THE GLOBE

The George Washington University

Volume XIII, Issue II, August 2026



AI, Drones, and the Changing Gendered Dynamics of Modern Warfare

EMILY WOLMETZ

The Inability of United Nations Refugee Law to Address Current Refugee Crises
GRACE FUNK

An Analysis of the United States' Maritime Strike, Operation Southern Spear in the Caribbean under International Law
MATHIAS NICHOLLS

The Hartz Reforms and Political Retrenchment of the German SPD
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Golden Dome and the Restoration of U.S. Air Superiority in the Missile Age
YOUNG PARK





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Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Readers,

This is my final time addressing you as the Editor-in-Chief of The Globe, the only undergraduate international affairs journal at The George Washington University and the Elliott School of International Affairs. I am honored to be presenting you with the newest edition of our journal.

This issue is the culmination of months of intense work on the part of our managing editors, associate editors, and authors to provide the highest quality student research in international affairs.

In these unprecedented times for international affairs, we have seen dramatic new changes alongside continuing precedents. Conflict still remains at the top of the global headlines. Despite many doubting Ukraine's ability to defend itself, it has begun larger and grander strikes in Russia itself. Meanwhile, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains without any end in sight, even as Prime Minister Netanyahu faces a reelection campaign. America's conflicts abroad continue to draw on, as the deal after deal between the United States and Iran fail and American presence in Venezuela creates many questions for scholars and citizens. However, we have also seen new shifts outside of security and conflict. The United Kingdom has appointed its 7th Prime Minister in 10 years, creating new questions for the future of UK foreign policy, while China and the United States continue to engage in intense competition over trade, critical minerals, emerging technologies, and influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. As scholars, we will continue to look into these developments and try our best to make sense of them within our worldview

As I step down as Editor-in-Chief, I move forward knowing that the journal has grown immensely, publishing new quantitative research, developing modern editing and layout techniques, and reaching an even wider audience. I entrust this journal to my successor, Josh Lipman, as well as our next cohort of managing editors, and I wish them all the best in continuing this journal's legacy.

All the best,
*Daniel Catapang**
Editor-in-Chief

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AI, Drones, and the Changing Gendered Dynamics of Modern Warfare

*By: Emily Wolmetz**

Abstract: Masculinity and violence have long shaped gendered identities and institutional structures in military contexts. Hegemonic masculinity, which valorizes willingness to engage in combat, underpins both individual soldierly identity and broader militarized hierarchies. Over the past 25 years, however, the rise of autonomous weapons systems (AWS), artificial intelligence, and remotely piloted aircraft has transformed modern warfare.

These technologies remove soldiers from direct combat, creating physical and psychological distance, and challenge the conventional ideal of the soldier as physically exposed to harm. This raises critical questions: do AI and drones degender warfare, or do they reconfigure gendered practices within military institutions while maintaining masculinist structures?

Using an intersectional feminist framework, this paper analyzes how these technologies intersect with militarized masculinity, colonial violence, and global capitalism. It argues that AI and drones do not degender conflict but instead produce new forms of gendered labor and violence, reinforcing existing hierarchies through technostrategic military practices. By situating emerging technologies within historical and theoretical contexts, this study highlights the evolving but persistent role of gender in contemporary warfare.

Key Words: militarized masculinity, AI warfare, autonomous weapons systems, feminist security studies, UAVs, technostrategic discourse, Russo-Ukrainian war, Israeli Defense Forces, algorithmic violence, gender and conflict.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative intersectional feminist approach to examine how artificial intelligence, autonomous weapon systems, and drone technologies implicate militarized masculinity and contemporary warfare. Drawing on feminist security studies and gender theory, and analyzing academic literature, policy documents, and current events of active conflict, the study explores the relationship between emerging military technologies and gendered power structures. The study assesses how these technologies reproduce existing masculine hierarchies within military institutions.

Introduction

The relationship between masculinity and violence has long been understood as central to the construction of gender in defense contexts. As Connell and Messerschmidt argue, the inclination to engage in violence constitutes a central component of hegemonic masculinity, shaping not only individual identities but also institutional structures of warfare.[1] Throughout human history, tactical warfare has served as a main mechanism through which states and non-state actors pursue offensive operations and defense of assets and interests. However, the state of contemporary conflict has undergone a dramatic shift over the past quarter century, especially through the introduction of autonomous weapons systems (AWS), artificial intelligence, and remotely piloted aircraft.[2]

The emergence of drone warfare and AI-enhanced military operations has prompted debate regarding the gendered dimensions of modern conflict. These new technologies have had the effect of removing direct human-to-human combat and creating physical and psychological distance between operators. The conventional ideal of the soldier, physically present in combat zones and exposed to harm, has been partially replaced with a remote operator.[3] This elicits questions of whether new military technologies are fundamentally degendering warfare or merely reconfiguring how gender operates within military institutions and practices, as well as the extent to which masculinist concepts of war continue to exist.[4]

While examining the extent to which the rise of AI and drone warfare degenders contemporary conflict, it is crucial to engage with critically intersectional feminist frameworks to assess how these systems are embedded within existing structures of militarized masculinity, colonial violence, and global capitalism.[5] While these technologies alter certain key dimensions and manifestations of conflict, it can be held that they simultaneously reproduce and reinforce gendered hierarchies through technologically strategic armaments and the maintenance of masculinist military cultures.

This paper argues that the increased prevalence of AI and drones in conflict zones does not *degender* war, but rather marks transitions in modern warfare and gendered statehood through technostrategic capitalist thinking, maintaining masculinist military structures while creating new forms of gendered labor and violence.

The Gendered Nature of Traditional Warfare

Feminist scholars recognize that warfare is not merely a neutral political or strategic activity, but is a fundamentally gendered practice that both reflects and reproduces hierarchies of masculinity and femininity.[6] The construction of the soldier as the archetypal masculine figure has been central to how states organize violence and how societies understand citizenship, heroism, and national belonging. As Conway demonstrates, military service functions as an "act" that is publicly acknowledged as a marker of citizenship, encompassing the development of identities that pertain to political status.[7] This connection between soldiering and citizenship has historically been gendered male, with women relegated to supportive roles that sustain but do not directly participate in combat.

Outside of American history, it is important to note that studies have displayed constant links between standards of manhood and warfare practices. Across many cultural contexts, warfare serves as a path for men to attain manhood, with the tactics of warfare often focused on dominating the enemy, and "in ways that give meaning to violence through gender politics".[8] Duriesmith outlines how, from childhood, young men are often socialized to seek out attributes necessary to conduct warfare such as toughness, aggression, and emotional detachment.[9] In the West, "manhood" may be reinforced through means such as

1. R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," Gender & Society 19, no. 6 (2005): 841, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639.
2. James Johnson, "Artificial Intelligence & Future Warfare: Implications for International Security," *Defense & Security Analysis* 35, no. 2 (2019): 147, https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2019.1600800; "How AI Is Changing Warfare," *The Economist,* June 20, 2024, https://www.economist.com/briefing/2024/06/20/how-ai-is-changing-warfare; Darina Kirichenko, "Russia Has Learned from Ukraine and Is Now Winning the Drone War," *Atlantic Council,* December 4, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-has-learned-from-ukraine-and-is-now-winning-the-drone-war/.
3. Cynthia Cockburn and Cynthia Enloe, "Militarism, Patriarchy, and Peace Movements: In Conversation with Cynthia Cockburn," in *Seriously! Investigating Crashes and Crises as if Women Mattered*, ed. Cynthia Enloe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) 137-158.
4. David Duriesmith, "Is Manhood a Causal Factor in the Shifting Nature of War?" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16, no. 2 (2014): 238–240, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.773718.
5. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 140; Duriesmith, "Is Manhood a Causal Factor in the Shifting Nature of War?" 238–240.
6. Charlotte Hooper, "Masculinities and Masculinism," in *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001)
7. Daniel Conway, *Masculinities, Militarisation and the End Conscription Campaign: War Resistance in Apartheid South Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 24
8. Duriesmith, "Is Manhood a Causal Factor in the Shifting Nature of War?" 242.
9. Duriesmith, "Is Manhood a Causal Factor in the Shifting Nature of War?" 242.

economic success, upward social mobility, marriage, or sports performance, but military service has continued to maintain an elevated significance across human history and is a highly regarded display of hegemonic masculine capability.[10]

Intersectional Feminist Critiques of Militarism

Intersectional feminist theory provides essential means for understanding how multiple systems of oppression, including but not limited to those of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality, operate simultaneously and cannot be understood in isolation.[11] Applied to military contexts, this framework indicates how militarized masculinity is differentiated by different groups having access to different forms of masculine status and power.

The term "technostrategic" was coined by Carol Cohn in the context of the intertwined nature of technological and nuclear strategic thinking.[12] Cohn's analysis of defense intellectuals reveals how "technostrategic discourse" itself is deeply gendered, structured by language that reflects and produces masculinist ways of talking about violence.

Technostrategic discourse is dually applicable to AI and drone warfare strategic thinking. Defense scholars note that "clean bombs" and "surgically clean strikes" are in reference to counterforce attacks that can accurately destroy an opponent's weapons without causing significant destruction of anything else.[13] This sanitized language obscures the lived experiences and realities of violence while celebrating technical mastery and precision, similarly often associated with nuclear warhead discourse. Further, the weapons manufacturers themselves consistently display "phallic imagery" in discussion of domination and control.[14] Advertisements for weapons like the "Kinetic Energy Penetrator" promise to "maximize runway cratering by optimizing penetration dynamics," language that simultaneously evokes technical competence and sexual conquest.[15]

What emerges from the rise of such advanced military capacity and technological development, as noted by Cohn, is "the drive to superior power as a means to exercise one's will and a readiness to threaten the disproportionate use of force to achieve one's own end."[16] This logic resembles the role of patriarchy in the state, and the use of power to control and conquer as an inherently masculinist principle.

Historical Context: The Rise of Technostrategic Warfare

The development of drone and AI warfare marks a demonstrated modernization of interstate conflict aimed at achieving strategic advantage through technical dominance among the great powers. Since World War I, the Global North has accelerated dramatically in military-industrial investment and research and development, with the pace and scope of transformation increasing exponentially since the 1990s.[17] Kaldor argues that the most prominent form of war shifted during the twentieth century, with the dominant Western imagination of warfare moving from large-scale, escalating duels between similarly organized state militaries to what she terms "new wars".[18]

Autonomous weapons systems are defined by their capability to operate without continuous human control. As Bode and Huelss explain, the defining feature of AWS is "their ability to operate autonomously: 'robotic weapons…, once activated, can select and engage targets without further human intervention'".[19] Most modern weapons systems are computer-assisted, with ever-increasing tasks assigned to these programs. While currently-deployed AWS are "comparatively 'stupid' from an AI perspective, fast-moving advances in AI research are very likely to filter into weapons systems in the near future".[20] While there is still no universal definition of AI, the last 18 months have witnessed dramatic acceleration in publicly visible AI development.[21] However, due to its national security nature, most Department of Defense Research and Development remains highly classified, meaning systems currently in testing by China, Russia, the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom are likely far more advanced than publicly acknowledged.[22]

Since 2022, Ukrainian drone production has skyrocketed to millions of units annually, establishing a "drone wall" along front lines. Over the past year, approximately three-quarters of all Russian casualties resulted from Ukrainian drones, also sinking warships, penetrating the Black Sea blockade, and enabling deep strikes in Russia far from the front lines, proving some of the most comprehensive deployments of advanced Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in active inter-state war in history.[23]

Weaponry Benefits & Ethical Concerns

Proponents of AI and drone warfare emphasize several benefits, including rhetoric that targeting algorithms ensure fewer military casualties for operators by removing human

10. Hooper, "Masculinities and Masculinism." 5.
11. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 140-142.
12.Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12, no. 4 (1987):): 690.
13. Cohn, "Sex and Death," 691–692.
14. Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death," 694.
15. Cohn, "Sex and Death," 694; Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 398.
16. Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death," 697.
17. Johnson, "Artificial Intelligence and Future Warfare," 147.
18. Duriesmith, "Is Manhood a Causal Factor in the Shifting Nature of War?" 237.
19. Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 394.
20. Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 394.
21. Fady A. Elbatanony, "The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Modern Warfare: A Comparative Study of Ukraine and Gaza Conflicts," *Toplumsal Tedkikler* (2025), https://doi.org/10.62156/habitus.1769504.
22. Kirichenko, "Russia Has Learned from Ukraine."
23. Kirichenko, "Russia Has Learned from Ukraine."

soldiers from direct combat zones. Precision targeting claims suggest that autonomous systems can more accurately distinguish combatants from civilians, capable of reducing collateral damage. Additionally, AI systems are presented as capable of assessing possible harm in military decisions and analyzing objective risks,[24] theoretically lowering civilian casualties while increasing accuracy and effectiveness.[25] However, as there remains no universally accepted definition of AI, fundamental questions are raised about what precisely is being deployed and how it functions. The phenomenon of "emergent behavior" in complex AI systems, actions "not programmed but aris[ing] out of complexity," further destabilizes the horizon of precision and introduces unpredictable violence.[26] Programs with millions of lines of code written by teams of programmers cannot guarantee that commands will have predictable effects, since portions of large programs may interact in unexpected, untested ways.[27]

Ethical concerns center on the inability of autonomous systems to make sound judgments or moral decisions, and to continue functioning even without human instruction. The automation of warfare in both defense and attack raises profound questions about accountability if and when systems do not act as intended. Additionally, these technologies grant unprecedented surveillance capabilities, making it efficient to monitor hundreds of thousands of people simultaneously. As The Economist reports, AI will likely make war "faster, more opaque and less humane."[28]

Critical Degendering

One of the most frequently cited ways that AI and drone warfare appear to degender military service involves the diminished centrality of physical strength and endurance of soldiering. Traditional combat emphasizes bodily capabilities, hand-to-hand combat, physical hardship, and performance under extreme exhaustion.[29] These requirements are deeply gendered, constructed as naturally favoring male bodies and justifying women's exclusion from combat roles.

Drone warfare replaces physical presence in war zones with remote operation and skills such as visual pattern recognition, attention to detail, sustained concentration, and technical proficiency with complex systems; overall, these do not map onto traditional markers of hegemonic militarized masculinities. This shift opens military roles to wider demographics, including women who were previously excluded based on purported physical inadequacy and individuals with disabilities who fully possess the cognitive and technical skills for remote operations. However, Eichler argues that "militarized masculinities evolve, and may become contested, redefined, or replaced," suggesting that the rise of technical military roles represents evolution in what constitutes militarized masculinity. Some scholars and advocates have interpreted this as evidence of degendering, with technology enabling military institutions to recognize that women possess equal capability to serve when physical requirements no longer dominate.[30]

Persistent Gendering: Drones and AI and the Maintenance of Gender Hierarchies

Though AI and drone warfare appear to challenge traditional physical masculinity, closer analysis reveals that these technologies reconstitute them through new forms. The apparent degendering marks what might be termed "algorithmic masculinity", a form of disembodied dominance that secures control while disguising it as neutral technological progress. This paper argues that rather than physical strength demonstrating masculine capability, technical mastery of complex systems becomes the new marker of hegemonic masculinity, and, as noted by Eichler, a reconfiguring of hierarchies through different means.[31]

Cohn coined the term "technostrategic discourse" to describe the phenomenon in which technological innovation is combined with notions of national security and power through the Cold War. Ultimately, this is intensified within current AI and drone warfare contexts. As opposed to direct combat, it reflects gendered agency's displacement from the battlefield and into code, where masculinist assumptions pertaining to legitimate violence, threat assessment, and the disposability of racialized and gendered bodies become embedded in "objective" decision-making architectures in and of themselves. Eichler notes that "a true redefinition of masculinity in the military context would require new ways of recruiting, training, and motivating soldiers that do not rely on the privileging of masculinity and denigration of femininity".[32] Though in terms of practical skillsets and technical competency can be understood as agendered, recruitment for AI and drone warfare positions continues to emphasize masculine competencies like aggression, dominance, technical mastery, and emotional detachment, as referenced previously, even as the specific physical requirements change.

In another way, Hooper notes that emotional vulnerability is seen as the key to "authenticity" to unraveling male power and violence, and removing inequalities between the sexes. Being impersonal and unemotional is equated with being powerful, as with the objectivity associated with AI, as operated within traditional hegemonic masculinist frameworks. [33]Train-

24. Johnson, "Artificial Intelligence and Future Warfare," 158, 16; Kirichenko, "Russia Has Learned from Ukraine."
25. Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 403.
26. Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 411.
27. Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 4.
28. "How AI Is Changing Warfare," The Economist, June 20, 2024.
29. Cockburn and Enloe, "Militarism, Patriarchy, and Peace Movements," 137-158; Duriesmith, "Is Manhood a Causal Factor in the Shifting Nature of War?" 241
30. Maya Eichler, "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 83.
31. Eichler, "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations," 88-90.
32. Eichler, "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations," 89.
33. Hooper, "Masculinities and Masculinism." 51.

ing cultivates what may be called "technomasculinity," where competence with systems and capacity for abstract violence replaces but retains the line of logic, whereas military capability demonstrates masculine superiority.

Technostrategic Capitalist Thinking

The integration of AI and drone warfare within capitalist military-industrial complexes reveals how gendered structures operate through economic logic. Gibney's analysis of late capitalism emphasizes how everything becomes commodified and subject to perpetual innovation. Applied to defense contexts, this produces an arms race driven not primarily by security needs but by profit imperatives. Defense contractors like BAE Systems collaborate with technology firms to develop ever-more sophisticated killing systems, generating profit through perpetual technological development.[34]

As long as AI is a tool of the state, it is gendered, as noted by hooks, "Patriarchy has become merely a sub-heading under the dominant system of imperialist capitalism".[35] Weapons ultimately serve the interests of the state, and the state itself has specific power and interests that are, to some degree, independent of those of the ruling class, yet still structured by patriarchal logics.[36]

The Racialized Violence of Targeting

The gendered and racialized dimensions of targeting decisions represent perhaps the most profound way that AI and drone warfare maintains rather than reduces existing hierarchies. The designation of combatants versus civilians, the assessment of threats, and the calculations of acceptable collateral damage all encode masculinist and racialized assumptions, especially when embedded in supposedly objective algorithms. Drone warfare produces "a view to a kill," where distance and technological mediation enable particular ways of seeing populations that render them available for violence. Populations in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan appear through drone cameras as probable threats to be cataloged, monitored, and potentially eliminated. This paradigm reproduces colonial patterns of surveillance and domination, where bodies exist as security threats to be managed through violence.[37]

The gendered dimensions operate at multiple levels. First, targeting algorithms rely on behavioral patterns to identify combatants, frequently designating "military-age males" as legitimate targets based solely on demographic characteristics. This designation encodes assumptions about masculinity and violence. Next, women and children appear in targeting calculus primarily as "collateral damage," unfortunate but acceptable casualties in pursuit of male targets. This reproduces the logic by which bodies are ultimately rendered expendable to military objectives.[38] The targeting of individuals based on behavioral patterns rather than known identity institutionalizes this logic in authorizing killing based on algorithmic assessment that certain activities potentially indicate militant status.[39] The promise of objective, rational decision-making reproduces this masculinist epistemology if algorithms are presented as neutral and simple data processors without human bias, as referenced previously. Yet, as the National AI R&D Strategic Plan acknowledges, current data systematically underrepresents historically marginalized communities,[40] and training data reflects historical inequalities and algorithms encode existing biases.[41]

Limitations Analysis: Colonialism and Empire

Western feminist frameworks cannot be universally applied without attention to imperial power relations. Drone warfare represents a clear extension of imperial projects, enabling the United States and allied powers to project violence globally without the political costs of traditional military occupation, where populations living under an indefinite threat of violence are subjected to surveillance regimes and are permanently available for targeting. The technology further embodies colonial relationships through asymmetrical surveillance capabilities, where systems and weapons developed by wealthier countries are inaccessible to their enemies. Further, AI-enabled decision-support systems fuse phone records, satellite images, and intelligence to turn human relationships and daily activities into targetable data points.[42]

Policy Recommendations and Areas for Future Research

Addressing the gendered dimensions of AI and drone warfare requires extensive reforms that transform militarized violence structures. Mandatory intersectional gender impact

34. Tobias Gibney, "Unpacking Late Capitalism," *University of Sydney News & Opinion*, December 20, 2022, https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2022/12/20/unpacking-late-capitalism.html; "How AI Is Changing Warfare," *The Economist.*
35. Bell Hooks, Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 103.
36. Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 4 (1983): 643–44.
37. Gregory, Derek. "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, nos. 7–8 (2011): 189-190. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411423027.
38. Gregory, "From a View to a Kill," 199-203; Judith Butler, B*odies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–4, 8, 16; Johnson, "Artificial Intelligence and Future Warfare," 164.
39. Elbatanony, "Role of Artificial Intelligence in Modern Warfare," 270–271, 274.
40. National Science and Technology Council, Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence, *National Artificial Intelligence Research and Development Strategic Plan: 2023 Update* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, 2023), 28.
41. Johnson, "Artificial Intelligence and Future Warfare," 157.
42. Gregory, "From a View to a Kill," 193-196; How AI Is Changing Warfare," *The Economist.*

assessments should precede all investment in defense technology development, examining how systems affect populations across gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, and disability. Incorporating input from feminist scholars, human rights organizations, and representatives from targeted communities may assist in preventing software from embedding masculinist assumptions about legitimate violence into purportedly neutral algorithms.[43] Algorithmic transparency is also included here. All targeting algorithms should undergo an independent audit that does not pose any risk to national security. As stated by the National Science and Technology Council under President Biden, training data must not encode discriminatory patterns, with historical bias identified and corrected.[44]

Further, this includes a review of recognition and visualization software, in which codes that feed AI Algorithms effectively identify legitimate targets. This considered, identification based on verified intelligence rather than algorithmic pattern-recognition should be required.[45] Strike authorization should ensure meaningful human control over lethal decisions, with the "burden of proof" resting on those authorizing violence over the elusive blame game of software.[46] An example of these dangers includes the inability to hold countries or individuals legally accountable for war crimes conducted through autonomous lethal weapons systems that independently conduct operations without human input.[47]

Clarified international humanitarian law must require meaningful human control over lethal decisions and prohibit weapons systems incapable of distinguishing combatants from civilians within complex environments. The 1977 Additional Protocol I standard must be applied to AWS in requiring independent testing before deployment.[48] Once implemented, strengthened accountability mechanisms will be required with clear hierarchies of responsibility and must subject commanders and operators to prosecution for international humanitarian law violations.[49] Independent civilian oversight boards with authority to investigate will be better regulatory bodies than the current anarchic policy of self-policing.

These reforms, while necessary, remain insufficient without broader demilitarization of the state. As Eichler observes, "a demilitarization of masculinities needs to go hand in hand with a demilitarization of femininities that support militarized masculinities".[50] Ultimately, this would serve as the most transformative strategy in protecting civilians, maintaining degrees of humanity in modern conflict, and challenging gendered structures of the state.

Conclusion

Overall, recent technological developments around the use of AI and drone warfare have not degendered conflict but rather have reconfigured how gender operates within military institutions and practices of violence. The apparent challenges to traditional hegemonic militarized masculinity represent surface transformations that leave deeper structures of militarized masculinity fundamentally intact while creating new forms of gendered hierarchy. Though many argue the removal of human agency in decision-making and manual data manipulation may degender concepts of warfare, as long as AI and drones are weaponized as a tool of the state, they inherently serve masculinist principles and help maintain current systems of socio-political order.

The conceptual framework developed through intersectional feminist analysis shows that gender never operates in isolation but always intersects with race, class, sex, and culture to structure who can legitimately exercise violence and whose bodies are rendered available for destruction.[51] Patriarchal logic operates through this imperialist capitalism to structure technological development and deployment. Technostrategy, as theorized by Cohn, is clear in the case of AI warfare, wherein the promise of emotionally detached, algorithmically optimized killing becomes the ideal form of militarized masculinity.[52] These policy recommendations, such as mandatory gender impact assessments, algorithmic transparency, strengthened accountability, and updated legal frameworks, are interventions that are capable of mitigating harms.

The current moment does not represent the degendering of war but rather an opportunity to make visible how deeply gender structures militarized violence. Imagining security beyond militarism and hegemonic domination will ultimately be best for humanity and the future of conflict. As we see the rise of AI and drones in unfolding warfare, it brings one to ask what holds for militarized gender roles and statehood in a globalized, nuclear, and AI-informed international community. Women's peace activism has historically played central roles in disrupting militarized gender roles and presenting alternatives to violence.[53] Elevating marginalized voices and promoting ethical technological improvement can ultimately foster elaborate interdependent innovation competitions that change humanity for the better.

43. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 140; Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," 690.
44. National Science and Technology Council, *National Artificial Intelligence Research and Development Strategic Plan*.
45. Gregory, "From a View to a Kill," 201-203; Johnson, "Artificial Intelligence and Future Warfare," 158-159, 168.
46. Gregory, "From a View to a Kill," 196, 199-203.
47. Michael Flood, "Men's Collective Struggles for Gender Justice: The Case of Anti-Violence Activism," in *Men's Activism in Gender Justice*, ed. Michael Flood (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 10; Cockburn and Enloe, "Militarism, Patriarchy, and Peace Movements," 137-138
48. Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 404.
49.Bode and Huelss, "Autonomous Weapons Systems and Changing Norms," 404-405.
50. Eichler, "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations," 89.
51. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 140; Butler, Bodies That Matter, 18, 116–117.
52. Cohn, "Sex and Death," 690, 717.
53. Cockburn and Enloe, "Militarism, Patriarchy, and Peace Movements," 137-158; Flood, "Men's Collective Struggles for Gender Justice," 8, 10.

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Inability of United Nations Refugee Law to Address Current Refugee Crises: An Analysis of The 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol

*By: Grace Funk**

Abstract: The United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention and subsequent 1967 Protocol established modern international refugee law. The 1951 Convention identified the characteristics that define refugee status and set forth the legal obligations of states to protect the refugees they receive, such as the principle of non-refoulement. The 1967 Protocol expanded the scope of the 1951 Convention, which was formed after World War II largely to cope with an influx of European refugees, and enabled it to be applied universally. Even though the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol made great strides in confronting and codifying the needs of refugees, they do not properly address the challenges of the 21st century, such as climate change or gang violence. However, the narrow scope of the documents written in the mid-1900s still governs international refugee law today, creating even more obstacles for refugees fleeing modern dangers that were not originally foreseen. This article will analyze how the perseverance of these historical interpretations actually hinders governments from sufficiently protecting refugees in the 21st century and why the United Nations has not created an updated convention for refugee law.

Key Words: Refugees; International Law; United Nations; Anti-Migration Sentiment; Burden-sharing

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Introduction

International refugee law emerged from the same type of crisis it would eventually be designed to prevent. After World War II, there were eleven million displaced persons in Europe and much debate about the qualities that made an individual a refugee.[1] There was no central protocol at this time that defined refugee status or detailed the resettlement process. Thus, to address the influx of displaced persons who were unwilling or unable to return home, either because they feared for their lives or had their homes and livelihoods destroyed, the newly created United Nations held a conference. The results of this conference and its 1967 continuation are the cornerstone of international refugee law today: the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. These documents were the first of their kind and are still fundamental to the ways in which governments treat refugees in the 21st century.

However, while the standards set in the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol were groundbreaking at the time of their formation, they are unable to address certain challenges that face the modern refugee, such as climate change, gang violence, and economic hardship. This paper will analyze how the legal framework established in the documents hinders governments from offering much-needed protection to refugees facing uniquely 21st-century crises yet remains the gold standard for international refugee law. Furthermore, this paper will examine the impact of anti-migration sentiments and disproportionate burden-sharing schemes in preventing an updated convention from being formulated at the United Nations. The combination of rising xenophobic identity politics across much of the Western world, economic anxieties over job and resource competition, and inter-country disagreements over the financial burdens of supporting refugees forms a steep hurdle for many UN member states to consider and agree upon a convention fit for modern times.

Development History of International Refugee Norms

Before the creation of international institutions like the League of Nations or the United Nations, refugee relief services were provided by non-governmental organizations. Groups like the Red Cross could lend material assistance but could not facilitate legal resettlement for refugees without a license from governments.[2] After lobbying from Red Cross leadership, the nascent League of Nations appointed a High Commissioner in 1921 to coordinate the legal definition of refugees and help secure their resettlement and employment.[3] However, international refugee agreements coordinated by the League's High Commissioner were limited to specific national groups. For example, the League's 1933 Convention relating to the International Status of Refugees addressed the status of only Russian and Armenian refugees, and its 1938 Convention only refugees from Germany.[4] Importantly, the principle of non-refoulement, a defining feature of the 1951 Convention that prevents refugees from being returned to their home country by force, was first introduced in the League's 1933 Convention.[5]

The dissolution of the League of Nations and the end of World War II forced the new United Nations to confront the challenge of how to manage millions of stateless refugees. Thus, the 1951 Convention was born. It defined a refugee as an individual who is outside their country of nationality and unwilling to return "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" but only "as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951."[6] But the events occurring before 1951 meant either 1) events occurring before 1951 in Europe or 2) events occurring before 1951 in Europe or elsewhere, left to the discretion of each ratifying state.[7] In practice, though, states considered this convention geographically bound to refugee-causing events in Europe with World War II still fresh in the collective consciousness; they did not apply this convention universally without bounds. The 1951 Convention also prohibited refoulement of a refugee by a ratifying state, as previously established by the League of Nations' 1933 Convention.[8]

The limitations of time and geography detailed in the 1951 Convention led to the establishment of the 1967 Protocol. The Protocol stated that "new refugee situations have arisen since the Convention has been adopted," originally to address the refugee crisis of World War II.[9] The Cold War and African and Asian decolonization movements led to the displacement of millions of people. For instance, the 1951 failed uprising against communism in Hungary led to the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, when hundreds of thousands of Hungarians left their country to escape Soviet control.[10] In South Asia, the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 resulted in the displacement of 14 million people.[11] In Africa, the former

1. Jennifer Popowycz, "'The Last Million:' Eastern European Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany," The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, April 3, 2022, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/last-million-eastern-european-displaced-persons-postwar-germany.
2. Gilbert Jaeger, "On the History of the International Protection of Refugees," International Review of the Red Cross 83, no. 843 (September 2001): 727–38, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1560775500119285, 728.
3. Jaeger, "On the History of the International Protection of Refugees," 728.
4. U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, "Defining 'Refugees'—An Exclusionary Legacy," U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, May 20, 2025, https://refugees.org/defining-refugees-an-exclusionary-legacy/.
5. Jaeger, "On the History of the International Protection of Refugees," 730.
6. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," conclusion date: July 28, 1951, and December 16, 1966, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Online, https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees, 14.
7. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," 15.
8. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," 30.
9. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," 51.
10. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "Operation Safe Haven: The Hungarian Refugee Crisis of 1956 | USCIS." U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, January 25, 2025. https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives/operation-safe-haven-the-hungarian-refugee-crisis-of-1956.
11. Lydia DePillis, Kulwant Saluja, and Denise Lu, "A Visual Guide to 75

European colonies of Algeria, Congo, Angola, and Nigeria fought wars of independence from their colonizers and then civil wars that triggered a surge in refugees fleeing the violence.[12] The 1967 Protocol therefore proclaimed, "it is desirable that equal status should be enjoyed by all refugees covered by the definition in the Convention, irrespective of the dateline of 1 January 1951."[13]

International Refugee Laws' Inability to Address New Refugee Crises

The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol clearly state that a refugee must have a substantiated concern of persecution based on a characteristic that fits within five distinct categories: race, religion, nationality, social group membership, or political opinion. While this definition certainly was appropriate at the time the Convention and Protocol were passed and still is relevant today for many refugees, there are refugee crises today that do not fit within the conventional mold. The three major refugee-causing plights that are not covered in traditional international refugee law are climate change, gang violence, and poverty or the destruction of economic livelihoods.

I. Climate Change

Climate change is widely considered to be one of – if not the – greatest challenges of modern times. By the end of the 21st century, 2 billion people could be displaced by climate change, yet they would not be considered as refugees under current conventions and thus not entitled to any legal protections.[14] Furthermore, by just 2040, the number of countries facing potentially extreme climate events will rise from three to 65, and many of the soon-to-be-included countries are already hosting populations escaping severe climate environments.[15] These 65 countries at risk actually host more than 40 percent of all displaced refugees.[16] So, if those displaced persons – in addition to the indigenous populations of those countries – must all flee from climate disaster, an even greater refugee crisis will need to be addressed.

Many of the regions that are the most affected by climate are coastal and low-lying. Cities such as Jakarta and Venice, as well as island nations such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, are threatened by rising sea levels.[17] One man from Kiribati, Ioane Teitiota, tried to establish a basis for climate refugees, which, in 2015, led to the first ruling by the UN Human Rights Committee on a person seeking asylum in another country from climate change.[18] Mr. Teitiota applied for asylum in New Zealand and argued that climate change was making Kiribati uninhabitable: there were violent land disputes because the amount of habitable land was decreasing with rising sea levels; freshwater was becoming contaminated with salt water; soil was no longer able to support subsistence farming.[19] His asylum claim was denied by New Zealand, and after he and his family were deported back to Kiribati, he filed a complaint with the UN Human Rights Committee alleging that New Zealand had "violated his right to life."[20]

The Committee's decision for Mr. Teitiota's case was twofold. Its ruling stated that while New Zealand was justified in rejecting the asylum claim because "sufficient protection measures [like sea walls] were put in place" in Kiribati, still protecting Mr. Teitiota's right to life, countries are not allowed to deport people who do face right-to-life violations as a result of climate change.[21] This decision could be a promising sign that the United Nations is recognizing the need to protect climate refugees, but the ruling is not legally binding or accepted by ratification in the same way the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol are. It is just symbolic.

II. Gang Violence

In addition to climate change, gang violence in Latin America and the Caribbean is a source of a refugee crisis not addressed in international refugee law put forth by the United Nations. It is important to note that only nine percent of the global population lives in Latin America, yet the region constitutes one-third of global homicides, 40 percent of which can be attributed to gangs.[22] Gang leaders can control every aspect of life in their communities and enforce their rules by violence and intimidation. In Jamaica, local gang leaders, or "dons," control community entrances and exits, dispute resolution, and access to basic services and aid resources.[23]

The presence of dominant gangs also makes states

Years of Major Refugee Crises around the World," Washington Post, December 21, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/historical-migrant-crisis/.

12. DePillis, Saluja, and Lu, "A Visual Guide to 75 Years of Major Refugee Crises around the World."

13. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," 51.

14. "Can We Rewrite the 1951 Refugee Convention for the 21st Century? | CBC Radio," CBCnews, July 20, 2018, https://www.cbc.ca/radio/sunday/the-sunday-edition-july-22-2018-1.4754841/can-we-rewrite-the-1951-refugee-convention-for-the-21st-century-1.4754912.

15. "How Climate Change Impacts Refugees and Displaced Communities," USA for UNHCR, November 12, 2024, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/how-climate-change-impacts-refugees-and-displaced-communities/.

16. "How Climate Change Impacts Refugees and Displaced Communities," USA for UNHCR, November 12, 2024, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/how-climate-change-impacts-refugees-and-displaced-communities/.

17. Joanna Apap, "The concept of 'climate refugee:' towards a possible definition," European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698753/EPRS_BRI(2021)698753_EN.pdf.

18. "Historic UN Human Rights Case Opens Door to Climate Change Asylum Claims," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, January 21, 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/01/historic-un-human-rights-case-opens-door-climate-change-asylum-claims.

19. "Historic UN Human Rights Case Opens Door to Climate Change Asylum Claims."

20. "Historic UN Human Rights Case Opens Door to Climate Change Asylum Claims."

21. "Historic UN Human Rights Case Opens Door to Climate Change Asylum Claims."

22. Lucia Dammert and Carolina Sampó, working paper, What Do We Know about Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean? (United Nations Development Programme Latin America and the Caribbean Working Papers, 2025), https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-10/46_crimen_organizado.pdf, 3.

23. Dammert and Sampó, What Do We Know about Organized Crime, 18.

weaker and forms power vacuums that gangs are happy to fill. In the north of Colombia, the Clan del Golfo gang exerts influence over 392 municipalities, and in the south – beyond just controlling business, mobility, and taxation issues – it corrupts official Colombian police forces and judges.[24] In Mexico, the Jalisco Cartel used tactics such as extortion and murder to influence the country's June 2024 elections and likely established control over some municipal officials.[25] While refugees fleeing gang violence could sometimes fit within the refugee definition pertaining to targeted prosecution of a particular social group, such as those who publicly oppose gang activities and crimes, many are not targeted for a specific reason. Gang behavior is often violence for the sake of violence or for retribution or drug-related business purposes.

Over 2 million people have fled gang violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America, a term that includes El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, since 2019.[26] However, a "fear of general strife" is not enough for an individual to qualify for refugee status; persecution is defined "as an extreme concept…mere harassment does not amount to persecution."[27] Potential refugees would have to demonstrate to a foreign government that their refusal to join a gang consists of a political opinion or that their young age, which could be construed as a social group, made them targets for gang recruitment.[28] But, for those who fear for their lives in general because of gang violence or were, for instance, extorted not on the basis of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, there is not a clear path forward for resettlement. It is often extremely difficult for those fleeing gang-based violence to obtain refugee status and be safely resettled.[29]

III. Poverty: Destruction of Economic Livelihoods

Extreme poverty is yet another crisis that causes displacement but is not considered in international refugee law. The concept of an economic refugee is frequently confused with that of an economic migrant. Economic migrants are individuals who, in a voluntary and unconstrained manner, leave their home country and are free to return; they migrate not because "they have a bad life but because they want a better one."[30] An economic refugee, on the other hand, considers their migration "an escape from economic oppression;" the poverty they experience in their home country "prevents them from satisfying their basic human needs."[31]

For example, in Somalia, the 2011 famine and drought resulted in more than 500,000 Somalis fleeing the country.[32] Moreover, between 2005 and 2009, millions of Zimbabweans fled to South Africa to find economic sanctuary, not just because they simply wanted more money but because they found very few people could "maintain viable livelihood strategies" without relying on foreign exchange or remittances.[33] However, because they were fleeing poverty as a result of the failure of their livelihoods, only 10 percent were legally resettled by South Africa; according to a South African NGO, this was because they were "escaping the economic consequences of [a] political situation," not political persecution as understood in the 1951 Convention.[34] The conditions causing economic refugees to flee poverty can sometimes be conflated with other factors, such as political violence that can destroy livelihoods. But, for those genuinely fleeing economic oppression and seeking better lives, the path forward as a refugee is closed for now.

Regional Refugee Codes as Positive Examples for the United Nations

While the United Nations' refugee codes do not address certain challenges of this century, including climate change, gang violence, and impoverished livelihoods, there are two regional refugee codes that could be an inspiring model for the institution in the future. One code, the Organization of African Unity's Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, responded to the refugee crisis on the African continent, and the other code, the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, to the refugee crisis in Latin America.

I. Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa

The Organization of African Unity's Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa gathered together its member states in 1969 to tackle the continent's mass displacement events.[35] The Organization of African Unity – the precursor to the African Union – observed simultaneous refugee flows across the continent. In Rwanda, the Hutus overthrew the Tutsi monarchy in the violent 1959-1962 conflict, triggering Tutsi migration.[36] Backlash against Portuguese colonization also led to brutal conflicts; for instance, in Angola, a rebellion against colonial rule in 1961 resulted in Portuguese assaults that drove 350,000 Angolans into the Democratic Re-

24. Dammert and Sampó, What Do We Know about Organized Crime, 21.
25. Dammert and Sampó, What Do We Know about Organized Crime, 23.
26. "Instability in the Northern Triangle," Council on Foreign Relations, September 19, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-instability-northern-triangle.
27. Grayce Cheng, "Gang Persecution as Grounds for Asylum in the USA," Forced Migration Review, n.d., https://www.fmreview.org/cheng/.
28. Cheng, "Gang Persecution as Grounds for Asylum in the USA."
29. Cheng, "Gang Persecution as Grounds for Asylum in the USA."
30. Agnieszka Piekutowska and Elżbieta Kużelewska, "Economic Refugees: An Analysis of the Phenomenon in the Context of the EU Migration Crisis," Irregular Migration as a Challenge for Democracy, October 12, 2018, 125–38, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781780687025.009, 125-126.
31. Piekutowska and Kużelewska, "Economic Refugees," 126.
32. Alexander Betts, Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 17.
33. Betts, Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement, 39.
34. Betts, Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement, 39.
35. "Organization of African Unity Convention: Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa," conclusion date: September 10, 1969, African Union Online, https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36400-treaty-36400-treaty-oau_convention_1963.pdf, 4.
36. Randall Fegley, "Rwandan Hutus Overthrow Tutsi Monarchy," EBSCO, 2023, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/rwandan-hutus-overthrow-tutsi-monarchy.

public of the Congo.[37] Furthermore, by 1966, approximately 100,000 Sudanese individuals fled to Uganda to escape their own civil war.[38]

The refugees that fled to neighboring countries for a general fear of violence were not protected under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. From these conflicts arose a broader definition of a refugee put forth by the Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. In addition to the established UN definition, a refugee could also be defined as a person who, "owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order" in their country of origin, is forced to leave their home.[39] Under this definition, a Sudanese person fleeing civil war would be protected from being returned to Sudan and entitled to a resettlement process in Uganda, whereas before the African Convention, that same person could have been rejected on the basis that their fear was of general violence, not persecution due to religion, race, nationality, social group membership, or political opinion.

II. The Cartagena Declaration on Refugees

The Cartagena Declaration on Refugees was adopted in 1984 to recognize that the refugee crisis in Latin America had "evolved in recent years to the point at which it deserves special attention."[40] Before the adoption of the declaration, the region had experienced civil wars as well as the emergence of military dictatorships. For example, the Guatemalan Civil War from 1960-1996 between the government and rebel groups included guerrilla warfare tactics and mass killings of Mayan citizens, spurring a refugee exodus among Guatemalans mainly to neighboring countries.[41] In Nicaragua, members of the Somoza family ruled the country as a dictatorship from the 1930s to the 1970s, followed by a violent civil war in the late 1970s to 1990 that forced tens of thousands to flee, mostly to Costa Rica.[42] El Salvador was similarly ruled by a dictatorship from the 1930s to the 1970s but erupted into civil war lasting from 1979 to 1992 that displaced more than a million El Salvadorean people.[43]

Like the situation with African refugees before the Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, Latin American refugees fleeing civil unrest were not protected by the United Nations conventions. Therefore, Belize, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Venezuela formed the Colloquium on the International Protection of Refugees in Central America, Mexico, and Panama, which then wrote the Cartagena Declaration. This declaration expanded the definition of a refugee from the five categories of persecution to include individuals who have "fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order."[44] Through the Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, the state signatories updated their conception of refugee norms from the 1951 Convention, which can serve as a successful example for the United Nations General Assembly to update international refugee norms.

Regional pacts of any kind are frequently easier to implement compared to their international counterparts because of their defined geographical limits. Expanding the definition of a refugee to match the scope of the African and Latin American Conventions would perhaps then also mean a simultaneous expansion of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to help the international community cope with an influx of claims. However, organizing the necessary time, personnel, and money could hinder projects even if the definition is expanded. Yet, while the effort and resources needed to reform refugee protocols at the UN level are immense, such reform is worth attempting to help vulnerable refugees facing existential threats worldwide.

Obstacles to Updating the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol

The 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol were pivotal documents in shaping international refugee norms and establishing a protection scheme for persecuted individuals. The advent of refugee crises caused by modern challenges such as climate change, gang violence, and destruction of economic livelihoods has led to discussions about potential reform of the United Nations refugee codes. The danger in reform is that certain protections already codified could be dismantled. Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, actually argued against a revision of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, calling it too risky: "Putting the Refugee Convention…on the table would be a catastrophic error" in today's political environment, particularly with the anti-migration sentiment in much of the United States and Europe[45]. It is that anti-migration sentiment, along with disproportionate burden-sharing measures, that stand as obstacles to the refugee codes being expanded and

37. Paul M. Whitaker, "The Revolutions of 'Portuguese' Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studie*s 8, no. 1 (April 1970): 15–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x00019339, 17.
38. Robert F. Gorman, "African Convention Expands the Definition of Refugees," EBSCO, 2023, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/african-convention-expands-definition-refugees.
39. "Organization of African Unity Convention," 6.
40. "Cartagena Declaration on Refugees," conclusion date: November 22, 1984, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Online, https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/legacy-pdf/45dc19084.pdf, 33.
41. "Guatemala," The Center for Justice and Accountability, n.d., https://cja.org/where-we-work/guatemala/.
42. Charles G. Ripley III, "Crisis Prompts Record Emigration from Nicaragua, Surpassing Cold War Era," Migration Policy Institute, March 7, 2023, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/record-emigration-nicaragua-crisis.
43. "Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992)," American Archives of Public Broadcasting, n.d., https://americanarchive.org/exhibits/newshour-cold-war/el-salvador.
44. "Cartagena Declaration on Refugees," 36.
45. Jamey Keaten, "U.N. Refugee Agency Chief Suggests That US Deportation Practices Violate the Law," PBS, October 7, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-n-refugee-agency-chief-suggests-that-us-deportation-practices-violate-the-law.

updated to include more crises of the 21st century.

I. Anti-Migration Sentiments in the West

Anti-migration rhetoric reduces the likelihood that the United Nations conventions would be updated – or that they would be updated to support a more inclusive definition of a refugee. Recently, on December 2, 2025, President Donald Trump expressed an extreme anti-immigrant outlook, claiming that Somali immigrants "contribute nothing" to the United States and that the country will "go the wrong way if we keep taking in garbage."[46] US homeland security adviser Stephen Miller argued that "migrants and their descendants recreate the conditions, and terrors, of their broken homelands."[47] In the United Kingdom, more than 100,000 people gathered together in a September 2025 anti-immigration protest named Unite the Kingdom to rally against allegedly uncontrolled Muslim migration.[48] Anti-immigration activists from the United Kingdom as well as France, Germany, and the United States promoted the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which posits that white Europeans are slowly but surely being replaced by non-white, mainly Muslim, immigrants.[49] In Germany alone, Muslim Turks and Kurds are subject to discrimination and are even the targets of serious crimes; in 2020, a far-right extremist targeted two shisha bars, places where Turkish and Kurdish refugees gather, and killed nine people – at least five of whom were Turkish nationals.[50] Commissioner Grandi said reviewing the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol could potentially be dangerous and lead to more restrictive refugee codes as the anti-immigration rhetoric from the United States and Europe continues to gain traction.

II. Disproportionate Burden-Sharing Frameworks

Burden-sharing in the refugee context refers to the process in which states share the responsibility of taking in refugees both financially and physically.[51] Some states, due to their individual policies, tend to receive more refugees than other states. For example, Eritrean refugees have about a 100 percent chance of reaching refugee status in Sweden but less than a 30 percent chance in France.[52] In this case, the physical burden is much higher on Sweden than France. Migration routes for refugees coming to Europe from the Middle East or North Africa typically pass through or end in Greece, Spain, and Italy, increasing the number of refugees hosted by those countries due to their geographic location. Refugees from Iraq who arrive in Greece face a 0 percent acceptance rate there yet a 64 percent acceptance rate in Germany and 81 percent in Sweden.[53] Greece's low acceptance rate shifts the responsibility of burden-sharing to countries like Germany and Sweden, just as France's reluctance to take in Eritrean refugees puts a heavier burden on Sweden. Those states with less of a burden have no incentive to restructure refugee norms because they are free riders: they support humanitarianism and the rights of refugees while not diverting a larger share of their resources toward resettlement.

Expanding the scope of the definition of a refugee can disrupt the patterns of free-rider nations. These restrictive states would no longer be able to exploit the narrow definition of a refugee under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol to the extent they do so now because an expanded definition means increased refugee claims across the system on uniquely modern issues. Free-rider nations will be forced to absorb refugees from a much larger pool containing a wide variety of demographics beyond those which they have banned. These self-imposed restrictions on refugees from certain areas would likely be negated by an influx of refugees

facing many different crises, including the climate, gang violence, or poverty.

Conclusion

The United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol remain the gold standard for international refugee law, even though they do not address certain challenges facing modern refugees. Refugees fleeing rising sea levels, escaping gang brutality, or searching for new economic livelihoods remain unprotected. Still, the probability that the United Nations refugee codes will be expanded to protect them is low with the rise of anti-immigration sentiment and the lack of incentives for free-rider burden-sharing nations. Nevertheless, small steps can still be taken as the international community works toward this larger goal. For example, international lawyers and immigration advocates could argue that those fleeing climate disasters are a member of a social group; in Tuvalu, all residents share the future loss of their homeland as an identifiable society and distinguishable group and would certainly classify themselves as such. These small steps can perhaps begin to catalyze a change to the deeply embedded refugee paradigm at the United Nations.

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51. Marnie Jane Thomson, "Burden Sharing," *The Sage Encyclopedia of Refugee Studies,* n.d., https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071919422.n29.
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Law Enforcement or Self-Defense?: An Analysis of the United States' Maritime Strike, Operation Southern Spear in the Caribbean under International Law

By: Mathias Nicholls

Abstract: This paper covers the legality of the United States maritime strike campaign Operation Southern Spear, which, from September to the current day, takes action against alleged drug vessels in the Caribbean Sea and parts of the North Pacific Ocean. The main legal debate centers around whether the strikes are justified under international law and are self-defensive acts, as the United States claims, or whether they constitute unlawful uses of force, which was the position of Venezuela and Colombia. The paper analyzes the United Nations Charter, the prevalent principles of jus ad bellum, the law of the sea, the governing standards of non-international armed conflicts, and statutes regarding the arbitrary deprivation of life, and comes to the conclusion that the United States' legal justifications are inadequate. Drug trafficking and the spread of fentanyl have been significant domestic and foreign policy concerns for the United States in recent years after an uptick in public health crises stemming from the influx of narcotics, and while the United States' official response attributes these as an "armed attack," it still does not meet the necessary requirements to trigger Article 51 self-defense, nor does cartel activity in the manner which it being undertaken fulfill the requisite categories to be considered a non-international armed conflict. The paper further raises concerns about the strike's purpose and location, seeing as the maritime zone operations alongside the due diligence executed before the strikes seem to violate principles of international sovereignty, proportionality, and necessity. One of the highlighted strikes was the purported "double-tap" strike, which heightened concerns over human rights violations within the scope of the operation. The paper ultimately affirms that Operation Southern Spear is largely in violation of international human rights law due to its foundational justification being based on an unsupported understanding of self-defense, as well as the frequent violation of international safeguards on law enforcement operations.

Key Words: Operation Southern Spear, Narcoterrorism, International Law, Human Rights, Arbitrary Deprivation of Life, Exclusive Economic Zone, Territorial Sovereignty

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Introduction

One of the major political and legal controversies of 2025 came from footage released by the United States Department of Defense, which showed an operation it undertook on September 2nd, 2025, subsequently sparking a litany of legal and ethical questions regarding the conduct of the United States in missile strikes toward alleged drug vessels in Caribbean and Pacific waters.[1] Following this strike, there has been a concurrent stream of follow-up operations, which have also proved a legal topic of discussion, as many international legal bodies and human rights organizations condemned them as potential extrajudicial killings instead of self-defense, which is the official claim from the United States government. When consulting all the relevant legal statutes and the case presented by the United States, there is substantial evidence that exhibits that the operations are inconsistent with international law in its extrajudicial strikes on Colombian and Venezuelan citizens, predicated on a misunderstanding of what prompts a pre-emptive strike, as well as the punishment for drug trafficking.

The September 2nd, 2025 strike in particular has prompted debate by legal scholars who question whether the United States' military conduct constitutes a war crime, due to the military engaging in a "double-tap" strike, which many legal experts have claimed was without justification, as well as illegal under international law. Colombian and former Venezuelan presidents Gustavo Petro and Nicolas Maduro have condemned all of the U.S strikes, with Petro calling the strikes " 'murders,' questioning the disproportionate use of force,"[2] and Maduro calling them another example of US aggression.[3] As such, the primary legal debate surrounding the incident is whether or not the United States is illegally violating the sovereignty of Colombia and Venezuela through its military operations. The secondary debate revolves around whether the United States had the authority to strike vessels containing drugs in the manner in which it did, or whether it violated international law. This also includes questions regarding the United States' conduct when acting within the territory of nations like Venezuela and Colombia, which were not included or involved in the operations. It is important to note that Nicolas Maduro, now former President of Venezuela, has since been captured by American forces and extradited to the United States. This, while indicative of some of the issues discussed in the analysis, is not the topic of contention, and as such will only serve to frame the issue, but not contribute to investigating it.

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3. "Venezuela's Maduro Says He's Ready to Declare State of Emergency after U.S. Military Strikes on Alleged Drug Boats." CBS News, 2025. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/venezuela-maduro-state-emergency-us-military-strikes-alleged-drug-boats/?.

The United States has consistently maintained that these are self-defense operations; however, that justification lies in a false characterization of legitimate principles, which are predicated on a notion of self-defense at odds with the legal definition under international law. Additionally, the United States Department of Justice released a legal opinion statement, which denoted that the strikes were, "consistent with the laws of armed conflict, and as such are lawful orders," and that, "Military personnel are legally obligated to follow lawful orders and, as such, are not subject to prosecution for following lawful orders."[4]

The United States of America

I. Justification for Strikes

The United States has maintained its position that the strikes it has carried out are part of a larger strategy of national security, as it has repeatedly cited the rise of the drug crisis in the United States as a matter of foreign intervention and attack. The United States has experienced a sharp increase in drug overdose deaths in the past decade, with cocaine-involved deaths rising 85% within the period of 2019-2023, from 15,883 to 29,449.[5] The Trump administration has specifically targeted cocaine and fentanyl trafficking, the latter being a synthetic opioid that has in recent years skyrocketed overdose deaths due to its intensely strong effects. The Drug Enforcement Administration classifies fentanyl as a "Schedule II controlled substance that is similar to morphine but about 100 times more potent."[6] According to the US Government Accountability Office, fentanyl accounted for 60% of all overdose deaths (48,000) in the United States.[7] They also noted that a majority of the fentanyl, and subsequent chemicals and equipment used to make it, come in from Mexico or China, stating that 80% of fentanyl seized was done so in the southwest border region.[8] As such, the new Trump Administration has made it its mission to curb fentanyl, which they have just labeled a "weapon of mass destruction" on December 15th, 2025[9], which has subsequently prompted them

4. "DOJ Drafts Legal Opinion Backing Immunity for US Troops Involved in Boat Strikes, Sources Say | Reuters." Reuters, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/doj-drafts-legal-opinion-backing-immunity-us-troops-involved-boat-strikes-2025-11-12/.
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8. Ibid
9. Stepansky, Joseph. "Trump Signs Executive Order Labelling Fentanyl 'Weapon of Mass Destruction.'" Al Jazeera, December 16, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/15/trump-signs-executive-order-labeling-fentanyl-weapon-of-mass-destruction#:~:text=Washington%2C%20DC%20–%20United%20States%20President,operations%20against%20drug%20cartels%20and.

to claim a need for self-defense. President Trump claimed that, "There's no doubt that America's adversaries are trafficking fentanyl into the United States, in part because they want to kill Americans."[10] The perceived threat of drug cartels by the administration caused President Trump to send a notice to various congressional committees, in which they justified what was at that point only three strikes as an armed conflict.[11]

II.Precedents of Non-International Armed Conflicts

It is an important distinction to note that since the Trump administration intentionally used the language of armed conflict, the conflict they claim would fall under the category of a Non-International Armed Conflict. According to International Humanitarian Law, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC) is an "Armed Conflict[s] between a State Party and one or more organised [*sic*] non-State Parties."[12] According to the UNDRR, "While NIAC occurs predominantly within a State, NIAC may feature extraterritorial aspects, and/or become internationalized with the involvement of foreign States in support of one or more Parties."[13] While this is often interpreted as armed conflicts with non-state entities within the confines of one state, such as domestic terror or rebel groups, the categorization of "non-state" also includes foreign non-state actors, which in this case could include a cartel or "narcoterrorist" organization that fulfills the requisite conditions. As mentioned, simple conflict with a non-state group does not indicate an NIAC. The conditions that trigger an NIAC classification are "'Internal disturbances and tensions, such as riots, isolated and sporadic acts of violence and other acts of a similar nature,' or 'Banditry, unorganized and short-lived insurrections, or terrorist activities.'"[14] An example of an NIAC that the United States was engaged in was in the post-9/11 period, where the United States engaged in retaliatory strikes against al-Qaeda after their terrorist attacks. In this case, the conditions of terrorism, and the condition of "intensity", as defined by the ICRC, which states:

"…indicators of intensity include, *inter alla:* the number, duration and intensity of individual confrontations between them, the type of weapons and other military equipment used, the number and calibre [*sic*] of munitions fired, the number of persons and types of forces partaking in the fighting, the number of casualties (including, inter alia, all persons killed, wounded, displaced or missing), the extent of material destruction, the number of civilians fleeing combat zones, the involvement of the UN Security Council, which may also be a reflection of the intensity of a conflict."[15]

The United States' "War on Terror" was founded on many of these conditions. This comparison warrants an analysis of both conflicts to ascertain how they differ and whether NIAC statutes may apply in either case. When comparing the intensity and organization of the drug crisis, neither legal precedent nor legal justification places the activity of the cartels within the same level of intensity previously associated with terrorist organizations. This has not stopped the White House from declaring that, "this administration has designated these narco terrorists as foreign terrorist organizations."[16] While they may claim that, and the cartels may even, in fact, in some of the many definitions, fit the label of terrorist organizations, they still do not satisfy the necessary aspects of a Non-International Armed Conflict. While drug trafficking does pose a sizeable threat to the American populace, it still is categorically different from a traditional attack, which is the only form of offensive action recognized by the law overseeing NIACs. Although some drug deaths are attributed to fentanyl being laced into other substances, it is still not a case of attack or intense terrorism.

The States of Colombia and Venezuela

I. Account of Damages and Threats from the US

The first strike on the alleged drug boats occurred on Sept 2nd, 2025[17], and the strikes have continued indefinitely, with the latest strike as of the writing of this article occurring on February 16th, 2026.[18] Within the known 42 strikes, there have been a total of 145 deaths reported.[19] The strikes are an ongoing continuation of the United States' campaign named Operation Southern Spear against the Venezuelan cartel Tren de Aragua, which has a large network that reaches into the United States; however, this has led to direct action by the United States against a foreign non-state entity without the permission of the presiding states' governments. As such, both Colombia and Venezuela have stated that the strikes are primarily illegal in International Law, but also that they are being carried out wrongfully in a way

10. Ibid
11. Savage, Charlie, and Eric Schmitt. "Trump 'Determined' the U.S. Is Now in a War with Drug Cartels, Congress Is Told - The New York Times." The New York Times, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/02/us/politics/trump-drug-cartels-war.html.
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13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. "Report How Is the Term 'Armed Conflict' Defined in International." International Committee of the Red Cross, 2024. https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document_new/file_list/armed_conflict_defined_in_ihl.pdf.
16. "Press Briefing: Karoline Leavitt Holds a Press Briefing at the White House - December 1, 2025." Roll Call Factbase, December 1, 2025. https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-press-conference-briefing-karoline-leavitt-december-1-2025/?
17. Lin, Margaret, Jeremy Chin, Aidan Arasasingham, and Marie Miller. 2026. "Timeline of Boat Strikes and Related Actions." Just Security. July 24, 2026. https://www.justsecurity.org/124002/timeline-vessel-strikes-related-actions/.
18. Lebowitz, Megan. "Trump Administration Strikes Three More Alleged Drug Boats in the Pacific and Caribbean." NBCNews.com, February 17, 2026. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/trump-administration/trump-military-strikes-three-alleged-drug-boats-pacific-caribbean-rcna259364.
19. Staff, Independent. "At Least 11 People Killed after Three 'narcoterrorists' Boat Strikes in Single Day." The Independent, February 17, 2026. https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-drug-boat-strikes-narcoterrorists-b2922275.html.

that is at times mistaken. President Gustavo Petro has specifically come out personally to state that, "launching missiles at small boats carrying a few people is a war crime."[20]

Prior to Maduro's capture, Venezuela had taken the position that the United States had repeatedly violated its sovereignty and territorial integrity with its incursions and attacks on boats within its territory. This comes after Donald Trump declared Venezuela's "Cartel de los Soles", a term used since the 1990s, "to refer to high-ranking military officers who had grown rich from drug-running,"[21] as a Maduro-led cartel and trafficking organization. Maduro's government rejected this, stating that it is a "'ridiculous fabrication' meant to 'justify an illegitimate and illegal intervention against Venezuela.'"[22]

II. Fatal Use of Force against Citizens by the US

In the wake of the strikes, both Colombia and Venezuela have claimed that the United States has engaged in the extrajudicial murder of its citizens. In response, the United States has repeatedly stated that, "All of these decisive strikes have been against designated narcoterrorists [*sic*], as affirmed by US intelligence, bringing deadly poison to our shores,"[23] which has been the underlying justification for its offensive actions. The US's conflation between the illicit narcotics operations within the countries and their leaders was the underlying motivation for its capture operation against Nicolas Maduro, which occurred on January 3rd, 2026. New York prosecutors cited both Mr. and Mrs. Maduro for having "abused their positions of public trust and corrupted once-legitimate institutions to import tons of cocaine into the United States."[24] However, regardless of whether or not Nicolas Maduro or Gustavo Petro are involved in trafficking, their claims are not that those killed were model citizens, nor were they all innocent of drug trafficking, but that they were killed in a way incongruent with legal principles and without the approval of the coastal nations. While the bulk of deaths have been Venezuelan nationals, there have been cases in which Colombian citizens have also been killed. The most famous case is that of Alejandro Carranza, who was murdered in a strike on September 15th, 2025. The details of his death are disputed, as there are varying claims of his reason for being in the region. The United States maintains that all of the people they have killed are involved in drug trafficking; however, Carranza's family and the Colombian government have maintained that Carranza's daily activities were simply fishing, which often took him near the area of the strike.[25] The family and government claim that the boat's engine had failed, which led it to drift within the area that the Trump Administration has designated a drug-running route.

III. Drug Cartels in the Region and the State's Involvement

In the analysis of the situation, it is vital to note the legal background that the United States cited for both its strikes on the vessels and its capture of Nicolas Maduro. The United States plainly stated that the "Cartel de los Soles," which is a term people often use to align government officials with corruption, is in fact real, and that Venezuela, or at least its top officials, has played a part in aiding and benefiting from drug trafficking. The US Department of Justice published an investigation on former President Maduro, where it claims, "the defendants participated in a corrupt and violent narco-terrorism conspiracy between the Venezuelan Cartel de Los Soles and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia ('FARC')."[26] Petro and Maduro have stated that the term "Cartel de los Soles" is merely a term used to malign politicians or officials who are at odds with the political aspirations of the people, but not necessarily corrupt. An investigation by the BBC shows that there is some truth to the claim. According to the BBC, Venezuelan cartel activities began in the 1980s-1990s, in response to the decline of Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel. Noting the potential financial benefits, many smuggling routes were established in Venezuela as a way to continue the drug trade. This increased with the support of then-President Hugo Chávez, who sympathized with guerrilla organizations like the FARC due to their left-wing ideological leaning, which heavily relied on drug revenue.[27] While it may be called a cartel, it does not operate under that structure, as it instead is a system of widespread corruption. The Maduro government allows this to happen because it saves them the trouble of having to pay their forces a livable salary if their security forces have a secondary source of revenue. Since then, the Maduro government has also been accused of collusion with these cartels by his former military intelligence chief, Hugo Carvajal, and former General Clíver Alcalá.[28] As such, it is somewhat true that Maduro has a hand in facilitating cartel activity and transit

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27. "What Is Cartel de Los Soles, Which the US Is Labelling a Terrorist Organisation?" BBC News, November 24, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8j4ye5x0mo.
28. "What Is Cartel de Los Soles, Which the US Is Labelling a Terrorist Organisation?"

from Venezuela to the United States and other territories; however, saying that he is at the head of a cartel or organization is a misrepresentation of these facts.

In the case of Colombia, Trump has recently designated Clan del Golfo a narco-terrorist organization and has alluded that Petro is "…next soon. I hope he's listening; he's going to be next."[29] While he has not done so yet, if the United States at any point attempts to allude to the Colombian government being involved in the drug trade, there is no evidence that points to internal involvement. If anything, the United States and Colombia have had a strong relationship and shared effort to curb drug production within the country.

IV. US Precedent

The United States has habitually undertaken these strikes and operations in Venezuela's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). They have perpetuated a fair number of strikes within the EEZ; however, they have also come under scrutiny recently for the additional search and seizure of vessels off the coast of Venezuela, with some fishing vessels and tankers being seized. The EEZ has been a widely disputed topic, as many countries debate the rights that they have within another nation's EEZ. The United States has routinely stated that it is entitled to conduct military surveys and undertake military operations within EEZs; however, the coastal host countries often have a different interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). A major debate arises from the fact that the United States is not a party to the UNCLOS; however, this does not necessarily mean that it is not beholden to many of its provisions. The primary argument for the United States' adherence to UNCLOS principles lies in its justification for its conduct regarding seabed mining, as well as its signatory status. According to former US Vice Admiral James Houck, there is a case to be made for the fact that the United States is friendly to the UNCLOS's seafloor regulations. This, namely, comes from the United States itself, which has stated that it has "an international legal obligation to not act contrary to the 'object and purpose' of the treaty."[30] This wording is intentional and relates to the legal principle of object and purpose outlined by the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. Within that convention, there was a portion which outlined "A treaty shall be interpreted in good faith in accordance with the ordinary meaning to be given to the terms of the treaty in their context and in light of its object and purpose."[31] Even though the US has not ratified the treaty and therefore is not a party to it, it still has to act within a certain framework due to having signed it, so that it does not violate the object and purpose of the treaty.[32]

In the signing of the UNCLOS in 1999, there were many different clauses that forbade the unauthorized use of weapons or military force within a country's territorial waters. The first comes via the definition of innocent passage, which is what allows countries to navigate EEZs without permission from the coastal state, which, in Article 19, states that: "Passage of a foreign ship shall be considered to be prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of the coastal State if in the territorial sea it engages in any of the following activities. (a) any threat or use of force against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence of the coastal State, or in any other manner in violation of the principles of international law embodied in the Charter of the United Nations. (b) any exercise or practice with weapons of any kind."[33] Within the same treaty, Brazil signed "The Brazilian Government understands that the provisions of the Convention do not authorize other States to carry out in the exclusive economic zone military exercises or manoeuvres [*sic*], in particular those that imply the use of weapons or explosives, without the consent of the coastal State."[34]

The United States has repeatedly violated this principle, which was made apparent in a dispute it had with China over military surveillance in the South China Sea. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen stated that "exclusive economic zones extend to two hundred nautical miles and every state has the right to enter them"[35] however, Huang Xueping, spokesman from China's Ministry of National Defense, had a different view, saying that any military surveillance or action done within China's EEZ was a violation of the UNCLOS, the Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone, the Continental Shelf of the People's Republic of China, and the Provisions of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Foreign-Related Maritime Scientific Research.[36] In analyzing all of the relevant statutes and precedential cases, it is abundantly clear that the United States has no right to attack and/or seize vessels within Venezuela's EEZ. The United States' insistence on its right to unilateral action within various EEZs is a demonstration of a habitual disregard for the customary international law established by the UNCLOS, which still applies to the US regardless of its ratification of the convention.

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36. Yu, "Jurisprudential Analysis of the U.S. Navy's Military Surveys."

The United Nations Charter and *jus ad bellum*

The following sections serve to analyze the relevant bodies of international law for the United States' maritime strikes against the alleged Venezuelan trafficking vessels. The analysis consists of reviewing the legal statutes under the United Nations Charter and principles of *jus ad bellum*, and using that to properly assess whether the strikes can use self-defense as justification for the use of force. It also serves to evaluate the strikes through the lens of international human rights law, giving particular focus to the prohibition on the arbitrary deprivation of life. These legal documents are the only ones applicable to the situation under international law. Maritime law and the United Nations Charter are necessary to rationalize the United States' actions within the territory belonging to Venezuela. *Jus ad bellum* and preemptive self-defense statutes are vital to check whether the cartels had triggered an NIAC and subsequently a self-defense response by the United States. The ICCPR is a fundamental document that enumerates international human rights against the arbitrary deprivation of human rights, which is one of the main legal concerns scholars allege the United States violated.[37] Together, it is possible to assess these legal frameworks and apply the findings to Operation Southern Spear and ascertain whether the strikes complied with established norms of international law.

I. United Nations Charter

A large point of contention within the conflict is whether the Trump Administration's strikes have defiled Venezuela's territorial sovereignty and integrity. Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter makes it clear that "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."38 The exact definition of this is where both countries have diverged in their interpretations, as the United States holds that it completely within its rights to take action where and when it did, while Venezuela is claiming that the strikes and actions taken by the United States are being done with the intention of affecting regime change within Caracas, which would be a violation of Venezuela's territorial integrity and political sovereignty. The US Ambassador to the UN claimed that the United States' actions are "consistent with Article 51 of the founding UN Charter."39 Venezuela's government alleged that the designation of the Cartel de los Soles is a lie engineered to justify "an illegitimate and illegal intervention against Venezuela in the classic US regime-change format."40 This point is especially prevalent now that the United States did exactly that and invaded Caracas and captured Nicolás Maduro.

The main bulk of the United States' potential defense lies in the exact area of its strikes. They claim that the strikes were not within Venezuelan territorial waters; however, they have also refused to release any evidence to that point, which raises questions as to the validity of their claim. While they may have violated the UNCLOS claim to EEZ protections, their actual violation of the UN Charter could be argued if they are willing to provide details on the exact location of the strikes. Venezuela's EEZ intersects with its territorial waters, so it could be reasonably inferred that the United States could have potentially violated its territorial space; nevertheless, this is an inferred claim that would need solid evidence to have any validity.

Even if the strikes did take place outside of the territorial waters of Venezuela, the UN Charter could have been violated due to the nature of the US presence within the area, which Venezuela has claimed has been mobilized to effect a regime change or to instigate an invasion of Venezuela. This comes at the heels of a slew of US offensive actions against Venezuelan entities, such as the United States' seizure of Skipper, an oil tanker that left Venezuela on December 4th, 2025, with approximately two million barrels of heavy crude slated for arrival in Cuba.[41] There was no reason given for this seizure, which conveniently disrupts oil distribution to Cuba, a heavily sanctioned rival to the United States, which was also providing Venezuela with protection against the increasing military buildup of US forces in Venezuelan waters. This buildup of forces has also been a matter of concern for Venezuela and other international organizations, which note the worrying increase of destroyers and aircraft carriers being amassed in the Caribbean Sea. Specifically, the United States has stationed the USS *Stockdale* and USS *Gravely* within close distance of Venezuela, with the rest of the cruisers and the Gerald R. Ford strike group being recently stationed in Puerto Rico, which is a launchpad for the region.[42] President Trump also recently announced a "'complete blockade' on sanctioned oil tankers going to and from Venezuela,"[43] which he then followed up on Truth Social by stating, "Venezuela is completely surrounded by the largest Armada ever assembled in the History of South America. It will only get bigger, and the shock to them will be like nothing they have ever seen before… The illegitimate Maduro Regime is using Oil from these stolen Oil Fields to finance themselves, Drug Terror-

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38. "United Nations Charter." United Nations, 1945. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text.
39. Nichols, Michelle. "Venezuela Asks UN Security Council to Say US Strikes Illegal | Reuters." Reuters, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-asks-un-security-council-say-us-strikes-illegal-2025-10-16/.
40. Phillips, Tom. "Venezuela Accuses Us of Using 'narco-Terrorism' Allegations to Justify 'Regime Change.'" The Guardian, November 24, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/24/venezuela-maduro-us-drug-cartel-terrorism?.
41. Kurmanaev, Anatoly, Nicholas Nehamas, and Farnaz Fassihi. "Venezuela Oil Tanker Seized by U.S. Was Part of Effort to Finance Cuba - The New York Times." The New York Times, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/12/world/americas/venezuela-cuba-oil-tanker.html.
42. Merrow, Will. "Mapping the U.S. Military Buildup near Venezuela." Council on Foreign Relations, 2025. https://www.cfr.org/article/mapping-us-military-buildup-near-venezuela.
43. Wong, Edward, Simon Romero, Charlie Savage, and Julian E Barnes. "Trump Orders Blockade of Some Oil Tankers to and from Venezuela - The New York Times." The New York Times, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/16/us/politics/trump-blockade-venezuela-oil-tankers.html.

ism, Human Trafficking, Murder, and Kidnapping… the Venezuelan Regime has been designated a FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATION."[44] Considering the blockade, buildup of troops, and seeming designation of Venezuela as a Foreign Terror Organization, it is reasonable to infer that the United States, with its escalations stemming from its initial strikes, is directly threatening the territorial integrity and political independence of Venezuela.

II. Jus ad bellum and pre-emptive self-defense

Much of the United States' reason for the strikes inherently lies within the principles of *jus ad bellum,* specifically the clause regarding self-defense. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter specifies that the only exception for use of force by a state is in response to an armed attack.[45] The Trump Administration has repeatedly claimed that the threat posed by each individual boat is more than enough to trigger the conditions for self-defense, and therefore allow for the killing of the people in the boats. Donald Trump has repeated an unfounded statement that "each shipment would have led to the deaths of 25,000 Americans."[46] However, the language of the article is very intentional and important. In the same manner as it applies to the designation of an NIAC, for a threat to be considered an armed attack, it must pass a certain threshold of sustained and violent hostilities, the likes of which drug trafficking does not fulfill. The International Committee of the Red Cross defines that to be governed by International Humanitarian Law, a conflict "must reach a certain level of intensity and the non-state parties involved must show a certain level of organization."[47] According to leading legal analysts, "The fact that they may belong to a group (Tren de Aragua) that has been designated as a foreign terrorist organization does not alter their civilian status, nor does it give the government any authority to target them with lethal force."[48] Thus, the applicability of self-defense is one that comes with strong contention by legal scholars and advocates. Even pre-emptive self-defense can only be done against individuals who have or are suspected of committing an armed attack, and even if the people in the boats were trafficking drugs, there is still no legal justification on the part of the United States government to attack them, because they are, under the eyes of the law, non-combatants.

On top of this, there is one specific strike where, regardless of the circumstances, there is reasonable doubt that the United States was acting purely in self-defense. In one of the strikes, upon seeing the U.S. forces, the boat began to turn back, which means, for all intents and purposes, they could not have possibly constituted a threat, even by the United States' own definition that includes drug trafficking. This caused some controversy within the United States' own Congress as a report was released that showed "the vessel had turned around and was heading back to shore, raising fresh questions as members of Congress are demanding more information about the provocative attack."[49] On top of this case, there is reasonable speculation on some of the other strikes as to the destination of the boats. Considering their general coordinates, it was not entirely clear that many of the boats were actually making their way to the United States, and could have landed within a number of different Caribbean states. One report showed that family members and investigators in Venezuela and Trinidad are convinced that some of the boats struck were "going to Trinidad… They weren't going to the United States."[50] In all, the United States' claims of self-defense are legally void, as they stem from an inherent misunderstanding of the same self-defense principles that they claim.

International Human Rights Law

I. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life in the "Double-tap" strike

While the strikes themselves have caused a lot of discussion and debate within the International Law community, none has drawn so much attention both internationally and domestically as the strike that occurred on September 2nd, 2025. The United States struck a boat, which caused it to go up in flames and collapse; however, according to reports, there were survivors (reports specifically claim it was 2 survivors) who were able to hang on to some of the debris from the strike and climb back into the boat from the water. The United States then proceeded to send another missile toward them in order to kill the stragglers.[51] This has sparked calls of crimes against humanity and demands for Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth to step down, due to the claim of arbitrary deprivation of life.

The concept of arbitrary deprivation of life comes from the right to life within the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 6(1) specifically claims that "Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be pro-

44. Trump, Donald J. "Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump)." Truth Social, 2025. https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump.
45. "United Nations Charter." United Nations, 1945. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text.
46. Mackey, Robert. "US Military Says Two Were Killed in Strike on Suspected Drug Vessel in Pacific." The Guardian, December 30, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/dec/29/ilitary-deaths-boat-strike-pacific?.
47. "What Is International Humanitarian Law?" The International Committee of the Red Cross, 2022. https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document/file_list/what_is_ihl.pdf.
48. Trumbull, Charlie. "The Administration's Drug Boat Strikes Are Crimes against Humanity." Lawfare, December 16, 2025. https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-administration-s-drug-boat-strikes-are-crimes-against-humanity.
49. Mascaro, Lisa, Aamer Madhani, Konstantin Toropin, and Regina Garcia Cano. "Vessel Struck by US Military off Venezuela Was Heading Back to Shore, AP Sources Say." AP News, September 12, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/trump-military-drugs-boat-venezuela-5d28da68e3ea1b5b1b14829af8aadd7b.
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51. Martinez, Luis. "New Details Emerge about Controversial Sept. 2 Strike on Alleged Drug Boat That Killed Survivors." ABC News, December 4, 2025. https://abcnews.com/Politics/new-details-emerge-controversial-sept-2-strike-alleged/story?id=128090044.

tected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life."[52] The article enshrines the right to life and protection from the arbitrary deprivation of it, which has caused some discussion amongst legal scholars, who dispute the ambiguity of the definition of arbitrariness within the law.

The United Nations defines the deprivation of life as "a deliberate or otherwise foreseeable and preventable life-terminating harm or injury, caused by an act or omission."[53] The application of arbitrariness has subsequently been defined by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which stated that "'deprivation of life is arbitrary if it is impermissible under international law, or under more protective domestic law provisions. Arbitrariness should be interpreted with reference to considerations such as appropriateness, justice, predictability, reasonableness, necessity, and proportionality. Any deprivation of life resulting from a violation of the procedural or substantive safeguards in the African Charter, including on the basis of discriminatory grounds or practices, is arbitrary and as a result unlawful.'"[54] The Human Rights Committee, notably in *Suarez de Guerrero v. Colombia* has also made the determination that arbitrary deprivation of life can be decided on the following criteria: "(a) sufficient legal basis; (b) legitimate purpose; (c) absolute necessity; and (d) strict proportionality."[55] Applying these criteria to the strike on September 2nd, 2025, raises significant concerns regarding right-to-life principles against the US Department of Defense. By no measure could any legal body claim that strike survivors clinging to debris would constitute any sort of threat. Nor can it be stated that it was a proportional response by the United States. Proportionality is strenuous, as the United States is already overstepping that principle in its use of strikes against drug traffickers in the first place.

The death penalty can only be applied for the most serious of crimes, yet it is still permitted on a state-by-state basis. However, not even in domestic US. law does drug trafficking trigger the death penalty, making its application in this scenario inappropriate in terms of international law. The UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36, specifically notes in relation to the death penalty that states must, "ensure that any death sentence would be 'in accordance with the law in force at the time of the commission of the crime.'"[56] This means that if the United States does not consider drug trafficking a punishment worthy of the death penalty at the time of the execution, which is true of all the strikes so far, it is not allowed to arbitrarily change its own laws to fit its actions. Nevertheless, even if the United States were able to make the case that its use of strikes was appropriate, its use of secondary, "execution-style" strikes is far past the bounds of proportionality. Strike survivors do not credibly pose a concrete threat; therefore, the secondary strike is disproportional. Under international law, the punishment must fit the crime, and a state cannot use excessive force when there is alternate recourse. Destroying the vessel in the manner in which it did is already a violation, as drug trafficking does not trigger death, yet striking survivors floating on debris is a substantially significant violation, as they were unarmed and could be reasonably inferred to have surrendered.

52. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | Ohchr, 1966. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights.
53. "General Comment No. 36 on Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the Right to Life." Human Rights Committee, 2017. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CCPR/GCArticle6/GCArticle6_EN.pdf.
54. "Counter-Terrorism Module 8 Key Issues: Arbitrary Deprivation of Life." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018. https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-8/key-issues/arbitrary-deprivation-of-life.html.
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56. "Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 36 (2018) on Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the Right to Life." United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, 2018. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CCPR/CCPR_C_GC_36.pdf.

Conclusion

Upon the complete analysis of all relevant and applicable legal frameworks, while the issue is being framed as one of controversial policy, it really relates to the adherence to customary international law and foundational legal principles. The claims by Venezuela and Colombia come from a valid legal interpretation of territorial sovereignty, as well as international human rights law, which was violated with regard to their citizens. The United States, while justifiably concerned over issues of public health and safety, engaged the crisis through a military lens, even though it was unjustifiable through the lens of international law.

The United States' military conduct within the Caribbean can be classified as inconsistent with international law, as it relied on a basis of self-defense and rightful protection, which were founded on mischaracterizations of existing principles that state arbitrary deprivation of life and territorial incursion are improper. The case made by the United States alleging a non-international armed conflict, while citing concrete damages and national security concerns, was predicated on a loose definition of the necessary requirements. As such, self-defense, not the manner in which it was carried out, was unjustified under international law.

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The Social Democratic Paradox: The Hartz Reforms and Political Retrenchment of the German SPD

By: Braedan Murphy

Abstract: This paper argues that the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD) implementation of the Hartz IV labor market reforms was not simply a technocratic response to economic stagnation, but a politically driven process of partisan retrenchment shaped by changing relationships between the party and its constituency, ideology, and governing structures. While Germany faced mounting unemployment, fiscal strain, and structural challenges associated with deindustrialization and the decline of the postwar welfare consensus, these pressures alone cannot explain the specific content and timing of the reforms. Instead, the paper contends that shifting voter preferences, weakening linkage institutions such as trade unions, and increasing electoral competition incentivized the SPD to reposition itself toward the political center.

The analysis develops a three-part explanatory framework centered on constituency, ideological, and structural change. First, evolving voter attitudes and the erosion of traditional party–voter linkages created incentives for welfare retrenchment and labor market flexibilization. Second, the rise of reform-oriented "modernizer" factions within the SPD, influenced by Third Way social democracy and international policy learning, provided the ideological justification for reform. Third, institutional and structural developments saw weakened corporatist arrangements and the strategic management of veto players which enabled the implementation of Hartz IV despite historical resistance from organized labor and elements of the SPD base. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, the paper argues that Hartz IV represented a broader transformation in German social democracy and the political foundations of the welfare state.

Key Words: Germany, Hartz IV Reforms, Political Retrenchment, Welfare Policy, Labor Markets, Corporatism

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Introduction

With a democracy characterized by its cumbersome and incremental approach to reform, Germany had an anomaly occur in 2005. The Hartz IV reforms marked a significant departure from the social and ideological paradigms surrounding German welfare that produced and reflected significant shifts in the political landscape. The impact of these reforms is far greater than their content, and arguably the political battle that created Hartz IV is just as important.

This paper explores partisan retrenchment, or what can otherwise be understood as the long-term and intentional change of political rhetoric and policy that alters a party's ideological position relative to others. The Hartz IV reforms will be used as a case study to explore partisan retrenchment from an electoral strategy perspective, where perceived needs to refocus and expand the primary voter base prompted parties to change their platforms to maintain electoral competitiveness. Three hypothesized factors are expected to increase the likelihood of a party's political repositioning: the weakening or realignment of traditional linkage institutions, the triumph of reformist factions within a party's leadership, and the overhaul of structural obstacles made by corporatist actors and partisan division.

This paper concedes that there was a significant demand in the German economy to reform its welfare system; however, it will be argued that the Hartz IV reforms were primarily a political tool used by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) to electorally reposition itself closer to the center of the political spectrum. The timing, character, and development of the Hartz IV reforms reflect social realignments in constituent groups, ideological refocusing in the SPD, and implicit restructuring in the corporatist party system. Evolving linkage organizations altered the landscape of constituents and prompted the social incentives for SPD repositioning. The ideological transition from traditionalist to modernist factions following the 1998 federal election gave the party the impetus to pursue those incentives. The structural pivot away from tripartite negotiations and towards collaboration with opposition parties exposed the means to act on that impetus. The throughline for these processes is the long-term SPD political strategy towards capturing new constituencies rather than pure economic motives.

The following section will provide context for German political economy and the content of the Hartz IV reforms, respectively. The third section will then discuss the constituent, ideological, and structural changes that defined these reforms.

The Political Economy of Welfare Reform in Germany

Contextualizing the German economy in this manner is used here to provide a reference point for comparing the changes made by the Hartz IV reforms. The German perspective on social welfare and its role in the greater economy prior to 2002 is crucial for understanding exactly how the SPD diverted away from the traditional debate surrounding the labor market. It is also important for understanding exactly why labor market reform is so integral to a country as a whole, thus making it ideal for imprinting political retrenchment. Specifics on the reforms produced by the Hartz Commission will also be provided as they are tangible policy aspects that will be examined as tools for political repositioning. It is important to note that the economics of the matter, both the initial problem and policy solutions, are considered secondary to the ultimate purpose of the Hartz IV reforms: partisan retrenchment.

I. The Post-War Consensus

The general post-war reconstruction boom that fueled German reconstruction was the product of a highly-skilled manufacturing base and full employment labor market strategy.[1] For nearly 30 years, Germany maintained a liberal trade policy, taking advantage of the European Economic Community and other open market opportunities to sustain its rapid export-driven growth.[2] This growth provided stable jobs that placated potential friction from trade unions that may have otherwise advocated for protectionism.[3] This aspect is crucial when considering the corporatist structure of German governance where unions and business groups possess significant influence over policy-making. A culture of consensus meant employer and employee relations fell under the immediate concern of the government, and labor policies were often carried out in a tripartite manner with the government facilitating labor policy produced by negotiations between trade unions and business representatives. This meant that while minimum salaries were enforced by the government, trade unions and employer associations were encouraged to arrange sectoral and industry standards through collective bargaining. Under the aforementioned manufacturing boom, labor relations could operate smoothly in the limited government intervention of the tripartite system. Consequently, the economy enjoyed a consistent degree of stability, allowing for an extensive social welfare system.[4]

An export slump in 1975 made this extensive social welfare system unsustainable as unemployment outpaced the government's ability to cover retirement reimbursements.[5] Previous strategies of maintaining a weak Deutsche Mark and encouraging foreign direct investment meant a rise in inflation that compounded instability.[6] This perfect storm was yet to be fully addressed prior to German reunification, which integrated an excess of labor and a capital deficiency into the Western labor market, further destabilizing wages and unemployment.[7]
Germany's social welfare and safety net structure were ill-equipped to handle this dramatic drop in economic growth, rise of unemployment, and stall in real wages. The post-war wel-

1. Michael Kreile, West Germany: the dynamics of expansion (International Organization 31, no. 4, 1977), 191.
2. Kreile, West Germany: the dynamics of expansion, 196.
3. Kreile, West Germany: the dynamics of expansion, 194.
4. Kreile, West Germany: the dynamics of expansion, 197.
5. Kreile, West Germany: the dynamics of expansion, 192.
6. Kreile, West Germany: the dynamics of expansion, 209.
7. Martin Elff and Sigrid Roßteutscher, All Gone? Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages on Voting Behavior in Germany since 1949, (Oxford University PressOxford, 2022), 31.

fare state previously achieved full employment by encouraging labor force exit through early retirement.[8] This system benefited in times of growth by ignoring the "active years of the life-cycle" where a single breadwinner was expected to have a full-time career without breaks of unemployment.[9] The initial response to the effects of deindustrialization was no different, so it only served to exacerbate pension costs for the government.[10] Worse still, the heightened fixed costs of employer unemployment insurance contributions decreased demand for labor, hurting the prospects for re-entry into the labor market for the unemployed.[11] Three foundational assumptions ensured German welfare was ill-equipped in its existing state to face this kind of labor market hit: the unemployed are representative of unqualified, low-productivity workers; the resulting increase in productivity from a high-skilled labor supply would offset the costs of passive transfer payments and wage maintenance; the problem will subside once the economy restructures itself in a post-industrial fashion.[12] Yet, a core issue with the resulting service-based economy is that productivity is unable to increase in the same technologically driven manner as manufacturing, stagnating economic growth, wages, and job creation.[13]

Fordist and Keynesian approaches to wages and welfare displayed continued decay following the stagnation of the 1970s and continued through reunification, leaving an opportunity for policy reform. Far from being a niche area of regulation, the labor market demands reforms that greatly impact job security and wages, making this issue one which deeply affects individual citizens and in turn voting patterns.[14] The Hartz reforms—described in the next section—are thus positioned to reflect fundamental aspects of the SPD platform, making the condition of the German welfare system a key proving ground for partisan retrenchment.

II. What Were the Hartz IV Reforms?

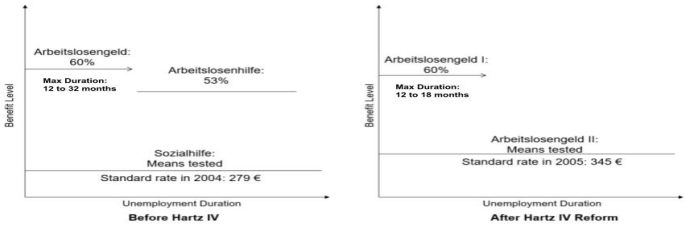
Rapid reunification made growing costs that began catching up with the German economy, especially by the mid-1990s, prompting tripartite negotiations between government, trade unions, and employers under the Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder governments, respectively.[15] This body, referred to as the Alliance for Jobs, failed to create significant headway in getting both labor and employer representatives to reach an agreement which, when then paired with an audit of the Public Employment Service (PES) that revealed a consistent budget deficit and general fiscal inefficiency, motivated the creation of the Hartz Commission in 2002.[16]

The commission—named after Peter Hartz, its chairman and former Human Resources Executive of Volkswagen—comprised experts from government, industry, labor, and academia.[17] Their reforms focused primarily on creating a welfare system centered around labor activation by returning those using unemployment insurance into the workforce.[18] Job Centers were used as one-stop shops for job placement and training. Standards for suitable work—jobs deemed acceptable enough in pay and benefits by the government for the unemployed to come off of wage replacement—were lowered such that job-seekers were compelled to accept offers regardless of lower wages relative to previous employment. Mini and Midi jobs were made to incentivize part-time employment by exempting employees earning below €400 per month from taxes and social contributions and creating a reduced rate for those between €400.01 and €800 respectively.[19] By making the labor market more flexible, the commission hoped to lower structural unemployment through positive and negative activation: the SPD focused on building human capital and using fiscal policy incentives while punishing extended reliance on unemployment benefits.[20]

The fourth Hartz reform set about a complete restructuring of the unemployment benefits system. Originally, unemployment insurance reflected contributions made by equal parts employee and employer contributions and posed an upfront cost proportional to wages. When an employee lost their job, they received 60-70% of their previous wage for 12-32 months, depending on their age. After that period, unemployment assistance kicks in for the long-term unemployed, paying around 55% of the previous wage. Social assistance helped those without enough employment experience, providing a less generous sum that came from taxes.[21] Hartz IV effectively kept unemployment insurance (Arbeitslosengeld I or ALGI) but with added means testing and a reduced benefits period.

8. Gøsta Esping-Andersen, Welfare States without Work: The Impasse of Labour Shedding and Familialism in Continental European Social Policy, (SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996), 68.
9. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 75-76.
10. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 69.
11. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 79.
12. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 77.
13. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 79.
14. David Brian Robertson, Political Conflict and Lesson-Drawing, (Journal of Public Policy 11, no. 1 1991), 58.
15. Andreas Busch and Philip Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2001), 182.
16. Achim Kemmerling and Oliver Bruttel, 'New Politics' in German Labour Market Policy? The Implications of the Recent Hartz Reforms for the German Welfare State, (West European Politics 29, no. 1, 2006), 94.
17. Kemmerling and Bruttel, 'New Politics' in German Labour Market Policy, 91.
18. Kemmerling and Bruttel, 'New Politics' in German Labour Market Policy, 92.
19. Kemmerling and Bruttel, 'New Politics' in German Labour Market Policy, 97.
20. Kemmerling and Bruttel, 'New Politics' in German Labour Market Policy, 97.
21. Max Deter, Hartz and Minds: Happiness Effects of Reforming an Employment Agency, (Journal of Happiness Studies 22, no. 4, 2021), 1822.

Figure 1: Unemployment Benefits for Single Person Households



Source: the figure was reproduced based on Brigitte Hochmuth, Britta Kohlbrecher, Christian Merkl, and Hermann Gartner, *Hartz IV and the Decline of German Unemployment: A Macroeconomic Evaluation*, (RePEc, 2021), 4.

Unemployment and social assistance were combined into unemployment income II (Arbeitslosengeld II or ALGII), where there were less payments, and they were not based on previous wages, similar to social assistance.[22] Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the changes made by Hartz IV.

These policy changes had some immediate and unequal effects, especially for the long-term unemployed with ample employment experience and high previous wages, as their benefits saw the biggest cut.[23] More generally, the unemployed had to make greater concessions when it came to wages and job quality, considering the higher pressure from sanctions, but also meant a quicker commitment towards pursuing employment.[24] Labor market flexibilization increased instability for unemployed and employed alike as the increased labor supply had a negative impact on wages. While the unemployed had to accept lower-paying jobs at the risk of losing benefits, decreased job security meant the employed were more willing to make concessions in wage quality.[25]

Paradoxically, such a shift in favor of employers occurred under the watch of Germany's primary social democratic party, which historically held greater allegiances to trade unions. To implement such a policy that so directly undermined collective bargaining power, job stability, and wages would seem contradictory to the party platform. To explain this paradox, the following sections sustain that the Hartz reforms are a projection of intentional platform realignment, taking advantage of an extremely visible policy area to rebrand the party closer to the center of the political spectrum.

SPD Electoral Strategy

Economic pressures alone cannot explain why a traditionally pro-labor party implemented reforms that disproportionately harmed its core constituency. To account for this, there is a need to turn to electoral incentives. As previously stated, by the turn of the century the SPD was placed in an electoral, ideological, and structural position conducive to partisan retrenchment. The combined effect of shifting linkage mechanisms, factional headway made by modernists, and the breakdown of tripartite governance was to produce critical reform as a sign of political repositioning. These sections will serve to elucidate how barriers to change were lowered for the SPD and exemplify the opportune environment for partisan retrenchment as an electoral strategy through the Hartz reforms.

Understanding the Hartz reforms as an electoral strategy may attract criticism insofar as the electoral results from the reforms were catastrophic for the SPD. As Jörg Michael Dostal notes, "the new policy triggered the largest ever street protest movement in the history of the unified Germany" and "the SPD suffered the largest electoral decline in the party's history."[26] To an extent, SPD leadership understood that liberalizing the welfare system could face electoral backlash from its traditional constituency.[27] However, the electoral strategy behind platform realignment requires, in part, the party to distance itself from its original voter base in order to capture new segments of the population. The need for such movement comes from the constituent, ideological, and structural change that will be elucidated in the following section. Even still, the decision-making process behind political repositioning is unable to account for electoral results with the precision of hindsight. In other words, analyzing the SPD's electoral strife following 2005 distracts from the environment in which policy members operated when implementing the reforms. This paper focuses on the catalysts of partisan retrenchment, but evaluation of their results rests outside the scope of analysis.

I. Constituency Change

For a party to adopt the electoral strategy of political repositioning, there must first be the policy opportunity that presents itself. These policy opportunities, derived from the electorate, are produced from the evolution of the linkage institutions that connect said electorate to the party in question. The Hartz reforms will be used to exemplify this argument. There are three main linkage institutions that will be explored in this section that will serve to clarify the changes in the voter landscape that prompted partisan retrenchment with the Hartz reforms. Election systems, labor unions, and media are the primary structural actors that encouraged the political repositioning of the SPD. The framework by which voters were motivated and affiliated to the SPD platform decisively evolved into the prime position by the early 21st century. In this new situation, SPD leadership logically perceived the long-term electoral benefits of platform realignment to outweigh the costs. Two dynamics shaped these electoral benefits: first, the structure of electoral competition;

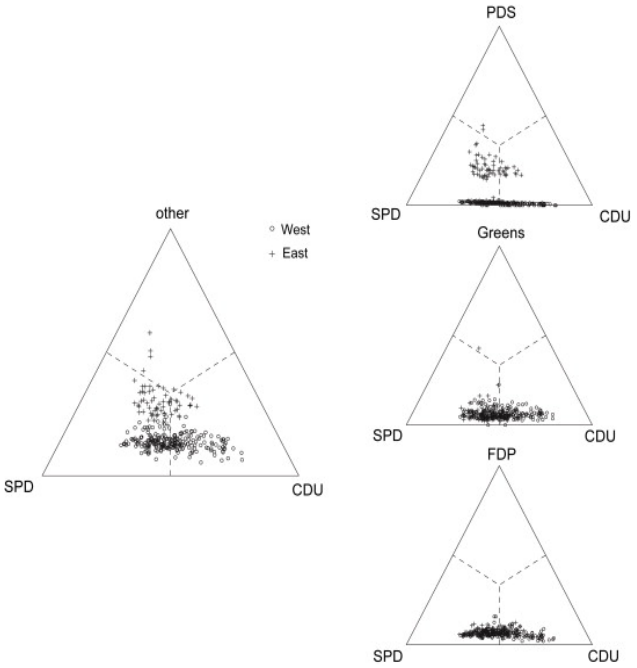
22. Deter, Hartz and Minds, 1822.
23. Deter, Hartz and Minds, 1824.
24. Deter, Hartz and Minds, 1834.
25. Christian Merkl, Perspektiven Zum Bürgergeld, (Wirtschaftsdienst 102, no. 2, 2022), 87.
26. Jörg Michael Dostal, The Crisis of German Social Democracy Revisited, (The Political Quarterly 88, no. 2, 2017), 231.
27. Reimut Zohlnhöfer, Putting Together the Pieces of the Puzzle: Explaining German Labor Market Reforms with a Modified Multiple-Streams Approach, (Policy Studies Journal 44, no. 1, 2016), 95.

second, shifting voter preferences.

Being at the center-left of the political spectrum, the SPD was the primary party of choice on the left in 2002. This is not to say there was no competition on the left, as the Greens—its coalition partner at the time—and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)—remnants of the previous East German socialist party—were able to garner support on environmental issues and previous East German allegiances, respectively. Far greater, however, was the competition with the center-right from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP).[28]

The first linkage institution that will be examined are German elections. For half of German constituencies, there are first-past-the-post elections that create a disproportionate advantage for major parties like the SPD and undermine competition from smaller left-wing parties. As Michael Herrmann and Franz Urban Pappi note, there is a trend of strategic voting in constituencies that underpins this claim. Their study found that individuals may elect a second or third choice candidate if their preferred party is faltering in an upcoming election.[29] This was found to be most common among voters whose first preference is a "non-viable" party and second choice is a "viable" party.[30] Close elections between the SPD and CDU encourage voters for parties such as the Greens to choose their second choice (in this case the SPD) rather than have their vote become irrelevant.[31]

Figure 2: Constituency Results in 2002 (N = 299).



Source: the figure was reproduced based on Michael Herrmann and Franz Urban Pappi, *Strategic Voting in German Constituencies*, (Electoral Studies 27, no. 2, 2008), 232.

Figure 2 illustrates the electoral success rates of parties in races where three or more parties are involved. The first graph shows results weighed against all third parties, while the three on the right show the breakdown of votes for PDS, Greens, and FDP respectively. They show that in most constituency elections, the SPD and CDU attract a majority of votes, with the PDS gaining some votes in East Germany, but otherwise most of the competition lies at the bottom of the graphs between the SPD and CDU.[32] Within this environment, there exist policy supply and demand motives for reform. On the supply side, the SPD faced limited left-wing competition from the Greens and PDS. From the analysis of Peter Lunz, the SPD faced a relatively less fractured left, likely as a result of the aforementioned electoral system, when compared to countries such as France.[33] The Socialist Party of France (PS) was compelled to move further left and squeeze competing left-wing parties in the first of two round elections.[34] In his comparison, Lunz found France committed to labor market reform on traditional partisan cleavages, which stands in stark contrast to that of the Hartz reforms.

Table 1: Social Policy Preferences in Germany

Social policy preferences (in %)	1994	2000	2004
reduce	9.8	20.2	23.2
sustain	53.4	53.7	55.1
expand	36.7	26.1	21.7

Source: the table was adapted by Patrick Lunz, *What's Left of the Left? Partisanship and the Political Economy of Labour Market Reform: Why Has the Social Democratic Party in Germany Liberalised Labour Markets*, (London School of Economics, 2013), 116.

The German scenario saw the SPD in a stronger electoral position where it was close enough to the center that a Green or FDP coalition were feasible on economic and libertarian commonalities, respectively. A grand coalition with the CDU was also possible with the chance of being a junior partner, while the PDS had no other choice but the SPD if it wanted to enter a governing coalition.[35] Political repositioning of the Red-Green coalition in 2002-2005 to the center appeared logical in a situation where the alternative for voters was a coalition even further on the right or a fringe party like the PDS.[36]

On the demand side, the SPD faced changing dispositions towards the welfare state in its core voter base. Table 1 lists the proportion of voters in favor of expanding, maintaining, and reducing the welfare state. Notably, while the expansion camp diminished by 15% across the period of 1994-2004, those favoring welfare reduction increased by 13.4%.[37]

28. Uwe Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, (Journal of Policy History 15, no. 1, 2003), 84-85.
29. Michael Herrmann and Franz Urban Pappi, Strategic Voting in German Constituencies, (Electoral Studies 27, no. 2, 2008), 242.
30. Herrmann and Pappi, Strategic Voting in German Constituencies, 240.a
31. Herrmann and Pappi, Strategic Voting in German Constituencies, 241.
32. Herrmann and Pappi, Strategic Voting in aGerman Constituencies, 232.
33. Patrick Lunz, What's Left of the Left? Partisanship and the Political Economy of Labour Market Reform: Why Has the Social Democratic Party in Germany Liberalised Labour Markets, (London School of Economics, 2013), 32.
34. Lunz, What's Left of the Left, 36-37.
35. Lunz, What's Left of the Left, 33.
36. Lunz, What's Left of the Left, 33.
37. Lunz, What's Left of the Left, 37.

Table 2: Social Policy and Party Preferences in Germany

	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	Greens	PDS
Reduce					
1994	57	-35.9	29.4	-50.2	-100
2000	33.3	-29.1	114.4	-33.8	-67.6
2004	33.3	-22.7	82.6	-28.2	-51.8
Sustain					
1994	10	-0,7	9.9	1	-63.8
2000	4.7	7.4	-19.3	15.1	-24.5
2004	-6.4	18.4	-20.3	23.7	-3.5
Expand					
1994	-35.3	8.1	1.8	29.6	141
2000	-32.3	5.9	-23.5	0.3	98.4
2004	-24.5	-1.8	-9.5	-19.1	96.4

***Key**:* The CDU/CSU had in 1994 57% more prospective voters among respondents favoring social policy reduction compared to the total electorate
Source: the table was adapted by Patrick Lunz, *What's Left of the Left? Partisanship and the Political Economy of Labour Market Reform: Why Has the Social Democratic Party in Germany Liberalised Labour Markets*, (London School of Economics, 2013), 38, from Georg Picot, *Germany: Two Political Logics of Segmenting Reforms*, (Politics of Segmentation, 1st ed., Routledge, 2012), 119.

Table 2 shows the SPD's initial advantage over the CDU among voters favoring social policy expansion, but it trails both the CDU and FDP among those in favor of reduction.[38] This would not pose as much of an issue were it not for the decline of those in favor of welfare expansion and the momentum among those calling for reduction.[39] This transition in social policy approval significantly advantaged the CDU at the expense of the SPD.[40] The SPD felt an incentive from voters to adopt policies that signaled fiscal restraint and labor market flexibility, even at the cost of its waning traditional base. This was in part possible since the FDP began its own shift towards the neoliberal right in the decades prior as its voter base lost social liberals, leaving room for the SPD to fill this space.[41] Partisan retrenchment in the policy area is consequently the chosen means by which the SPD sought to offset the welfare-reductionist trend.[42]

Drawing from this information on voter preference, the effects of changes among the second linkage institution, trade unions, can be further explored. Industrial trade union members formed the historical backbone of the SPD electorate, favoring redistributive social and economic policies.[43] The 1960s showed a broadening of appeal to non-manual and service workers that brought about political traction for the SPD, supplementing votes from the trade unions and diversifying the voter base.[44] The effects of deindustrialization, financial improvements among the lower class, or a rise in education and individualism are all possibilities for the gradual decline of trade union membership.[45] Regardless, with the core constituency declining, non-manual and service votes could compensate only so much for the compositional change. While the dynamics of class compositional changes were problematic, it was superseded by the loss of trade union support since a core mobilizer for SPD voters diminished and a consequent rise in voter abstention ate into possible SPD majority.[46]

Under these circumstances, sustaining or intensifying ties with a linkage institution in decline posed a severe electoral risk, demanding the SPD to pivot towards a new group and broaden support.[47] Similar to 1959, where anti-capitalist rhetoric was dialed back in the party platform to effectively attract broader left-liberal support, the SPD in the early 2000s targeted the "new middle class" or the highly educated service class with the liberal Hartz reforms.[48] In the grander scheme of policy formation, the decline in a linkage institution integral to party voter activation demanded partisan retrenchment as a means to adapt to evolving political cleavages.

The third and final linkage institution applies to public image in the media, where the SPD as an organization reoriented itself as an appeal to the aesthetics of competency and grassroots support.[49] More specifically, the reformation of the SPD communication apparatus with initiatives like the Kampa election campaign center[50] and the inclusion of nonmembers in party activities sought to gather broader consensus.[51] Here the party sought to capitalize on emerging technologies and capture media attention through digitization[52] as a response to the individualization of lifestyles and norms.[53] The SPD also attempted to include party outsiders as a means of developing "toward credible and majority-producing projects and issues that are able to determine the political and media agenda."[54]

The combined effects were two-fold: the SPD platform concentrated less on coherent principles so much as result-oriented consensus[55] while at the same time attempting to welcome an increasingly heterogeneous body.[56] As contradictory as these two results may seem, the transition towards direct connection with voters via public media can be seen as an attempt to diversify following the decline of trade unions. The nature of these phenomena meant that a salient reform was incumbent upon the

38. Lunz, What's Left of the Left, 38.
39. Lunz, What's Left of the Left, 38.
40. Lunz, What's Left of the Left, 38.
41. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 181.
42. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 181.
43. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 31.
44. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 41.
45. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 33.
46. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 41.
47. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 39.
48. Elff and Roßteutscher, Change and Persistence in the Impact of Social Cleavages, 34.
49. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 70-71.
50. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 68.
51. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 72.
52. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 73.
53. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 68.
54. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 80.
55. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 77.
56. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 80.

SPD to carry out the *perceived* majoritarian will.[57] 1998 only served to reinforce this strategy as the election saw the SPD become the big-tent centrist party of the West's middle class and the East's working class with numerous other disparate groups cobbled in.[58] The positive feedback loop of programmatic media expansion into a diversifying voter base undermined traditional party platforms in favor of cementing pragmatic policy reform. Media integration in this regard represents a linkage institution that deepened ties with the general electorate to the effect of partisan retrenchment by social conformity.

These examples illustrate the impacts of linkage institutions on a broader scale, drawing from the specific context of the Hartz reforms. Weighing their influence comparatively extends beyond the scope of this paper; instead, they are intended to tie a logical connection between the Hartz reforms and platform realignment as an electoral strategy. Linkage institutions alone fail to account for reform holistically, but they foster an environment welcoming to political repositioning. From this foundation, the following two sections will develop the ideological motivation and structural means by which the SPD and political parties more generally carry out partisan retrenchment.

II. Ideological Change

In the context of the greater partisan retrenchment argument, motivation stems from reformist factions gaining dominance within a party with a policy platform that possesses a legitimizing source. Factional infighting within the SPD leading up to the 1998 election and into the 2002 election produced an ideological dominance of the modernizers and the Neue Mitte (New Center) platform that compelled the SPD's platform realignment via the Hartz reforms. The reforms solidified in writing the modernist ideology and moved away from traditional social democratic principles. Legitimization of this move came from 'policy learning' that created a new political dialogue centered on labor activation.

The factional divide will be distinguished based on the competing leaders: Oskar Lafontaine and Gerhard Schröder for the traditionalists and modernizers, respectively. Lafontaine made his entrance into party leadership in the 1980s partly for his criticism of the growth-induced full-employment model on the grounds of "solidarity within class" or the prioritization of trade union redistribution of jobs.[59] This fell in line with the social democratic governing principles of corporatist connection between the SPD, state, and trade unions and an emphasis on equality of outcome in employment and wages.[60] His mindset was one of advocating for 'grand ideas' with the government being a source of solutions to reconcile societal issues.[61] Derived from this model is the traditional position on welfare, where wage replacement and unemployment redistribution were tied to securing social status and previous living standards.[62]

Schröder diverges significantly on several key points, primarily in redefining the meaning of social justice at the center of the social democratic platform. In it, he affirms equality of opportunity without guaranteeing equal outcome; translated to economic policy, this meant an equal distribution of job and training access to encourage labor market re-entry.[63] His vision for the future of social democratic government was to facilitate the mediation of societal forces in place of Lafontaine's 'grand idea' model.[64] Schröder viewed high government spending without returns on job growth as flaws in the traditional welfare system, which he blamed on the passivity of reintegration efforts.[65] Fixation on the SPD-trade union relationship broke down, and in its place Schröder's approach was relatively ambiguous in its attempt to appeal to a more general electorate.[66] This ideological differentiation, combined with Schröder's ability to construct a public profile through the media, grabbed attention and support from SPD members as well as the electorate more generally.[67] His status as a change-maker made his ascension to candidacy a judgement of his electability against the Kohl government.[68]

Schröder's success in the 1998 election and Lafontaine's eventual resignation in 1999 showed modernizer dominance within the SPD and a prerogative to reform. Lafontaine himself even conceded that existing budget deficits demanded austerity measures, contradicting his previous platform of fiscal redistribution.[69] Attempts to combat the welfare problem prior to the resignation maintained the equality of outcome mindset, with Lafontaine facing backlash as job protections, tax reforms, and extension of welfare contributors to include the self-employed raised the fixed cost of labor and lowered employment rates.[70] Yet with modernists at the reins by 2002, the mindset of equality of opportunity and the role of government as a mediator can be found in the details of the Hartz reforms.

Regarding opportunity, job centers were created to increase the unemployed's access to employers, retraining initiatives sought to help people find new jobs in growing sectors, while Mini and Midi jobs increased the quantity of available jobs.[71] Benefit cuts in ALG II not only saw movement away from preserving the previous standard of living, but also transitioned the government towards a mediatorial role in the labor market since it reduced supply distortions by cutting funding for structural unemployment.[72] Consequently, the Hartz reforms re-

57. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 82.
58. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 83.
59. Jörg Michael Dostal, From 'Modernizer' to 'Traditionalist': Oskar Lafontaine And German Social Democracy in the 1990s, (Debatte, 8.1, 2000), 24-25.
60. Dostal, From 'Modernizer' to 'Traditionalist', 30; Christine Harlen, Schröder's Economic Reforms: The End of Reformstau, (German Politics 11, no. 1, 2002), 68.
61. Dostal, From 'Modernizer' to 'Traditionalist', 30.
62. Timo Fleckenstein, Restructuring Welfare for the Unemployed: The Hartz Legislation in Germany, (Journal of European Social Policy 18, no. 2, 2008), 179.
63. Jun, The Changing SPD in the Schröder Era, 75-76.
64. Dostal, From 'Modernizer' to 'Traditionalist', 30.
65. Fleckenstein, Restructuring Welfare for the Unemployed, 182.
66. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 179-180.
67. Dostal, From 'Modernizer' to 'Traditionalist', 27.
68. Dostal, From 'Modernizer' to 'Traditionalist', 27.
69. Dostal, From 'Modernizer' to 'Traditionalist', 29.
70. Harlen, Schröder's Economic Reforms, 66.
71. Kemmerling and Bruttel, 'New Politics' in German Labour Market Policy, 97.
72. Kemmerling and Bruttel, 'New Politics' in German Labour Market

structured the German welfare system in the image of a greater ideological shift: by reorienting government involvement in the labor market, it redefined social justice, equality of opportunity, and social democratic governing style in line with Schröder's new agenda. Contrary to Reimut Zohlnhöfer's claim that "the SPD leadership was not particularly picky with regard to the content of the proposals as long as they could credibly be sold to the voters as dealing with unemployment," the integration of modernist ideology in the Hartz reforms suggests the specific intention of engraining partisan retrenchment in tangible policy.[73]

To redefine the terms of social democracy took a systemic overhaul of the national labor market debate, which is where a degree of policy learning was employed as a political weapon to legitimize this ideological shift.[74] By discussing learned experiences from policies abroad, politicians use policy lessons as "politically neutral truths" that give the party an air of impartiality and command the topic of debate.[75] Labor market policies are especially prone to using this form of political tool as they penetrate numerous aspects of life while labor issues are similar across most industrialized democracies.[76] Clear linkages between the Neue Mitte and New Labour movement in the UK were reinforced by the joint paper written by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder.[77] Drawing from the success of the Third Way wave that spread across social democratic parties in the UK and US, the modernizers in the SPD buttressed their demands for a revitalization of social democratic principles through liberalizing markets.[78] More than that, it allowed the SPD to justify electorally risky policies as economically necessary and internationally validated.

Policy learning was used to set labor activation as a politically neutral truth needed to address unemployment. The debate no longer surrounded whether or not activation should be used, but the type of activation that should be implemented.[79] Positive activation, where the government would enable labor reintegration through job training, was more widely accepted than its negative counterpart, which increased pressure to oblige reintegration.[80] Both sides of the debate still rested upon the modernist conception of social justice where opportunity, not outcome, falls under the purview of the government: "the revised understanding of reciprocity particularly involves the obligation of the unemployed to be more actively engaged in becoming reintegrated into the labor market and to accept suitable job and activation offers."[81] Labor activation was thus used by modernizers to selectively associate the platform with the strong foreign economic performance.[82] This had a legitimizing effect for the ideological transformation of the SPD that motivated partisan retrenchment by emphasizing the contribution of the Third Way to the well-being of foreign polities and its potentially similar consequences for Germany.[83]

Developing this case study more broadly, a will to platform realignment is crucial for its actualization, and intra-party reformist factions that seek substantive changes to the party platform's tenets provide said will. Their success hinges upon substantive legitimation of an ideological shift, which in the case of the Hartz reforms came readily in the form of policy learning. Modernizers gained ground under the auspices of Gerhard Schröder's growing public image and electoral competitiveness. Evidence of their success liberalized views on social justice and the role of government found themselves clearly voiced in the Hartz reforms. Ideologically, the threshold for partisan retrenchment was met primarily by appealing to evolving constituencies. Thus, ideological change did not independently drive reform, but provided the motivation and justification for an electorally driven repositioning strategy.

III. Structural Change

The final piece to the puzzle rests on the means of partisan retrenchment, which is where systemic restructuring ties in. Delving into the structure of governance in any given polity is required to understand the available approaches to political repositioning by identifying the institutional barriers and pathways a party must address in the process. The German form of corporatism, defined by the close relationship between interest groups to the party and government apparatus alongside tripartite negotiations in policy implementation, incorporated reform in crawling increments, considering the disparate interests of so many groups. To implement the Hartz reforms, the SPD circumvented employer-employee negotiation by abandoning the tripartite negotiations in the Alliance for Jobs. They also garnered a majority in the Bundesrat (the upper house of parliament composed of representatives of the constituent states) despite holding a minority of constituent governments by appealing to Länder (constituent states of the federal government) interests and reducing ideological differences. In doing so, the SPD ignored conflicting interest group input and drew in votes from CDU and FDP Bundesrat representatives. The following section will draw from veto-player models to assess the institutional barriers to reform and then identify the political maneuvers utilized by the SPD in carrying out the reform.

Veto players are interest groups, institutions, and other actors whose consent is critical for reforming the status quo.[84] When looking at the German politico-economic structures, it scores a 5/5 in Manfred Schmidt's scale, indicating the most powerful institutional constraints on the central government.[85]

Policy, 97.
73. Zohlnhöfer, Putting Together the Pieces of the Puzzle, 95.
74. Robertson, Political Conflict and Lesson-Drawing, 57.
75. Robertson, Political Conflict and Lesson-Drawing, 55.
76. Robertson, Political Conflict and Lesson-Drawing, 58.
77. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 175.
78. Fleckenstein, Restructuring Welfare for the Unemployed, 181.
79. Fleckenstein, Restructuring Welfare for the Unemployed, 178.
80. Fleckenstein, Restructuring Welfare for the Unemployed, 182-183.
81. Fleckenstein, Restructuring Welfare for the Unemployed, 182-183.
82. Robertson, Political Conflict and Lesson-Drawing, 59.
83. Robertson, Political Conflict and Lesson-Drawing, 60.
84. George Tsebelis, Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies: An Empirical Analysis, (The American Political Science Review 93, no. 3, 1999), 3.
85. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 179.

This makes the status quo extremely stable, and attempts at reform are met with harsh structural resistance, particularly in circumstances where governing parties and other actors have substantial ideological differences.[86] The first veto player to consider is coalition partners, but the Green party was seen as too young of a party, with internal divisions that kept it too weak to impose significant will over its senior partner.[87] The Alliance for Jobs, where the chancellor and ministers negotiated regularly with labor unions and employer organizations to develop a joint strategy, represented an informal veto actor.[88] Since Schröder rested much of his political reputation on the negotiations, the unions and employers had the opportunity to make the talks costly by blackmailing him until any attempts at far-reaching reform fell short.[89] Finally, CDU dominance in the Bundesrat formed another obstacle to reform as opposition parties had the ability to block reform attempts made by the SPD.[90]

The latter two veto players proved to be substantive challenges to Schröder's plans for reform. The successful political repositioning of the SPD was thus a result of political maneuvers to overcome these veto players. Considering the gridlock in the Alliance for Jobs spanning both Kohl and Schröder administrations, a new approach to developing a labor market reform strategy took hold. To break resistance to reform, the Schröder government utilized outside experts from think tanks such as the Bertelsmann Foundation.[91] The foundation was one of the best privately resourced operative foundations, and its stakeholders held close ties to the SPD.[92] Rather than lobbying, the think tank used intellectual debate as a means of progressing its reform-minded interests of the 'common good,' where the interests of unions and employers were both seen to undermine the government's ability to operate.[93] Interestingly, the Bertelsmann Foundation employed benchmarking to compare the outcomes of policies across countries, which corroborates the SPD's policy learning of the previous section.[94]

The Foundation found itself a part of both the Benchmarking group—a policy advising group for the Alliance for Jobs—and the Hartz commission as "a 'driver' - but not an originator - of Schröder's reform agenda."[95] Its involvement worked to counter the impulses of both unions and employers while advocating for the activation and decentralization in the modernist platform, serving as a crucial partner for breaking through the stalemate and legitimizing the radical reforms from a seemingly neutral perspective.[96] In circumventing tripartite negotiations by partnering with the Bertelsmann Foundation, the Schröder government confronted the first of two barriers to the electoral repositioning scheme.

As an aside, it is important to acknowledge that throughout this process, SPD modernizers maintained their tight imperative of implementing their reformed view of social democracy through the think tank. The Hartz reforms were not, contrary to Zohlnhöfer's argument, a product of solely civil servants removed from party input.[97] Rather, the Hartz commission possessed little prerogative to form policy and instead drew upon the policies first discussed by the Bertelsmann Foundation.[98] In fact, the original benchmarking group specifically limited civil servant input, fearing "the civil service's ability and willingness to think outside the box."[99] This meant the Hartz reforms were consistent with the electorally driven party interests and shaped by the SPD modernizers' platform realignment plan.

As for the Bundesrat, the relationship between the CDU-FDP opposition and Schröder was complex. For one, the need to accommodate the opposition's liberal interests meant Schröder could get greater concessions from the left wing of the SPD-Green coalition.[100] Also of note is Schröder's ability to appeal to Länder interests similar in concept to pork-barrel spending in the US when negotiating with individual CDU-led constituencies. These constituencies voted against the CDU's leadership, which urged rejection of the SPD tax reform in 2000.[101] In the context of the veto player model, however, the SPD successfully reduced the ideological gap to form an "'informal grand coalition' between the red-green government and the CDU/CSU opposition majority in the Bundesrat."[102] As George Tsebelis theorizes, parties at the political center, such as the SPD, can lean slightly in either direction to gain allies on different legislation.[103] By reducing the ideological range of veto players, the SPD modernizers increased the likelihood of significant legislation.[104] The government's agenda-setting power was effectively utilized to overcome the Bundesrat's veto player restrictions.[105] Passage of the Hartz reforms in the Bundesrat consequently relied upon strategic partisan retrenchment to address the layer of resistance posed by ideological adversaries.

From formulation and negotiation to promotion and passage, political repositioning underpins the legislative process by redefining the government-interest group and government-op-

86. Tsebelis, Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies, 3.
87. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 184; Harlen, Schröder's Economic Reforms, 4.
88. Zohlnhöfer. "Putting Together the Pieces of the Puzzle" 95.
89. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 184.
90. Maximilian Freier, The Political Economy of Germany's "Agenda 2010" Reforms: Insights from an Augmented Veto Player Model, (London School of Economics, 2022), 33.
91. Hartwig Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany: The Bertelsmann Foundation's Role in Labour Market Reform, (Zeitschrift Für Politikberatung 1, nos. 3–4, 2008), 439.
92. Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany, 441-442.
93. Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany, 442.
94. Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany, 443.
95. Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany, 445.
96. Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany, 447-448.
97. Zohlnhöfer, Putting Together the Pieces of the Puzzle, 97.
98. Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany, 449.
99. Pautz, Think-Tanks in Germany, 444.
100. Busch and Manow, The SPD and the Neue Mitte in Germany, 183.
101. Harlen, Schröder's Economic Reforms, 72-73.
102. Freier, The Political Economy of Germany's "Agenda 2010" Reforms, 38.
103. Tsebelis, Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies, 4.
104. Tsebelis, Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies, 6.
105. Tsebelis, Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies, 15.

position relationship. The SPD's approach to implementation is emblematic of the constituency trends and ideological competition previously discussed: evolving linkage institutions disincentivized tripartite negotiations as union support diminished and a growing reformist platform enabled cooperation between government and opposition parties. By examining veto players, partisan retrenchment is systemically examined such that the logistical means of implementation can be better grasped. The structural opportunity of political repositioning is made contingent upon the consent of those organizational factors partial to the status quo.

Conclusion

This study set about a three-part analytical framework that sought to develop a holistic view of the nature of partisan retrenchment. In practice, the Hartz reforms were tested as a proving ground for this framework, the merits of which are encouraged to be further explored through more case studies in the future. Individual aspects of this study, from the changes in specific linkage institutions to international influence through policy learning and veto-player mechanisms, have all been individually explored, but their synthesis adds specificity in defining the political intentions behind partisan retrenchment.

This paper further suggests the political shift in Germany represents a paradigmatic shift far beyond any one individual party, with cleavage shifts contributing to new norms and redefining principles such as social justice. As such, the impact of partisan retrenchment indicates a serious redirection in the language of politics and national interests. Organizations such as labor unions, once a voice for the public, were relabeled as factional and subversive to collective goals; government was reimagined from a force for change to an arbitrator of social forces. Further examination of political retrenchment is therefore useful in understanding the evolution of the political landscape of norms. Where the Hartz reforms can be viewed as a result of the diminishing class cleavage in Germany, partisan retrenchment is likely to emerge as different polities experience shifting social pressures, and parties move to represent those ideological differences or face obsolescence. In response, part of the strength of this framework is its ability to not only identify the environment conducive to political retrenchment, but also the political assumptions of the status quo being challenged.

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Golden Dome and the Restoration of US Air Superiority in the Missile Age

*By: Young Park**

Abstract: The proliferation of advanced adversary missile capabilities increasingly threaten U.S. air superiority by creating vulnerabilities to the homeland and weakening Washington's traditional coercive advantage. This paper observes how Golden Dome for America could restore U.S. air superiority by shifting from reliance on offensive punishment to complete denial of adversaries' ability to impose meaningful costs. By integrating sensors, command-and-control systems, and layered interceptors across multiple domains, Golden Dome aims to counter ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic missile threats while preserving Washington's freedom of action and second-strike capability. From theories of coercion, airpower, and deterrence, this paper argues that effective missile defense can diminish the political utility of adversary strike capabilities and improve American escalation control. Historical examples including the Battle of Britain, Israel's Iron Dome, and South Korea's Three-Axis system illustrate how credible defensive capabilities can undermine an adversary's confidence in achieving decisive results. Although critics are concerned that Golden Dome could weaken mutual deterrence and accelerate an arms race, accepting growing vulnerability is increasingly unsustainable as adversary missile threats advance exponentially. Therefore, Golden Dome's purpose is beyond a defensive shield: it serves as a strategic tool to preserve U.S. coercive leverage and restore the conditions necessary for American air superiority in a contested multilateral environment.

Key Words: United States, missile defense, deterrence, airpower, air superiority, Golden Dome, strategic stability, coercion, aerospace security

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"Military superiority is not a birthright granted to us; it is the product of diligence, creativity, and sustained investment,"

Patrick M. Shanahan,
Former Acting Secretary of Defense.[1]

Introduction

Modern airpower now operates across a multi-domain battlespace that extends into outer space. Airpower depends on coercion–the ability to influence adversary behavior by threatening harm through projective offensive strength and increasing the opponent's vulnerability to attack. Introduced in January 2025, "Golden Dome for America," an expansive adaptation of Israel's Iron Dome, will build Washington's coercive leverage from just punishment to complete denial of attacks, shifting how the US applies coercive power in global politics. Through an integrated air and missile defense architecture designed to intercept incoming threats, Golden Dome increases US opportunities to project air superiority not by expanding strike capacity, but by eliminating Washington's susceptibility to coercion. Golden Dome draws inspiration from localized missile defense systems and applies the same denial-based logic to homeland defense across multiple operational terrains. By neutralizing missile threats and ultimately controlling the intensity of the conflict, the system preserves the credibility of US coercive power, guarantees second-strike capabilities, and strengthens escalation dominance to redefine how it can shape adversary behavior in modern conflict.

U.S. Air Superiority

The United States has long prioritized building the world's most sophisticated air force since World War II. Its development of long-range bombers and advanced aircraft created the capability to strike globally, granting Washington a form of airpower defined by unparalleled geographic freedom to maneuver and attack. During the Cold War, Thomas Schelling argued that credible military force allows a state to coerce other actors through the threat of future harm.[2] Airpower is the optimal vehicle for this logic: it is quick and precise, enabling states to compel behavior without committing to a total war. Coercion occurs when target states fearfully anticipate punishment for non-compliance; the threat of air strikes destroying infrastructure and inflicting political costs is sufficient to change behavior.

Washington is internationally recognized for its global strike capability through advanced bombers, carriers, and aircraft. It also exploits Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to maintain air superiority. The US can not only coerce individual actors, but also shape the behavior of all nations simultaneously through the mere threat of employing these technologies. Therefore, American airpower transformed coercion of one to the deterrence of many–ultimately giving the US air superiority and systemic influence.

John Warden's "Five Rings Model" explains why the U.S. military strategy consistently prioritizes air superiority. Warden detailed the center of gravity–the critical source of strength whose loss would most degrade an opponent's ability to operate–in rings from outer to the center: fielded forces and action units, population, infrastructure, processes, and leadership at the core.[3] Air superiority enables the US to reach the inner rings with prompt efficacy. The ability to threaten leadership and paralyze decision-making systems makes air superiority a necessary component for strategic success. Only through dominating the air can Washington demonstrate the capacity to project offensive power onto an adversary's most vital center of gravity, thus influencing its leadership's decision-making and strategic options. This ultimately reinforces Schelling's coercive dynamic by creating threats to be both credible and decisive.

Washington's coercive dominance relies on credible strike threats to achieve strategic influence. Thus far, Washington has benefitted from projecting these aerospace threats while remaining largely invulnerable to adversary air attacks. However, its air superiority is threatened by adversaries' rapid proliferation of advanced missile capabilities. If they can effectively put the US at risk of attack, the credibility of American strike threats diminishes. This would collapse the causal chain that sustains US air superiority and weaken its coercive leverage.

Former Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan warned that military superiority is earned and not granted. This perspective is rooted in the US having historically secured air superiority by demonstrating advanced technological capabilities, earning strategic legitimacy. His statement reflects the growing concern that unless the United States adapts to new missile threats, its long-standing advantage in coercion and deterrence may no longer be guaranteed.

The Threat

Ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles have become a core asset of modern military strategy because their rapid, long-range strike ability can alter political calculations without large force deployment. Each creates a different operational challenge for defenders. Ballistic missiles travel at high altitudes unguided after launch from a powered flight, hypersonic weapons sustain speeds exceeding Mach 5–five times the speed of sound–within the atmosphere while maneuvering to complicate detection and interception, and cruise missiles–launched from any domain–fly

1. Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 Missile Defense Review," Department of Defense, 2019, https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/5687662/2019-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.pdf.
2. Robert A. Pape, Jr., "Coercive Air Power in the Vietnam War," International Society, Fall 1990, Vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 110, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538867.
3. John Andreas Olsen, Airpower Reborn: The Strategic Concepts of John Warden and John Boyd, Naval Institute Press, 2015, pp. 107, https://rudyct.com/sm.vuca/Airpower%20Reborn%20The%20Strategic%20Concepts%20of%20John%20Warden%20and%20John%20Boyd%20(John%20Andreas%20Olsen)2015.pdf.

guided at low altitudes to evade radar.[4] These technical characteristics limit the target state's warning time and complicate interception; this uncertainty transforms the attacker's technical capability into political leverage. When a state cannot reliably detect or intercept an incoming strike, its strategic options become constrained by the constant possibility of unpredicted attacks.

The global proliferation of advanced missiles poses a challenge to the US: the number of states that possess strike capabilities to deliver rapid, long-range force has increased. This evolution builds on classic airpower theory that emphasizes the shift from force-on-force engagements for victory towards coercion and threat manipulation by air and missile technology. If such capabilities are applied against the United States, Washington's freedom of action would be vulnerable to adversary coercion because of the current limits of its missile defense. This ultimately calls for a denial-based missile defense architecture, such as Golden Dome, to reduce the political utility of adversary missile attacks.

North Korea Capabilities

A rival of the US, North Korea has exponentially increased its ballistic missile programs and is no longer limited to short- or medium-range missiles that threaten only its neighbors. This raises concerns in Washington, not only for its East Asia allies, but also regarding the security of the US homeland. With the continental US now in the threat envelope, traditional missile defense and deterrence is insufficient.

The threat is growing in both the quantity and technical sophistication of North Korean missiles. Kim Jong-Un has accelerated the pace of ballistic missile test launches. After the 2022 test of a liquid-fueled Hwasong-12, in 2023, Pyongyang tested its solid-fueled Hwasong-19, which can deliver nuclear payloads to targets through North America. Most recently, North Korea conducted a test of a hypersonic glide vehicle payload on Hwasong-16B–this weapon offers opportunities to employ unpredictable flight paths to evade traditional radar tracking and interception technology. Pyongyang now holds the capability to launch greatly maneuverable missiles–posing a large threat to the US. It is predicted to possess fifty intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by 2035.[5]

The US Intelligence Community's 2025 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) indicates that North Korea's strategic objective is to enhance offensive strike capabilities to render Washington's defenses ineffective. In addition to its independent growth, North Korea is expanding its arsenal with the support of Russia–a major military power–as compensation for contributing to the war against Ukraine. Russia is sharing advanced space, nuclear, and missile-applicable technology and expertise to proliferate Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program.[6] When an adversary, such as North Korea, focuses on bypassing defensive capabilities, the US must respond by shifting from maintaining legacy systems to adapting to new technologies.

North Korea can now credibly threaten the US and is receiving supplementary external support from other US foes to accelerate these capabilities. Response to this threat is imperative: Golden Dome is a justified risk management system that preserves escalation control and prevents coercive leverage from forming.

Current US Missile Defense Capabilities

While existing defense systems provide important regional protection, they were not designed for the multi-domain saturation capabilities of modern missile threats. The Army iterated its critical vision for air and missile defense: "The most stressing threat is a complex, integrated attack incorporating multiple threat capabilities in a well-coordinated and synchronized attack. These attacks include off-axis approaches for [cruise missiles] and lethal [unmanned aerial systems] to neutralize our defensive capabilities and attack our critical assets."[7] This verbiage reflects the recognition of adversaries specifically designing missiles to overwhelm existing US defenses. Off-axis cruise missiles take advantage of radar coverage gaps, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs or drones) saturate the airspace, and salvos confuse existing algorithms. Existing systems are currently expected to confront attacks whose intent is to degrade them. Altogether, this reduces the probability of successful interception and also shifts US air superiority as adversaries generate coercive leverage by threatening multi-vector attacks that the US cannot currently defeat.

The US currently operates a single-purpose defense architecture designed to protect against midcourse ballistic missile attacks through the management of the Missile Defense Agency. The Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) interceptor system has California and Alaska sites with interceptors stored in silos, ready for launch to protect the US homeland. The system utilizes integrated communications networks, fire control systems, sensors, and Ground-Based Interceptors (GBI) to ultimately destroy ballistic missile threats. The first notice of a missile launch is delivered by early warning satellites and forward-based radars–from either X-band radars in allied locations or ship-based Aegis radars–within mere minutes. When the missile's booster burns out, the weapon's visibility is challenged, forming a "threat cloud." The next opportunity for detection is ground-based radars that provide tracking data sufficiently accurate to launch interceptors. Identifying the warhead among

4. Andrew Feickert, "Missile Survey: Ballistic and Cruise Missiles of Selected Foreign Countries," Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, July 26, 2005, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA454552.pdf.
5. Daniel M. Gettinger and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs," Congress, September 26, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10472.
6. Daniel M. Gettinger and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs."
7. Thomas Karako, "The Missile Defense Review: Insufficient for Complex and Integrated Attack," Strategic Studies Quarterly, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26639670.

decoy objects remains a challenge.[8]

The problem with this current system is its lack of reliability. A strategic missile defense must be very effective to provide meaningful protection and to restrict adversaries from exploiting its vulnerability. GMD is only partially reliable: it cannot guarantee interception. Although it has successfully intercepted targets in controlled test environments, some tests have failed due to sensor and interceptor challenges–limiting confidence even in perfect conditions. Additionally, GMD was designed for unsophisticated missiles; this system cannot sustain the challenges of the evolving missile threat built on simultaneous employment of cruise missiles, hypersonic glide vehicles, unmanned aerial systems, and space-enabled targeting.[9] These limitations are central strategic vulnerabilities that call for a system like Golden Dome.

Unlike GMD, which relies on a single-purpose architecture focused on midcourse ballistic missile interception, Golden Dome seeks to integrate multiple sensors, command-and-control networks, and interception layers capable of responding to simultaneous threats across multiple domains. The system adapts the same denial-based principle to the strategic challenge of homeland defense to preserve decision-making and deterrence against complex, multi-vector attacks–rather than simply expanding existing missile defense systems. Without technological advancements, adversaries will retain the ability to impose coercive pressure on the US, weakening Washington's deterrence and decision-making capabilities. Golden Dome restores confidence in missile defense through an integrated and effective denial-based architecture.

As aforementioned, foreign adversaries are growing their ICBM capabilities. This requires a strategic response as they directly challenge the credibility of US air superiority and general homeland security. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, US Air Force General Gregory Guillot of the US Northern Command shared the rising threat of intercontinental attack capabilities of North Korea: when foe states improve the range, accuracy, and launch readiness of their missile delivery systems, they take away the valuable warning time for US decision-makers and increase the risk of the weapon hurting US security.[10] This is essential to confront: credible ICBM threats are designed for coercion. They hold the capacity to make the US vulnerable during crises and complicate American freedom of action abroad–ultimately reducing Washington's deterrence stability and shifting bargaining power in favor of the adversaries. Therefore, successful interception prevents them from using the threat of catastrophic harm as a political tool.

Golden Dome

The Golden Dome for America is designed to address the threat of attacks by ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles–and other advanced aerial offense–through a next-generation defense shield. Through the projection of the integrated technology, the US will be able to successfully deter any foreign aerial attack on the homeland and guarantee second-strike capability.[11]

To blunt expanding coercive capabilities of adversaries, such as North Korea, Golden Dome will integrate advanced radar and sensor architectures against the unpredictable and multidimensional nature of modern missiles. Adversaries can now employ ballistic and cruise missiles and hypersonic glide vehicles that are designed to overwhelm single-layer or single-domain detection systems. When US sensor assets, such as Long-Range Discrimination Radar, Upgraded Early Warning Radars, Transportable Radar, Sea-Based X-Band Radar, and the Space-Based Infrared Systems, are layered and integrated, they can provide persistent and efficient coverage that can track and detect all missile threats. Incorporating space domain awareness data with these capabilities ensures the earliest possible warning for decision-makers and reduces uncertainty in threat characterization.[12]

Current US kinetic ballistic missile defense capabilities can intercept traditional ballistic threats. New systems, such as cruise missiles and maneuverable hypersonic glide vehicles, are significantly harder to counter. Layered awareness with the inclusion of multi-domain interceptors–including space-based interceptors for interception at the missile's boost phase–is imperative to approach all threats approaching North America.[13]

To support these objectives, the fiscal year 2025 reconciliation law allocated $24.4 billion for the Golden Dome architecture in the "One Big Beautiful Bill," reflecting US commitment to counter advanced missile threats. Although specific design details remain limited, available assessments suggest that upgrades in sensor, surveillance, and interceptor layers and command and control systems will be essential.[14] Together, they

8. John Maslin, Erin Connolly, Jessica Gott, et al., "Why the United States Does Not Need Another Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) Facility," edited by Sarah Minot Asrar, On the Horizon: A Collection of Papers from the Next Generation, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22545.14.

9. Laura Grego, George N. Lewis, and David Wright, "Shielded from Oversight: The Disastrous US Approach to Strategic Missile Defense," Union of Concerned Scientists, July 2016, https://www.ucs.org/sites/default/files/attach/2016/07/Shielded-from-Oversight-full-report.pdf.

10. Matthew Olay, "Top Northcom, NORAD Officer Highlights Trio of Homeland Security Concerns During Senate Testimony," U.S. Department of War, February 13, 2025, https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4066756/top-northcom-norad-officer-highlights-trio-of-homeland-security-concerns-during/.

11. Executive Office of the President, "The Iron Dome for America," Federal Register, January 27, 2025, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02182/the-iron-dome-for-america.

12. Hannah D. Dennis, "Defense Primer: The Golden Dome for America," Congress In Focus, September 29, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF13115.

13. Jason Sherman, "DOD Seeks New Space-Based Interceptor Effort in FY-20," Inside Missile Defense Vol. 25, No. 7, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26624475.

14. Raymond Wang and Lachlan MacKenzie, "Golden Dome for America: Assessing Chinese and Russian Reactions," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 20, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/golden-dome-america-assessing-chinese-and-russian-reactions.

will grant the US earlier detection, faster decision-making, and effective threat interception across the entire homeland.

The Risk of an Arms Race

There is a concern that Washington's ambition for a national missile shield will trigger a new arms race and ultimately destabilize the balance between global powers. China has accused the US of turning "space into a war zone," and Russia has called the effort a "very destabilizing initiative."[15] Critics warn that expanded US missile defense would be perceived as an attempt to degrade mutual deterrence and prompt adversaries to try to overwhelm defense with decoys and salvo launches to restore coercive leverage.

However, offensive buildups are already in process–regardless of US missile defense programs. Rivals have continuously expanded and diversified their missile capabilities, and the US will become vulnerable to coercion if it does not adapt to the growing threats. Additionally, improved detection reduces misperception and the chance of escalatory decisions, disproving the allegation that Golden Dome risks an arms race. Overall, expanding credible, layered missile defense will reduce adversary coercive leverage and address US vulnerabilities.

Criticism of Golden Dome is rooted in the fear of mutual assured destruction (MAD). When both sides of conflict possess credible second-strike capabilities, neither can launch the first strike without inevitably facing retaliatory consequences. In these scenarios, deterrence is strengthened by the near-guarantee that aggression will be punished. Golden Dome challenges this interpretation by directly seeking to reduce American vulnerability to incoming attacks. If adversaries believe that the United States can intercept retaliation efforts while maintaining superiority in offensive capabilities, they will fear that the balance of deterrence is shifting against their favor. This fear could trigger expansion of missile arsenals and sophisticated delivery systems to preserve the success of their retaliation. This concern could incentivize preemptive action during a crisis, causing an arms race and global instability.

However, this belief assumes that vulnerability is essential for global stability. Golden Dome suggests otherwise: deterrence will be strengthened when adversaries believe their attacks will be unsuccessful and will fail to achieve meaningful effects. While missile defense can encourage adversaries to pursue new and stronger offensive capabilities, it simultaneously continues to reduce the political utility of those weapons by undermining their ability to coerce the US In a global environment where missile threats are rapidly proliferating, accepting vulnerability as a stabilizing foundation is too risky: a credible denial-based defense is the necessary adaptation to the evolving threats to preserve deterrence.

15. Clayton Swope and Melissa Dalton, "Does the Golden Dome Create Strategic Instability or an Opportunity with China and Russia?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 23, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/does-golden-dome-create-strategic-instability-or-opportunity-china-and-russia.

How Golden Dome Fits into US Air Superiority

The intent of Golden Dome is to establish an integrated defensive architecture capable of intercepting all incoming missiles that threaten the US. This system will produce two paths of influence on adversary behavior. First, if an adversary launches an attack and Golden Dome successfully intercepts the missile, the failed strike increases the adversary's political and military costs of further aggression.

Historical precedent reinforces this dynamic. During the Battle of Britain, the Royal Air Force's (RAF) successful interception of the German bombers in head-on attacks compelled Germany to abandon its strategic bombing campaign. Despite German optimism of winning the war, British interference–through early-warning radar and fighter interception–convinced Adolf Hitler to postpone Operation Sea Lion, demonstrating that credible defense can reverse the attacker's agenda.[16] German planners had assumed that sustained bombing would collapse the British will; however, the RAF's defensive success tarnished German morale and imposed operational costs. The Luftwaffe's failure to secure British airspace demonstrated that when a defender consistently denies the attacker from inflicting meaningful damage, its offensive strategy collapses. While the Battle of Britain involved conventional aircraft rather than modern-day missile threats, it remains a relevant demonstration of the strategic principle that denying an adversary the ability to achieve operational objectives can fundamentally alter political decision-making.

Translating to Golden Dome, adversaries will not have the capability to secure American airspace due to Golden Dome, as all strike attempts–from missiles, UAVs, and hypersonic vehicles–will be contained. This will delegitimize an adversary's coercive attempts and pressure them to withdraw. Every failed strike deprives the attacker of operational gains, and its escalatory efforts become futile. As Schelling emphasized, coercion only works when the target anticipates impending punishment: Golden Dome would systemically deny the adversary from making such a claim.

Second, Golden Dome can shape behavior before the conflict even begins: if attackers believe that interception will occur, the benefits of launching a strike completely dissipate. A defensive system that is globally perceived as highly effective removes the legitimacy of missiles as a coercive tool.

The current relationship between North and South Korea offers a modern parallel to Golden Dome's capabilities. As its neighbor continues to advance missile capabilities, South Korea has a response to the threat: the "Three-Axis" system. Utilizing F-35As, reconnaissance satellites, missile interceptors, and ballistic missiles, South Korea aims to defend with a kill chain against incoming attacks. The Korea Air and Missile

16. Ron Dick, "Battle of Britain," Air Power History, Vol. 37, No. 2, 1990, pp. 11-25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26271113.

Defense (KAMD) and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) campaigns work to disable North Korea's command and control–how orders are coordinated and issued–by neutralizing its leadership's capabilities, the core of North Korea's center of gravity.[17] The public knowledge of South Korea's defensive capabilities ultimately limits Pyongyang's confidence in achieving decisive effects–despite its expansive missile technology. While Seoul's Three-Axis system is designed for regional deterrence rather than continental homeland defense, it demonstrates how defensive architectures reduce an adversary's confidence in decisive coercion. Similarly, Golden Dome's perceived reliability will diminish the enemy's expectations of gain, shaping behavior before a launch order is even considered. Golden Dome will dissuade coercion at its source.

If Golden Dome is successful, the US will regain a requirement for air superiority: the ultimate ability to project force without any fear of coercion in return. Air superiority has historically given Washington the freedom of threatening punishment, but rising adversary missile capabilities threaten this asymmetric advantage by putting the US at risk. By refusing the possibility of being coerced by preventing successful attacks and deterring attempts altogether, Golden Dome reverses this vulnerability by ensuring that Washington's strategic behavior will never be constrained by the fear of retaliation. Ultimately, Golden Dome will enable the US to maintain escalation dominance and globally preserve its coercive leverage.

Justified Escalation Through Second-Strike

Golden Dome functions as more than a technical shield: it is a risk-management tool that strengthens air superiority and shapes crisis escalation incentives. By denying adversaries the opportunity to achieve meaningful effects with an initial strike, Golden Dome reinforces US air superiority and preserves credible second-strike options. If an adversary launches a strike on the homeland, Golden Dome will absorb the attack and maintain command and control continuity to provide decision-makers the liberty to thoughtfully deliberate the timing and scale of retaliatory efforts.

This preserved decision-making stage is essential. By reliably denying an attacker the ability to inflict decisive damage, Golden Dome will increase the probability that the US retains operational freedom to impose punishment. Additionally, because the US would be responding *after* an enemy-initiated strike, a second strike would be in alignment with domestic political expectations and alliance norms–unlike a preemptive first strike.[18] Golden Dome will allow Washington to project coercive pressure without the reputational and geopolitical costs associated with initiating the first strike, reducing the risk of inadvertent escalation and reinforcing that US retaliation is justified. A US-initiated first strike would weaken alliances and increase perceptions of American aggression, destabilizing international norms. Additionally, if the US force posture appears to be offensive, rather than defending security, this will encourage adversaries to justify rapid escalation. A retaliation conducted after an adversary attempts to attack will be viewed as proportional and justified under domestic and international expectations.

The absence of a strong denial system risks turning crises into a zero-sum contest: an attacker that succeeds in inflicting damage on the US gains coercive leverage, which in turn would incentivize the US to rapidly escalate. An attacker with matching modern missile capabilities would then respond, and the cycle could continue. Golden Dome will give the US an asymmetric advantage by removing the attacker's expected gains while preserving Washington's survivable retaliatory options. Ultimately, Washington would avoid coercive loss and retain its coercive recourse.

This strategic position is reflected in congressional attention. In June 2025, the US House Committee on Armed Services emphasized that guaranteeing second-strike capability is central to deterring adversaries from attacking the homeland.[19] Golden Dome directly contributes to this objective by preserving decision time and retaliatory credibility.

Iron Dome Case Study

Iron Dome provides a direct demonstration of a missile defense shield and strike capability that successfully functions as a form of airpower–beyond just a passive protection of assets. Traditionally, airpower is achieved through offensive operations–destroying enemy assets–to deny them the opportunity to retaliate. While the system operates on a significantly smaller geographic scale than Golden Dome, the Israeli experience with coercive logic illustrates that persistent and reliable interception can prevent the adversary from meaningfully projecting force into airspace and offer opportunities for decisive retaliation.

Iron Dome began servicing Israel in 2011 and demonstrated its success immediately: within its first year of operation, the system demonstrated 93 intercepts. By Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012, it intercepted 421 rockets in eight days–an 84% success rate–against more than 1,500 inbound rockets. This success allowed Israel to avoid a ground operation and preserve freedom of action for further offensive air operations. The adversary failed to impose meaningful costs on Israel, despite firing more than 1,500 rockets.[20]

Israel's experience against Iran emphasizes how missile defense directly reinforces airpower by preserving its freedom to strike while denying opponents any meaningful ability to in-

17. Doyeong Jung, "South Korea's Revitalized 'Three-Axis' System," Council on Foreign Relations, January 4, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-koreas-revitalized-three-axis-system.
18. Daryl G. Kimball, "The Case for U.S. No-First Use Policy," Arms Control Today, Vol. 48, No. 8, October 2018, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/90025252.
19. Mark B. Messmer, "H.R.4107 - Golden Dome Act of 2025," 119th Congress, June 24, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/4107/text.
20. Yiftah S. Shapir, "Lessons from the Iron Dome," Military and Strategic Affairs, Vol. 5, No. 1, May 2013, pp. 81-93, https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/MASA5-1Eng4_Shapir.pdf.

flict damage. In April 2024, Iran launched over 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles, and 120 ballistic missiles to overwhelm Israel's defenses in response to the Iranian embassy bombing in Damascus. Almost all were intercepted by Iron Dome–with some assistance from Israeli air defense and allied support. Regardless, Iran's attempt to punish Israel was neutralized and Israel was able to conduct large-scale offensive operations–such as Operation Rising Lion, comprising over 200 Israeli aircraft to strike Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure–without much concern for future Iranian threats.[21] Effective missile defense removes an adversary's ability to coerce through aeronautical strikes, allowing the defender to operate with greater confidence and freedom of action. Iron Dome protects infrastructure and civilians while preserving the strategic conditions for air dominance by denying adversaries the ability to inflict sufficient harm to constrain Israeli decision-making or application of airpower. This is directly transferable to Golden Dome strategy.

Conclusion

Golden Dome represents a new era of how the United States secures and retains air superiority in the modern stage of multi-domain missile threats. Since the establishment of air capabilities, American coercive power rested on the assumption that it could punish adversaries without significant fear of meaningful retaliation, an assumption that is now increasingly challenged by missile proliferation. Historical and peer examples suggest that denial-based architecture can influence adversary decision-making across multiple operational contexts. By denying adversaries the ability to impose meaningful political costs, Golden Dome will restore the asymmetry that once granted the US ultimate air superiority. It will eliminate the political utility of missile coercion, stabilize decision-making during crises, and guarantee credible second-strike capability. Effective denial-based systems reshape adversary expectations and degrade offensive strategies. In an increasingly contested aerospace environment, the shield will provide strategic conditions necessary to sustain US air superiority.

21. Benjamin Jensen and Yasir Atalan, "Iran's Options for Retaliating Against Israel," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 13, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/irans-options-retaliating-against-israel.

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A Descriptive Analysis of INES 2020 Sinn Féin Voter Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland

By: Anton Chung Frantisak

Abstract: Sinn Féin's vote share in the Republic of Ireland skyrocketed in 2020—yet few studies examine the voter base of Sinn Féin, analyze its subcategories, and compare its voters to those of other Irish parties. Thus, this study describes the left-right ideological self-placement and attitudes of these voter groupings regarding taxes and government spending, Irish unification, and government action to address income differences. The study employs INES survey data to construct three group comparisons using 2020 first-preference vote choice and 2016 first-preference vote choice: (1) current Sinn Féin and non-Sinn Féin voters, (2) returning and new Sinn Féin voters, and (3) former and current Sinn Féin voters. Then, it compares subgroup means on these measures using violin plots and reports mean differences. Overall, it argues that unification attitudes alone are not sufficient for a descriptive account of 2020 Sinn Féin voters. This finding is important because it informs future studies, which could conduct an experiment in subsequent Irish elections.

Key Words: Sinn Féin, Irish unification, voting behavior, left-wing politics, Republic of Ireland, Irish National Election Study

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Introduction

Sinn Féin (SF; "Ourselves"), the predominant pan-Irish pro-unification party, increased its vote share in the Republic of Ireland to 24.5 percent in 2020, up from 13.8 percent in 2016 and 9.9 percent in 2011.[1] Although the party's historical emphasis on Irish nationalism and unification still anchors its political identity in Northern Ireland, support for unity is lower in the Republic than would be expected given an electorate that is 90 percent Irish-identifying, with 64 percent favoring unity.[2] This essay argues that attitudes toward Irish unification alone are insufficient for a descriptive account of 2020 SF voters.

This essay has five sections. First, it reviews existing literature on SF and its political platform in the Republic of Ireland. Second, it identifies the research gap and introduces the study's descriptive expectations about political ideology and attitudes toward unification, redistribution, and social spending across SF voter subgroups. Third, it outlines the research design, in which it details and justifies its methods. Fourth, it presents and discusses its findings on SF voter subgroup attitudes, while also comparing them to other voters. Fifth, it considers the study's limitations as a descriptive endeavor. Last, it concludes by suggesting paths for future research.

Literature Review

Overall attention to the Northern Ireland question, which encompasses Northern Ireland's status and Irish unification, has fallen over time in party manifestos in the Republic. Green-Pedersen and Little demonstrate that attention to the question in manifestos has declined since the Northern Ireland peace process in the 1990s.[3] On this basis, they further suggest that the question may not have played a major role in recent Irish party competition.[4] While this claim is inconclusive, such a trend among Irish political parties provides the baseline for assessing how SF addresses the Northern Ireland question within its manifestos.

SF's southern manifestos gave less attention to the Northern Ireland question than did its northern manifestos in 2016 and 2020. Arlow builds on Green-Pedersen and Little by showing that SF's 2016 and 2020 southern manifestos only allocate two to three percent of coded manifesto sentences to Irish unification, which is less than half of the space given to this issue in the North.[5] With this disparity as evidence, Arlow argues that Irish unification appears not to be an issue of day-to-day concern and may not win elections, although SF still dedicates the greatest amount of space to the issue out of all Irish party manifestos.[6] In the Republic, therefore, declining attention to the Northern Ireland question in party manifestos and SF's weaker emphasis on unification legitimize examining SF voters' attitudes toward Irish unification.

SF's platform in the South instead focuses more on social-democratic issues than Irish unification. Arlow contends that the party's platform differs in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland because each has a distinct electorate.[7] In the Republic, SF's adaptation to an electorate not structured around the unionism-nationalism divide corresponds to a platform centered on social-democratic economic policy framed around the failures of previous administrations, such as universal healthcare and affordable housing.[8] This platform sits well within the political mainstream, given that the issues SF emphasizes in the Republic have been similar to those of other parties, even if SF remains to the left of Ireland's political establishment on these issues.[9] SF's left-wing social-democratic platform thus invites examining SF voters and their attitudes toward policy.

SF voters were more left-wing in 2020 than in previous elections. Employing the same Irish National Election Study (INES) data as this study,[10] Müller and Regan document a leftward shift among SF voters in 2020.[11] Even after excluding far-left respondents who placed themselves at 0 on a 0-10 scale, they still observed the same shift, which held across all parties in 2020 and was particularly strong among SF supporters.[12] Therefore, SF voters' leftward shift in 2020 likely does not reflect an influx of far-left respondents into SF's electorate, but rather reflects a broader change within SF's voter base.

Scholars have also used INES data to quantify whether voters lean more left- or right-wing.[13] In the same article, Müller and Regan show that the average Irish voter now leans center-left and that income predicts left-right self-placement (leftRight), attitudes toward taxes and government spending (taxesSpending), and attitudes toward government intervention to reduce inequality (incomeDifferences) for Irish voters over-

1. Niall McCarthy, "Infographic: Irish Election: Sinn Féin's Rise," Statista Daily Data, February 10, 2020, https://www.statista.com/chart/20776/sinn-feins-share-of-the-vote-in-irish-elections.
2. John Garry et al., ARINS/Irish Times North & South Research 2024: Republic of Ireland Summary (Royal Irish Academy, 2025), 3, 9, https://www.ria.ie/assets/uploads/2025/03/ARINS-IT_ROIsummary_2024.pdf.
3. Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Conor Little, "Understanding the Conflict of Conflicts: Is Left-Right Conflict a Necessary Condition for the Development of New Politics?" Political Studies 72, no. 2 (2024): 9–10, https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217221141424.
4. Green-Pedersen and Little, "Understanding the Conflict of Conflicts," 9–10.
5. Jonathan Arlow, "Comparing Sinn Féin between North and South: Do Institutional Context and Varying Public Attitudes Drive Party Policy Preferences?" The British Journal of Politics and International Relations 27, no. 3 (2025): 858, https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241303280; Green-Pedersen and Little, "Conflict of Conflicts," 9–10.
6. Arlow, "Comparing Sinn Féin between North and South," 858.
7. Arlow, "Comparing Sinn Féin between North and South," 840–42.
8. Arlow, "Comparing Sinn Féin between North and South," 859.
9. Arlow, "Comparing Sinn Féin between North and South," 859; Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Conor Little, "The Issue Content of Party Politics in Ireland: A New Perspective on the Irish Party System and Its Development," Irish Political Studies 38, no. 1 (2023): 53, https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2022.2036039.
10. Johan Elkink and David Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)," version 4.0, Harvard Dataverse, November 14, 2020, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/E6TAVY.
11. Stefan Müller and Aidan Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?" Irish Political Studies 36, no. 4 (2021): 543, https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2021.1973737.
12. Müller and Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?," 542–43.
13. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."

all.[14] By situating these results within a broader leftward shift in the Irish electorate, Müller and Regan treat 'leftRight,' 'taxesSpending,' and 'incomeDifferences' as alternative indicators of being more left-wing.[15] As a result, this precedent validates certain participant responses stored under 'leftRight,' 'taxesSpending,' and 'incomeDifferences' as established indicators of a voter leaning more to the left.

Although Müller and Regan use INES measures to identify this leftward shift in SF's electorate and to quantify being left-wing, they neither put them in conversation with SF voters' attitudes toward Irish unification nor compare them across SF voter subgroups.[16] Accordingly, this study uses two categories of attitudes. On the one hand, SF's social-democratic policy orientation, its left-of-center platform, and its more left-wing 2020 voter base thereby justify analyzing attitudes toward taxes and government spending on social services, government action to reduce income differences, and voters' self-placed left-right ideology, using the three INES variables 'taxesSpending,' 'incomeDifferences,' and 'leftRight.'[17] On the other hand, party manifestos' declining attention to the Northern Ireland question and SF's lesser focus on unification warrant examining SF voter attitudes toward Irish unification, which is also contained in INES.[18]

Research Questions and Descriptive Expectations

This study helps fill this gap by describing these variables from INES concerning SF voters and relevant subgroups.[19] In its contribution to the literature, this study aims to (1) provide a descriptive account of SF's 2020 first-preference voters, (2) describe SF voters' attitudes toward Irish unification in the contemporary Republic, and (3) lay the descriptive groundwork to inform a future experimental analysis of SF voter attitudes in subsequent elections.

In order to achieve this objective, this study examines three research questions. First, *how do SF and non-SF first-preference voters compare on Irish unification attitudes, left-right ideology self-placement, and left-wing policy attitudes?* Given SF's historical association with the issue and that they dedicate the most space to it out of all Irish parties, SF first-preference voters' attitudes may be more favorable toward Irish unification compared to non-SF first-preference voters. SF first-preference voters may also self-place further left and report more left-wing policy attitudes when compared with non-SF first-preference voters, in line with SF's 2020 left-leaning social-democratic party platform in the Republic.

Expectation 1: *SF first-preference voters' average attitude toward Irish unification may be more favorable than that of non-SF first-preference voters.*

Expectation 2: *SF first-preference voters may, on average, self-place further left and report more left-wing policy attitudes than non-SF first-preference voters.*

Second, *how do returning (SF in both 2016 and 2020) and new (SF in 2020 who did not vote SF in 2016) SF first-preference voters compare on Irish unification attitudes, left-right ideology self-placement, and left-wing policy attitudes?* In light of SF's 2020 southern platform emphasizing Irish unification less and focusing more on social democratic issues, new voters may report different attitudes toward Irish unification compared to returning voters. New voters may also differ in self-placement and report different attitudes toward left-wing policy relative to returning SF first-preference voters, in the context of the leftward shift of SF's voter base in 2020. However, existing studies do not substantiate a particular expectation, only hinting at possible differences between these two groups in general.

Expectation 3: *Returning and new SF first-preference voters may differ in their average attitude toward Irish unification.*

Expectation 4: *Returning and new SF first-preference voters may differ in left-right self-placement and left-wing policy attitudes.*

Third, *how do former (SF in 2016 but not in 2020) and current (SF in 2020) SF voters compare on Irish unification attitudes, left-right ideology self-placement, and left-wing policy attitudes?* Again, in the context of SF's shift away from Irish unification, current voters may report different attitudes toward unification on average in comparison to former voters. Current voters may likewise differ in terms of left-right self-placement and attitudes toward left-wing policy when compared with former voters, in light of prior evidence of the voter base's shift leftward. Nevertheless, existing studies do not support a specific expectation about how the groups compare beyond suggesting that differences may exist.

Expectation 5: *Former and current SF first-preference voters may differ in their average attitude toward Irish unification.*

Expectation 6: *Former and current SF first-preference voters may differ in left-right self-placement and left-wing policy attitudes.*

Data and Methods

This study employs the INES survey because it contains key vote and attitude measures.[20] First, it includes voters' first-preference choice (firstPreference) in Ireland's ranked-choice system, enabling the grouping of respondents from various parties, such as SF. Second, it includes the voters' attitudes toward Irish unification (irishUnification) on a 0 to 10 scale. Third, it contains the various measures of left-wing politics, each on a 0 to 10 scale and established by Müller and Regan,[21] where self-placed left-right ideology (leftRight) is the primary measure, while attitudes toward government action to reduce income differences (incomeDifferences) and attitudes toward tax-

14. Müller and Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?," 546.
15. Müller and Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?," 535.
16. Müller and Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?"; Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."
17. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."
18. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."
19. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."
20. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."
21. Müller and Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?"

es and government spending on social services (taxesSpending) are secondary measures. Last, it includes voters' first-preference choice in the last election (vote2016), so that SF subcategories can be grouped into (1) returning voters for comparison with new voters and (2) former voters to be compared with current voters.

The bounded timeframe of INES limits this analysis.[22] However, other datasets, such as the Irish Polling Indicator and Irish Demographic Polling Data, do not combine first-preference vote choice, self-placed left-right ideology, and attitudes toward taxes and government spending, Irish unification, and government action to reduce income differences. Although INES data from prior elections for these variables is available, as used by Müller and Regan,[23] it are not currently available to the public due to ongoing dataset harmonization by the INES team. A copy of this data was promised but not delivered in time for this essay.

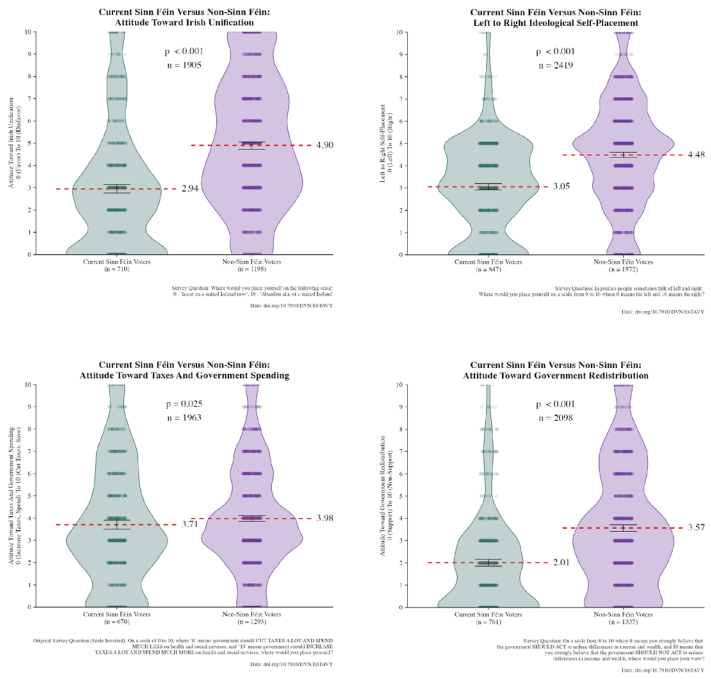
In terms of procedure, the variable 'taxesSpending' was recoded by reversing its scale so that lower values indicate a more favorable attitude toward the policy. All outcomes are thus coded so that lower values correspond to more favorable attitudes toward unification, more left self-placement, and more supportive attitudes toward redistribution and toward taxes and government spending. The first research question involved creating two groups, 'current_SF' and 'non_SF,' comparing them on the four variables, and calculating means for these two groups in 2020. The second research question involved applying the same method to the 'returning_SF' and 'new_SF' groups and then calculating the two groups' mean attitudes for each variable in 2020. The third research question involved the separation and comparison of the 'former_SF' and 'current_SF' groups using the same set of mean comparisons. Last, violin plots were generated for each comparison, displaying the mean, 95 percent confidence interval, and p-value for the difference in means between groups. All code for these analyses is available and fully reproducible.

Findings and Discussion

Current SF voters' attitudes toward Irish unification were much closer to 0 ("Insist on a united Ireland now") compared to non-SF voters.[24] Current SF voters had a mean of 2.94 compared to 4.90 for non-SF voters, a difference of 1.96 between the groups. This difference was also statistically significant, with $p < .001$ and 1,905 total responses. Such a pattern is consistent with SF's position as the predominant Irish unification party and its manifestos allocating more space to unification than any other Irish party, despite reduced emphasis on unification in the South. Therefore, this finding matches Expectation 1 that current SF voters hold more favorable attitudes toward Irish unification than other voters.

22. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."
23. Müller and Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?"
24. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."

5.1 *Current SF Versus Non-SF*



The expected result that current SF voters self-place as more left-wing than non-SF voters was also found for left-right self-placement. Current SF voters were closer to 0 than non-SF voters when rating themselves on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 is the most left-wing, as the mean was 3.05 for current SF voters and 4.48 for non-SF voters. The difference in means of 1.43 was also statistically significant, with $p < .001$ and 2,419 total responses. Although Müller and Regan found that SF voters self-placed themselves as more left-wing in 2020,[25] their study builds on this work by reporting the difference in means between SF and non-SF voters on this measure, along with its statistical significance.

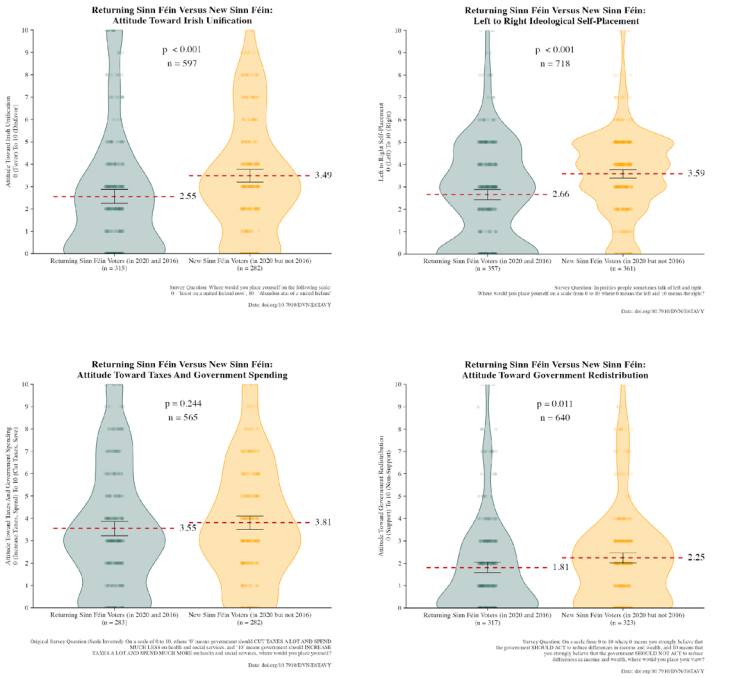
The two more specific left-wing policy issues also followed this pattern overall. On the one hand, the mean difference of attitudes toward government redistribution was pronounced between SF and non-SF voters, with a difference of 1.56, $p < .001$, and 2,098 total responses. Specifically, SF voters had an average attitude of 2.01 compared to 3.57 for non-SF voters. This finding is compatible with Expectation 2 that SF voters hold more left-wing policy attitudes than non-SF voters.

On the other hand, SF voters' mean attitude toward taxes and government spending was closer to 0, with a mean of 3.71. However, the rest of the Irish electorate showed similar attitudes, with a mean of 3.98. As such, only a small difference in means of .27 was found, with a p-value of .025 and 1,963 total responses, indicating only a slight difference in attitudes. While the difference between SF voters' and non-SF voters' attitudes toward taxes and government spending is small, the Irish electorate may have widespread favorable attitudes toward taxes and government spending. Given that the result is statisti-

25. Müller and Regan, "Are Irish Voters Moving to the Left?"

cally significant, the SF mean is closer to zero, and the other two measures demonstrate stronger differences, the result still aligns with Expectation 2 that SF voters are generally more left-wing than non-SF voters.

5.2 *Returning Versus New*



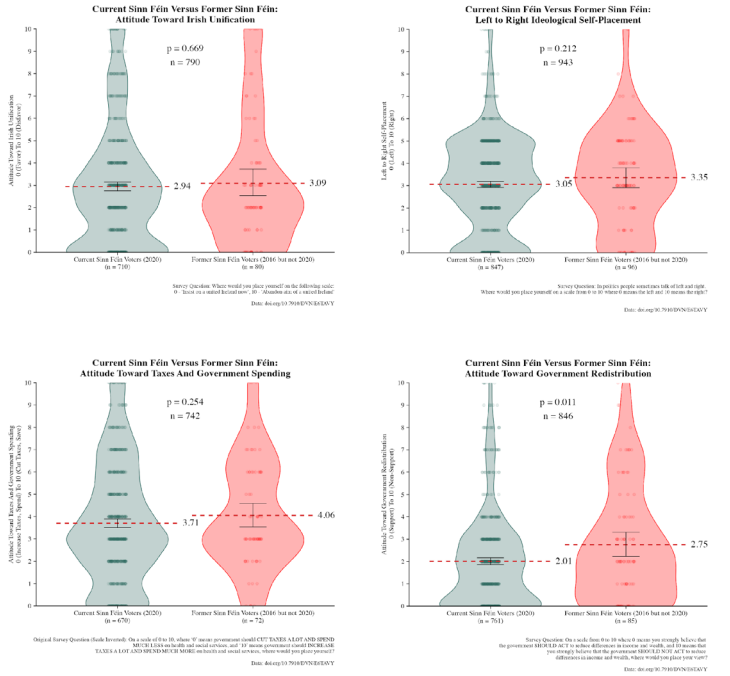
The results again follow Expectation 3 of a difference between returning SF and new SF voters' attitudes toward Irish unification. On the one hand, returning SF voters had an attitude closer to 0 toward Irish unification, with a mean of 2.55. On the other hand, new SF voters had a mean of 3.49, producing a difference in means of .94 with $p < .001$. Although both groups still held more favorable attitudes toward Irish unification than non-SF voters (mean of 4.9), new SF voters held more moderate attitudes toward unification. Accordingly, this finding matches Expectation 3 that returning and new SF voters do not share the same average attitude toward Irish unification, in that new SF voters hold less favorable attitudes than returning SF voters.

The difference in means for 'leftRight' supports Expectation 4 that the two groups do not share the same average self-placement on a left-right scale. Returning voters placed themselves as more left-wing at 2.66, whereas new voters placed themselves as more moderate at 3.59. The difference in means was .93 for this comparison, with $p < .001$ and 718 total responses. Therefore, this finding aligns with Expectation 4.

The two further issue-specific left-wing variables did not yield results as strong as left-right self-placement did. This result could reflect the smaller number of responses for these subgroup comparisons (around 600), compared to the earlier SF versus non-SF comparisons (over 2,000). While the result for income differences was statistically significant at $p = .011$, the difference in means was small at .44, with returning SF voters having a more favorable attitude at 1.81 versus 2.25 for new SF voters. But this result still indicates a difference between the means.

Conversely, the difference in the means between returning and new SF voters' attitudes toward taxes and government spending was not statistically significant. Even so, the similar attitudes in the Irish electorate toward taxes and government spending—as suggested by the .27 difference in means between SF voters and non-SF voters—could indicate that this measure does not differentiate between left-wing and right-wing voters as well as previously assumed. Thus, given two statistically significant differences in means and uncertainty about whether voters' attitudes toward taxes and government spending are a reliable measure of political orientation in the Irish electorate, these findings partially align with Expectation 4.

5.3 *Current Versus Former*



Regarding the comparison between current and former SF voters, differences in means were small and rarely statistically significant. Large differences in sample sizes may have influenced these outcomes, given that responses from current SF voters were more common than responses from former SF voters. The outcome for Irish unification produced a small difference that was not statistically significant. These findings thus do not align with Expectation 5 and would benefit from more data.

Regarding the self-placed left-right, the difference in means was not statistically significant. For government spending and taxes, the difference was also not statistically significant. However, the last outcome, concerning support for government action to reduce differences in income, was significant, with a p-value of .011 and a difference of .74. Although the small sample size for former SF voters should be noted, with 761 current SF respondents and 85 former SF respondents, this outcome may suggest that current SF voters' attitudes are more left-wing, based only on attitudes toward government redistribution. Still, this limited finding does not outweigh the non-significant results for the other secondary measure (taxesSpending) and the

primary measure (leftRight). Accordingly, these findings do not show the pattern described in Expectation 6 and would benefit from more data, similar to Expectation 5.

Limitations, Implications and Conclusion

This study's dataset and descriptive method limit it. On the one hand, this study would have benefited from more data for its subgroups, as the last subgroup of current versus former SF voters was particularly disadvantaged by this shortcoming. Although INES has been fielded since 2002, the 2020 dataset is the only segment currently publicly available. A completed 2002-2020 dataset is currently being developed, but it was unavailable during the creation of this study. The unavailability of past datasets precluded a larger-scale analysis of SF's entire rise from 2011 to 2020 and an analysis of SF before its rise. As only 2020 data with 2016 vote choice were used, this study also does not measure voters' attitudes on these variables in 2016. Therefore, this data constraint limits the findings to a focus on 2020. On the other hand, the non-experimental nature of this dataset constrains this study's methods and limits it to description. This obstructs any inference about causality or relationships but serves as a basis for future research. While this study serves to provide a foundation for a future experiment that better interrogates SF in 2020 and its rise from 2011 to 2020, these constraints limit its implications for a full analysis of SF's rise. Nonetheless, future studies should use a longer timeline, larger samples, and consider employing an experimental design.

In conclusion, this essay argued that attitudes toward Irish unification alone are insufficient for a descriptive account of SF's 2020 electorate. Using INES data,[26] it provided a descriptive account of Irish voter subgroups' attitudes and left-right self-placement, with a particular focus on SF. First, it found that SF voters held more favorable mean attitudes toward Irish unification and were more left-wing across three measures. Second, it showed that returning and new SF voters held different average attitudes toward Irish unification in 2020 and found partial differences between these groups in left-wing policy attitudes and left-right self-placement. Last, it examined current and former SF voters but found few statistically significant differences between them across these measures. Considering these findings, Irish unification alone appears insufficient for a descriptive account of 2020 SF voters in this sample.

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26. Elkink and Farrell, "2020 UCD Online Election Poll (INES 1)."

Sangrama and *Aragalaya*: The Struggles for Democratization in South Asia

By: Joshua Lipman

Abstract: In September 2025, young Nepalis successfully forced the resignation of Prime Minister K.P Sharma Oli and elected his replacement using the internet platform Discord. While the Gen Z Protests gained international attention, it was not the first example of a youth led movement that led to the removal of the longtime political establishment. Across South Asia, similar youth led movements have led to major political changes in at least 5 nations. Researchers have explored the many causes of the revolutions, as well as the immediate aftermath of the protests. This paper explores how the first of these protest movements, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, have led to improvements in the quality of democracy. The paper details the lead up to the protests and the political changes it led to. It then establishes a theoretical framework of different concepts in democratization, and applies that framework to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The paper finds that the protests have helped to improve the quality and strength of democracy in both countries. By understanding the democratic developments in both countries, academics and policymakers can further understand the impact that Gen Z has had on democracy, and the implications on the region.

Key Words: Democratization, South Asia, Generation Z, Social movements

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Introduction

In the past three years, leaders and political elites across Asia have faced mass protests that have yielded major reforms and changes in government. Protestors in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have forced the resignations of long-time political leaders, and protests in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and the Philippines have led to a wider reflection on democratic accountability. Many of these protests have been led by young people, who have been faced with economic anxieties and mass corruption that hamper their quality of life. The first of these protests began in Sri Lanka, where the *Aragalaya* (The Struggle in Sinhala) was sparked by an economic crisis largely blamed on the powerful Rajapaksa family, which had appointed themselves to roles throughout the country. The *Aragalaya* led to the ouster of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, and later his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and in 2024, the election of a third-party government for the first time in Sri Lanka's history. The same year, demonstrations for quota reform in Bangladesh triggered the July Revolution, and a non-cooperation movement which ousted 15-year incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. In her wake, a caretaker government led by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Muhammad Yunus was instituted, tasked with revising the constitution and holding fresh general elections, which took place in February 2026.

These developments mark the beginning of a new age for democracy in South Asia. Long-standing political parties and elites have been swept aside, and new leaders, largely installed by young people, have promised greater accountability and participation in politics. From this emerges an important question: to what extent has regime change by youth-led social movements affected the quality of democracy in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh? This paper aims to understand why these movements have been successful in a region marked by democratic backsliding, and what that means for the future of democracy in the region.

Scholars have largely focused on the institutional changes that have resulted from these protests. While this paper does address these important developments, it argues that the protest movements have had an important role in improving the quality of democracy in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh by developing crucial institutions and implementing key reforms through their own actions. This includes a renewal of social capital, which has in turn led to the revitalization of civil society and political parties. In addition, the protest movements largely used nonviolence and existing procedures to affect change in government institutions. The developments of social capital, social movements, and the use of legitimacy during and after *Aragalaya* and the July Revolution set the stage for full democratization in both countries through improved participation and contestation.

This paper proceeds with a review of literature looking at the developments that led to the protests in these countries, as well the roles that protest movements have played in the regime change. The second section introduces the theoretical framework, illustrating the different theories of democratization present in the protests. It also introduces the argument of why these theories play such an important role in the development of democracy. The third section applies these concepts to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, looking at the similarities and differences in improvements of quality of democracy. It also details how the specific reforms in these countries relate to theories of democratization. Finally, the paper concludes by looking at the implications for democracy in these countries, and how these protest movements may affect the quality of democracy elsewhere.

Historical Background

The existing literature on the recent protests and regime changes in general focus largely on the economic state of the countries, and theorize on how the changes in regime will affect the democracies in those countries. The literature often places emphasis on the economies' role in galvanizing social movements against authoritarian and illiberal regimes, as well as a perception of corruption and non-responsiveness in the regime.

Sri Lanka's *Aragalaya* is intricately linked to both elite power structures and economic crises that faced the nation after the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Aragalaya* ousted the Rajapaska brothers, who had served as President and Prime Minister since 2019, and had previously held various roles from 2005 to 2015. The Rajapaksas, especially Gotabaya Rajapaksa, were seen as heroes by the Sinhalese majority for their role in winning the Sri Lankan Civil War.[1] Over time, however, their popularity declined, and in 2015, their party, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, lost power when opposition Sri Lanka Freedom party candidate Maithripala Sirisena won the presidential election. However, it soon became clear that Sirisena was also beholden to the elite power structure, even attempting to dismiss his own prime minister and appoint former President Mahinda Rajapaksa.[2] This coordination between the supposed opposition leader Sirisena and the Rajapaskas seemed to prove to many that the elites of the two party system were working against the people's interests to preserve their own power.[3] While the effort failed, it seemed that the country was inevitably going to be controlled by the Rajapaksas, a belief cemented by the 2019 presidential election, which marked the election of Gotayaba to the presidency.

Throughout this time, Sri Lanka's government faced rising corruption, especially in infrastructure and economic development projects. Throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, under the Rajapaskas, Sri Lanka took out sizable loans from foreign nations for infrastructure projects. The public and external debt of the country skyrocketed, even with a widespread perception that these projects were almost solely for the benefit of government leaders.[4] In addition to this, Sri Lanka faced

1. Aparna Ramamurthy, "The rise and fall of Sri Lanka's powerful Rajapaksa dynasty," DW News, July 13, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/rajapaksa-the-rise-and-fall-of-sri-lankas-powerful-political-dynasty/a-62458780.
2. Ramamurthy, "Rise and Fall of Rajapaksa dynasty."
3. Jeffery Feltman, "Sri Lanka's presidential elections: Progress, regression, or paralysis?," Brookings Institution, April 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sri-lankas-presidential-elections-progress-regression-or-paralysis/.
4. Peter Hoskins, "Sri Lanka defaults on debt for first time in its histo-

multiple economic shocks during the late 2010s and 2020s, which had rippling effects throughout the country. Firstly, the 2019 Easter terrorist attacks led to an economic downturn, and caused a drop in support for the government, as many believed President Sirisena did not heed intelligence that showed the risk of a terrorist plot. This was followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which decimated the tourism industry, which had made up roughly 5% of GDP.[5] Finally, a ban on pesticides led to a drop in agricultural productivity on the island, decreasing food security and exports of foodstuffs.[6] Throughout this escalating crisis, the Rajapaksas took very little action to resolve the crisis, including refusing to negotiate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)to restructure the debt.

By 2022, the economic crisis reached a breaking point. Power outages and widespread shortages of food, fuel, and medicine plagued the nation. The United Nations estimated that roughly 28 percent of the country was food insecure by June 2022.[7] This crisis affected huge swaths of the country, cutting across ethnic and class divisions. This bridging of groups was largely alien to the country, which has continued to be defined by lines drawn during the civil war.

Protests began to break out in early April, which largely coalesced around different industries. By the end of April, over 200 protests had been sparked across the country. Many of these protests included young people, who had lost hope in a prosperous future in the country and trust in the government's leadership. The protests continued to grow throughout the month, including two nationwide strikes involving over 1,000 unions. On May 6th, the government declared a state of emergency in response to the escalating protest. Three days later, clashes broke out between protestors and supporters of the Rajapaskas' Sri Lanka Freedom Party. That day, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned, and in the aftermath, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to the position.[8] This appointment quelled the protests for a short period of time, but on July 9th, protestors flooded the Galle Face Green to demand the resignation of President Rajapaksa. They soon occupied the president's office and the residence of the prime minister and president.[9] These protests eventually turned violent, with the president's residence lit on fire that night, and violent clashes between supporters and opponents of Aragalaya. In the aftermath, President Rajapaksa announced his intention to resign, and fled the country.[10]

The subsequent appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe as president was controversial in the eyes of many, but eased some protests, and the remainder were suppressed by his government.[11] However, the end of *Aragalaya* protests did not mark the end of democratic change in the country. Scholars noted that Sri Lankans felt dissatisfied with the government, and the lack of any material change in the concentration of political power.[12] Voters chose third party candidate Anura Kumara Dissanayake as president, and gave his party a landslide victory in the following parliamentary elections. Dissanakye ran on an anti-corruption and anti-status quo platform, and promised to implement sweeping measures to improve quality of life and the economic situation of Sri Lanka.[13]

In contrast to the general economic malaise in Sri Lanka, literature surrounding the July Revolution in Bangladesh firmly roots the protests in the quota system for government jobs, and the lack of government responsiveness to criticism of the system. The incumbent Hasina government supported and often manipulated the system, with many of the jobs reserved for minorities and descendants of veterans of the Bangladeshi Liberation War.[14] However, many educated young people saw these jobs as a reliable source of income, and wanted hiring to be merit-based. In 2018, protestors demanded that the quota be reformed, with leaders from universities across the nation demanding the 30% quota be reformed for descendants of veterans. [15] In a surprising move, the Hasina government decided to abolish the entire quota system, which was met with mixed reactions from youth activists, as it did not reflect their original demands.[16] This view only deteriorated when, six years later, the High Court restored the quota system in its entirety.[17] Many Bangladeshis, especially young people, felt outraged by the lack of any responsiveness from the government, including the supposedly independent judiciary.

This lack of democratic responsiveness was coupled with increasing democratic backsliding that Bangladesh had faced since the beginning of Sheikh Hasina's government in 2009. Her rule has been marked by an undermining of democratic institutions as well as a weakening of the rule of law.[18]

ry," BBC World News, May 20, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61505842.

5. The Global Economy, "Sri Lanka: International tourism revenue, percent of GDP," The Global Economy, 2020, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Sri-Lanka/international_tourism_revenue_to_GDP/.

6. Elizabeth Stifel, "What Sri Lanka's ban of chemical fertilizers in 2021 can teach the world," International Water Management Institute, April 29, 2025, https://www.iwmi.org/blogs/challenges-and-opportunities-for-an-agro-ecological-transformation/.

7. World Food Programme, "Household Food Security Surveys," World Food Programme, May 22, 2024, https://www.wfp.org/publications/household-food-security-surveys-sri-lanka.

8. Timberman, "Aragalaya and the Political Change."

9. David G. Timberman, "The Aragalaya Protest Movement and the Struggle for Political Change in Sri Lanka," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, August 27, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/08/sri-lanka-aragalaya-protest-movement-oust-wickremesinghe-rajapaksa?lang=en.

10. Timberman, "Aragalaya and the Political Change."

11. Timberman, "Aragalaya and the Political Change."

12. Marlon Ariyasinghe, "The Man Who Would Oust A Dynasty," Journal of Democracy, September 2025, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/elections/the-man-who-would-oust-a-dynasty/.

13. Bhavani Fonseka, "Sri Lanka's Elusive Democratic Renewal," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, November 10, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/11/sri-lanka-democracy-protest-one-year-later?lang=en.

14. Abdullah al-Mamun, "Bangladesh's July Revolution: A Youth-Driven Paradigm Shift in Nation-Building," İLKE Vakfı, September 2025, https://ilke.org.tr/en/yayin-detay/bangladesh-s-july-revolution-a-youth-driven-paradigm-shift-in-nation-building.

15. Abdullah al-Mamun, "Bangladesh's July Revolution."

16. Abdullah al-Mamun, "Bangladesh's July Revolution."

17. Abdullah al-Mamun, "Bangladesh's July Revolution."

18. The Economist, "Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, wins a

Sheikh Hasina had suppressed journalists and opposition parties, leading to a boycott of the 2024 election by her main rival, the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party. This election marked, for some, Bangladesh's official transition to a one-party state.[19] Her government was also marked by endemic corruption, with Bangladesh receiving consistently lower scores on the Corruption Perceptions Index each year of her government, indicating increasing government corruption.[20]

It was under this backdrop that the 2024 Students Against Discrimination Movement began. Students at public universities in Dhaka began to call for the reversal of the High Court's decision and real reform of the quota system.[21] The government, however, responded negatively to the protests, and largely ignored their demands. Over time, the students began to increase their disruption to everyday life, blocking major roadways in Dhaka and angering the government.[22] On July 14th, 2024, the Prime Minister referred to the protestors as "razakars," a paramilitary force used to violently quell the movement for Bangladeshi independence in the 1970s. Scholars have viewed this as a turning point in the movement, as it both marked a significant negative shift in the government's view of the protests, as well as increased vitriol and anger towards the government from protestors and at large.[23] Soon thereafter, the protests escalated drastically, with protestors becoming bolder in their actions through mass disruption of public life and the government attempting to violently suppress protests. After a video of the murder of a student protester went viral on social media, the government shut down access to the entire internet restricting a full view of the government crackdown. By the end of July, more than 1,000 protesters were killed, and the student movement began to evolve into a non-cooperation movement opposing the Hasina government.

On August 3rd, the leaders of Students Against Discrimination announced their one-point demand: the resignation of Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet.[24] The subsequent two days, crowds gathered in Dhaka, clashing with police and continuing in their appeals. On August 5th, Sheikh Hasina fled the country for India, and the president and military announced the appointment of an interim government headed by Nobel Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus.[25]

Both nations faced spiraling crises that allowed for large social movements to develop, and eventually led to the fall of backsliding regimes and the institution of reformist governments.

Theoretical Framework

At the most basic level, democracy requires the participation of citizens as well as the contestation of power.[26] When these are absent, a country cannot truly be considered a democracy. However, there are many ways that citizens of an autocracy can build and consolidate democracy in their countries. This paper considers social capital, associations, social movements, and legitimacy as some of the most important components of both a democratic transition and full consolidation.

Social capital was first developed in democratization literature by Robert Putnam during his work on democracy in Italy. Putnam defines social capital as the links between people that create norms of trust and cooperation.[27] There are two generally accepted types of social capital: behavioral through networks between people, and attitudinal through trust among communities.[28] Social capital can be used in democratization to build networks between people, which can help to provide information to all actors in the democratization process. When people have both trust and networks, they are more able to assess the quality of their leaders and mobilize against those who do not meet their standards. In addition, networks can help to build skills within a country such as knowing how to precisely apply political pressure or engaging citizens in the political process. A specific form of social capital that is extremely conducive to democratization is bridging social capital, which can help to form ties between different groups of people. This is essential in the realization of economic and social prosperity in diverse societies.[29]

Another key part of social capital is its role in developing civil society within a country. There is a general consensus amongst democratization scholars that a strong civil society can ensure the creation of a democratic state, stretching back to Alexis de Tocqueville's assertion that voluntary associations, such as social clubs, are "schools of democracy."[30] These asso-

fifth term", The Economist, January 8, 2024, https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/08/10/muhammad-yunus-a-microcredit-pioneer-is-bangladeshs-interim-leader.

19. The Economist, "Sheikh Hasina wins fifth term."
20. Transparency International Bangladesh, "Corruption Perceptions Index," Transparency International, 2024, https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/bangladesh.
21. Surendra Kumar Yadawa, "Popular Uprising Brings Regime Changes, but Democratic Institutions Determine Survival of Democracy (in Bangladesh)," Journal of Asian and African Studies (2025): https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096251365458.
22. Surendra Kumar Yadawa, "Popular Uprisings (in Bangladesh)."
23. Abid Hussain, "Who were the Razakars and why are they central to Bangladesh protests?," Al Jazeera, July 22, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/22/who-were-the-razakars-and-why-are-they-central-to-bangladesh-protest.
24. Staff Correspondent, "'One Point Demand' announced from Central Shaheed Minar," Bonik Barta, August 3, 2024, https://www.bonikbarta.com/home/news_description/393604/%E2%80%98One-Point-Demand%E2%80%99-announced-from-Central-Shaheed-Minar.
25. Tanya Dawar, "From Hasina to Yunus: Bangladesh's Reforms, Recovery, and Economic Transition," Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, June 18, 2025, https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/concerns-muhammad-yunus-bangladesh-government.
26. Robert Dahl, Polyarchy; participation and opposition (Yale University Press, 1971).
27. Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Princeton University Press, 1993).
28. Natalia Letki, "Social Capital and Civil Society," in Democratization, ed. Christian Haerpfer, Patrick Bernhagen, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 171-181.
29. Natalia Letki, "Social Capital and Civil Society," in Democratization, ed. Christian Haerpfer, Patrick Bernhagen, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 171-181.
30. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

ciations teach citizens civic virtues like trust and skills like open discussion and organization. There are three major roles of these organizations: socializing for cooperative behavior, skills building, and expanding networks.[31] The lack or presence of these voluntary formal associations plays a major role in democratization that informal networks do not, as they allow for more coordinated actions than individual actors can.

In addition to social capital, the study of social movements is vital to understanding how citizens push countries to democratization. Recent democratization literature has proposed the role of contentious politics as vital in ensuring democracy from below, or without direct elite intervention.[32] Social movements began purely as resistance to a regime, and evolved throughout the democratization process as democracy consolidates and strengthens. At the beginning, social movements work clandestinely, and are reliant on transnational advocacy and international pressure inspired by activists within the country. These social movements can build strength using the social capital techniques explained above. Over time, social movements help to create a perception that the regime must open, and resurrect civil society, mobilizing a pro-democracy coalition, and eventually, consolidating democracy through free and fair elections and universal applications of citizenship.[33]

Finally, legitimacy works to ensure that the changes during democratization are accepted by the general public outside of the democratization movement. Legitimation is the process of developing positive attitudes, or legitimacy, in society towards democracy and its institutions. Legitimacy can be provided to democracy exclusively, or without the support of the elites, or inclusively, with all parties coming to a consensus of democratization.[34] Democratization literature illustrates a wide range of positives and negatives that different sources of legitimacy play on the development of democracy in formerly autocratic countries. These range from lower violence to less inclusive representation.[35] The main source of this legitimacy is through anchors, which hooks citizens into supporting democracy and bind citizens to the outcome of the democratic institutions.[36] This can help to ensure legitimacy for the democratic institutions and strengthen their role in the new political structure.

These frameworks provide the basis of democratization in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In both countries, social capital and their resulting associations have allowed people to truly participate in the political process, as well as put real pressure onto the elites in their countries. In addition, social movements allow people to adapt to the different stages of democratization occurring in the country, especially when it rapidly develops from resistance to regimes facing extreme democratic backsliding. Thus, these different factors help to prove the role of youth-led social movements in improving democratic quality in the two countries at hand.

Applications

Associations, and their use of social capital, played a defining role in both the July Revolution and the *Aragalaya* movements. In both countries, social capital arising from the protests has affected the trajectory of democratization in both countries. In Bangladesh, the organized Students Against Discrimination evolved into two different entities: the National Citizens Party and the Jatiya Nagorik Committee. These entities were meant to continue the citizens' involvement that flourished during the July Revolution through conventional and unconventional political participation. The NCP ran as part of 11 Party Alliance in the 2026 national elections, while Jatiya Nagorik is serving as a watchdog to the interim Yunus government.[37] The NCP won six seats in the election, and became part of the Official Opposition. Despite not being in power, the successors of the Students Against Discrimination have continued to hold the government accountable by pioneering the first "shadow cabinet" in Bangladeshi history.[38]

In Sri Lanka, social capital worked to provide people with skills and motivation to be involved in the political system. A Carnegie Endowment for International Peace article found "[a]mid the bleakness engulfing Sri Lanka, the power of citizen mobilization and resistance has captured global attention and injected much-needed energy, ideas and perspectives into the Sri Lankan opposition."[39] This citizen mobilization eventually led to a surge in support for third party candidate Anura Kumara Dissanayake, as well as a landslide victory in the subsequent parliamentary elections that cut across ethnic divisions.

In Bangladesh, the July Revolution began as an association between students fighting for quota reform. Student protestors fought against a law that reserved government jobs for descendants of veterans of the Bangladeshi Liberation War, viewing it as discriminatory. In response, they formed the organization known as Students Against Discrimination, which led the July quota protests that eventually led to the nationwide noncooperation movement that ousted Sheikh Hasina. This association

31. Kenneth Newton, "Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy," American Journaal of Sociology 22, no. 2 (2001): 201–214, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512101222.
32. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, Dynamics of Contention (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
33. Federico M. Rossi and Donatella della Porta, "Social Movements and Contention in Democratization Process," in Democratization, ed. Christian Haerpfer, Patrick Bernhagen, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 182-194.
34. Leonardo Morlino, "Political Parties," in Democratization, ed. Christian Haerpfer, Patrick Bernhagen, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 212-227.
35. Leonardo Morlino, "Political Parties," 212-227.
36. Leonardo Morlino, "Political Parties," 212-227.
37. Staff Correspondent, "Public opinion polls are starting across the country on the formation of a new party: Citizens' Committee and anti-discrimination leaders announced," Prothom Alo, February 5, 2025, https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/0wcwne7ghj.
38. SM Jarif, "What is a shadow cabinet, will it take shape in Bangladesh?," Prothom Alo, February 16, 2026, https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/cnt3fkoalv.
39. David G. Timberman, "The Aragalaya Protest Movement and the Struggle for Political Change in Sri Lanka," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, August 27, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/08/sri-lanka-aragalaya-protest-movement-oust-wickremesinghe-rajapaksa?lang=en.

allowed the students to learn the most effective ways to pressure the government. In addition, Students Against Discrimination became a symbol of resistance to Sheikh Hasina's government, allowing them to expand their network beyond university students in urban areas.

Sri Lanka had a different experience with social capital, with bridging social capital playing a much more prominent role compared to associations. The protestors in Sri Lanka consisted largely of economically disadvantaged citizens, regardless of background.[40] This was a notable step for Sri Lanka, whose politics are often split along ethnic lines. The role that the bridging of social capital from *Aragalaya* had was evident in the subsequent election results, where the National People's Power (NPP) party became the first party in Sri Lankan history to win a substantial number of seats in both the Sinhalese south and Tamil north, clear evidence of bridging social capital.[41] This was attributed to the appeal of the NPP to economic issues at the heart of the Aragalaya, and the trust that was built between Sri Lankans during it. The country, however, lacked a clear and independent political association that advocated for the goals of the protest movement. While some political parties supported the *Aragalaya* movement, many protestors tried to distance themselves from a specific party as to not seem too radical.[42] Thus, even though the protests were extremely short and lacked a guiding leader or organization, they played an important role in democratization in Sri Lanka.

The development and characteristics of the social movements that led to the July Revolution and *Aragalaya* were different in leadership and structure, which affected the subsequent democratization process. *Aragalaya* lacked any clear leadership throughout the process, resulting in less organized communication with the government and the international community. The protests were largely spontaneous, and organized by sector. This lack of leadership was complemented by an attitude of nonpartisanship throughout the protest, with many Sri Lankans expressing skepticism about the parties' motivations.[43] While the lack of parties lowered outside manipulation and expanded the coalition that Aragalaya could build within the country, it limited clear demands from the protestors. Instead of a clear manifesto, the protests called for a range of reforms, from restructuring the IMF deal to abolishing the executive presidency to reducing corruption in general. Without a clear plank of demands, there was a clear space for a party to run on a general platform of reform. The National People's Power alliance was able to capitalize on this void, and win on a platform of "cleaner governance, economic fairness, and a break from politics as usual." [44]

Bangladesh, on the other hand, had a clear leadership structure to their social movement, which articulated a coherent set of demands throughout. The July 2024 protests, organized by Students Against Discrimination, quickly formulated a list of demands. These protestors also used popular frustration to successfully gain a leadership role, garnering support and admiration from the broader Bangladeshi society. Soon, people around the country knew the names of student leaders like Nahid Islam, and Abu Sayed, who was killed on July 16th by government forces.[45] Later, Students Against Discrimination spearheaded the noncooperation movement, with a cohesive message of forcing the resignation of Sheikh Hasina. In addition, because there were clear leaders of the protest, Students Against Discrimination ensured that they had the ability to influence the appointment of the interim government. The student leaders met early on with the president and the military to ensure the appointment of Muhammad Yunus as Chief Adviser, and two prominent student leaders were appointed as advisers in the interim government.[46] Later, student leaders influenced and later signed onto the July Charter, a series of reforms that came out of the July Uprising. An advisory referendum on the charter held alongside the general election passed with 68% of the vote.[47]

The protest movements in both countries were able to strengthen the legitimacy of the new regimes by using existing, democratic procedures to install new governments. In Sri Lanka, the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe was seen as suspicious by many people, as he had been appointed Prime Minister only months before, and because Gotayaba Rajapaksa appointed him after fleeing to the Maldives.[48] Thus, the election of current President Dissanayake was seen as a boost for legitimacy as it was carried out through the procedures that had been previously created for Sri Lanka. In addition, the use of a two-round system for the first time in Sri Lanka's history made sure the candidate with the widest base of support won the election, also boosting legitimacy.[49] The protest movement's use of

40. David G. Timberman, "The Aragalaya Protest Movement and the Struggle for Political Change in Sri Lanka," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, August 27, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/08/sri-lanka-aragalaya-protest-movement-oust-wickremesinghe-rajapaksa?lang=en.
41. Shubhajit Roy, "Sri Lanka presidential elections: What victory of Marxist Anura Kumara Dissanayake tells about the popular mood," Indian Express, September 24, 2024, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/dissanayake-sri-lanka-elections-analysis-9582638/.
42. Timberman, "Aragalaya and the Political Change."
43. David G. Timberman, "The Aragalaya Protest Movement and the Struggle for Political Change in Sri Lanka," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, August 27, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/08/sri-lanka-aragalaya-protest-movement-oust-wickremesinghe-rajapaksa?lang=en.
44. Danish Manzoor Bhat, "Sri Lanka's President Speaks: Turmoil, Recovery and Diplomacy," Newsweek, December 8, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/sri-lankas-president-speaks-turmoil-recovery-and-diplomacy-11172487.
45. UNB, "Chief Adviser Yunus visits Sayed's Rangpur home, condoles family members," Dhaka Tribune, August 10, 2024, https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/354249/chief-adviser-yunus-reaches-rangpur-to-visit.
46. Mohiuddin Alamgir, "In historic first, students form part of interim government," University World News, August 12, 2024, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240812163757270.
47. Senior Correspondent, "Bangladesh gazettes referendum results, 68.59% back 'Yes'," BD News 24, February 14, 2026, https://bdnews24.com/national-election-2026/de33a9ca4a1f.
48. David G. Timberman, "The Aragalaya Protest Movement and the Struggle for Political Change in Sri Lanka," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, August 27, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/08/sri-lanka-aragalaya-protest-movement-oust-wickremesinghe-rajapaksa?lang=en.
49. Shubhajit Roy, "Sri Lanka presidential elections: What victory of Marxist Anura Kumara Dissanayake tells about the popular mood," Indian Express, September 24, 2024, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/dissanayake-sri-lanka-elections-analysis-9582638/.

a legitimate process strengthened subsequent democratization by contrasting the system of government and gaining respect domestically and abroad.

The legitimacy of Bangladesh's government was more complicated than Sri Lanka's. The incumbent Hasina government had abolished Bangladesh's traditional caretaker system in 2011.[50] Before this, a caretaker government would typically come to power to oversee the country and its conduct of elections. Thus, it was unclear what course of action Bangladesh would take. However, after the president, student leaders, and the military met, they decided to appoint Muhammad Yunus to the post of chief adviser. While this did not strictly follow democratic procedures, the army, student leaders, and many citizens around the country deemed the appointment of an interim necessary to the country's stability.[51] Assisting in this was the fact that Muhammad Yunus is extremely popular in Bangladesh due to his status as a Nobel Prize Winner and ideas opposing Sheikh Hasina. Thus, the interim Bangladeshi government was able to both directly and indirectly appeal to the general population. In addition, the Bangladeshi interim government implemented the July Charter, which had the support of the political parties across the country. This agreement aims to expand checks and balances, but needs to be approved in a referendum by the people, the first of its kind in 30 years in Bangladesh. This built the legitimacy of the government, and allowed it to be supported by a wide range of parties in Bangladesh.[52]

Some argue that the democratization of these countries has failed, despite the movements that have moved them towards a fully consolidated democracy. Freedom House still ranks both countries as partially free, citing "political violence and retribution" in Bangladesh,[53] and issues of corruption and arbitrary detention through anti-drug operations in Sri Lanka.[54] These issues pose a major challenge to a fully consolidated democracy, which would have a completely open political space and a guarantee of due process for citizens. However, this skepticism of the process, while needed in a democratic transition, clouds the progress that has been made in both countries. The same Freedom House report cites a more open political space in Bangladesh and major reforms already taken in Sri Lanka.[55] The fact that these changes have already made a difference in both countries shows the real effect that the *Aragalaya* and July Revolutions had on democratic backsliding in the countries, enhancing the quality of democratic institutions. In addition, others may argue that the democratization process was more dependent on elites than social movements in either country. This would be especially true in Bangladesh, where army leaders and the President ensured the appointment of the interim Yunus government. Similarly, the fiercely non-partisan orientation of Aragalaya led some to believe that the NPP's success had little to do with the popular movement. However, this view is complicated by the government formations that followed the uprisings. In Bangladesh, student leaders were intimately involved in the appointment of the interim government, meeting with the president and army to decide on the new head of government, and even getting elites to visit the grave of Abu Sayed.[56] In Sri Lanka, the NPP was able to galvanize dissatisfaction after the apparent failure of Aragalaya and successfully ousted the incumbent government for only the second time in Sri Lankan history.[57] All of this was done with and through the support and mobilization of non-elites in both countries.

Conclusion

The development of democracy in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have had major implications for the rest of the region. The July Revolution and Aragalaya have been characterized by some scholars and journalists as the beginning of an "Asian Spring."[58] Thus, it is important to reflect on how these youth-led social movements have affected the quality of democracy in these countries.

Overall, these cases show that social movements are the most effective in resisting and replacing authoritarian regimes through techniques like social capital, associations, legitimation, and structures of social movements themselves. Social capital serves to build trust and networks within a protest movement, which can later be applied to a democratic transition and consolidation. Associations complement this process by providing formal groups that build skills like cooperative behavior and network building on a larger scale. Legitimation, especially when performed by a protest movement, can help to ensure that democracy is seen as the only viable form of government. Finally, the structure of a protest movement can ensure the effectiveness of the movement and its role after the transition.

In both countries, all of these factors helped to ensure that *Aragalaya* and the July Revolution improved the quality of democracy. Bangladesh was defined by a strong, well struc-

50. Sarah Tansim Shehabuddhin, "Bangladeshi Politics Since Independence," in Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh, ed. Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman. (Taylor and Francis, 2016), 17-39.
51. Saif Hasnat, Shayeza Walid and Anupreeta Das, "Nobel Laureate Tapped to Lead Interim Government in Bangladesh," New York Times, August 6, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/06/world/asia/bangladesh-government.html.
52. Tribune Report, "What political parties said about July Charter draft," Dhaka Tribune, July 29, 2025, https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/387702/what-political-leaders-said-about-july-charter.
53. "Bangladesh," Freedom in the World, Freedom House, published 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh/freedom-world/2025.
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tured social movement that used associations to influence the appointment of the interim government and later constitutional reforms. Sri Lanka was defined by a rapid social movement that built trust within society and laid the groundwork for a landslide victory of a third party. While it differed in both countries, the characteristics of youth-led social movements in both countries laid the groundwork for an improvement in the quality of democracy. As scholars continue to study democratization in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the world at large, it will be important to understand how protest movements can be leveraged to improve the quality of democracy.

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Volume XIII, Issue II, August 2026

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