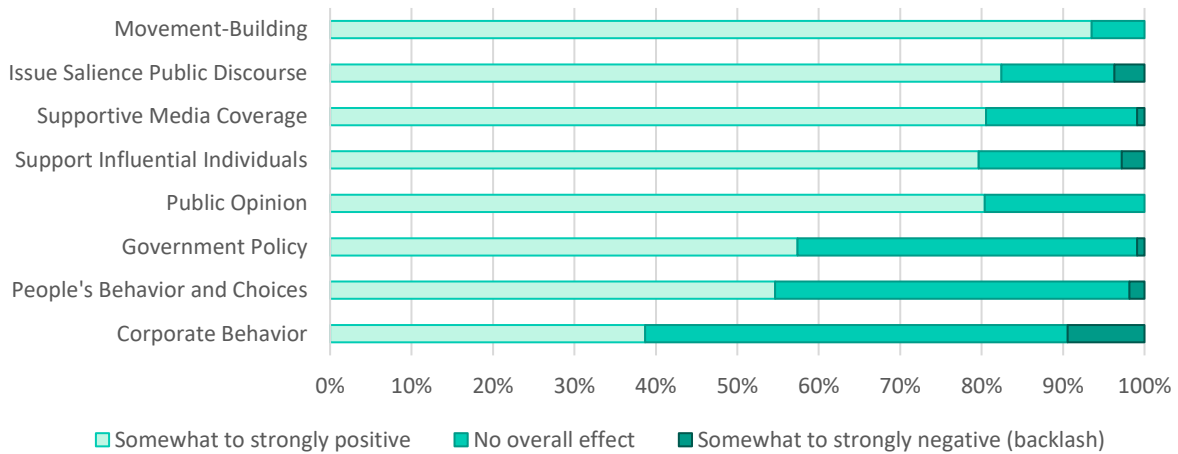


Figure 5: Impact of moderate climate action on a variety of factors.

Starting with the case of moderate climate action, figure 5 shows the experts' ranking of the effect of this kind of activism on a series of factors. The survey participants were asked to indicate whether a moderate climate protest, such as an authorized protest march, would have a negative (strongly or somewhat), positive (strongly or somewhat) or even an indiscernible impact on for example government policy or corporate behavior. Corporate behavior, for example, was perceived by 51,9% of the experts as unaffected by moderate action tactics such as peaceful and authorized protest marches. Negative impact can be considered as a part in creating a **backlash effect**, as a moderate action strategy might not lead to the desired increase in issue salience or could even spark stronger criminalization or stigmatization of a movement.

As the aforementioned figure indicates, **moderate tactics** were deemed to have the largest positive impact on internal movement-building. 101 experts, or 84,2%, ranked this effect as somewhat or strongly positive, and none believed the impact would be even somewhat negative. Whilst the use of moderate tactics was generally considered to have a mostly positive effect, ten experts (8,3%) believed they could have a potentially negative impact on corporate behavior. Climate protests frequently target industrial sites, think for example of oil fields or the headquarters of highly polluting companies, thus potentially widening the gap between big corporations and activist groups. As figure 5 shows, all respondents indicated that moderate action strategies would have no negative impact on both movement building and public opinion. Yet, protests tend to attract the attention of a wide variety of people, each with their own opinions and perspectives. As a result, most social movements deal with critique or even the rise of countermovements. The complete absence of a perceived negative impact might therefore seem strange at first, but is likely due to the assumption that moderate action will overall have a positive impact that outweighs these effects. Judging by the three factors that were perceived as most likely to suffer negatively from moderate protest, its potential for a backlash effect could be largely the result of declining issue salience, limited support from influential individuals or counterproductive changes in corporate behavior. To gain a better understanding of how choice in action tactic influence a movement's risk of backlash, however, the next section looks at disruptive protest as well.

### Disruptive Climate Action

In a second set of questions, our expert pool were once again confronted with the same list of factors and the same scale. This time around, they were asked to consider the impact of disruptive climate activism. Disruptive action is typically considered as an effective tactic to gain media attention and to increase both public issue awareness as well as issue salience. At the same time, disruptive action

groups run the risk of scaring off potential supporters who consider these tactics as too radical, damaging the reputation of the overarching movement, or increasing criminalization and stigmatization of all sorts of protests (Haines, 2013; Bergman, 2014).

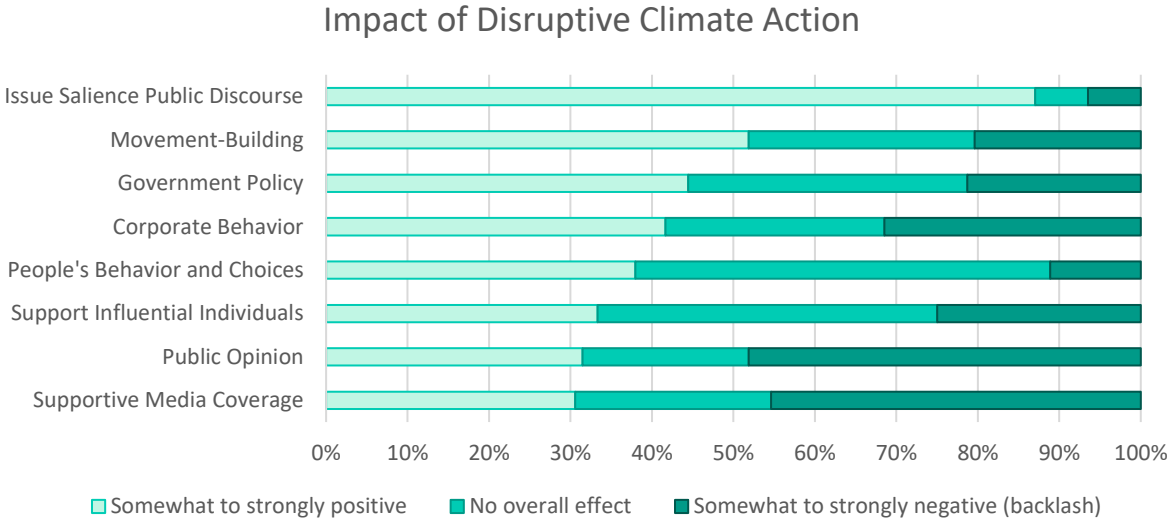


Figure 6: Impact of disruptive climate action on a variety of factors.

As figure 6 shows, the results differ substantially from those on moderate climate action. Here, the experts believed **disruptive action** would have the largest positive impact on the climate issue’s salience in public discourse (94 experts, 78,3%), and the largest negative impact on public opinion (34 experts, 28,3%) and supportive media coverage (33 experts, 27,5%). As shown in the figure, the effects of disruptive action were still largely considered to be positive, despite a noticeable shift towards negative impact when compared to figure 5. The smallest effect can be found for the issue salience in public discourse. Here, slightly more experts were of the position that the effect of disruptive tactics would be largely positive (87%, compared to 82,4% for moderate tactics), as the perceived negative impact went up with only 2,78%. On the other end of the spectrum, the shift from moderate to disruptive tactics had the largest negative impact on public opinion. When asked to judge the impact disruptive action on public opinion, 48,1% of all respondents considered disruptive action strategies to be detrimental, making it not only the strongest shift when compared to the impact of moderate tactics on public opinion, but also the largest negative effect for disruptive action across all factors depicted in figure 6. Or, in other words, the negative impact of disruptive action was considered to be the most significant for public opinion of a movement, more so than for its ability to gain supportive media coverage (45,4%).

As figure 6 also shows, disruptive action was deemed to have the least amount of impact on people’s behavior and choice, neither positive nor negative. Here, 50,9% of the survey participants, or 55 experts, considered a disruptive action strategy to have no overall effect. This contradicts the line of argument of many disruptive climate action groups, most recently Extinction Rebellion, who state that disruptive action increases public awareness of climate change issues, as well as injects a sense of urgency into the public debate, thus helping to transform ordinary citizens from “bystanders into upstanders.” (Fotaki & Foroughi, 2022). Much of the existing scholarly work similarly highlights that although disruptive forms of action might result in more negative media coverage than moderate action tactics, they do increase a sense of conflict, thus sparking an increase in overall media attention (Davis, 2022) (Berglund, 2023). As such, it might also give off a powerful signal to policy makers, as the media has the potential to act as a “megaphone” and might increase the “perceived importance” of topics that experience higher level of salience (Sevenans, 2018). And indeed, the positive impact of disruptive action on issue salience was perceived to be slightly higher for disruptive versus moderate

tactics (increasing from 82,4% to 87%, with no overall effect responses declining by 7,4%). In short, the choice for either disruptive or moderate action tactics may be part of a delicate **balancing act**, as social movements are tasked with navigating between a large potential for backlash when it comes to public opinion formation or supportive media coverage, and possible increases in issue salience. This choice then ultimately comes down to both a movement's goals, and the factors it deems important to achieve those goals.

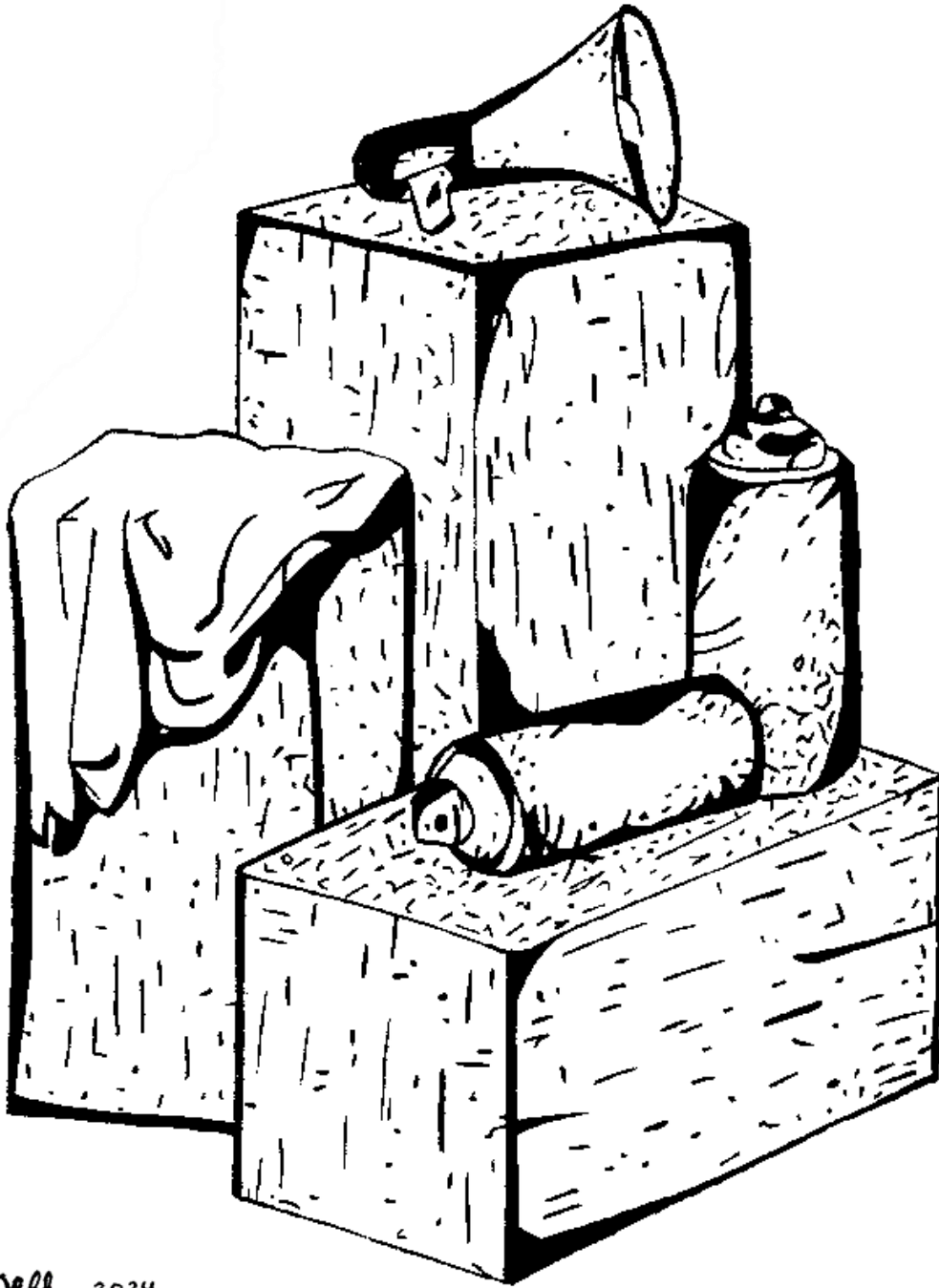
### **Open-Ended Questions Responses**

For the subsection on climate action, respondents used the open-ended questions to express their reluctance to make generalized statements. Many agreed that the impact of both disruptive and moderate protests depends largely on the context in which they occur, as well as their targets and objectives. In the case of the climate movement, for example, one anonymous expert wrote that *"in Australia, we have enough majority support for climate action that most disruptive protests of any type will lead to greater wins [...] than losses"*, whilst another respondent based in the UK was more skeptical. This British survey participant instead highlighted the rise in right-wing counter-movements and global warming deniers. Additionally, one American expert simply remarked, *"the USA is a hot mess. I wish I knew what would work or not"*.

The choice not to provide a **definition** of 'disruptive action' once again provoked a number of responses. Similarly, the concept of a potential 'backlash effect' raised questions amongst the experts, despite the fact that a concise description of a backlash effect had been provided. As Pamela Oliver (University of Wisconsin-Madison) noted, it is important to make a distinction between the net effect of a movement (e.g., its positive impacts minus any potential negative effects), and the existence of backlash in general. As she wrote, there will typically be some form of backlash in response to a social movement, be that the creation of countermovements, unfavorable media coverage or increasingly restrictive legislation. At the same time, this is not a *"simple cause-effect relation"*, and the overall positive impact of a movement might outweigh its negative effects. To use the example provided by Kevin Gillan (University of Manchester), radical action groups might have a negative impact on media coverage or public opinion, but they will also *"likely drive the issue up the policy agenda, with possibly a greater chance of more moderate voices being heard."* At the same time, a respondent to the climate movement questions also noted that the initial boost brought forward by radical groups such as Extinction Rebellion ultimately runs the risk of being overshadowed by its negative impact on public opinion, thus risking *"sinking this social movement altogether."*

Others argued that there was no such thing as a *"one size fits all"* answer to the questions or that activists themselves ultimately would be the ones capable of determining the best action strategies. Touching upon this, Louisa Parks (University of Trento) argued that adopting a more **long-term view** of the effects of specific action could form a way forward. She used the case of climate activists throwing soup at paintings in museums as an example of disruptive action that sparks short-term but widespread negative reactions, but that at the same time could start a debate on *"what we as a society protect and value, and what we don't."* Yet, she acknowledged that such social or cultural change would be slow and that it would *"take time to get through the outrage"*.

### Part III: Most Successful Movements



Jell 2024

## Real-Life Examples of Movement Success

Where the previous two sections asked the expert panel to reflect on social movements in general or the climate movement writ large, this third and final section offers more concrete examples. Here, the experts themselves were asked to provide examples of what they believed were some of the most successful movements of the past few decades. As such, this final part of the report provides the opportunity to both apply the aforementioned debates on factors of movement success and tactical strategies to real-life cases, and to integrate the insights provided.

In order to gain a better idea of what makes a movement ‘successful’ in the eyes of our expert pool we asked the respondents to reflect on what had, in their view, been the most successful social movement of the last twenty years. The experts were free to choose any movement that occurred within their own home country, or simply a real-life social movement example that they were well-acquainted with. Additionally, they were asked to expand on the reasons as to why they consider this movement to be successful, as well as the relevant factors to which they would attribute its success. Although the question was optional, 69 of our 120 experts (57,5%) provided one or more examples of what they believed had been successful movements in their country, 102 in total. In total, their responses included 32 different social movements and action groups, ranging from the peace movement to feminist strikes and disability rights activism. The full list of movements and organizations can be found in the appendix (D). Although the experts in the pool were largely American (45% or 54 experts said they were based in the US at the time of the survey), our results also include some examples from different national and political contexts, such as the Mexican Zapatistas movement and the site occupation of a to-be-constructed airfield in Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France. In spite of this large variety of listed groups, **four** different kinds of social movement activism stood out: examples of LGBTQIA+ activism (17 mentions), climate justice/environmentalist action groups (15 mentions), white/Christian nationalism and radical right movements (14 mentions), and lastly Black Lives Matter protests (12 mentions). We discuss each of these more frequently mentioned movements in the next few paragraphs.

**LGBTQIA+** activism was brought up most as a prime example of the most successful movements of the last twenty years. This high level of perceived success, many experts argued, is visible primarily through changes in public opinion as well as policy change (e.g., legalization of same-sex marriage). When asked to reflect on the reasons for this success, responses were varied. Ben Kenward (Oxford Brookes University) noted that the movement benefits from having “*few vested economic interests that oppose it*”, or that it relied heavily on favorable media coverage. Changes in **public opinion**, Regina Werum (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) wrote, are especially interesting because they preceded legislative change, instead of having “*courts/congress as leading indicators*”. As another respondent noted, the LGBTQIA+ movement shifted public opinion not just because of its activism, but also because its members are a “*part of every family*”, meaning they are not “*segregated from birth as are racial minorities who suffer from histories of redlining, racist oppression, racist stereotyping, macro- and micro-aggressions*”. The inclusive and celebratory nature of for example Pride Parades were also listed as effective ways of “*mobilizing around love*” and **non-confrontational** campaigning that empathizes “*understanding and explanation rather than antagonistic tactics*” in a way that facilitates elite and celebrity support. At the same time, multiple experts were weary of the recent rise in counter-movement mobilization and backlash. Mary Bernstein (University of Connecticut), for example, choose to include only lesbian, gay and bisexual forms of activism, as feeling forced to “*leave out the T because trans people are currently the target of terrible transphobic legislation*”.

For the case of the **climate justice/environmentalist movement**, the survey responses included references to a wide variety of action groups, ranging from Extinction Rebellion to Fridays for Future, and even the British anti-fracking movement. Many experts highlighted the movement’s ability to mobilize **large masses** of people, to capture public attention and to raise concerns about the urgency of climate policy change at a speed that is “*unparalleled compared to other movements*”. The reasons given to explain this success were varied. Some experts argued that **non-violent disruptive** protest by

groups such as Extinction Rebellion helped created a widely shared sense of urgency, although Colin Davis (University of Bristol) noted the action group may have been able to achieve even more if it had *“formulated more specific demands during its initial phase”*. Others praised the climate movement’s ability to network on the left side of politics or take many incremental steps towards making progress. The increased visibility of the negative impact of climate change when it comes to natural disasters such as flooding and forest fires, too, has increased the movement’s salience. At the same time, several experts stressed the discrepancy between the shift in public climate attitudes and the lack of large-scale policy change, which they related in part to the *“very entrenched power of the fossil fuel industry”* and also to the rise of an *“astute counter-movement which has poured money into politics”*. Certain media outlets, Winnifred Louis (University of Queensland) warned, benefit from the use of disruptive action as they have been able *“cynically to exploit to delegitimize”* the movement writ large.

The category of **white/Christian nationalism and radical right movements** was also often mentioned. Here, respondents mentioned the effectiveness of decades of slowly *“coopted large portions of the government”*, forming alliances with **political elites** or established **political parties** (e.g., the Republic Party in the US), and recent upswings in the use of *“racist/ethnonationalist rhetoric”* and broader populist protest waves (anti-vax, anti-woke, anti-immigration). Radical right activists, several experts argued are helped by their extensive network of non-political allies, ranging from *“police who suppress protests”* and *“White nationalist/supremacist churches”*, to *“conservatives who own many influential media outlets and social media platforms”*. As Pamela Oliver (University of Wisconsin-Madison) wrote:

*“I attribute the rise of overt White supremacist movements and the broader White Christian Nationalist movement to successful attempts to manipulate underlying cultural chauvinism and implicit racism and [...] a willingness to use violence and intimidation toward others”*.

White nationalist or radical right activists, the expert panel noted, achieve their goals in part because they have the means to threaten local government and to use **violence** to intimidate their adversaries. In doing so, one expert based in Sweden argued, they are able to impact a wide variety of *“policies proposed by the Swedish government today (mainly for immigration, but even the environment)”*.

**Black Lives Matter protests**, specifically those taking place after the death of George Floyd in 2020, were associated with their ability to mobilize crowds of thousands of people and to increase public awareness on a variety of topics such as police brutality, racism, and ethnic profiling. The use of social media to spread video evidence of police violence, as well as the large amounts of national and international media attention, caused a strong *“moral shock”*. This in turn lead to the participation of diverse group of protesters. Compared to the previous three movements mentioned above, the expert panel spent less time discussing the policy effects of Black Lives Matter activism, which some noted have been *“uneven”*, instead highlighting its impact on shifting public opinion. As one anonymous expert noted, the movement has been incredibly successful in stressing its *“moral legitimacy”* and in drawing public attention to the high number of *“police-involved fatalities”*. Nevertheless, its political impact is still evident as *“lots of reform-minded officials were elected”* following the protests.



## Conclusion

This report aimed to revisit debates in the field of social movement studies on structure/agency, disruptive/moderate tactics and movement success. By means of an expert survey, it sought to take stock on the current progress being made on these debates in the fields of sociology, political science, communication studies and psychology. At the same time, by asking all expert to answer the same, uniform list of survey questions, it hoped to overcome some of the field's fragmentation caused by frequent case study research. Our diverse pool of 120 experts from various national and academic contexts and backgrounds provided useful reflections on the factors that influence both movement success and movement failure, the effects of different action strategies and the examples of the most successful movements of the last two decades. Open-ended text questions further provided the survey participants with the opportunity to add the necessary nuance to their responses, as well as point out issues and questions that would have otherwise remained overlooked.

The report's first section aimed to provide a closer analysis of precisely which **internal and external factors** were deemed to influence a social movement's chances to succeed. Its main findings were:

- Social movement experts considered activists' ability to connect with political allies as the most important factors of a social movement's potential for success.
- The ranking's top ten included six internal factors, such as a movement's organizational capacity or its willingness to collaborate with other action groups and activists.
- Internal conflict or movement infighting were considered to be the largest influencers of movement failure.
- The choice of focusing on narrow issues as well as having stated goals that are too broad were found at the bottom of the list, indicating that the scope of a social movement's goals was perceived to have only a limited effect on a movement's success, potentially because of relative ease of reframing.
- Having clear political goals was seen as an important indicator of a movement's success, and their absence as the second most likely threat, thus implying that clear political goals are vital both in attracting political allies and in giving activists a real-life target to work towards.
- In their open-ended text answers, the expert pool pointed out the ways in which internal and external factors influence each other, as well as the importance of context, as the factors that influence a movement's success are largely shaped by the social and political structures in which it takes place as well as the goals it sets out to achieve. In sum, the open answers highlighted that the crux of success lies in the interaction between both internal and external aspects.

The second part of the report looked at the effects of both **disruptive and moderate action** strategies. Here, the main takeaway were:

- Our expert pool believed that the impact of disruption as an action tactics would be the most positive for movements benefiting from high levels of public support as well as public awareness.
- Whereas the existing theory on disruptive activism might highlight its potential for marginalized and underrepresented social groups, the survey participants highlighted the high risks of political repression and stigmatization, as well as limited public support.
- The choice for moderate climate action, the expert pool argued, would have the largest positive impact on processes of movement-building and issue salience creation, but its ability to change the behavior of both corporations and ordinary citizens was perceived to be limited.
- Disruptive **climate** action, on the other hand, was considered to be hugely effective in raising climate issue salience, yet ran the risk of negatively impacting public opinion and the chance of supportive media coverage. Action groups that were too radical in their strategies might

scare off potential sympathizers and limit the chance of productive political dialogue, thus negating their potential positive impact on climate activists' ability to garner public attention.

Lastly, the pool of experts were asked to provide real-life examples of what they considered to be the **most successful movements** of the last twenty years. A ranking of the four most common answers showed that:

- LGBTQIA+ activism was mentioned the most frequently, with survey participants highlighting its effectiveness in changing both public opinion and policy, and the limited economic opposition that surrounded the movement.
- White/Christian nationalism and radical right movements were characterized by their ability to influence political elites, whereas the climate justice movement was praised for its ability to mobilize large masses of people and to employ non-violent direct action techniques.
- Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd, the experts stressed, were effective in capitalizing on a widespread sense of moral shock and resulted in the election of reform-minded officials.

Using the open-ended text questions the experts left some useful points of improvement for any future study to take into account. They for example argued that it would have been helpful to provide more differentiation when it comes to conditions under which specific internal or external factors might be important. The lack of well-defined definition of terms as 'disruptive', too, led to confusion and a hesitation to take strong positions. In either case, future expert surveys should present their participants with more concrete examples of circumstances in which a social movement might take place, like for instance by means of well-crafted vignette experiments that take systematically both internal and external features of social movement activism into account.

Recurrent themes throughout this report were the importance of public support, of strong internal unity (e.g. through movement-building or the clear articulation of shared goals and action tactics), as well as the relation with the political system, be that positively in case of political ally formation or negatively in the case of repression measures and stigmatization. Considering the rising interest in the impact of social movement activism by a wide variety of fields including sociology, political science and history, as well as the emergency of new mass movements such as Black Lives Matter or action groups like Extinction Rebellion, understanding what constitutes movement success and which factors impede or facilitate it, remain pressing, and scholarly work dissecting it, strongly needed. We hope this report can inspire both activists and experts to keep on working to a better (understanding of the) real-world out there.

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## Illustrations

All illustrations featured in the report were provided by Janneke Drent.

## Appendix

### A: Recruitment email:

Dear x,

I hope this email finds you well.

We ([Social Change Lab](#) and [Ruud Wouters](#)) would like to invite you to participate in an expert survey we are running. **This survey will be the first to bring together global academic experts on social movements and protest.** The goal of the project is to make a publicly available report that will inform practitioners about expert opinion on movement outcomes and strategies. We believe it will provide hugely valuable information to organisers, strategists and members of social movements. The survey is being run in conjunction with [Apollo Academic Surveys](#), a non-profit whose mission is to collect and freely disseminate the views of worldwide academic experts.

The survey will aggregate the views of around 100 influential political science, sociology and psychology academics on the topic of social movements and protest. **Given your research in this area, we very much hope that you will be interested in taking part.** We would also be delighted if you would consider distributing the survey to encourage fellow experts in your network. Some scholars who have already participated and/or helped create the survey include Edwin Amenta (UC Irvine) , Marco Giugni (University of Geneva), Katrin Uba (Uppsala University) and Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp).

For ease of reading, we recommend that you answer the survey on a laptop/desktop computer rather than a phone. It will take around 20-25 minutes to complete and **the deadline for responses is 31st May 2023** so we would appreciate your responding before then.

You can complete the survey via [this link](#).

We eagerly look forward to your response. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions. Thank you in advance for sparing your time for this.

Best wishes,  
James, Cathy & Ruud

Ruud Wouters, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Tilburg University  
James Ozden, Director & Cathy Rogers, Research Consultant, [Social Change Lab](#)

### B: Countries the expert panel were based in (full list):

Country	Number	Percentage
United States	55	45,83
United Kingdom	14	11,67
Spain	6	5,00
Australia	5	4,17
Sweden	5	4,17
The Netherlands	4	3,33
France	3	2,50
Italy	3	2,50

Mexico	3	2,50
Belgium	2	1,67
Canada	2	1,67
Germany	2	1,67
Hong Kong	2	1,67
Switzerland	2	1,67
Bangladesh	1	0,83
Bulgaria	1	0,83
Ecuador	1	0,83
Finland	1	0,83
India	1	0,83
Lithuania	1	0,83
New Zealand	1	0,83
Poland	1	0,83
Tanzania	1	0,83
Turkey	1	0,83
Venezuela	1	0,83
Unknown	1	0,83
Total	120	100,00

**C: Full list of the participating scholars who agreed to have their names be included (the others remain anonymous):**

Wisnu Adihartono (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences Paris), Paul Almeida (University of California-Merced), Philipp Altmann (Central University of Ecuador), Shamsul Arefin (University of Massachusetts-Amherst), Elizabeth A. Armstrong (University of Michigan), Matthew Baggetta (Indiana University), Paul Bagguley (University of Leeds), Joshua A. Basseches (Tulane University), Colin J. Beck (Pomona College), Karen Beckwith (Case Western Reserve University), Oscar Berglund (University of Bristol), Luca Bernardi (University of Liverpool), Mary Bernstein (University of Connecticut), Michelle Beyeler (University of Zurich), Elizabeth Borland (College of New Jersey), Cameron Brick (University of Amsterdam), Cornelia Butler Flora (Iowa State University), Jorge Cadena-Roa (National Autonomous University of Mexico), Bart Cammaerts (London School of Economics and Political Science), Alejandro Tirado Castro (University Charles III of Madrid), Camilo Cristancho (University of Barcelona), Colin Davis (University of Bristol), Joost de Moor (Sciences Po Paris), Michaela DeSoucey (North Carolina State University), Ivaylo Dinev (Centre for East European and International Studies), Benjamin Duke (University of Leicester), Zackary Dunivin (Indiana University), Simone Durham (University of Maryland), Jan Willem Duyvendak (University of Amsterdam), Jennifer Earl (University of Delaware), Rachel L. Einwohner (Purdue University), Cristina Flesher Fominaya (Aarhus University), Carol Galais (Autonomous University of Barcelona), Kevin Gillan (University of Manchester), Johan Gordillo-García (National Autonomous University of Mexico), Robyn Gulliver (University of Queensland), Selin Bengi Gümürükçü (Rutgers University), James F. Hamilton (University of Georgia), Christina Hansen (Malmö University), David J. Hess (Vanderbilt University), Elizabeth Humphrys (University of Technology Sydney), María Inclán (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas), Larry W. Isaac (Vanderbilt University), Nicole Iturriaga (University of California-Irvine), James M. Jasper (City University of New York), Ben Kenward (Oxford Brookes University), Bert Klandermans (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur (Rhode Island College), Sarah Lockwood (University of Cambridge), Margarita López Maya (Central University of Venezuela), Winnifred Louis (University of Queensland), Andrew Martin (Ohio State University), Setsuko Matsuzawa (College of Wooster), Alice Mattoni (University of Bologna), Holly McCammon (Vanderbilt University), John McCarthy (Pennsylvania State

University), Angela G. Mertig (Middle Tennessee State University), David S. Meyer (University of California-Irvine), Bishnu Prasad Mohapatra (MIT World Peace University), Laura Morales (Sciences Po Paris), Lorenzo Mosca (University of Milan), Lisa Mueller (Macalester University), Bariki Gwalugano Mwasaga (Tanzanian Prime Minister's Office), Erin O'Brien (Queensland University of Technology), Catharina O'Donnell (Harvard University), Pamela Oliver (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Susan Olzak (Stanford University), Michelle Oyakawa (Muskingum University), Louisa Parks (University of Trento), Katia Pilati (University of Trento), Daniel Płatek (Polish Academy of Science), Martín Portos (Charles III University of Madrid), Jan-Erik Refle (University of Geneva), Heidi Reynolds-Stenson (Colorado State University-Pueblo), Elle Rochford (University of Delaware), Conny Roggeband (University of Amsterdam), Deana A. Rohlinger (Florida State University), Eduardo Romanos (Complutense University of Madrid), Teal Rothschild (Roger Williams University), Dieter Rucht (Berlin Social Science Center), Chandra Russo (Colgate University), Kim Scipes (Purdue University Northwest), Eric Selbin (Southwestern University), Brent Simpson (University of South Carolina), David C. Sorge (Bryn Mawr College), Sarah A. Soule (Stanford University), Viktoria Spaiser (University of Leeds), Anthony J. Spires (University of Melbourne), Suzanne Staggenborg (University of Pittsburgh), Verta Taylor (University of California-Santa Barbara), Didem Türkoğlu (Kadir Has University), Katrin Uba (Uppsala University), Nella Van Dyke (University of California-Merced), Sara Vestergren (Keele University), Kateřina Vráblíková (University of Bath), Mattias Wahlström (University of Gothenburg), Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp), Edward Walker (University of California-Los Angeles), Omar Wasow (University of California-Berkeley), Regina Werum (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), Åsa Wettergren (University of Gothenburg), Wayne Whitmore (Inver Hills Community College), Matthew Williams (Loyola University Chicago), Lesley Wood (York University), Michael C. Zeller (Bielefeld University).

**D: List of the most successful movements of the last twenty years:**

<b>Movement</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
LGBTQIA+ activism	17	16,67
Climate justice/environmentalist movement	15	14,71
White/Christian nationalism and radical right movements	14	13,73
Black Lives Matter	12	11,76
Feminist/women's rights activism	8	7,84
Indigenous activism	3	2,94
#MeToo	3	2,94
Movimiento 15-M	3	2,94
Belgian White March (1996)	2	1,96
Pro-Brexit activism	2	1,96
Trade union activism	2	1,96
Anti-austerity movement	1	0,98
Anti-eviction protests	1	0,98
Anti-globalization movement	1	0,98
Anti-nuclearism	1	0,98
Bangladesh quota reform movement (2018)	1	0,98
Disability rights movement	1	0,98
Farmers' protests	1	0,98
Healthcare reforms activism	1	0,98
Hong Kong 1 July protest (2003)	1	0,98
Lithuanian cauliflower revolution	1	0,98
Mental health advocacy	1	0,98

Movement against Phul-Bari mine project	1	0,98
Notre-Dame-des-Landes activism	1	0,98
Occupy movement	1	0,98
Peace movement	1	0,98
Protests against the Iraq War	1	0,98
Student protest BMSRSTU	1	0,98
Treatment Action Campaign	1	0,98
War on drugs	1	0,98
Yellow vests movement	1	0,98
Zapatistas	1	0,98
Total	102	100,00