

Fridays of Revolution: Focal Days and Mass Protest in Egypt and Tunisia

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Abstract

Focal days of protest are increasingly common to episodes of revolutionary mobilization. This paper explores the significance of focal days in patterning sustained protest in Egypt and Tunisia from 2011 to 2012. In Egypt, resource-poor activists exploited the confluence of worshippers on Fridays to mobilize mass transitory protest. This reliance on ritualized action hindered cross-sectoral coordination and meant mass protest often failed to inflict a direct economic cost. In Tunisia, there was no focal day of protest, in large part due to the coordinating hand of trade unions. In consequence, mass protest was more likely to span multiple sites, sectors, and tactics. These results suggest that oppositions can sustain mass mobilization even absent organizational capacity, but a reliance on a focal day limits the potential of protest over a political transition. Supplementary analyses point to the applicability of our findings to a number of other Arab Spring countries.

Keywords

focal days, protest, democratization, Arab Spring

Introduction

From the Monday sit-ins in Leipzig against the German Democratic Republic to Friday demonstrations in Syria agitating for the downfall of the Baathist regime, focal days of protest have emerged as important tools for assembling large crowds of citizens in contexts of authoritarianism. In such cases, a focal day appears to solve a collective action problem in the absence of an organized opposition. The logic is intuitive. In authoritarian regimes, opposition forces are rarely able to organize openly, and so struggle to coordinate mass protest or even communicate a message of resistance to broad publics. Focal days of protest, which invariably fall on public holidays or some other occasion that naturally involves the gathering of large numbers of citizens, circumvent this problem by providing the date and time setting function of protest usually performed by social movements and opposition groups. This dynamic has been highlighted by both rational choice theorists and scholars of revolution as integral to the formation of revolutionary bandwagons, as opposition forces are able to exploit commonplace routines of social interaction to draw ordinary citizens into mass mobilization. In consequence, authoritarian regimes have securitized national holidays and other symbolic occasions, as they look to obviate popular unrest.

While the power of focal days of mobilization is increasingly recognized by dictators and political scientists alike, their impact on patterning prolonged periods of

protest has evaded systematic empirical investigation. This reflects a more general shortcoming in the literature on social movements and collective protest: while significant attention has been paid to the temporal fluctuations of mass protest in mature Western democracies—where social movements and not focal days are an established feature of the contentious landscape—far less is known about how sustained waves of protest unfold in settings where movements either lack organizational capacity or are entirely absent. This has particular implications for how we explain the trajectory and fate of recent democratic breakthroughs, which are frequently led by loosely organized “negative coalitions” (Beissinger 2013) and rely on focal days to sustain street-level mobilization. To begin addressing this gap, we assess the relative significance and impact of a focal day of protest in Egypt and Tunisia. To carry out our analysis, we draw on two original catalogs of protest events totaling over nine thousand events derived from Arabic- and French-language news and social media. We begin by tracing the emergence of Friday as a focal day of protest in Egypt during the January

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25th Revolution in 2011. We then scrutinize the temporal patterning of protest in Tunisia during the same period, to discern if comparable dynamics were present in a geographically and culturally proximate context. Finally, we compare how a focal day of protest influenced the sectors, repertoires, and locations of protest in these two cases.

Our results suggest that the reliance of organizationally weak actors on a focal day that falls on a weekend can simultaneously enable and segment contentious collective action. While potentially large, Friday protest is less likely to involve groups and movements from multiple sectors, less likely to endure, and less likely to span multiple locales. Absent organizations capable of dictating the rhythm of protest, activists in Egypt exploited the focal qualities of Fridays to amass large numbers of people in transitory protests that left places of worship for public spaces. By contrast, Egyptian workers and student groups were much less likely to mobilize on Fridays, with workplaces and university campuses also seeing significantly less protest on Fridays. In consequence, days of mass protest inflicted little direct economic cost, undermined the possibilities of cross-sectoral mobilization, and gave rise to a repertoire that was comparatively easy to police. In Tunisia, there was no single focal day of action, in large part due to the coordinating role of organized labor. In that context, the transitional regime often faced successive days of protest that spanned multiple sites, sectors, and tactics. Supplementary analyses point to the application of our results to numerous other cases in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Taken together, these findings point to a hitherto unappreciated dynamic: in contexts of political disorganization, the “when” of protest can powerfully influence the “who,” the “how,” and the “where” of mass mobilization.

Focal Days of Protest

The “who” in protest research refers almost invariably to organized movements or movement leaders. Corollary of this, the “how” and the “where” of protest are assumed to flow from the decisions of organizations. This assumption is found most obviously in studies aligned with the resource mobilization approach, which sees organization as among the most important resources available to potential protesters (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The guiding assumption of this literature could be summarized as: “the more organization, the better the prospects for mobilization and success” (Clemens and Minkoff 2004, 155). The importance of organizational resources has been identified in shaping movement outcomes (Clemens 1993), on levels of protest nationally and cross-nationally (Dalton, Van Sickle, and Weldon 2010), movement emergence and continuity (Taylor 1989), the diffusion and

decline of protest (Minkoff 1997), the brokering of common fronts through processes of “mesomobilization” (Gerhards and Rucht 1992), and the facilitation of large-scale non-local protest (Fisher et al. 2005).

A second literature keys the patterning of mass mobilization to developments in the political process. When it comes to the timing of protest, the emphasis of much of this scholarship is on responsiveness to shifts in political opportunity structure, both discursive and institutional, and the role of social movement organizations in perceiving and acting on such openings (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Tarrow 2011). Most importantly, scholars argue, activists react strategically to changing opportunity structures, employing adaptive tactics in the face of repression or political openings, and utilizing alternative repertoires of action in alternative locales to respond to changes in the political environment (Lichbach 1995). By way of example, movement leaders may elect to call strikes, over public (and more exposed) demonstrations, in the wake of repression (Francisco 2004). Relatedly, movements might innovate and employ new tactics in the wake of defeat (McCammon 2012).

The majority of this research pertains to Western liberal-democratic regimes—a limitation acknowledged by the originators of the resource mobilization approach (Zald and McCarthy 2002, 150)—and exhibits a clearly “movement-centric” bias (McAdam and Boudet 2012). By comparison, we know little of the determinants of mass mobilization in non-democratic contexts where organizational weakness predominates, and where freedom of association and assembly are curtailed, and so social movements are either heavily circumscribed or entirely repressed. Here, the “who” of protest is likely not to be an organized movement but instead disorganized and fragmented coalitions operating in semi-legality. As Beissinger (2013) notes, contemporary “urban civic revolutions” frequently lack internal coherence as a campaign and, after achieving the ouster of an authoritarian incumbent, are often hamstrung by the absence of any coherent organizational basis.

How then do disparate actors manage to overcome their organizational weakness and continue to challenge regimes? A key argument is that in conditions of organizational weakness, mass mobilization is aided by “focal point” solutions (Schelling 1960). In the case of the “Colour Revolutions” of the early- to mid-2000s, these were provided in part by stolen elections (Tucker 2007). Ritualized action, Pfaff and Yang (2001) suggest, can also help overcome collective action problems in such settings. Pointing to the state-socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and China in 1989, they show how protest can be mobilized in the absence of organizational resources familiar to us from the resource mobilization paradigm. Indeed, previous episodes of mass mobilization, notably

the protests in Leipzig that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, have demonstrated the centrality of rituals as focal point solutions to coordination problems (Lohmann 1994; Opp and Gern 1993). The Monday protests in Leipzig relied on the institution of “peace prayers” held every Monday from 5 to 6 p.m. in churches in the surrounding area that provided a definite time and place for would-be protesters to congregate and an “institutional incentive” (Opp and Gern 1993) to participate. So too, during the Iranian Revolution, ritualized religious action came to perform a date-setting function for protest as the forty-day mourning cycle served to structure patterns of contention (Rasler 1996). More contemporaneously, Friday protests were a key feature of the Arab Spring, as citizens exploited their periodic confluence in places of worship to stage large demonstrations in public spaces (Ketchley 2017). Crucially, in these instances, the “who” of protest—in the form of organization leaders or movements—was no longer the sole arbiter of the coordinates of contentious collective action. Instead, where organizational weakness abounds, the “when”—in the form of a calendar of ritualized action—appears to powerfully influence who might participate.

What are the observable implications of a reliance on focal days? Here, we take lessons from the theoretical literature on ritualized action and argue that this reliance will produce systematic regularities in the tactics and locations of protest. The “common knowledge” (Chwe 2001) required for such action is a product of the unchanging, predictable, iterative nature of rituals themselves and the “repertoire of recognized practices” (Pfaff and Yang 2001, 556) of which they are formed. In consequence, we should expect to see a lack of adaptive tactical or geographical variation written into the functioning of ritualized contentious action. When these rituals follow a regular temporal rhythm, we might then expect to see systematic regularities in the weekly calendar of protest. By implication, the types of protest should be significantly distinct from those observed on other days of the week where, in the absence of ritualized action, protest can be expected to exhibit a more stochastic rhythm. When it comes to the specific types of protest we can expect to see on these days, one of the most common forms of ritualized contentious action involves the massing of large numbers of individuals on given days in focal public spaces for the staging of public demonstrations (Beissinger 2013; Schock 2005). As we will go on to detail, the ritualized recourse to this mode of protest may plausibly undermine the viability of protest campaigns.

An overarching hypothesis arises from the above discussion. We expect focal points to predominate in contexts of weakness; in the absence of organizations, activists and unaffiliated contentious actors will rely on focal days to launch protest. To the extent that this hypothesis finds

support, an observable implication is that a ritual reliance on these focal point solutions will have consequences for who protests and how protest is conducted: what we refer to as the “who,” the “how,” and the “where” of mass mobilization. Specifically, we expect that focal days will exhibit systematic regularities in the participants, tactics, and locales of protest.

Mass Mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia

We now explore these concerns as they relate to the wave of mass protest that unfolded in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring and its aftermath. The Egyptian and Tunisian cases are notable for witnessing relatively brief episodes of mass mobilization within short succession of one another, with both episodes culminating in the ousting of a seemingly well-entrenched authoritarian (Gunning and Baron 2013; Hmed 2015; Ketchley 2017). Both countries also saw sustained protest during post-breakthrough democratic transitions. Being Sunni-majority countries located in North Africa with long histories of Islamist activism, they also share broadly comparable religious and socio-cultural profiles. Nationally representative surveys fielded during our analysis period suggest that sizeable proportions of both populations regularly attended mosques and engaged in daily religious practices, and this allows us to hold constant the relative availability of Islamic associational activities in patterning contentious collective action.¹

Sources

Our principal data sources for this research are two event catalogs derived from Egyptian and Tunisian news media that captured protest from December 2010 to January 2012. To identify protest events, we employed Horn and Tilly’s (1988) definition of contentious gatherings as “occasions on which at least ten or more persons assembled in a publicly-accessible place and either by word or deed made claims that would, if realized, affect the interests of some person or group outside their own number.” Events were coded, *inter alia*, for date of occurrence, repertoire (e.g., demonstration, march, occupation, sit-in, strike), participation, and organizer.² The principal source for the Egyptian catalog is *al-Masry al-Youm*, while two further newspapers—*al-Dostor* and *al-Shorouk*—were used during periods of particularly intense mobilization to guard against potential “news hole” effects (Oliver and Maney 2000).

The same coding conventions were used for identifying protest events in Tunisia. Here, the principal news source used was *al-Chourouk*. This newspaper was archived by the online newspaper aggregator and archiving

tool *turess.com*.³ For the twenty-nine day period of revolutionary mobilization from December 17, 2010, to January 14, 2011, national print news media did not report on protest until the closing stages of the uprising. For this period, we elected to use several archived Facebook pages created for the purposes of reporting on protest during the media blackout, alongside international news media, and the multiple daily written protest reports produced by Tunisian radio station *Kalima Tunis*, which were also archived on *turess.com*. Full details of sources for the Tunisia event catalog can be found in the supplemental appendix.

For the purposes of comparison, we confine attention to the episodes of mass uprising that led to a democratic breakthrough in both countries, and the first year of the subsequent democratic transition. In total, for the period we analyze, we have records of 4,925 protest events in Egypt and 4,828 protest events in Tunisia.

Egypt, 2011–2012

The ousting of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, following eighteen days of disorderly and energetic protest unleashed an unprecedented wave of mobilization in Egypt. The scale of this mobilization is all the more noteworthy for the absence of well-resourced opposition movements.⁴ In what follows, we give an account of the organizational landscape in Egypt during this period, before considering the emergence of Fridays as a focal day of protest during the January 25th Revolution and how it came to pattern contention in the post-Mubarak transition. We then compare Egypt to Tunisia, to establish whether a reliance on a focal day of protest travels to an analogous socio-political context where social movement organizations are comparatively better resourced.

Protest without Movement

Following Mubarak's resignation on February 11, 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most significant social movement, demobilized to focus on securing a place in a newly elected parliament (see Ketchley 2017, ch. 4). Figure 1 charts Muslim Brotherhood mobilization as a percentage of all protest events involving social movements and activists between 2011 and 2012. While the Brotherhood did return to the streets periodically to protest backsliding by the transitional military government, as well as to raise other local grievances, they were noticeably absent from the iconic venue of Midan al-Tahrir, as well as the large Friday protests called for by other activist groups. Instead, the vast majority of activist-led protests during this period were called by secular movements and groups with small memberships and only a titular organizational presence nationwide. As Abdelrahman (2013)

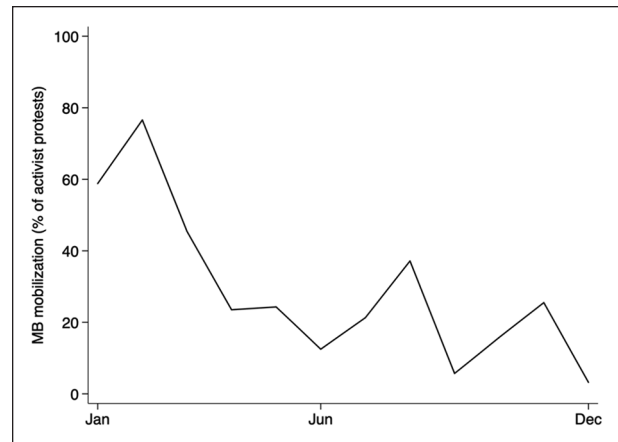


Figure 1. Muslim Brotherhood mobilization as a percentage of activist protests, 2011–2012.

notes, these non-Islamist forces often took the form of informal networks with no branch infrastructure or organized cadre. The organizational weakness of these actors is all the more apparent when we consider their performance in elections held after Egypt's democratic breakthrough, when secular, pro-revolutionary candidates failed to compete with the electoral machines commanded by the country's Islamist movements (Masoud 2014).

The Muslim Brotherhood's absence from street-level mobilization following the January 25th Revolution poses an interesting puzzle. If theories of resource mobilization and political process assume that collective protest unfolds under the direction of activists and social movements, who have the organizational resources to respond to political opportunities and frame grievances, this leaves unexplained variation in the occurrence of mass protest in the post-Mubarak transition. Against this back drop, we consider the role that Fridays played in the timing of contention over this period.

Fridays of Revolution

The importance of Fridays in patterning protest participation in Egypt is well illustrated using event data. Figure 2 shows daily protest participation between 2011 and 2012. During this period, mass mobilization (defined as $\geq 100,000$ protestors mobilizing on one day) occurred on twenty-three occasions: twelve of these were Fridays (52%). The association between Fridays and mass mobilization is even more pronounced in the post-Mubarak transition. Excluding the eighteen days of the January 25th Revolution, there were eleven days of mass protest in the year of Egypt's democratic breakthrough: nine of these occurred on a Friday (82%). These protests did not occur spontaneously (see Gunning and Baron 2013; Ketchley 2017). Rather, they were typically called for in

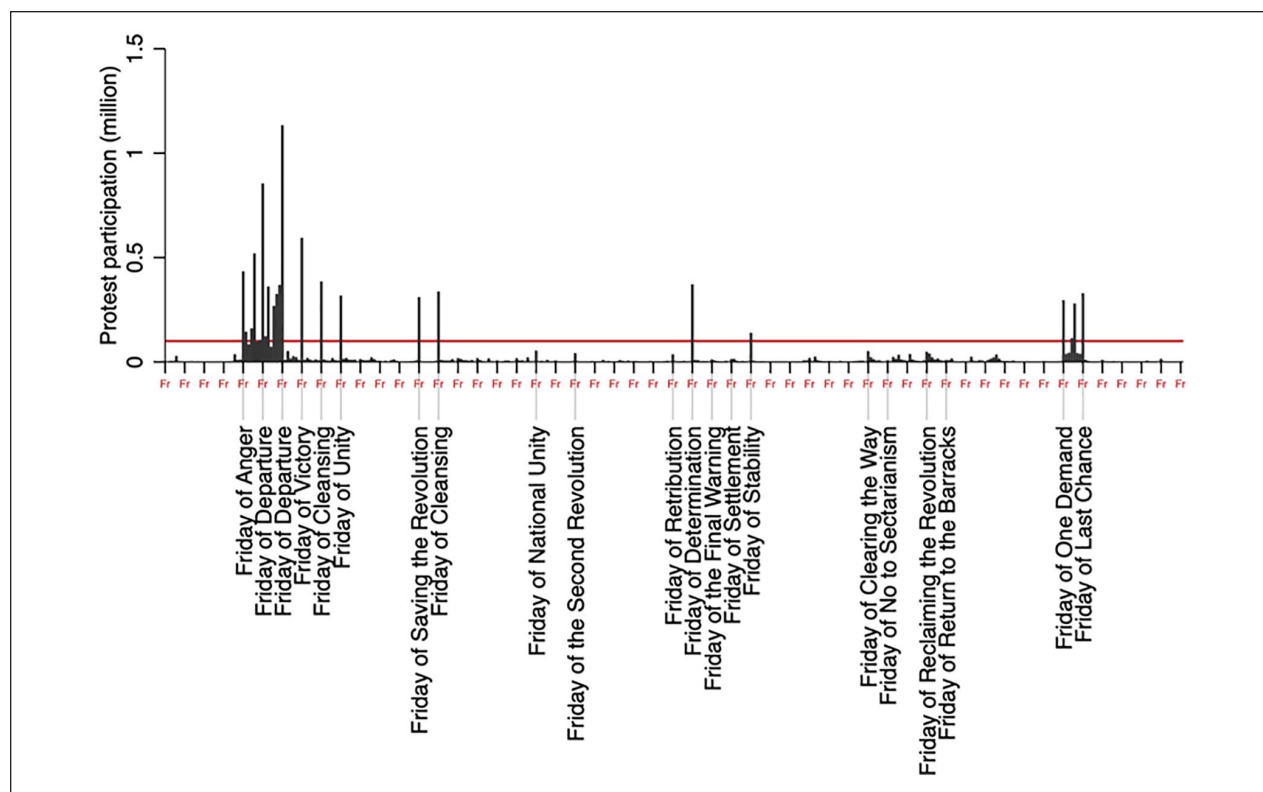


Figure 2. Protest participation in Egypt, 2011–2012.

The red y-line marks 100,000 protestors; “Fr” marks Friday.

advance by secular activists and given names that were pregnant with revolutionary symbolism, for example, the “Friday of Unity,” the “Friday of the Last Chance,” the “Friday of Reclaiming the Revolution,” and so forth. This followed a repertoire fashioned during the first days of January 25th Revolution—when opposition forces looked to mobilize mass protest on 28 January, dubbed the “Friday of Anger.” On 27 January, the Mubarak regime had cut off access to Internet and mobile phone services in a bid to demobilize anti-regime opposition. With few other means to coordinate mass protest, activists waited outside of mosques to rally crowds following the conclusion of prayer (see Gunning and Baron 2013, ch. 6). The Muslim Brotherhood belatedly announced that they would also participate in these protests. The plan was a success: large crowds moved from mosques and converged on squares and main roads across the country. Once the efficacy of this repertoire was established, resource-poor activists would consistently turn to the focal qualities of Friday protest to sustain revolutionary momentum in the post-Mubarak period.

Event data allow us to evidence this phenomenon systematically. Figure 3 sums participation in protests held between 2011 and 2012 by the day of the week. As our analysis reveals, more Egyptians protested on Friday than

on any other day of the week. A pairwise comparison of average daily protest sizes between January 2011 and January 2012 suggests that protest participation on Fridays was 3 times larger than the daily average ($p < .001$). This test assumes equal variance in the residuals of our count data, and so we repeat our analysis using a Kruskal–Wallis test, a non-parametric alternative. The results are substantively identical: protest participation on Fridays stochastically dominates participation on other days of the week ($p < .01$). Setting Sunday as the reference category, negative binomial regression (shown in Figure 3), also suggests that Friday exerted a large and substantive effect on daily protest participation during this period ($p < .001$).

Interestingly, this patterning does not appear to predate the January 25th Revolution. Figure 4 considers the temporal patterning of protest participation in Egypt between 2008 and 2010 using event data collected by Gunning and Baron (2013). This data derive from the same Egyptian newspaper as our own event catalog, making it ideally suited for a within-case across-time comparison. When aggregating protest participation to the day of the week (Sunday–Saturday), the bar graph appears to suggest that protest on Fridays was larger than on other days. However, this piece of evidence alone is misleading, as it does not

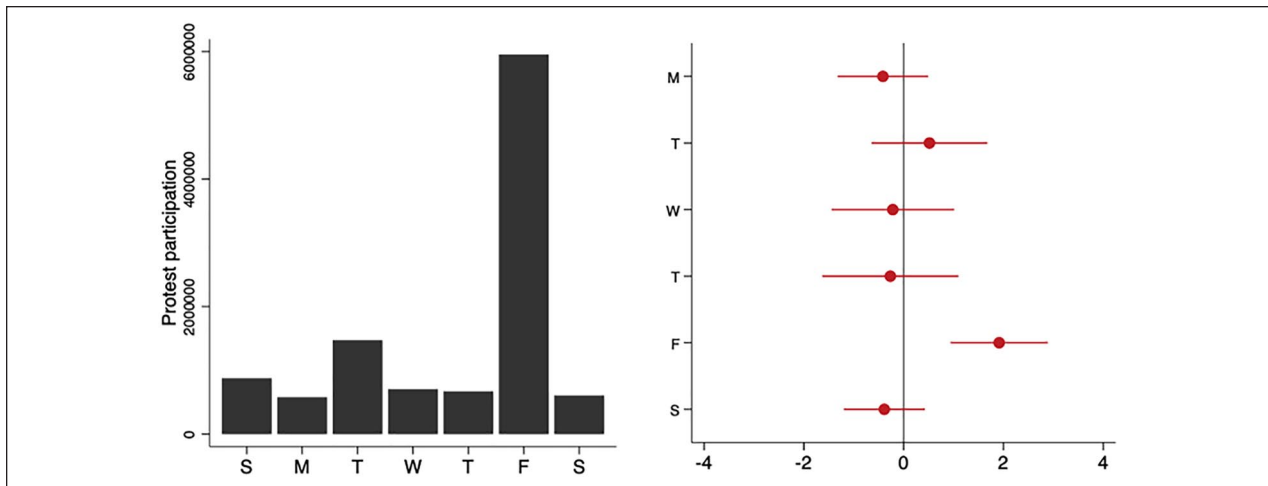


Figure 3. Protest participation by day of the week, 2011–2012 (left); negative binomial regression of daily protest participation between 2011 and 2012 with Sunday as the reference category (right).

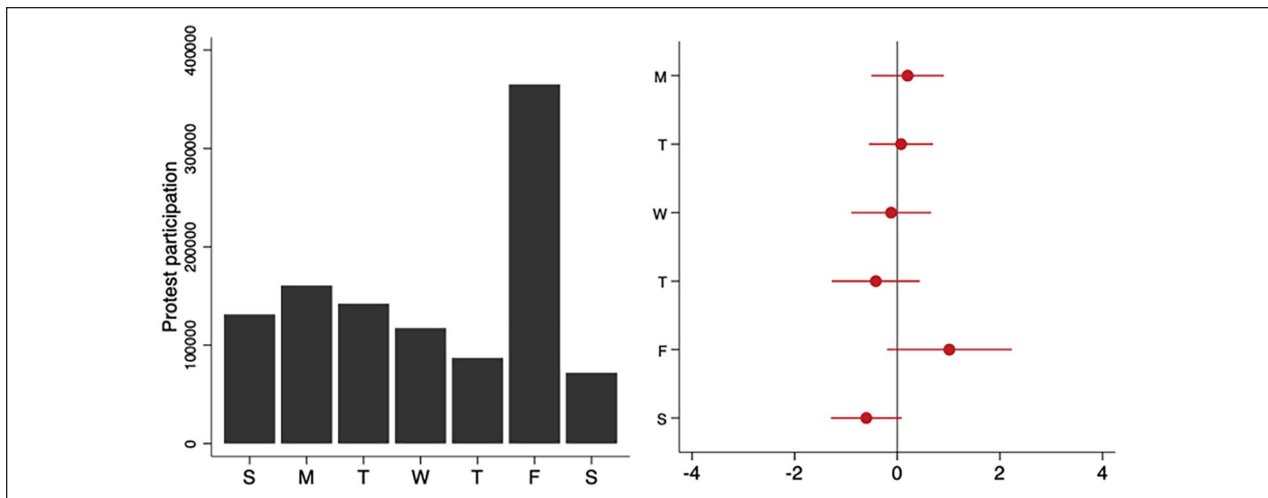


Figure 4. Protest participation by day of the week, 2008–2010 (left); negative binomial regression of daily protest participation between 2008 and 2010 with Sunday as the reference category (right).

take into account the large number of Fridays that saw small or zero protest. Indeed, when analyzed as part of a daily time series over several years, negative binomial regression, shown in the coefficient plot, suggests that protest participation on Friday was not statistically significantly larger than on protests held at the beginning of the working week. In other words, the ostensible Friday effect seen in the bar graph is attributable to a small number of large protests held on Fridays; on average, however, Friday protests were actually comparable to those held on Sundays. This makes sense when we consider the “who” of protest during this period. In the years before the January 25th Revolution, the majority of protests in Egypt were launched by workers in the context of employment disputes (25%), university students mobilizing on campuses

(20%), or involved the country’s largest social movement, the Muslim Brotherhood (21%). For those actors, Fridays held less significance, either because they had the organizational capacity to mobilize large numbers during the working week, or because workplaces and campuses became unavailable during the weekend. Taken together, the periodic amassing of diverse constituencies of protesters on focal Fridays appears to be an inheritance of the revolutionary conjuncture.

Tunisia, 2010–2011

Crucially, the significance of Friday protests in shaping the trajectories of street-level mobilization in Egypt is not simply a function of Islamic religious practice. Here, a

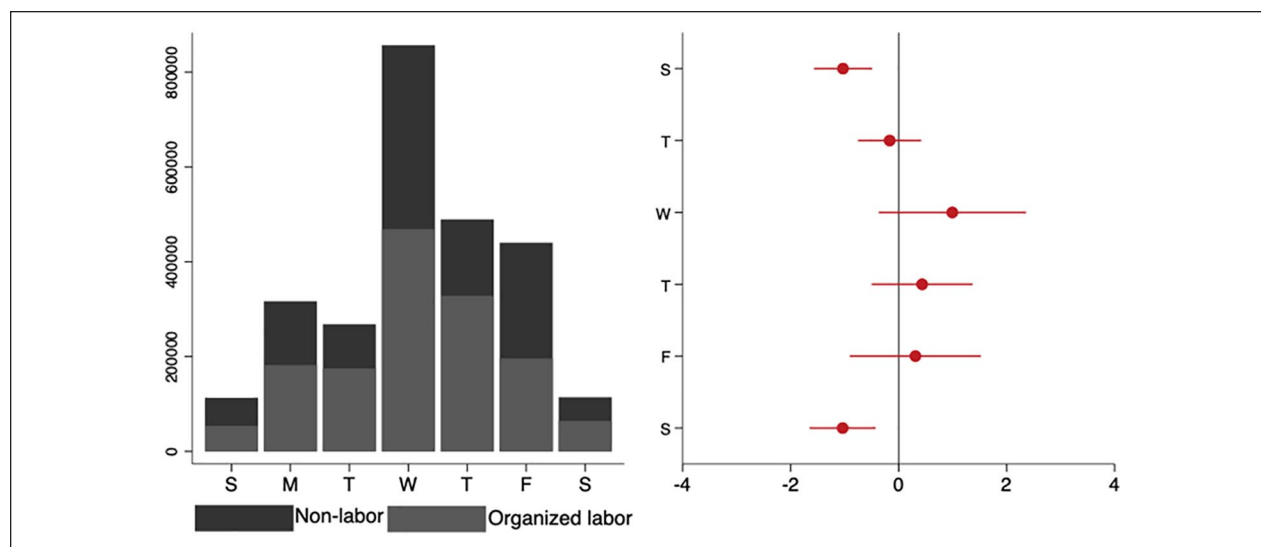


Figure 5. Protest participation by day of the week, December 2010–December 2011 (left); negative binomial regression of daily protest participation between 2010 and 2011 with Monday as the reference category (right).

comparison with contentious collective action in the year of the Tunisian Revolution against Ben Ali is illuminating. As previously noted, Wave II of the Arab Barometer (2011) finds that 52 percent of male Tunisians attended Friday prayers “always” or “most of the time.” This translates into millions of individuals who routinely congregated at mosques on Fridays, and so suggests that Friday was available as a focal point solution in Tunisia during our analysis period. To put this figure into perspective, we can look at another former French colony in North Africa with a similarly fraught secular–Islamist cleavage: Algeria. Wave II of the Arab Barometer finds that 59 percent of male Algerians reported attending Friday prayers “always” or “most of the time.” As we know, Fridays in Algeria have since gone on to function as a focal day of protest against the ossified regime of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, with participants even coining their own verb for protesting on a Friday: “vendredire” (see *Jadaliyya* 2019). If the focal qualities of Friday in shaping mobilization are culturally predetermined, we might thus expect that protest participation in Tunisia would follow the same patterning. Figure 5 draws on our catalog of Tunisian protest events. We repeat the analyses carried out above. Note that in Tunisia the working week runs from Monday to Friday, and so we set the reference category to Monday. The results are revealing. Negative binomial regression suggests that in Tunisia the scale of protest participation was no greater on Friday than on other days of the working week. Instead, we see a trend opposite to that witnessed in Egypt: compared to the first day of the working week, weekends see significantly lower levels of protest participation.

The absence of Friday as a focal day of protest is also apparent when examining the distribution of mass mobilization during the year of the Tunisian Revolution. In this period, there were five days of mass protest (defined as $\geq 100,000$ protestors taking to the streets on one day), and only one of these days fell on a Friday (20%). Confining attention to the post–Ben Ali transition, there were only two days of mass protest—neither of these fell on a Friday. Of course, this seeming absence of a focal day of mobilization may be attributable to Tunisia’s considerably smaller population. In 2011, the population of Tunisia was 10.65 million, while in the same year the population of Egypt was 83.78 million. Thus, we might reasonably conclude that 100,000 protestors (1% of the population of Tunisia) is not a valid measure for comparison. To take into account Tunisia’s smaller population, we also looked at days in which ten thousand protestors or more mobilized. Again, event data suggest that Friday did not function as a focal day of mass protest—of the twenty-six days when over ten thousand Tunisians took to the streets, only four fell on a Friday (15%).⁵ Crucially, no other day singularly predicts an increase in protest, indicating that Tunisians did not rely on a focal day to coordinate street-level mobilization.

What explains this divergence from the Egyptian case? Following our argument, and the broader literature on the role of resource-rich movements in coordinating mobilization, one obvious axis of variation relates to the date-setting function of Tunisia’s trade unions. In Tunisia, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) played a leading role in the anti–Ben Ali mobilization. The UGTT is the country’s largest trade union and can claim a

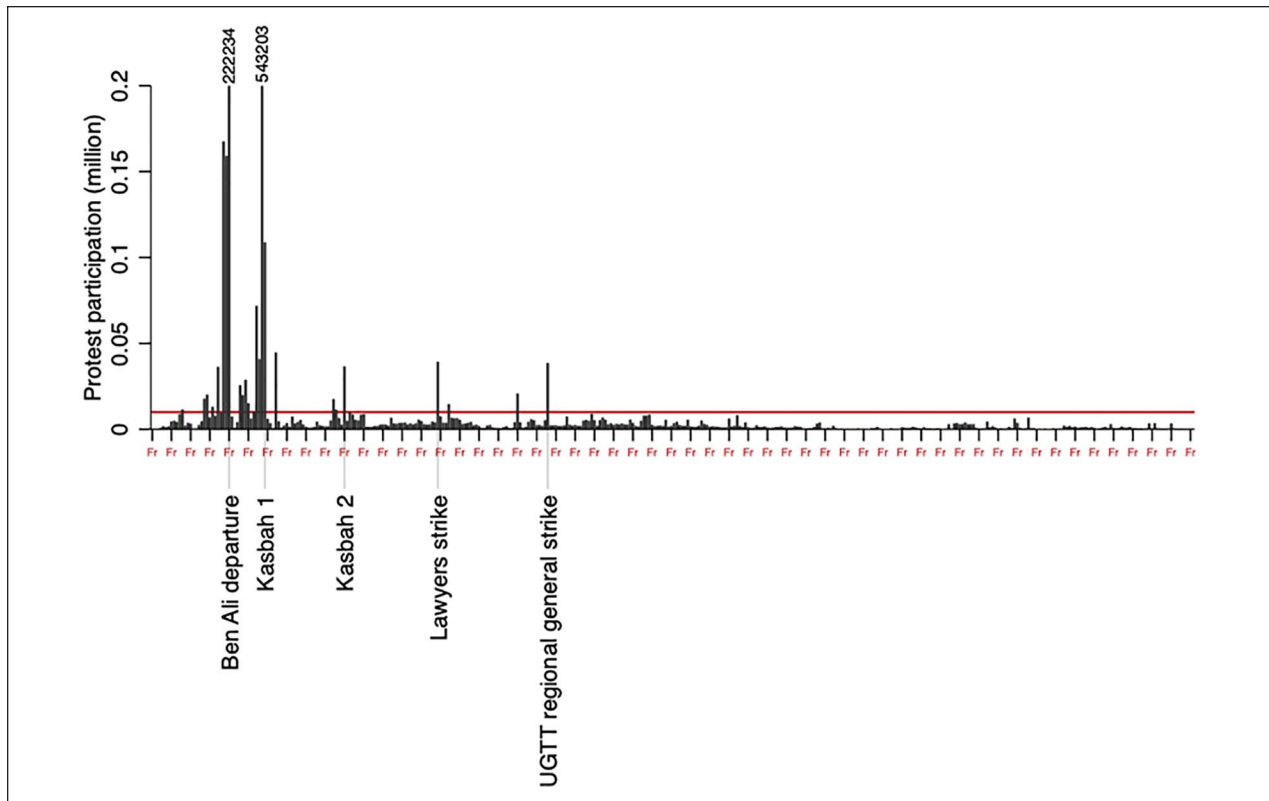


Figure 6. Protest participation in Tunisia, 2010–2012.
The red y-line marks 10,000 protesters; “Fr” marks Friday.

membership of over five hundred thousand members (5% of Tunisia’s adult population) as well as an organizational presence in each of Tunisia’s twenty-four governorates. Figure 5 shows the capacity of organized labor for coordinating mobilization: most protestors mobilized during the working week alongside workers, often in response to general strikes called by the UGTT. Crucially, unlike in the Egyptian case where the Muslim Brotherhood demobilized to focus on elections, the UGTT did not withdraw from street-level mobilization following Ben Ali’s ousting. In other words, the Tunisian case conforms to the expectations of the literature on resource mobilization and protest cycles: a focal day of protest played no significant mobilizing role in a context of organized political opposition.

A particular episode, in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali’s departure, is illustrative of the powerful role of organized trade unions in coordinating protest action. While initially a participant in the “National Unity” government of Mohammed Ghannouchi, the ministers put forward by the UGTT for this coalition government would resign just four days later, on January 18, under pressure from the street and the UGTT’s membership base. In the following week and a half, numerous districts of Tunisia saw daily protest marches against the interim government, which were either organized by or

received the support of the UGTT. The Tunisian Teachers Union took strike action from January 24 explicitly demanding the dissolution of the Ghannouchi-led government, and the UGTT would give its support to the simultaneous occupation of Kasbah Square in Tunisia’s capital. This accumulating wave of street-level contention would culminate in a series of regional general strikes and large protest marches, from January 26 to 27, in all of El-Kef, Jendouba, Kairouan, Nabeul, Sidi Bouzid, Sfax, and Sousse led by the UGTT. The old regime holdovers in the Ghannouchi-led government resigned on January 27. Figure 6 gives an idea of the size and timing of these protests. Tellingly, over the course of 2011, Tunisia saw no named days of protest nor any obvious regularity to the timing of mass contention outside of the revolutionary period. Here, then, we see play out the counterfactual scenario absent in Egypt. Armed with a powerful institutional actor broadly supportive of the demands of the street, contention in Tunisia did not rely on the ritual weekly gathering of loosely affiliated actors on a focal day of protest. Rather, protest action was immediately responsive to the unfolding political process and could rely on the support of organizations with the capacity to diversify the fronts on which, and means by which, protest was conducted.

Focality and Protest in Egypt and Tunisia

Having established that there was a focal day of protest in Egypt and not in Tunisia, we now look to explain how a focal day patterned the cycle of protest in the post-Mubarak transition. Here, we are interested in examining how a focal point impacts the coordinates of contentious collective action in the absence of an organized opposition, and so we analyze how Friday protests shaped the “who,” the “how,” and the “where” of mass mobilization following Egypt’s revolutionary breakthrough. The conclusion of parliamentary elections in January 2012 signaled a profound shift in political opportunities in Egypt, and so we concentrate on the first year of the post-Mubarak transition, when Egypt’s activist scene was at its most energetic (see Ketchley 2017, ch. 4). To establish that this dynamic was rooted in the organizational weakness that characterized the political field in Egypt, we simultaneously analyze how these differing characteristics of protest played out in Tunisia. If our argument holds, no single day should predict an upsurge in protest in the Tunisian case.

Analytical Strategy

Our dependent variables are counts of protestor participation. The unit of analysis is the national protest day. Rather than test variables for every movement, place, or tactic, we abstract those characteristics that we anticipate will be most affected by having a focal day of protest. Our expectation is that who protests varies depending on the day of the week, and so we analyze participation in protests launched by activists, worker groups, university students, and local residents. Following the social movements literature, the “who” refers specifically to protest groups and not participants more generally. While individual participation identities are no doubt of interest, these are difficult to ascertain, especially in the context of mass mobilization events. We are next interested in how temporality conditions where people protest. To explore this, we code variables for protest participation in workplaces (factories, companies, government offices, and public utilities), university campuses, public spaces (main roads and public squares), and places of worship (mosques and churches). Finally, we expect that the day of the week will influence how protestors mobilize. Thus, variables are coded for the number of protestors engaging in disruptive repertoires (violent attacks, blockades, and sit-ins), economic protests (strikes), transitory protests (marches and demonstrations), and static protests (protest occupations).

As is common to quantitative analyses of protest, our counts of protest participation show pronounced overdispersion, and so negative binomial regression is preferred.⁶

Negative binomial regression models protest participation μ at date t as a function of day of the week by

$$\tilde{u}_t = \exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1) \delta$$

where X_1 is a categorical variable measuring day of the week with the reference category set to the first day of the working week for each country (i.e., Sunday for Egypt, Monday for Tunisia), and δ is the error term drawn from a gamma distribution with variance α . As our data structure is a time series, we use Newey–West standard errors to correct for serial autocorrelation.

Results

We present regression results graphically with coefficients expressed as point estimates located on their 95 percent confidence intervals (the full regression outputs can be found in Supplemental Appendix Tables A.1–A.6). Each dependent variable is modeled separately, with models grouped by sector, location, and repertoire.

We begin with protest participation by sector. Figure 7 analyzes participation in protest events organized by workers, student groups, local residents, and activists in Egypt. Fridays have a significant and substantive effect on the patterning of sectoral mobilization. On average, participation in protest events organized by activists was much larger on Fridays than on Sundays ($p < .001$). We find the inverse pattern for participation in protests involving worker groups and student organizations. Friday has no discernible effect on participation in local residents’ protests. Figure 7 suggests that a very different pattern obtained in Tunisia, where larger protests were more likely to take place during the working week. There is some evidence that protest launched by workers was more likely to fall in the middle part of the week (Wednesdays and Thursdays), while protest organized by local residents and students was slightly less likely on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Importantly, though, there is no one single day on which systematic differences in the sectors engaging in protest are concentrated. What is more, in direct opposition to the trend observed in Egypt, the only days on which multiple sectors exhibit a reduced likelihood of organizing protest is on the weekend when workplaces are closed. We thus have further confirmation of the more general trend in post-revolutionary Tunisian protest identified above: organized labor is central to the trajectories of mass mobilization over this period, and no focal day of protest obtained.

Turning to how people protested, results shown in Figure 8 suggest that Egyptians were much more likely to engage in large transitory protests on Fridays. However, protestors were significantly less likely to join protests that inflicted a direct economic cost on Fridays when

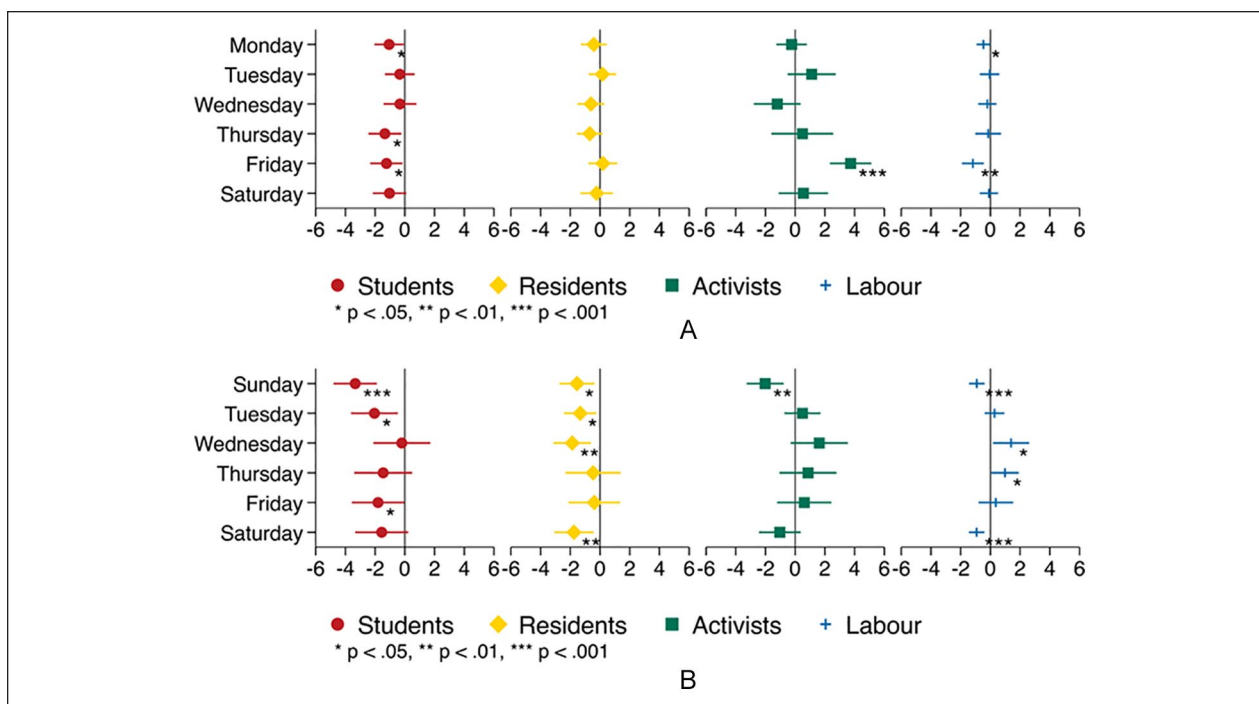


Figure 7. Protest participation by sector in (A) Egypt and (B) Tunisia.

compared to the reference category. The signs for participation in static and disruptive forms of protest on Fridays are both positive, but are not statistically significant at $p < .05$. Again, as per Figure 8, we find a markedly different trend in Tunisia. When compared to protest on Monday, large economic, transitory, and disruptive protests fell coeval to one another during days that fell on the working week, with participation in disruptive and economic protest falling on the weekend. As in Egypt, we see no discernible pattern for participation in static protests.

Figure 9 examines how Egypt's focal day of protest influenced where people protested. The mobilizing effect of Fridays in shaping the spaces of mobilization is again borne out. When compared to Sunday, Egyptians were significantly more likely to protest in larger numbers on Fridays outside of places of worship and in public spaces. By the same measure, Egyptians were much less likely to protest in workplaces and on campuses on Fridays. In Tunisia no single day predicts greater participation in where people protest, while campus protest is less likely at the end of the week and weekend (see Figure 9).⁷ Note that there is no direct comparison to places of worship: in Tunisia, ritual confluence at places of worship did not function as launching points for protest. Instead, UGTT offices often provided the locale for protest initiation, and it is protest staged outside trade union offices that we test in place of mosques. As one Tunisian activist reflected in the post-Ben Ali period, "In Tunisia, the mosques of the

revolution are the offices of the UGTT" (cited in Yousfi 2015, 62). This is confirmed by event data. Over the year of the revolution and its aftermath, the event catalog for Tunisia contains records for protest setting off from UGTT offices on 201 separate occasions. This represents the most frequently recurring start location for mobile protest. Among these, no single day predominates, and Fridays were the occasion for such protests just 14% of the time. By contrast, over the same period in Egypt, 268 protests set off from mosques, and of these 75% took place on Fridays. Thus, to the extent that commonplace locales for protest were in evidence in both Tunisia and Egypt, it was only in the latter that the spaces of contention exhibited a ritualized temporal rhythm, and this appears to be a consequence of political disorganization.

Discussion

Our findings are provocative. Theories of protest cycles and resource mobilization theory assume that social movements have a strong hand in setting the timing, locations, and repertoires of contention. However, as the Egyptian case suggests, in contexts of political disorganization, focal days of protest can strongly influence the "who," the "how," and the "where" of contentious collective action. Before discussing our results further, we should acknowledge their limitations. By focusing on the role of Fridays in patterning protest participation, our

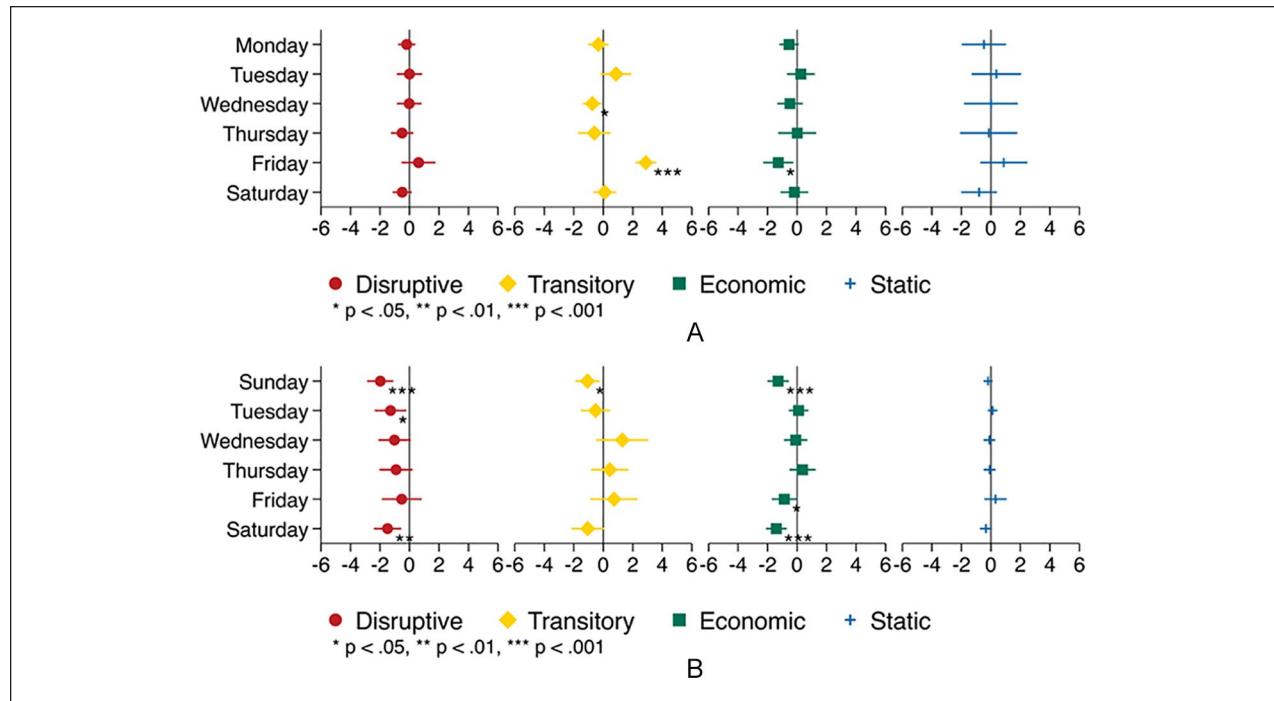


Figure 8. Protest participation by repertoire in (A) Egypt and (B) Tunisia.

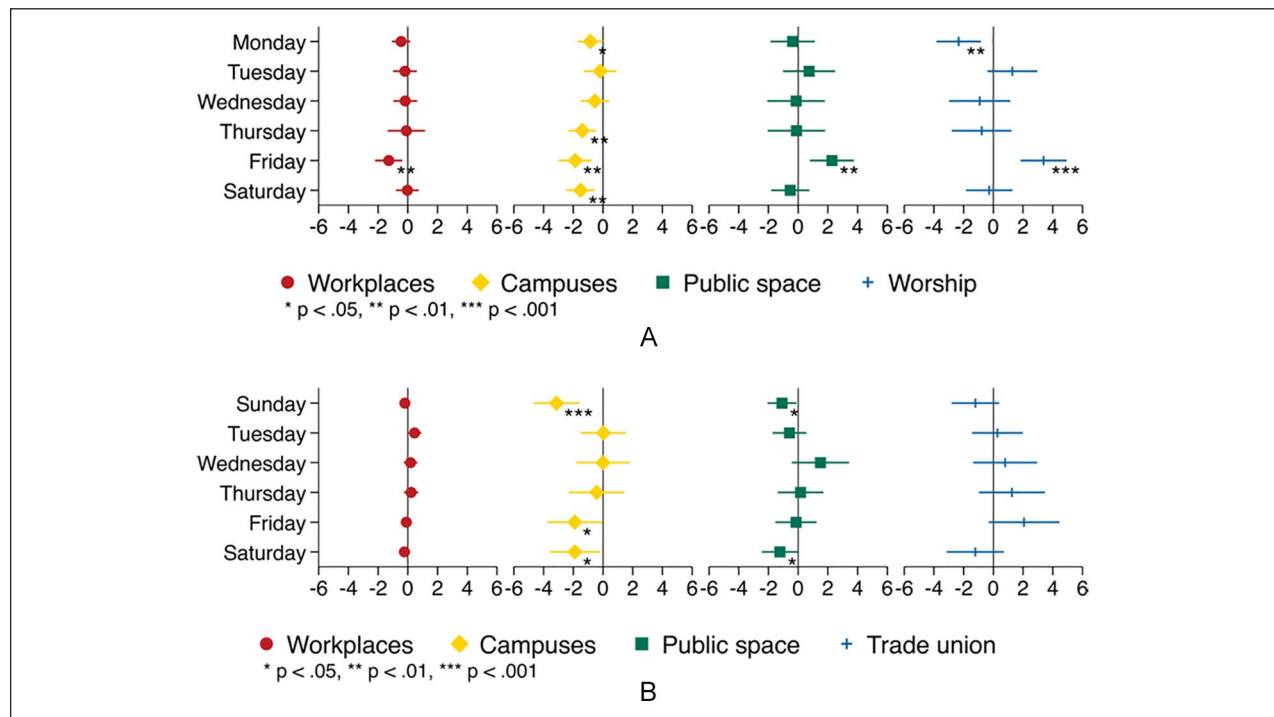


Figure 9. Protest participation by location in (A) Egypt and (B) Tunisia.

analysis is silent on the eventful dynamics of contentious politics. As a wealth of empirical research suggests, the decision to participate in protest can often be spontaneous

or come in response to a particular event or incident (see, for example, Kurzman 2004; Snow and Moss 2014; Steinert-Threlkeld 2017a, 2017b). While these more

contingent and eventful logics were doubtless central to the initial outbreak of the revolutionary mobilization wave that struck Egypt in 2011, the patterning of contention otherwise exhibited obvious patterning in time, with large numbers of protestors waiting until Friday to air their grievances. Another concern pertains to the sectoral identity of protestors. It is undoubtedly the case that some protestors belonged to multiple sectors. Individual workers could mobilize at workplaces on weekdays and join their compatriots at a protest march on a Friday. However, of consequence for our analysis is the sectoral identity of protest *organizers*. Absent organizational underpinnings shared across multiple sectors, protest in Egypt exhibited striking regularity in the sectors that organized large-scale weekly protest and, as a result, the tactics and locales available for these protests.

Our contribution demonstrates the lessons that can be learned from an attention to the organizational foundations and consequent temporalities of protest. A growing literature is turning its attention to contentious politics for the explanation of both democratic breakthroughs and democratic consolidation (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Kadivar 2018). This scholarship investigates the effects of protest on democratic outcomes in a cross-national context, aggregating the attributes of mobilization episodes into single campaigns. By contrast, the foregoing analysis demonstrates what a finer-grained attention to the internal attributes of collective action can tell us about the potential of popular contention in transitional settings. In Egypt, the focal properties of Fridays, which functioned to segment and constrain popular mobilization, had several heretofore unappreciated consequences for the possibilities of mass mobilization. We review these below, pointing to three principal strategic shortcomings of a reliance on ritualized action when contesting state power, which, we argue, functions to (1) hinder system-wide action, (2) curtail disruptive protest, and (3) hamper coalition formation.

Firstly, having a focal day of protest that fell on a weekend ensured that activists (*qua* activists) and workers (*qua* workers) in Egypt rarely organized protest on the same day.⁸ In consequence, the post-Mubarak military government never faced truly system-wide mobilization—spanning public spaces, workplaces, and campuses—as activists demobilized during the working week. A reliance on focal days also meant labor protest during the post-Mubarak transition remained localized: workers rarely continued their protests into the weekend, when their workplaces were mainly closed. That economic protest was less likely on Fridays does not imply that mass protest in Egypt did not inflict any cost. Indeed, macro-economic costs of instability following the Arab Spring were sizeable (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia 2016). Of most note

here is that mass protest rarely inflicted a *direct* cost on employers and authorities, while labor protests rarely occurred in conjunction with other forms of protest as part of a larger campaign with a named political motivation. By contrast, such protest was seen frequently in Tunisia (see Yousfi 2015, ch. 3). Counterfactually, it also seems reasonable to assume that had workers' organizations and activist groups been mobilizing coeval to one another, then they would have been more likely to broker a shared front. As it was, labor mobilization unfolded at a distance from the big set piece Friday protests, contributing to the parochialization of this activism (see Barrie and Ketchley 2018).

Secondly, the focal qualities of Fridays ensured that successive regimes in Egypt rarely had to police multiple spaces of contention simultaneously. This has continuing implications for the possibilities of mass protest in Egypt. With most workplaces and university campuses empty on weekends, the military and the Interior Ministry can concentrate their forces in just a few spaces, as activists look to make up for their organizational weakness by exploiting the focal qualities of Fridays. While this aided activists in coordinating collective action during the post-Mubarak transition when the security apparatus was weak and less willing to repress such highly visible protest, its long-term effect has been to ease what Francisco (2010, 65–66) refers to as the “state’s dilemma.” When faced with multiple sites of protest, state security forces must confront the “traveling salesman problem” (Kauffman 1995, cited in Francisco 2010, 66); that is, the number of possible routes to take when policing protest, which increases exponentially as the number of protest sites increase. The now established tradition of amassing large numbers of people outside of mosques and moving to squares on Fridays has meant that the patterns of contentious action in Egypt are regular, predictable, and comparatively easy to police.⁹

This dynamic is well evidenced in Egypt following the military coup that removed Islamist president Muhammad Mursi in July 2013. In the subsequent period, the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies launched rolling street protests in a failed attempt to restore Mursi to office. Crucially, the Brotherhood, faced with mass arrests and the closure of their organizational infrastructure, fell back on the repertoire of amassing large numbers of protestors on successive Fridays. As Ketchley (2013, 15) chronicles, these large Friday protests were especially vulnerable to repression, as a reconstituted security apparatus concentrated their forces outside of mosques and on arterial routes. At the same time, the authorities installed large security barriers on roads leading to focal spaces for protest, which were preemptively closed on Friday mornings. The Ministry of Religious Endowments also closed mosques associated with Muslim Brotherhood protests

and imposed a pre-approved Friday sermon that had to be delivered by a graduate of al-Azhar. Denied these spaces to mobilize, the Brotherhood struggled to adapt and ultimately demobilized (see Ketchley 2017, ch. 6).

Finally, our results demonstrate that protestors mobilizing on Fridays were much more likely to participate in transitory forms of protests. As several studies have noted, new protest organizations are more likely to crystallize in static occupations, protest encampments, and on barricades, when the opportunities to co-mingle and strategize are greatest (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012; Traugott 2010). That the primary mode of contestation engaged in by protestors lasted just a few hours (at most) surely inhibited these processes. Even the spectacular mass protests staged in Tahrir Square were often short-lived; over the transitional period, protest numbered in the hundreds of thousands on consecutive days in Tahrir on only one occasion (21–22 November), and consecutively in the tens of thousands on two occasions (19–20 and 23–24 November). Over the course of 2011, 44 percent of Tahrir protest occurred on a Friday. Against this backdrop, it is telling that no new national movements emerged in Egypt during the critical first year of the post-Mubarak transition.

Focal Days in the MENA

Thus far, our analysis has focused on two countries undergoing democratic transitions in the aftermath of revolutionary uprisings. This raises questions of external validity and the generalizability of our findings. Following Biggs (2018), our main analyses make use of protest participation to more properly capture collective action. The aggregate temporal patterns we identify are still discernible when using event counts as the outcome, however.¹⁰ The Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) includes cross-national event data for each of the countries that saw significant protest activity during the Arab Spring (Raleigh et al. 2010).¹¹ Using these data, we analyze country-day event counts for five further countries in the MENA, as well as Egypt and Tunisia over the period January 2011 to January 2019.

As above, bar graphs display raw counts aggregated to the day of the week, while the coefficient plots display results from a negative binomial regression of daily event counts with day of the week tested as a categorical variable (again, populating missing dates with zero counts to avoid upwardly biased means). The results are displayed in Figure 10. A striking pattern emerges: in every one of the countries that saw sizeable mobilization in 2011, we have evidence of a focal day of protest—with the exception of Tunisia. In all of the countries with a Sunday–Thursday working week including Egypt, this focal day falls on a Friday. In Morocco, the only other MENA country with a Monday–Friday working week, the focal

day is Sunday. In Tunisia, by contrast, we see diminished protest on weekends but sizeable protest during the working week.

A number of comments are worthwhile here. First, confirmation with event data of the temporal patterns in Egypt and Tunisia identified using protest participation data boosts confidence in the out-of-sample validity of our estimates. Second, the results provide a counter to the claim that focal days were unavailable to Tunisians due to the particularities of their working week. In Morocco, where a Monday–Friday working week is in operation, the focal day falls on Sunday. Note also that Morocco, like Tunisia, is 99 percent Sunni Muslim. According to Arab Barometer Wave III, 72 percent of male Moroccans reported going to Friday prayers “always” or “most of the time.” Still, despite the obvious availability of Friday as a focal point solution, it did not function as such. Instead, the February 20 Movement, the movement that spurred Morocco’s Arab Spring protests, was so named after the Sunday on which February 20 of 2011 fell.¹² Third, there is good reason to think that these cases may not be independent of one another. In Syria, for example, activists explicitly took inspiration from events in Egypt to call for named Friday protests against the Assad regime—even using the same naming conventions, for example, the “Friday of Anger” (Droz-Vincent 2014, 44). Here, it appears that, having been successfully trialed in Egypt, other hastily assembled protest coalitions adopted Friday as a focal day to overcome their organizational weakness and coordinate mass protest.

While sufficient information is not available to analyze the effect focal days had on the sectors, locations, and repertoires of protest in these countries, it follows that we could plausibly expect to find a pattern not dissimilar to that which obtained in Egypt. Organizational weakness, in other words, likely constrains the potential of protest in numerous other countries in the MENA where protestors rely on a focal day to coordinate mobilization.

Conclusion

Focal days of protest have emerged as important tools for massing large numbers of citizens during episodes of revolutionary mobilization and mass uprising, but their impact on patterning longer cycles of protest has not previously been established. In this article, we have compared the dynamics of mass mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia during the 2011 Arab Spring and its aftermath. We have argued that a reliance on focal points is in large part a function of political disorganization, and that focal days of mobilization can segment and constrain contentious collective action following a revolutionary episode. In the Egyptian case, focal days definitively patterned

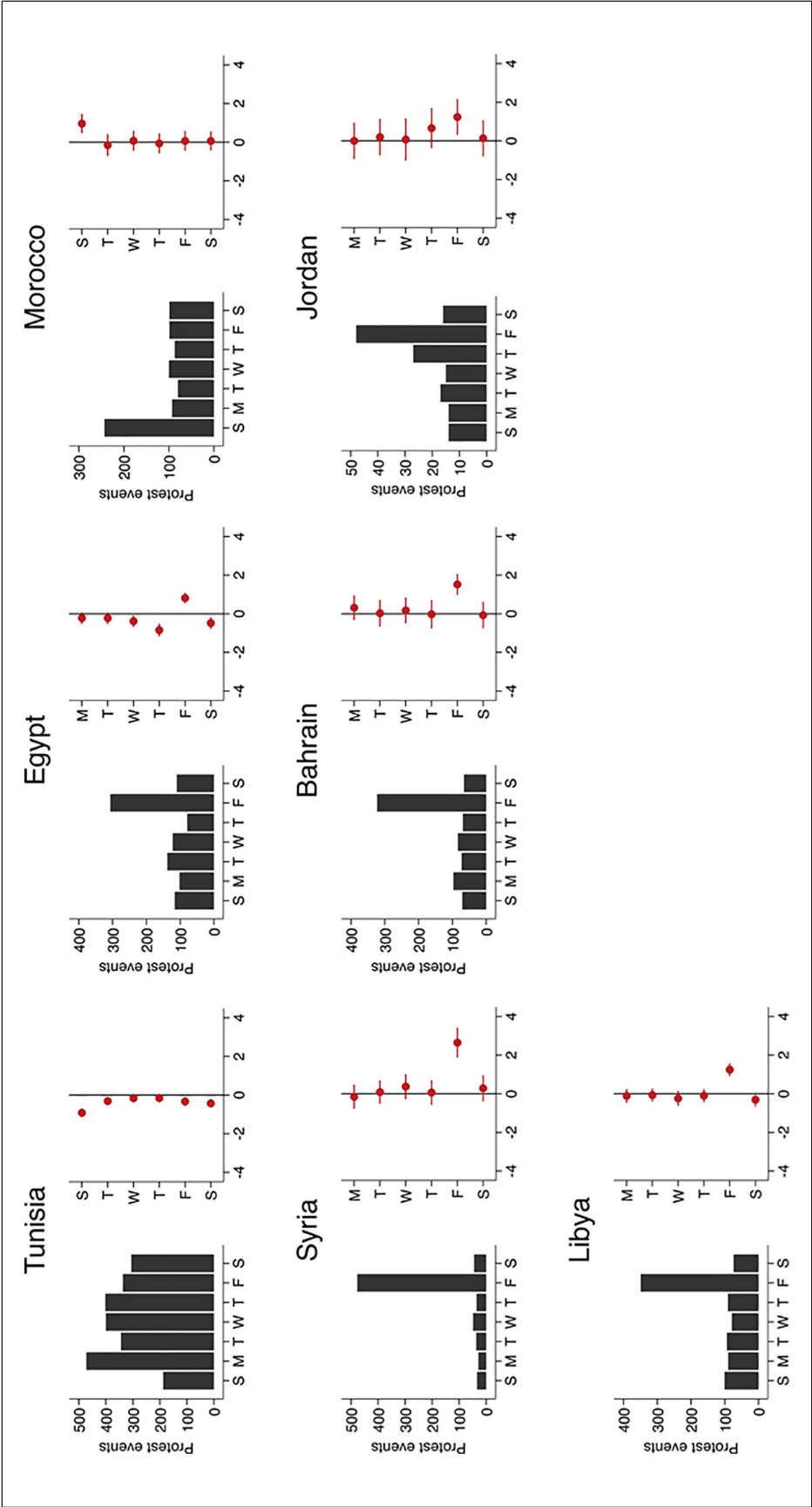


Figure 10. Protest events by day of the week, 2011–2019 (left panels); negative binomial regression of daily protest counts with first day of the working week as the reference category (right panels).

protest, but in a way that had deleterious consequences for the prospects of street-level demands. The temporal and strategic repertoires exhibited during the transitional period proved unable to diversify, form broader coalitions, or inflict system-wide disruption. In this, we provide insight into an oft-overlooked dimension of contentious politics and democratization: how inherited repertoires of contention, and here focal days of mass protest, may function to limit the democratic potential of mobilization from the street, particularly in conditions of organizational weakness.

We cast Egypt into comparative relief against Tunisia where there was no single focal day of protest due, in large part, to the role of organized labor in coordinating protest. In this, Tunisia adheres to the expectations of the literatures on resource mobilization and protest cycles. One objection to this argument would be that organized movements might still stand to benefit from the use of focal days. Put otherwise, given their seeming success in Egypt (and adoption across numerous other countries in the MENA following the January 25th Revolution) why did the UGTT in Tunisia not also exploit their mobilizational potential? In response, we would say that the dilemma of coordinating mass protest is only really salient in contexts of organizational weakness. Where activists cannot be sure of support, ritual activity on a focal day provides a coordination solution. Well-resourced movement simply does not face this dilemma and thus the decision-making calculus operates outside of these considerations. Furthermore, focal days involve two key costs that movements would wish to avoid. First, it would mean relinquishing control over the mobilization process to a set of rituals outside of the immediate reach of the movement itself. Second, by not responding immediately to unfolding events in the political process, movements would cede a strategic advantage to forces threatening a transition.

Our supplementary analysis of protest event counts in five further countries of the MENA points to a widespread reliance on focal days. Again, it is revealing that the only country not to have a focal day—Tunisia—is also arguably the only country to boast well-resourced, national movement organizations with the willingness to launch protest. Unfortunately, reliable daily interval event data for other countries undergoing revolutionary upheavals are rare—but it seems intuitive that having a focal day of protest that falls on a weekend will have particular consequence for the MENA region, or else Muslim-majority countries in South and Southeast Asia (see Butt 2016). The Egyptian experience provides additional translatable lessons. Here, our findings hold out important implications for the study of contemporary revolutions, and in particular the fate of rapidly convened revolutionary coalitions. Despite the repeated amassing of huge numbers of protesters in loose coalitions of challengers—the repertoire common to new “urban civic

revolutions” (Beissinger 2013) that increasingly subside into democratic transitions—contentious collective action may yet fail to achieve lasting gains. In this, we contribute to an emerging body of work seeking to unite contentious politics and democratization literatures. The rapid mobilization of a diverse “negative coalition” of revolutionary contenders, while able to unseat dictators, bears heavily the birth scars of its origins in the brief revolutionary conjuncture, and this can profoundly influence the shape and outcomes of protest cycles in the revolutionary aftermath.

Authors' Note

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Notes

1. Note that self-reported religiosity and mosque attendance is typically higher in Egypt than in Tunisia, although this depends on the survey. In Wave II of the Arab Barometer, 94 percent of males in Egypt reported attending Friday prayer “always” or “most of the time,” while 83 percent said that they prayed daily. In Tunisia, 52 percent of males went to Friday prayer “always” or “most of the time,” and 60 percent of respondents reported praying daily. Similarly, a 2012 Pew survey found that 70 percent of Egyptians went to mosques at least once a week (including Friday prayer), while in Tunisia 54 percent did the same. However, in Wave VI of the World Values Survey, this is reversed: 40 percent of Egyptian Muslims reported attending religious services “once/more a week,” compared to 45 percent of Tunisians. Also, in the 2012 Pew poll, 53 percent of Egyptian Muslims claimed to pray all five prayers daily, compared to 63 percent of Tunisians. For our purposes, it is sufficient that, even where levels of religiosity differ, a threshold level of religious activity enabling of regular protest outside places of worship is satisfied in both cases.
2. The codebook is provided in the supplemental appendix together with details of the coding conventions when protest size was not reported.

3. For some days, *al-Chourouk* was not available. On these occasions, we used instead a combination of *La Presse* and the *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse*.
4. This is not to deny the existence of prehistories of mobilization on the part of workers and activists in the decade prior to the 2011 Revolution. Workers, as well as groups such as Kefaya and April 6, did lead sustained protests in the years leading up to 2011. However, the coordinating capacity of such groups was low (see Clarke 2014).
5. In Supplemental Appendix Table A.1, we estimate coefficient differences in Friday protest participation in Egypt and Tunisia.
6. Residual plots of daily protest participation can be found in Supplemental Appendix Figures A.3 and A.4. In all cases, goodness of fit tests indicate negative binomial regression should be preferred to a Poisson model.
7. It is worth noting that, in the Egyptian case, certain days other than Fridays do exhibit, on occasion, significant differences in the locales and sectors of protest. Mondays appear to be less likely occasions for protest at places of worship, and Thursdays and Saturdays saw less campus-based and student protest, for example. Calendars may thus impact on protest in ways unconnected to focal Fridays. However, consistent with our central argument, Fridays are the only day on which there is a significant upsurge or decline in participation across multiple sectors, locales, and repertoires.
8. As Friday prayer is typically reserved for males we use survey data to test, in the supplemental appendix, for differences in the gender profile of protesters between Egypt and Tunisia. No significant differences are found.
9. We should also reflect on the implications of mass Friday protest on the likelihood of defection. Scholars have theorized that, when faced with mass protest drawn from diverse constituencies, security forces may be more likely to defect (Barany 2016). However, Friday protests in Egypt, as we describe above, were rarely cross-sectoral. Furthermore, after Mubarak's ouster, successive regimes have made every effort to secure against defection by employing thugs, military police, and running columns when interacting with protestors (Ketchley 2017, ch. 3).
10. We use event counts as few secondary datasets record the number of participants.
11. The exception is Yemen, for which reliable daily event data from the period 2011 onward are not available.
12. Sundays would continue to serve a date-setting function for Morocco's burgeoning, but ultimately fragile, protest coalition in ensuing years. This reliance on a focal day of protest, however, led to a growing sense of apathy. As one former member of February 20 Movement would put it: "Going on protesting in the streets every Sunday with repetitive slogans is pointless and leads nowhere" (cited in Benchemsi 2014, 229).

Supplemental Material

The data and code required to reproduce the statistical analyses can be downloaded from <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CLIGCI>. Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

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