An Analysis of “Contentious Politics in New Democracies:
East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 1989-93”

In the extensively researched paper, “Contentious Politics in New Democracies: East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 1989-93,” authors Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik provide four main explanations as to why people protest. Of the four explanations given by Ekiert and Kubik, the two most logical theories of what causes protests are firstly, “prior existence of traditions, repertoires of collective action, and mobilizing collective action frames,” and secondly, the combination of “political opportunity structure,” “institutional constraints,” and “opportunities available to protesters.” Before further explaining these theories, however, it must first be stressed that it is highly improbable that these alone are independent in initiating all protests within a country. As the authors themselves write, “We . . . assume that we are dealing with multiple and conjunctural types of causation. From this point of view, the four theories (or analytical perspectives) are not mutually exclusive.” In other words, it is expected that all four theories which are discussed by Ekiert and Kubik are in some way involved in the probability and frequency of protests within a country.

Upon realizing the risks which many dissident citizens face in their decision to protest – including the loss of a job or social status and the endangerment of self and/or family – one must consider why exactly it is that citizens do indeed protest. In the first theory mentioned above, Ekiert and Kubik analyze the importance of culture (tradition) and habit (repertoires of collective action), both variables which influence an individual’s psychological state of being. Because a certain psychological state of being is necessary for an individual to feel the need to protest – for example, one must feel angered by some sort of unfair treatment, and must also have the courage
to stand up for his or her beliefs – it is this psychological state that must therefore be analyzed in questioning why people protest.

Essentially, the desire for an individual to protest stems from a threatening attack of the person's being, that is, the absolute disregard and disrespect of an individual's beliefs, morals and rights. In this case, a person's pride in his or her being (in terms of beliefs, morals and rights) will sometimes override his or her desire to maintain a job or the assurance of physical safety simply because a passive acceptance of the latter is often considered worthless if the true self is unfairly denied. By not protesting, the individual is conversely more likely to maintain a job and safety, but the individual is denied true existence in society. It must also be mentioned here that the attack of “self” is sometimes indirect; for example, if another individual’s rights are denied, then many citizens may protest because they desire to establish rights for this person as well as rights for all.

Having established the psychological need to protest, cultural and habitual influence on a nation’s likelihood of protesting becomes more apparent. In nations such as the United States which promote cultural values such as pride, individualism, personal accomplishment and protection of self-interest, citizens are more likely to take a public stand on issues that might impair their personal interests. In the United States, protests are often large and public gatherings regarding economical issues such as strikes or boycotts, and political policy issues such as personal liberties (i.e. free speech or gay rights), environmental concerns and military actions. Conversely, protests are more likely to be fewer and less public in nations that practice or are accustomed to either oppression or submissiveness. In Mongolia, for example, the most prevalent type of protest is the hunger strike, in which an individual renounces food and literally starves in order to show his or her dislike of a certain issue. This apparently self-destructive form of protest can be understood in part by the predominant religion of Mongolia, which is
Buddhism. This religion emphasizes the need to transcend the pervasiveness of human suffering through the acceptance of this reality and the personal practice of peace, love and self-sacrifice. Therefore, because Buddhism is so common in Mongolia, citizens there are more likely to protest in very personal, self-sacrificing manner that does not seem to make sense from the perspective of a culture that values self-preservation. Because dominant religions, cults, and government histories differ from nation to nation and because all of these factors play some role in citizen’s behaviors, it can be seen why countries vary in their methods of protest.

This concept also relates to the second of Ekiert and Kubik’s theories previously mentioned, which analyzes the importance of “political opportunity structure,” “institutional constraints,” and “opportunities available to protesters, including those that are linked to the transformation processes taking place in the region.” In other words, this theory notably stresses the importance of governmental involvement in a citizen’s likelihood of protesting. Because both the United States and Mongolia are considered to be free nations, citizens in these nations are fortunately and generally not prevented from protesting. In nations that practice hostile or totalitarian-like regimes, however, individuals face more severe risks in protesting; thus, it is expected that protests will be drastically less frequent. The reasons for this are fairly simple. While common protests generally do not cause immediate changes, they do elicit emotional responses, as well as societal and governmental attention. Over time, individuals are able to increase awareness of the issue, often leading to the continuation of protests. Eventually, change in some manner occurs. In a more hostile nation, however, protests are predominately unable to even accomplish this first step; they are most likely to be quickly and permanently silenced.

Thus, in the presence of severe risks, and without the knowledge that the message will even be continued or even heard, it is understandable that protests are less common in totalitarian-like regimes.
The theory that freer countries engage in more protests while more severely controlled countries engage in less protests, however, differs from another of Ekiert and Kubik’s theories, which is that “relative deprivation links variation in protest activities to the changing perceptions and assessments of people’s (particularly economic) situation.” In other words, Ekiert and Kubik’s theory suggests that a nation’s level of discontent directly influences the level of protests. Using this idea, it should be true that a higher level of national discontent causes a higher level of protests; however, this is not always the case in Ekiert and Kubik’s research. One of the most interesting but unanticipated findings in their research involves the nature of protests in Poland, where data indicates that “as people’s approval of the political and economic systems increases systematically, so too does the magnitude of protest.” Possibly the best explanation for the anomaly is that Polish citizens, in discovering that their protests worked, became so encouraged by the political and economic improvement that they continued to protest for more. Yet another anomaly of Ekiert and Kubik’s theory is found in their following discovery about Hungary and Poland:

Hungarians are clearly most dissatisfied with the post-1989 changes, and yet the magnitude of protest there is lower than elsewhere. The contrast with Poland is particularly striking: Hungarians are more dissatisfied than Poles, yet Poland has a higher magnitude of protest.

Though unverifiable, the simplest explanation of this incongruity is that Hungarians are led to be afraid of, avoid, or simply “give up” on the government, perhaps for the very same reasons that they are dissatisfied. Conversely, perhaps Poles have been encouraged by past governmental change to continue protesting.

While Ekiert and Kubik’s theory of relative deprivation is at times true (for example, research data indicates that unlike Poland, protest magnitudes of Hungary and Slovakia followed the “pattern of the fluctuations in people’s approval of economic and political systems”) there are
key factors that can be found in the analysis of the theories’ discrepancies. To begin with, while
the relative deprivation theory should not simply be disregarded, it is not sufficient by itself.
Protest levels also often depend on whether the protest topic is worth the dangers faced. For
critical threats to human rights, protests are often worth serious risks. Where risks are many and
the protest topic is considerably less important, however, protests may not be worth the potential
dangers.

Additionally, such research incongruities further prove the authors’ assertion that a
combination of theories exists. Thus, a fourth and final of Ekiert and Kubik’s theories, which
places emphasis on “resources available to challenging groups,” must also be present in
influencing citizens to protest.

From an examination of protests in Mongolia and the United States, it can be concluded
that multiple variables do indeed exist in the causation of protest levels and types. While both
Mongolia and the United States share the variable of a relatively free government, they do not
share similar cultural values. Consequently, while both Mongolia and the United States practice
protests relatively freely due to a similar governmental variable, the predominant type of protest
varies significantly because of differing cultural variables. We can assume from this example
that the same applies elsewhere. Protests in all nations will be relatively different, as influences
in all nations will be relatively different. Similarly, and for this reason, some influences will be
more dominant in particular nations than in others. Regardless, however, a combination of most
if not all of these influences will be present in all nations around the world in deciding the
likelihood and type of protest within that nation.