

Dear WGAPE readers,

This paper is a small component of my dissertation on protest participation in Africa. Since off-the-shelf data do not allow me to address my primary research interest (how political entrepreneurs strategically target aggrieved people and provide them with mobilization goods), the goals and findings of this paper are very modest. Most of my dissertation will draw on fieldwork starting this summer in Niamey, which will involve three main activities: 1) a survey with more specific questions about people's grievances, protest involvement, and contact with political entrepreneurs; 2) an experiment using monetary allocations to manipulate different grievances (e.g. relative deprivation and prospects of upward mobility); and 3) an ethnography involving the direct observation of political entrepreneurs' protest mobilization efforts. My main objective for the present paper is to add some cross-country perspective to my otherwise Niger-focused project.

I welcome suggestions on fieldwork (i.e. survey questions to include, etc.), as well as on the draft itself.

Thanks!

Lisa

# Protest Participation in Africa

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## **Abstract**

Sub-Saharan Africa is the poorest region in the world, yet Africans seldom take to the streets demanding improved living conditions and better governance. At the same time, those who do protest shoulder great risks in demanding reforms from reluctant and sometimes violent regimes. Why do some Africans protest the status quo, whereas others do not? I show that although Africans may feel economically deprived and resent inequality, these grievances do not drive them to protest. Rather, Africans protest because they have low prospects of upward mobility and sense that their living conditions have deteriorated over time. To the extent that so few of them demand change, therefore, it is in part because they foresee that existing institutions and power configurations will serve them better in the future.

By almost any measure, Sub-Saharan Africa is the most underdeveloped region in the world (Table 1). Even African economic “success stories” like Senegal and Rwanda fall near the bottom of the United Nations’ Human Development rankings, with Afghanistan and Timor-Leste the only non-African states ranked in the bottom thirty (UNDP 2009). Unlike other regions, Africa is also failing to progress over time: whereas East Asia and South Asia saw significant declines in poverty between 1981 and 2001, the number of Africans living on less than one dollar a day nearly doubled over the same period (Chen and Ravallion 2004, 20).<sup>1</sup> In addition to extreme poverty, Africa has endured political repression and civil conflict on a scale that Paul Collier terms “development in reverse” (Collier 2007, 27).

[Table 1 about here]

But if Africans are suffering, most are suffering in silence. In nationally representative surveys from twenty African countries, less than 13 percent of respondents reported having attended a demonstration or protest march the previous year (Afrobarometer 2009). Protest participation rates are barely higher in Africa than in Latin America, where the average person is over five times richer (Table 2). Far from demanding economic reform and government accountability, voters in many African countries have “recycled” corrupt and ineffective leaders over years of elections (Chabal and Daloz 1999). This behavior contradicts studies linking poverty to protest (e.g. Johoda 1982; Jordan 1973) and the theory that the poor, lacking institutional tools to address their grievances, will resort to protest to exact concessions from elite groups (Bagguley 2008, 695).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Africa has, however, experienced some gains in child mortality and school enrollment rates. Radelet (2010) highlights seventeen “emerging countries” that have made especially good progress in terms of economic growth, poverty reduction, and government effectiveness.

<sup>2</sup> This may be especially true in Africa, where democracy is often weak. Gandhi and Kim (2010) propose that under autocracy, *nominally* democratic institutions can serve as a relief valve for political opposition by moving labor unions’ protests from the streets to the legislative chamber. There is little evidence of this happening in Africa, however, since even nominally democratic institutions tend to be nonexistent or disorganized.

[Table 2 about here]

On the other hand, the minority of Africans who do protest economic and political conditions have done so boldly and vociferously. After the inflation of staple food prices raised poverty levels by three percentage points in low-income countries between 2005 and 2007 (World Bank 2008, 2), 40 Cameroonians died in urban food riots that mirrored events in Côte d’Ivoire and Mozambique (Adam 2008). In September 2009, Guineans fell under military fire while rallying for democracy and improved living conditions. Three months later, ten thousand demonstrators took to the streets in the capital of famine-struck Niger to denounce Mamadou Tandja’s decision to outstay his presidential mandate.

Why do some Africans protest and others do not? It is theoretically puzzling and, to some onlookers, upsetting that the poorest and most politically vulnerable peoples in the world seldom pressure their governments for change. And yet it is also puzzling why the few who do protest are willing to bear the sometimes mortal risks of opposing intransigent leaders and entrenched political systems.

This paper analyzes evidence suggesting that Africans protest not because they are faring poorly under current circumstances but instead because they have low prospects of upward mobility and perceive prior declines over time in their living standards. Other grievances—including economic deprivation and inequality—have no apparent effects on protest participation. The finding that low prospects of upward mobility predict protest behavior has the following implication: if fewer Africans are challenging the status quo than one might expect given objective indicators of underdevelopment, it is not due to a lack of suffering; rather, Africans remain politically quiescent in part because they expect existing institutions and power configurations to serve them better in the future.

This argument contrasts Africans' apparent optimism with the "Afropessimism" pervasive in scholarship and policy circles. It also recasts the empirical puzzle as the following: Why, in a region that has been "developing in reverse" for decades, do people expect a turn for the better? The present study addresses this question, as well as the original puzzle of what drives protest in Africa.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: The first section reviews major protest theories, identifies their observable implications, and elaborates testable hypotheses. The second section outlines my data and methods. The third section reports statistical findings and robustness tests. After demonstrating that prospects of upward mobility (POUM) influence protest behavior, I include a fourth section in which I theorize and empirically test the determinants of POUM. The final section concludes and suggests avenues for future research.

## **1. PROTEST THEORIES**

Broadly speaking, people rise up (1) because they want to and (2) because they can. Absent the will and the means, however, a mass demonstration will not materialize. Most research on protests has accordingly tried to account for people's grievances *or* mobilizational capacity, with sociologists and social psychologists tending to emphasize the former and political scientists emphasizing the latter. Few studies have attempted to incorporate both.<sup>3</sup> This section reviews theories that attempt explain protest outcomes, organizing them into three general categories: collective action theories, relative deprivation theories, and theories about prospects of upward mobility (POUM). It also outlines observable implications of these theories and proposes testable hypotheses.

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<sup>3</sup> There are some notable exceptions, including Klandermans (2004) and Tarrow (1998). However, these studies are mainly theoretical and do not attempt systematic empirical analyses of how grievances and opportunities influence protest behavior.

## **Collective Action Theories**

Mancur Olson (1965) popularized the idea that members of a group will “free-ride” if they expect others to bear the costs of mounting a social movement. If the collective goal is a public good such as democracy or an increase in the minimum wage, a rational person will prefer to consume the good without shouldering any cost associated with obtaining it. If all members of the community are equally rational, then collective action never occurs. Only if group members receive selective incentives or are coerced into participating will a protest materialize.

Other theories of collective action center on communication dilemmas (Kielbowicz and Scherer 1986; Tarrow 1998, 114-116). Here, the problem is not cooperation but coordination. For people to work together toward a common goal, they must agree on a course of action, i.e. where to meet, which message to convey, etc. It can be especially difficult to coordinate protests in developing countries where the mail system is slow, internet service limited, and cellular phone reception unreliable. Repressive governments compound communication problems by restricting the media. Under heavy censorship, people might not even know whom to target with their demands, let alone how to coordinate the logistics of a demonstration. In societies with low levels of wage labor (namely agricultural societies), less on-the-job socialization translates into less information-sharing and higher barriers to collective action (Ross 2008, 108). Therefore, collective action can fail even provided a group’s common desire to protest and the presence of mechanisms to prevent free-riding.

An observable implication of collective action theories is that rural people will be less likely to assemble protests. First, rural people face cooperation problems: it is harder to police free-riders in large groups (Olson 1965), and farmers tend to be very large populations in most

African countries.<sup>4</sup> Rural people also face coordination problems: they are geographically dispersed<sup>5</sup> and excluded from technological or employment-based information networks. Finally, rural people are geographically farther from protest targets (i.e. the government). Hence,

*H<sub>1</sub>: Rural people are less likely than urban people to participate in protests.*<sup>6</sup>

Scacco (2007; 2008) finds that Nigerians who attend community meetings are more likely to participate in ethnic riots. Using a variety of tests, she shows that this relationship obtains not because rioters are already more likely to socialize or because community meetings drum up grievances, but rather because community meetings expose people to social networks that “pull” rioters to the front lines. By exerting social pressure that discourages free-riding (hence solving cooperation problems) and by facilitating the exchange of information (hence solving coordination problems), community meetings might likewise encourage protest participation:

*H<sub>2</sub>: People who attend community meetings are more likely to participate in protests.*

## **Grievance Theories**

Theories about grievances acknowledge that Olsonian logic “provides an explanation for why people do not participate, but fares poorly in explaining why people do participate” in protests (Klandermans 2004, 363). Whereas most collective action theories focus on the *ability* of aggrieved people to stage protests, grievance theories spotlight frustration, aggression, and people’s *desires* to change the status quo. This literature argues that the ability to mount collective action is only relevant insofar as people want to act collectively in the first place. In

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<sup>4</sup> Bates (1981) documents this phenomenon in Africa: Since smaller groups can more easily coordinate and overcome free-ridership than larger groups, urban industrial firms can more easily pressure politicians than large farming populations can. Hence, African governments cater to urban interests to prevent their overthrow.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to coordination effects, Rule (1988) proposes that physical proximity may affect protest propensity through emotional mechanisms: “The shared experience of reacting to a single source of stimulation, or sharing a strong emotion, almost irresistibly draws the exposed individual into the crowd state” (94).

<sup>6</sup> This hypothesis applies to non-African settings, as well. Bohstedt (1983) observes that riots in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England and Wales occurred almost exclusively in towns.

his classic essay, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd” (1971), Thompson proposes that it is not objective deprivation, but rather subjective perceptions of deprivation, that cause protests:

“It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action” (78).

The most basic grievance theory is the theory of *absolute deprivation*, which the following hypothesis summarizes:

*H<sub>3</sub>: People who perceive their living conditions to be bad are more likely to participate in protests.*

The *relative deprivation* theory of protest gained prominence with the 1970 publication of Ted Robert Gurr’s *Why Men Rebel*. Gurr identified relative deprivation (RD), or the disparity between “justifiable expectations” and “perceived value capabilities,” as a precondition of revolution. He viewed collective unrest as a function not of selective incentives or coerced cooperation, but of “the distribution of individual anger in society” (Abell et al. 1971, 85). In his later work, Gurr tested the hypothesis that grievances determine social groups’ propensity for protest and rebellion, estimating that communal grievances have a greater effect on mobilization than any variable besides lost autonomy (Gurr 1993).

Recent studies have retested Gurr’s hypothesis that relative deprivation makes people more likely to protest. Some researchers estimate that RD has little or no effect on protest (e.g. Sayles 2007), while others find that only certain types of RD matter. Motivated by the theoretical literature distinguishing “egoistic” from “fraternal” RD (Crosby 1976; Olson 1995; Runciman



1966), Dubé and Guimond (1983) and Walker and Mann (1987) find that personal discontent with one's relative social position (egoistic RD) has less of an effect on protest behavior than an individual's discontent with the social position of her or his identity group (fraternal RD). Some scholars also highlight "backward-looking framing effects," whereby individuals assess their wellbeing relative to their own wellbeing in the past (Shapiro 2002, 121). In short, the effects of relative deprivation on protest behavior are ambiguous and suggest three hypotheses:

*H<sub>4</sub>: People who feel that they are less advantaged than other people are more likely to participate in protests. (Egoistic RD Hypothesis)*

*H<sub>5</sub>: People who feel that their social group is less advantaged than other social groups are more likely to participate in protests. (Fraternal RD Hypothesis)*

*H<sub>6</sub>: People who feel that their current living conditions are worse than their living conditions in the past are more likely to participate in protests. (Temporal RD Hypothesis)*

### **Prospects of Upward Mobility**

Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) pioneered the prospects of upward mobility (POUM) hypothesis, which states that people will be less inclined to resist the status quo if they expect their wellbeing to improve. To explain the intuition behind this hypothesis, they use an analogy of a two-lane tunnel with all traffic heading in the same direction and slow to a standstill. The tunnel is so long that nobody can see to the end. If a driver suddenly notices cars beginning to accelerate in the next lane, she will not initially be bitter, but will instead take this as a sign that her lane might also start to move sometime soon. This acceptance of one's current suffering is called "the tunnel effect." However, if after a while the driver's lane does not begin to speed up, the driver will get angry and switch lanes, possibly even despite signs prohibiting lane switching. Hirschman and Rothschild note that when the tunnel effect wears off, the immobile "experience

the turnaround from hopefulness to disenchantment,” a situation that “clearly contains much potential for social upheaval” and “might even qualify as a theory of revolution” (1973, 552). As long as people have prospects of upward mobility, though, they will be disinclined to protest the status quo. Using a formal model, Bénabou and Ok (2001) illustrate that this theory is compatible with rational choice.

Several studies have empirically corroborated the POUM hypothesis. Using survey data from Russia, Ravallion and Lokshin (2000) estimate that people with better expectations for their future welfare are less likely to support government limits on the incomes of the rich. This relationship held even if respondents’ incomes are below average. Alesina and La Ferrara (2004) similarly observe that Americans who believe that their families will experience improved living conditions are less likely to support redistribution. Checchi and Filippin (2003) conducted a laboratory experiment in which subjects chose levels of income redistribution after viewing simulations of how different tax rates might change their incomes over time. Respondents who saw a matrix depicting higher prospects of upward mobility consistently preferred lower tax rates.

While earlier research has explored the effects of POUM on political preferences, it has generally ignored the effects of POUM on political behavior. The relevance of the POUM hypothesis to the study of protest lies in the sources of grievances. Whereas relative deprivation theories attribute frustration to the disparity between a person’s current wellbeing and the wellbeing of others, the POUM literature argues that grievances derive from the disparity between a person’s current wellbeing and that person’s projected future wellbeing. It contends that even the most objectively dismal living conditions will not necessarily fuel people’s desire

to challenge the state of affairs if people believe that they will become better off eventually. This would help explain widespread political quiescence in extremely poor societies.

*H<sub>7</sub>: People with low prospects of upward mobility are more likely to participate in protests than people with high prospects of upward mobility.*

## **2. DATA AND METHODS**

I test the above hypotheses with an analysis of survey data from the Afrobarometer research group. Afrobarometer enumerators conducted four rounds of surveys in twenty African countries from 1999 to 2009, although not every country was surveyed every year (Table 3). These surveys are nationally representative and include approximately one thousand respondents each. Because three of the four survey rounds included standard questions about each respondent's location of residence, economic grievances, and protest involvement, it is possible to analyze the nature of correlation across nearly 70,000 observations. Besides a large sample size, Afrobarometer data offer several advantages over the data that researchers typically use to study protests. First, because the enumerators employed random sampling procedures, these data avoid the pitfall of "selection on the dependent variable" that is prevalent in the literature. Second, analyzing individual-level data provides greater leverage on psychological theories about the links between grievances and protest behavior than analyzing protest *events* at the municipal or national level, or the protest behavior of groups (e.g. Bruhn 2008).

[Table 3 about here]

The dataset has the disadvantage of over-representing democracies and Anglophone countries. Among the 19 countries sampled, 10 are democracies, six are partial democracies, and four are autocracies (Marshall and Jagers 2008). Thirteen of the countries use English as their primary official language, while five use French and two use Portuguese. These distributions are

not representative of Africa as a whole, where the majority of countries are autocratic and a minority Anglophone. I address this problem by including country-level fixed effects in all statistical models. This controls for heterogeneity across countries, thereby avoiding the omitted-variable bias that would result if variables such as regime type or national history were correlated with economic grievances and prospects of upward mobility. Including country dummies also controls for state capacity to intervene in protests, which Wilkinson (2004 & 2009) convincingly argues can enter into potential protestors' decision calculus.

Below I estimate a logit regression model to analyze how key variables influence the likelihood that a survey respondent reports having participated in a demonstration or protest march. A logit model accounts for the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable: respondents receive either a score of "1" if they say they have protested or "0" otherwise.<sup>7</sup> In addition to country fixed effects, I include time fixed effects to account for the sometimes dramatic variation from year to year in levels of grievances.<sup>8</sup>

## **Variables**

The dependent variable is *Protest Participation*, which is derived from respondents' answers to the following Afrobarometer survey question:

*Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Attended a demonstration or protest march?*

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<sup>7</sup> Afrobarometer enumerators take care to ensure the confidentiality of interviews so that respondents feel comfortable divulging sensitive information about their political activities. While it is still possible that respondents under-report their protest participation, reporting bias should work against a positive finding (i.e. that the explanatory variables increase the chance of protest) and hence make any positive finding more convincing.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the percentage of Zimbabweans who expected their living conditions to worsen leapt from twenty-one percent to eighty-four percent between 2004 and 2005, likely because of a contested parliamentary election and the displacement of nearly 700,000 shanty dwellers in government "clean-up" programs (BBC News 2010). Regression results were robust to the omission of fixed effects.

Response options included the following:

- No, would never do this.
- No, but would do if had the chance.
- Yes, once or twice.
- Yes, several times.
- Yes, often.
- Don't know.

Because the outcome of interest is protest participation (rather than the intention to protest) and because of the low response rate in several categories, I recoded responses into a dichotomous indicator of whether or not people said they had participated in a demonstration or protest march. Although one could argue that the intention to protest is qualitatively different from the resolve never to protest, any bias resulting from dichotomization should work against supporting my hypotheses.

Afrobarometer surveys also provided data for the following dichotomous independent variables:

- *Rural*: whether a respondent lives in a rural instead of an urban area.
- *Attendance at Community Meetings*: whether a respondent has attended a community meeting in the past year.
- *Absolute Deprivation*: whether a respondent considers her or his present living conditions to be either “bad” or “very bad.”
- *Relative Deprivation (Egoistic)*: whether a respondent considers her or his living conditions to be worse than those of co-nationals.

- *Relative Deprivation (Fraternal)*: whether a respondent considers the living conditions of her or his ethnic group to be worse than those of other ethnic groups in the country.
- *Relative Deprivation (Temporal)*: whether a respondent considers her or his living conditions to be worse now than they were twelve months ago.
- *Low Prospects of Upward Mobility (POUM)*: whether a respondent expects her or his living conditions to be worse in the future.

With the exception of *Rural* and *Attendance at Community Meetings*, all independent variables capture how respondents *perceive* their living conditions or prospects of upward mobility.<sup>9</sup> Subjective measures of wellbeing have two advantages over objective measures such as caloric consumption: they offer a glimpse into the psychology of potential protestors; and they account for the gaps that researchers have observed between people’s subjective and objective levels of deprivation (Graham and Pettinato 2000, 239) and the weak relationship between objective deprivation and protest (Ford 1970; Jiobu 1974; Lieske 1978; Spilerman 1970 & 1971). Bratton and van de Walle agree that “it is ultimately misleading to interpret political protest in strictly economic terms,” because “there is little correlation between the intensity of political unrest, on the one hand, and the severity of economic conditions or austerity measures, on the other” (1992, 430). Country experts might detect this phenomenon in Table 4, which summarizes grievances by country.

[Table 4 about here]

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the potential appropriateness of focusing on subjective grievances. These graphs plot national protest participation rates in Africa against two common objective measures of wellbeing: income per capita and inequality. Based on theories about grievances and protest, the relationships are counterintuitive: protest participation *increases* as

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<sup>9</sup> These variables are not highly correlated, so including them in the model should not pose estimation problems.

countries become richer and *decreases* as income distribution becomes less equal. Note the wide variation in protest rates among countries with middling incomes per capita (Fig. 1). Note also that Tanzania and South Africa have the highest and second-highest protest rates, despite falling at opposite ends of the inequality spectrum (Fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> Taken together, these scatter plots suggest that aggregate, objective indicators of prosperity and relative deprivation tell us very little about why people join protests.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

The main model also includes the following control variables:

- *Contact with Religious Leaders*: Scheve and Stasavage (2006) show that religion and social insurance are substitute mechanisms for coping with adversity. I therefore control for whether respondents have recently contacted a religious leader “about some important problem” or to share their views. This variable is more appropriate than alternative measures of religiosity like self-reported piety or attendance at religious services, because it directly gauges the extent to which people turn to religion specifically to solve their problems. Although I expect this variable to show a negative relationship to protest participation, contact with religious leaders could also promote protest if religious leaders act as political entrepreneurs by providing “mobilization goods”—such as means of communication and selective incentives—that facilitate collective action.
- *State Legitimacy*: In an analysis using earlier rounds of Afrobarometer data, Kirwin and Cho (2009) find that people were more likely to say they had protested if they regarded the state as illegitimate: “Without positive perceptions about state legitimacy, people do not believe that they ought to follow rules or commands issued by their state. As legitimacy of the

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<sup>10</sup> In Latin America, Graham and Pettinato likewise find that people “who live in countries where income distribution is most unequal assess their future prospects for upward mobility more positively than those in more equal countries” (2000, 74).

government decreases individuals become increasingly less likely to follow the rule of law which could lead to higher levels of violence” (Kirwin and Cho 2009, 7). Consistent with Kirwin and Cho’s coding rules, I measure state legitimacy with a composite score from 3 to 15 based on how strongly respondents agreed with the following statements:

- The courts have the right to make decisions that people always have to abide by.
  - The police always have the right to make people obey the law.
  - The tax department always has the right to make people pay taxes.
- *Sex*: In Sub-Saharan Africa, men are more visible in political life than women and, presumably, more likely to join protests. I therefore include a dummy variable that takes a value of “1” if the respondent is female and “0” if the respondent is male.
  - *Age*: In Africa’s independence and pro-democracy movements, students and other young people were often the most active protestors. In general, youth tend to be free from family and occupational obligations that deter people from protesting. I therefore control for age, with the expectation that younger people will be more likely to participate in protests than older people.
  - *Education*: Although Schussman and Soule (2005) find no influence of education on protest participation in the United States, Sears and McConahay (1970) find systematically higher education levels among participants in the Watts riots as compared to non-rioters. Studying Africa, Kirwin and Cho (2009) observe that education has a significant and positive effect on protest participation (which they suspect is because better educated people are more politically aware than less educated people). Afrobarometer data allow me to categorize respondents according to the highest level of education they have completed: no formal schooling, primary school, secondary school, or post-secondary school.



### 3. RESULTS

Using data from twenty African countries from 1999 to 2009, I test the aforementioned seven hypotheses about the determinants of protest participation in Africa. Validating findings by Scacco (2007; 2008), people who attend community meetings are more likely to participate in protests (Table 5). This effect is both statistically and substantively significant: controlling for the other variables in the model, attendance at community meetings increases protest propensity approximately threefold. This effect is greater than the estimated effect of any grievance, suggesting that collective action theories explain more about protest behavior than grievance theories.

Regression estimates do not support the hypotheses that people are more likely to protest if they live in a rural area or have feelings of absolute and relative deprivation. The former result might stem from measurement error: labor migration patterns in Sub-Saharan Africa have long blurred the lines between rural and urban communities, making rural identity hard to define (First 1983; Seddon and Zeilig 2005, 12). It might also be that urbanites systematically under-report protest involvement for fear of police action. The latter findings help explain why so many people who “should” be protesting remain politically quiescent. It is not, as in Marx’s theory of “false consciousness,” that materially deprived people do not perceive themselves as poor or are unaware of inequality; rather, absolute and relative deprivation are simply not politically salient in ways that drive protest. This might be due to what Shapiro terms an *empathy gulf*, or “a situation in which people who are situated in one stratum of society may find it literally impossible to imagine the goods pursued by those in another” (2002, 119). Put another way, people may envy or even deeply resent other people’s power or wealth, yet think that it is worthless to pursue similar status.

[Table 5 about here]

Respondents *are* more likely to report having protested if they feel that their wellbeing has deteriorated over time. Holding all other variables at their mean values, respondents who felt that their living conditions were better a year ago were about two percent more likely to say they had attended a demonstration or protest march.

In assessing the costs and potential gains of protesting, people look to the future, as well as to the past. Having *low prospects of upward mobility* is associated with slightly more than a two-percent net increase in the probability that a respondent says she or he has participated in a protest. This estimate supports the theory that grievances about present circumstances will have less bearing on policy preferences if people anticipate changes in their standards of living: one's present self might be better off under a different political economy, but the same might not be true of one's future self. Like stock traders who alter their behavior based on expectations about impending market trends, Africans seem to be refraining from protest because they anticipate improvements in their living conditions.

### **Robustness Checks**

The large number of observations in the Afrobarometer dataset allows me to run separate regressions for each country to see whether any individual cases are driving the observed relationships between grievances and protest participation. The statistical results in Table 6 reveal that not all countries in the sample display a positive relationship between low POUM or temporal relative deprivation and protest. Countries that do display these relationships exhibit effects of different magnitudes. For instance, low prospects of upward mobility have over twice the effect on protest behavior in Liberia as they have in Nigeria. Surprisingly, people who feel that their living situations have declined over time are relatively *less* likely to protest in Burkina

Faso. Country experts might be able to explain variations across countries in the effects of grievances on protest behavior. It is possible that the variations are not systematic, but idiosyncratic. The particular grievances that become salient in any given society might depend on national culture (e.g. the American Dream, which emphasizes prospects of upward mobility) or on how political entrepreneurs discursively frame grievances (e.g. opposition candidates may try to convince people that economic conditions have worsened under the incumbent's tenure).

[Table 6 about here]

## **Discussion**

Regression estimates suggest that one reason for low protest rates in Africa is that Africans (at least in some countries) do not think that their living conditions have worsened over time. Given that economic conditions have objectively declined for the average African over the past thirty years (Chen and Ravallion 2004), one might wonder why more Africans do not recognize declines in their living standards and protest for social welfare programs or government reforms. One reason might be the recent development gains in “emerging countries” (Radelet 2010). Another possible explanation, which is in line with a “false consciousness” theory of protest, is that political incumbents have successfully convinced people that they are better off under the status quo than under previous policies and leaders. This is unlikely, however, since over 65 percent of respondents in the most recent round of surveys said they believe that government economic policies have hurt most people and benefited only a few (Afrobarometer 2009). An alternative explanation for low protest rates is the phenomenon of *consumption-smoothing*: many households in Africa hold assets, including tradable goods and livestock, that can be sold or directly consumed during lean times (Aryeetey and Urduy 2000).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Researchers have documented consumption-smoothing in Côte d’Ivoire (Deaton 1992; Grimand 1997), India (Bhalla 1979), Latin America (Musgrove 1979), and across low-income economies (Morduch 1995).

Because these assets are often not recorded in official records, living conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa might actually be better than the data suggest.

Despite collective action theories predicting the contrary, urbanites are not statistically more likely to protest than rural dwellers. Consistent with collective action theories, however, people who attend community meetings are more likely to protest. While this suggests that community meetings mobilize people to protest, the Afrobarometer data cannot reveal whether people who are already mobilized select into meetings. Identifying the reason behind the observed correlation would require additional data on the content of meetings and the reasons for attendance.

The third main finding is that Africans with low prospects of upward mobility (POUM) are more likely to protest. This implies that Africans protest as infrequently as they do because they expect their living conditions to improve. Indeed, prospects of upward mobility are higher on average in Africa than in Asia or Latin America (Table 7). Why, amidst depressing economic growth rates and bad governance, do Africans view themselves as upwardly mobile?

[Table 7 about here]

#### **4. THE DETERMINANTS OF POUM**

##### **Theories of Unrealistic Optimism**

In studies conducted mainly in the United States, psychologists observe that the general population tends to overestimate the chances of positive outcomes. “For instance, most people give themselves a much higher chance of surviving natural disasters than those around them in exactly the same circumstances and similarly view others to be far more likely to suffer from ill health” (de Meza and Southey 1996, 375). In contrast to their “sadder but wiser” peers (Alloy and Abramson 1979), people who are optimistic in the face of unfavorable odds may be less

likely to engage in behaviors that restack the odds in their favor. For example, unrealistic optimism about vulnerability to AIDS may lead people in communities with high HIV infection rates to engage in risky sex, enhancing the likelihood that they will contract HIV (Taylor and Armor 1996, 879). In the context of protest politics, people who believe that existing institutions and power arrangements will benefit them in the future may be less likely to push for reforms such as democratization and income redistribution, even if those reforms will objectively benefit them.

The general consensus among psychologists is that positive illusions are essential to mental health, even if they distort reality (Taylor 1989). Among extremely poor and politically vulnerable people, prospects of upward mobility may arise from cognitive adaptations to harsh realities, providing a natural defense against depression (Myers and Ridl 1979; Taylor 1989). An observable implication of this theory is that the greater threats people face, the more optimistic they will become. In other words, “while illusions of invulnerability may be generally adaptive and protect people from the minor negative experiences of daily life, illusions may become especially important and exaggerated in people facing severe threats as a method of dealing with the threat” (Taylor et al. 1992, 469-470). This could explain the higher average prospects of upward mobility among Africans as compared to Latin Americans and Asians who are materially and politically much better off (Table 6). The cognitive defense mechanism should also be able to account for variations in POUM within Africa. Theories about unrealistic optimism suggest two counterintuitive hypotheses that can be tested using Afrobarometer data:

*H7: People who are materially worse off have higher prospects of upward mobility than people who are materially better off.*

*H8: People who are more vulnerable to violence and crime have higher prospects of upward mobility than people who are less vulnerable.*

### **Testing the Determinants of POUM**

To test the above two hypotheses, I use the most recent round of Afrobarometer survey data, which includes measures of material wellbeing and vulnerability to crime and violence. I estimate a logit regression model that includes low POUM as the dependent variable and the following covariates:

- *Owns TV*: The respondent has a television in the household.
- *Cash-Paying Job*: The respondent has a job that pays a cash income.
- *Gone Without Fuel*: During the past year, the respondent or someone in the respondent's family has gone without enough fuel to cook food.
- *Gone Without Cash Income*: During the past year, the respondent or someone in the respondent's family has gone without a cash income.
- *Feared Crime*: During the past year, the respondent or someone in the respondent's family has feared crime in the household.
- *Experienced Theft*: During the past year, the respondent or someone in the respondent's family has had something stolen from the household.
- *Physically Attacked*: During the past year, the respondent or someone in the respondent's family has been physically attacked.
- *Education*: A categorical variable indicating the respondent's highest level of education: no formal schooling, primary school, secondary school, or post-secondary school.
- *Age*: Respondent's age.
- *Female*: The respondent is female.

- *Devout*: Religion is important or very important in the respondent's life.
- *Rural*: The respondent lives in a rural area.

In addition to individual-level variables, country-level variables might affect people's feelings about the status quo and expectations for the future. Investigating the origins of grievances among German opponents of nuclear energy in the 1980s, Opp (1988) finds that grievances arise in response to "critical incidents" or shocks: survey respondents who reported relatively mild disapproval of nuclear energy in 1982 reported significantly higher levels of disapproval after the nuclear reactor accident at Chernobyl. Conversely, critical incidents can assuage grievances and improve prospects of upward mobility. Citing "the Obama effect," Douglas (2009) reports that African-Americans became more optimistic about their economic prospects after Barack Obama's election, despite objectively remaining one of the most financially strapped segments of society. 58 percent of African-Americans said they expected their financial situations to improve in the next year, compared with only 30 percent of the general population. In Africa, it is possible that prospects of upward mobility are likewise affected by shocks such as famines, coups, and elections. The low number of countries in the sample does not allow me to investigate the effects of different country-level shocks. However, I am able to control for such events by including country and year fixed effects in a model of the determinants of POUM.

## **Results**

The regression results in Table 8 do not support the theory that people become more optimistic in order to cope with hardship. Controlling for other covariates, respondents are more likely to have low POUM if they have gone without cooking fuel, gone without a cash income, feared crime, experienced theft, or have been physically attacked. They are *less* likely to have

low POUM if they have a cash-paying job, are better educated, or are religious. In short, Africans seem to have quite realistic expectations about their mobility in the context of Africa's negative development trends: those who are doing worse now do not expect to be doing any better in the future.

Therefore, to the extent that Africans have unexpectedly high prospects of upward mobility, their "unrealistic optimism" is not explained by their material wellbeing or vulnerability to crime and violence. The only optimism-enhancing variable that is unrelated to material wellbeing or physical vulnerability is religiosity. These results suggest that psychological mechanisms for coping with adversity may be different in Africa than they are in the United States, where theories of unrealistic optimism have traditionally been tested. In addition to seeking explanations for variation in POUM within Africa, future studies might explore the reasons behind cross-regional variation. For instance, Africans might have higher POUM on average than people in other regions because of the recent success of 17 "emerging countries" whose average annual income growth per capita between 1996 and 2008 was 3.2% (Radelet 2010, 13).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study has explored why some Africans protest the status quo while others do not. On the whole, very few Africans use protest to challenge the institutions, policies, and leaders that neglect and oppress them. Although mediating the shortcomings of a failed state can be a profitable enterprise that leads some Africans to "exchange national submission for local sovereign domination or exploitation" (Englebert 2010, 6), the average African suffers tremendously from ineffective governance and severe economic underdevelopment. The preceding analyses have demonstrated that Africans are aggrieved, albeit not to the extent we



might expect (Table 4). They have also shown that only some grievances—and not necessarily the most commonly reported ones—motivate Africans to protest: namely, low prospects of upward mobility and perceived declines in living conditions. These grievances have different effects in different countries, leaving opportunities for country experts to explain why some grievances become more politically salient than others.

Protest behavior depends not only the *will* to change the status quo, but also on the *ability* to overcome collective action dilemmas. Statistical analyses show that people who attend community meetings are significantly more likely to protest than people who do not attend community meetings. Ethnographic research involving the direct observation of community meetings—especially protest organizers’ recruitment tactics and use of selective incentives or coercion—will further illuminate the factors that facilitate protest.

The determinants of POUM remain unclear. Existing theories about unrealistic optimism find no support in the Afrobarometer data, possibly because they were developed in contexts that are very different from the ones in which the data were collected. Given that prospects of upward mobility are higher in Sub-Saharan Africa than in regions that exhibit significantly higher rates of development, it could be that the mechanisms generating grievances in Africa are different from the mechanisms generating grievances elsewhere. Future research on the sources of economic and political grievances should begin on the theoretical end and possibly delve further into the ways that religion conditions Africans’ prospects of upward mobility.

Understanding the link between grievances and protest is key to understanding diverse forms of contentious politics and collective action. This paper provides a conceptual framework that can be applied to the study of riots, labor strikes, and voting behavior. It makes the contribution of highlighting prospects of upward mobility as a potential influence on protest

behavior: people who expect themselves to be better off in the future may be less likely to riot against food shortages, strike for higher wages, or vote for redistribution, *regardless of their current level of wellbeing*. This observation suggests an explanation for patterns of behavior—such as the political quiescence of the extremely poor—that might initially seem paradoxical or irrational.

**Table 1: Development Indicators by Region**

	<i>GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international \$)</i>	<i>Life expectancy</i>	<i>Infant mortality rate (per 1000)</i>	<i>Literacy rate</i>
Sub-Saharan Africa	1899	52	144	66
South Asia	2484	64	76	61
East Asia/Pacific	5030	72	29	93
Latin America/Carib.	9758	73	23	92
Mid. East/N. Africa	-	71	34	73
Europe/Central Asia	11205	70	22	98

Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank 2008).

**Table 2: Protest Participation Rates by Region<sup>a</sup>**

Sub-Saharan Africa	12.9%
Latin America	12.6%
East Asia	4.8%

<sup>a</sup>Percent of survey respondents who said they had attended a protest in the past year. Sources: Afrobarometer (2009), Latinobarometro (2008), Asian Barometer (2008).

**Table 3: Countries and Years Analyzed**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Benin	2005, 2008	2,398
Botswana	2003, 2005, 2008	3,600
Burkina Faso	2008	1,200
Cape Verde	2002, 2005, 2008	3,788
Ghana	2002, 2005, 2008	3,597
Kenya	2003, 2005, 2008	4,780
Lesotho	2003, 2005, 2008	3,561
Liberia	2008	1,200
Madagascar	2005, 2008	2,700
Malawi	2003, 2005, 2008	3,600
Mali	2002, 2005, 2008	3,759
Mozambique	2002, 2005, 2008	3,798
Namibia	2003, 2005, 2008	3,599
Nigeria	2003, 2005, 2008	7,115
Senegal	2002, 2005, 2008	3,600
South Africa	2002, 2006, 2008	7,200
Tanzania	2003, 2005, 2008	3,735
Uganda	2002, 2005, 2008	7,231
Zambia	2003, 2005, 2008	3,598
Zimbabwe	2004, 2005, 2009	3,352

**Table 4: Grievances by Country (% Affirmative Response)**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Absolute Deprivation</i>	<i>Relative Deprivation (Egoistic)</i>	<i>Relative Deprivation (Fraternal)</i>	<i>Relative Deprivation (Temporal)</i>	<i>Low POUM</i>
<i>Description</i>	Present living conditions “bad” or “very bad”	Worse off than others	Ethnic group worse off than other groups	Past living conditions were better	Expect living conditions to be worse in a year
Benin	61	40	42	29	20
Botswana	53	45	24	31	19
Cape Verde	27	30	25	28	4
Ghana	49	32	36	48	9
Kenya	66	51	48	21	47
Lesotho	75	51	19	20	44
Madagascar	42	32	14	30	17
Malawi	55	44	55	42	29
Mali	57	32	30	39	9
Mozambique	32	36	34	41	8
Namibia	38	38	30	36	13
Nigeria	31	29	29	51	5
Senegal	68	38	22	23	37
South Africa	43	34	34	30	30
Tanzania	54	52	48	26	39
Uganda	52	54	56	26	32
Zambia	58	46	21	35	31
Zimbabwe	46	38	22	66	6
Burkina Faso	49	33	29	52	10
Liberia	50	34	23	39	15
Total	49	39	33	36	21

Source: Afrobarometer 2009. Note that the table draws on only the most recent round of data and therefore does not capture variation over time.

**Table 5: Logit Model of Protest Participation<sup>b</sup>**

Rural	<b>0.059</b> <b>(0.028)</b>
Absolute Deprivation	0.025 (0.026)
Relative Deprivation (Egoistic)	-0.033 (0.027)
Relative Deprivation (Fraternal)	0.014 (0.027)
Relative Deprivation (Temporal)	<b>0.076</b> <b>(0.025)</b>
Low POUM	<b>0.093</b> <b>(0.032)</b>
Contacted Religious Leader	<b>0.377</b> <b>(0.024)</b>
Attended Community Meeting	<b>1.420</b> <b>(0.032)</b>
State Legitimacy	-0.025 <b>(0.004)</b>
Female	-0.291 <b>(0.024)</b>
Age	-0.013 <b>(0.001)</b>
Primary Education (vs. No Formal Schooling)	<b>0.170</b> <b>(0.041)</b>
Secondary Education (vs. No Formal Schooling)	<b>0.438</b> <b>(0.042)</b>
Post-Secondary Education (vs. No Formal Schooling)	<b>0.761</b> <b>(0.048)</b>
$R^2$	0.092
$N$	67,922

<sup>b</sup>Logit estimates using country and year fixed effects, with standard errors in parentheses. Bold type indicates statistical significance at the 1% level or better. Data are from Afrobarometer (2002-2009).

**Table 6: POUM and Temporal RD Effects by Country<sup>c</sup>**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Low POUM</i>	<i>Relative Deprivation (Temporal)</i>
Benin	-0.143 (0.163)	<b>0.443***</b> (0.142)
Botswana	<b>0.324***</b> (0.123)	0.020 (0.106)
Burkina Faso	<b>0.530*</b> (0.308)	<b>-0.394**</b> (0.198)
Cape Verde	0.050 (0.283)	0.150 (0.116)
Ghana	<b>0.378**</b> (0.168)	0.061 (0.136)
Kenya	-0.178 (0.126)	0.112 (0.094)
Lesotho	<b>0.340**</b> (0.152)	-0.024 (0.183)
Liberia	<b>0.755***</b> (0.257)	0.125 (0.206)
Madagascar	-0.283 (0.280)	-0.147 (0.123)
Malawi	-0.008 (0.154)	<b>0.260**</b> (0.138)
Mali	-0.035 (0.190)	0.034 (0.117)
Mozambique	<b>0.333**</b> (0.164)	<b>0.180*</b> (0.105)
Namibia	0.090 (0.189)	0.091 (0.104)
Nigeria	<b>0.296***</b> (0.109)	-0.040 (0.076)
Senegal	0.181 (0.136)	0.171 (0.112)
South Africa	-0.081 (0.093)	<b>0.143**</b> (0.072)
Tanzania	0.117 (0.108)	0.005 (0.096)
Uganda	-0.058 (0.105)	<b>0.195***</b> (0.089)
Zambia	-0.246 (0.169)	0.122 (0.131)
Zimbabwe	-0.047 (0.212)	-0.204 (0.147)

<sup>c</sup>\* denotes significance at the 10% level, \*\* at the 5% level, and \*\*\* at the 1% level.

**Table 7: Prospects of Upward Mobility by Region<sup>d</sup>**

Sub-Saharan Africa	63.0%
Latin America	48.7%
East Asia	52.0%

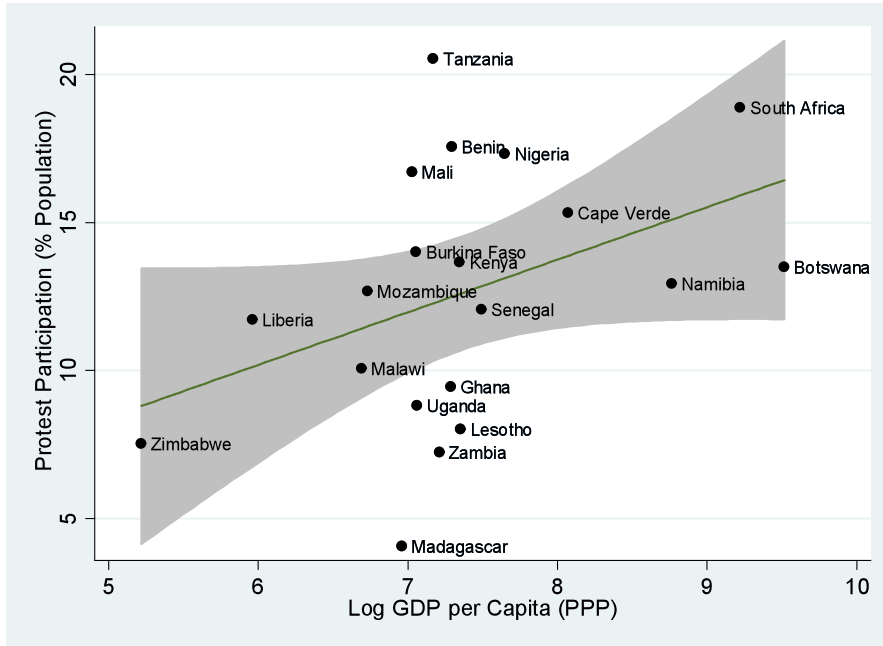
<sup>d</sup>Percent of respondents who expect their living conditions to improve in the future. Sources: Afrobarometer (2008), Latinobarometro (2008), Asian Barometer (2009).

**Table 8: Logit Model of Low POUM<sup>e</sup>**

Owns TV	0.013 (0.030)
Cash-Paying Job	<b>-0.071*</b> (0.027)
Gone Without Fuel	<b>0.283***</b> (0.025)
Gone Without Cash Income	<b>0.250***</b> (0.035)
Feared Crime	<b>0.148***</b> (0.027)
Experienced Theft	<b>0.124***</b> (0.028)
Physically Attacked	<b>0.421***</b> (0.034)
Primary Education (vs. No Formal Schooling)	-0.039 (0.037)
Secondary Education (vs. No Formal Schooling)	-0.056 (0.040)
Post-Secondary Education (vs. No Formal Schooling)	<b>-0.174***</b> (0.055)
Age	<b>0.009***</b> (0.001)
Female	-0.011 (0.024)
Devout	<b>-0.076**</b> (0.033)
Rural	<b>0.114***</b> (0.032)
$R^2$	0.081
$N$	52,246

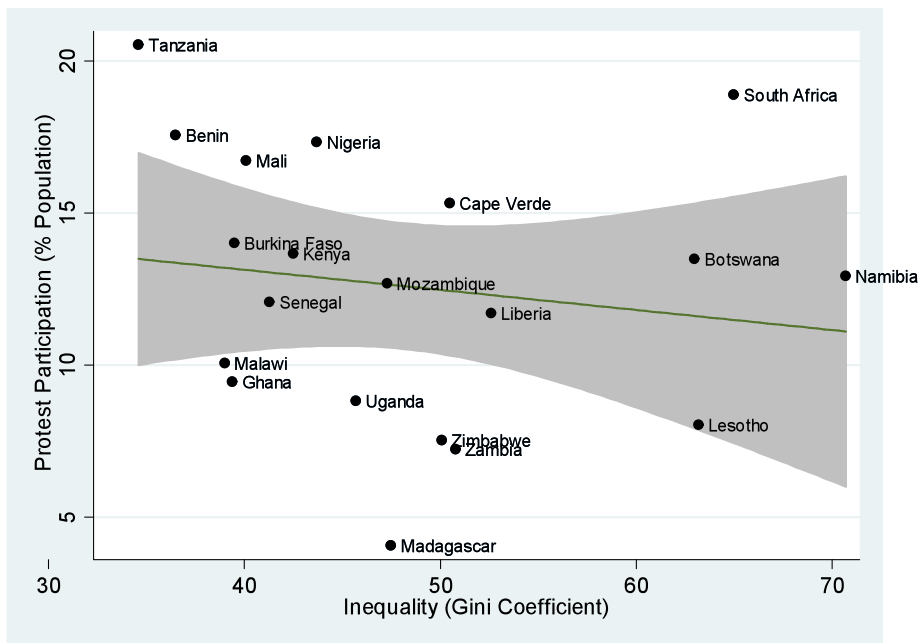
<sup>e</sup>Logit estimates using country and year fixed effects, with standard errors in parentheses. \* denotes significance at the 10% level, \*\* at the 5% level, and \*\*\* at the 1% level. Data are from Afrobarometer (2009).

**Figure 1: Protest Participation by Income per Capita**



Sources: Afrobarometer 2008 (2009 for Zimbabwe) and World Development Indicators 2008. Shaded area denotes 95% confidence interval around fitted values.

**Figure 2: Protest Participation by Inequality**



Sources: Afrobarometer 2008 (2009 for Zimbabwe) and CIA World Factbook 2010. Shaded area denotes 95% confidence interval around fitted values.



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