The effect of disruptive protests on public opinion

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Abstract

Recently, the world has seen a wave of activism of a particular kind: disruptive, non-violent protests. These are protests that go beyond conventional tactics such as marches or handing out flyers, but without involving violent acts such as property destruction or harm to people. In this review, I collect the evidence on how such protests affect public opinion—a key way in which activists seek to influence policy. I find that disruptive protests cause opposition to the disruptive group, its tactics, and perhaps its specific policy demand. At the same time, they are better than conventional protests at generating media attention and large corresponding increases in issue salience. With respect to broader attitudes and behaviors, such as concern about the issue itself or green party voting, null or small positive effects are typical. So while disruptive groups and their tactics are disliked, they do garner attention, and on the whole they do not usually seem to move people away from their cause. This conclusion from a new body of research upends conventional wisdom about disruptive protest and its consequences.

keywords: public opinion, social movements, protest, media

In June 2025, Nicolai Nørrekær sat down on an crosswalk in a busy road in Copenhagen, alongside seven fellow activists. Members of a group called Nødbremsen (the Emergency Brake), all of them were holding orange banners reading "drop the new highways" (Nødbremsen 2025). They are part of a recent surge in a particular form of activism: non-violent disruptive protest. These are protests that go beyond conventional tactics such as marches or handing out flyers, but without involving violent acts such as property destruction or harm to people. Beginning in 2019, the past half decade has seen an explosion in disruptive protest, in particular by climate and environmental groups, but also by pro-Palestinian, farmers' rights and other movements. These activists are following in the footsteps of (among other) the US civil rights movement, which used disruptive tactics like strikes and sit-ins in its campaigns for racial equality in the 1950s and 1960s, and the labor movement, which has used some of those techniques for centuries (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). They are also revisiting the "direct action" tactics of older environmental movements such as the Indian Chipko movement, Sea Shepherds and Greenpeace.

Researchers and activists have been interested in the effect of protest on public opinion, mobilization, elections and ultimately policy-making for a long time. This topic has been the subject of sociological theory and qualitative research since the 1970s (Gamson 1975; McAdam 1982; Piven and Cloward 1978; Sharp 1973). Recently, there has been a wave of quantitative studies focused on causally identifying the effects of protest, usually with mass political opinion or behavior as the outcome. Most of those studies have focused on conventional protest tactics such as marches (Sisco et al. 2021; Swim, Geiger, and Lengieza 2019), violent tactics such as riots or vandalism (Enos, Kaufman, and Sands 2019; Steinert-Threlkeld, Chan, and Joo 2022; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019), or comparing both (Shuman et al. 2022; Wasow 2020; Wouters 2019; Dasch et al. 2024; Orazani et al. 2021). But only in the last few years have researchers responded to the surge of *non-violent disruptive* protests with new investigations of their effects, in particular on public opinion.

Changing public opinion via the media is a major stated goal of disruptive activism groups. Indeed, the media attention that disruption attracts is a prime reason why activists engage in it in the first place (sometimes alongside the goal of directly disrupting activities they see as harmful). However, approval ratings of these groups and their tactics are generally low, leading news outlets (Dablander, Wimmer, and Haslbeck 2025) and poll respondents (Nylund, Thai, and Hornsey 2025; YouGov 2021b) to say that they are hurting their cause. Early research, which received quite a lot of media attention, also suggested that the final impact of disruptive protest on public opinion about its focal issue would be negative (Patterson and Mann 2022; Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020). In this review, I summarize the evidence on non-violent disruptive protests and public opinion that we have now amassed. I arrive at a rather different conclusion—namely, that the effect of disruption on approval of the protest(ers) is clearly negative, but the effect on attitudes about their broader political issue is likely either zero or somewhat positive on average.

I give shape to the existing findings by fitting them into a causal model of possible public opinion effects. Using disruptive tactics in a protest is aimed at attracting media coverage. If successful, this could have two immediate consequences: it could provoke a loss of support for the protest and the activists (or less likely, a boost); and it could result in heightened attention to the protesters' issue, both in media and among the public. Theoretically, these two consequences would push in opposite directions when it comes to the next step in the causal chain, namely increasing citizens' stated concern about the issue and their support for policy to address it. On the one hand, disapproval of the group could bleed into backlash effects on concern and policy support, as people use their feelings about the messenger as a cue for how to feel about the message (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). On the other hand, media attention could include persuasive messaging on the issue that sways public opinion. Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff (2020) have dubbed this problem "the activist's dilemma". Finally, any positive or negative persuasion effects may result in changes in mass behavior, like participation or voting.

Figure 1 summarizes the findings in this review. I conclude that disruptive protests are indeed better than conventional protests at generating media attention. And exposure to such protests does cause opposition to the disruptive group and its tactics. At the same time, we see large increases in attention to the protesters' issue in the media and among citizens. With respect to broader attitudes and behaviors, such as concern about the issue itself or green party voting, null or small positive effects are typical (with the exception of some negative effects on the specific policy demands of the protesters). So while disruptive groups and their tactics are disliked, they do garner attention, and on the whole they do not usually seem to move people away from their cause. This conclusion from a new body of research upends conventional wisdom about disruptive protest and its consequences. I end by suggesting next steps for researchers.

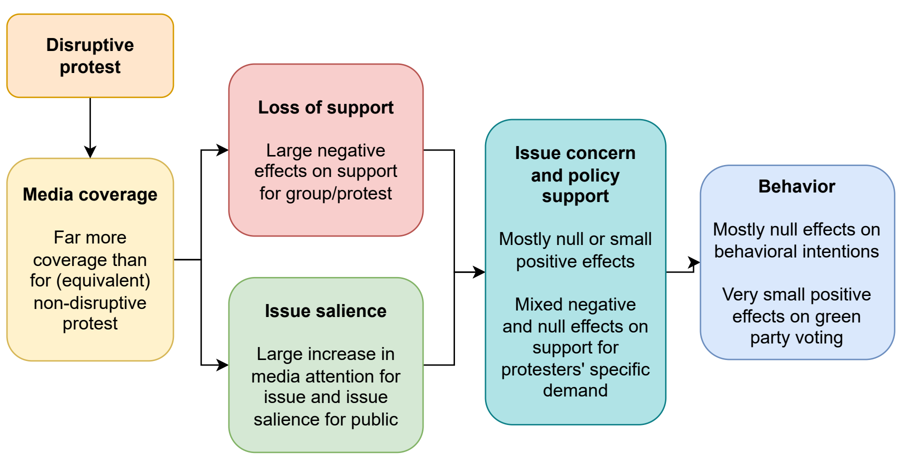

Figure 1: Disruptive protest and public opinion: overview of the evidence.

Scope of this review

Following Vandeweerdt and Kenward (2025), I define disruptive protest as "protest that appears to be aimed at interrupting the functioning of some other activity generally regarded as legitimate as a means to draw attention to a cause or as a means to prevent the activity." This definition hinges on (apparent) intentions and does not depend on the actual level of disturbance caused. For example, a one-person school strike and a mass public transit worker strike both qualify as disruptive protests. Similarly, a large permitted march could cause serious traffic disorder as a side effect, but is not a disruptive protest.

I define non-violent protest as actions that do not involve (inciting) violence to people and do not appear to have intended permanent property damage (Della Posta 2003). Studies or experimental conditions that feature violence are not included in this review. Admittedly, the boundary between permanent and temporary property damage can be blurry. For instance, I include so-called "art attacks" by environmental groups because they are designed not to cause permanent damage to the art—although they do typically cause significant clean-up work and lie at the edge on non-violence. Moreover, there is the issue of perception: it will not always be clear to audiences whether or not, say, activists are using washable spray-paint. Nonetheless, I attempt to make this distinction, both because social movements themselves maintain it (Amnesty International 2024; Extinction Rebellion, n.d.), and because the public opinion effects of violence against property (e.g. arson, environmental sabotage) are likely to be different from those of non-violent protest.

The majority of the studies included in this review study climate protests, as climate policy is the most common target of disruptive protests today. They employ a mix of methodologies: experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal (a.k.a. pre-post surveys or "interrupted time series") and difference-in-differences. In the Supplementary Information, I provide a table of all the papers whose empirical findings I included along with their peer-review status, their method, the issue(s) they studied and the effects they found. I also list all evidence that was left out.

Media coverage of protests

In order for protests to impact either public attitudes or issue-related media content, they must first be covered by the media. A few studies document specific disruptive protests being extremely effective at generating coverage. In the UK, protests where organizations Just Stop Oil and Animal Rising disrupted sporting events—respectively involving only two and about one hundred activists—received roughly the same amount of media attention as a march attended by 45,000 people (Scheuch et al. 2024). After this same Animal Rising protest, Ostarek, Klein, Rogers, et al. (2025) document an impressive spike in media attention to (and television airtime for) the organization itself compared to before the protest.

When trying to isolate the effect of disruptive versus non-disruptive tactics via large-n studies, we see clear evidence that disruption leads to more media attention than conventional protests. Ostarek, Klein, Pomerenke, et al. (2025) report that when a protests scores one point higher on a five-point disruptiveness scale, this is associated with 77 additional media mentions of the protest group in the following two weeks. According to Wouters (2013), if a protest involves arrests, road blockades or violence, the odds of it being featured on TV news increase three-fold. Because coverage of protests depends on how large they are (id.), the small number of protesters involved in a typical disruptive action would have been unlikely to receive any media attention, had they staged a non-disruptive protest.

Support for disruptive protests and groups

When we directly ask citizens how they feel about disruptive groups and tactics, approval ratings are unsurprisingly low. For example, just 14% of UK residents have a positive opinion of the disruptive environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (YouGov 2025). Similarly, only 17–18% of UK respondents have a favorable view of disruptive movement Just Stop Oil (Özden and Glover 2022; YouGov 2023a), and just 16% approved of Insulate Britain after its intense campaign of highway blockades in 2021 (YouGov 2021a). In Sweden, only 12% considered the disruptive tactics of the environmental campaign Restore Wetlands to be justified (Rogers et al. 2025). Approval rates of disruptive protests are particularly low among right-wing respondents (Patterson and Mann 2022; Badullovich et al. 2024; Özden and Glover 2022; YouGov 2021b; Verkuyten, Adelman, and Yogeeswaran 2023). This is especially true for protests about left-wing causes, though it also holds for right-wing protests (Reimer et al. 2025). This has sparked concern that if left-wing movements use disruption, the effect could be polarizing (more on this below).

Still, approval of disruptive protests varies a lot depending on the tactic and the target. US respondents mostly see sit-ins, labor strikes and school strikes as appropriate tactics for the environmental movement, but they see road blockades and art attacks as highly inappropriate (Badullovich et al. 2024; Reimer et al. 2025). Similarly, most consider fossil fuel companies to be highly appropriate targets, but consider commuters or "ordinary people" inappropriate. Protesters' social identities and the issues they fight for also matter: road blockades receive far less support if they are used by climate activists as opposed to farmers (Le Corre Juratic, Wagner, and Bischof 2025; Kleer, Teutem, and De Vries 2024—though the latter report the same gap in support for these groups when they stage a conventional rally). Strikes are considered more or less acceptable depending on the occupation of the strikers (YouGov 2023b). Interestingly, support can be strong even if the level of disturbance caused by the strike would be high: the most-supported workers are health care employees and firefighters.

Several experiments test participants' reactions to disruptive tactics compared to non-disruptive ones, using vignettes to make sure that other aspects of the protest are held constant. These studies largely show that support for the protest and the group decreases noticeably when it uses disruption, whether it is office occupations, blocking entry to a building, targeted road blockades, art attacks, or using spray-paint (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020; Joly, Wagner, and Carstens 2025; Gonzatti, Hunger, and Hutter 2023; Fuller et al. 2025; Nylund, Thai, and Hornsey 2025). Typically, the proposed mechanism for this drop in support is a lack of identification with the protesters (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020; Nylund, Thai, and Hornsey 2025). Exceptions exist, however. Bugden (2020) sees positive average support levels for a climate sit-in, only slightly lower than support for a march. And Kenward and Brick (2024) find both experimental and (more tentatively) longitudinal evidence that exposure to disruptive activism can cause small increases in support for it.

In this section, I focused on the effect of disruption on support for the disruptive group or protest, and I documented mostly negative effects. Another outcome variable that has sometimes been studied is support for another, moderate flank of the same movement; the effect of a more extreme wing on a less extreme one has been called the "radical flank effect" (Haines 1984). Radical flank effects of disruptive tactics have been found to be slightly positive (Ostarek et al. 2024) or null (Joly, Wagner, and Carstens 2025; Kenward 2024). In our causal model, this is relevant mostly because it could be related to attitudes about the issue more broadly, and could affect behaviors such as supporting or joining a (non-disruptive) activist group. I come back to such outcomes in the section on behavior below.

Issue salience: media and public

According to the activist's dilemma, loss of support is the price that disruptive groups may pay for a chance at media coverage of their issue, awareness raising, and possibly winning over the general public to their cause (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020). In this section, we will examine whether disruptive campaigns reach their immediate goals: issue coverage and issue awareness. This could be especially important for issues where majorities of the public would agree with the activists' stance when asked, but do not necessarily prioritize the issue or act on those opinions. This is the case, for example, for climate policy support in most countries (Fabre, Douenne, and Mattauch 2025; Andre et al. 2024).

Descriptive evidence suggests that the spikes in media attention following a protest also include coverage of their political issue. This could be because the issue is mentioned in articles reporting on the protests, but the effect could also be broader. Newsworthy events bring related political issues onto the agenda—not just through coverage of the events themselves, but also because journalists deliberately seek out additional, connected stories (Boydstun 2013). Indeed, Fabel et al. (2025) find that when German local newspapers see a lot of Fridays for Future protests in their area of circulation, they report significantly more on climate change in both the short and the long term. During the disruptive

Insulate Britain campaign, media mentions of "home insulation" went from near-zero to hundreds of daily mentions in the days following most of the protests (Rogers et al. 2024). Rogers et al. (2025) research the effect of the disruptive Restore Wetlands campaign in Sweden. They find that it coincides with a doubling of "wetlands" mentions in Swedish media in 2022, and a tripling in 2023 (compared to 2021). In weeks following a protest, daily media mentions increased by an estimated 84%. These findings speak against the narrative that disruption comes at the cost of spreading a substantive message, because media coverage will be dedicated to the drama and logistics of the disruptive action (Sobieraj 2011, p. 90-91).

As a last step, both experimental and real-world research shows that this media attention results in large positive effects on issue salience—the prominence of the issue for the general public. Known as "agenda setting", the effect of media mentions on salience is very well-documented (Barberá et al. 2019; King, Schneer, and White 2017; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Cohen 1963). One way to test it is by looking at the percentage of people mentioning the protesters' cause as one of the top three issue facing their country—a typical measure of salience. Comparing this measure just before and after a large climate protest by Extinction Rebellion in the UK, YouGov (2019) found that mentions of "the environment" jumped from 17% to 24%. Vandeweerdt (2025) experimentally replicates this result, showing 10–19% increases in such mentions after participants are presented with real news articles about disruptive climate protests. Akehurst (2023) uses video content about protests and finds smaller increases, between 3% and 13%. Turning to behavioral traces of issue salience, Kountouris and Williams (2023) document large spikes in search activity for "climate change" coinciding with major climate protests by Extinction Rebellion in 2019. This is in line with other research showing that in general, protests significantly raise public awareness of their issue (Gethin and Pons 2024), at least if they are able to attract media attention (Sisco et al. 2021).

Effects on concern and policy support

Whether or not citizens are paying attention to an issue is a separate question from whether they share activists' stances on the issue. In this section, we will cover effects on concern about the issue and support for policies targeting the issue. In other words, we investigate whether disruptive protests, besides raising awareness, can also be persuasive. Alternatively, audiences' dislike of disruptive tactics could instead lead to backlash, as they use their impressions the messenger as a heuristic for judging the message (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). I end by discussing effects on the protesters' specific policy demands—which appear to be different from effects on more general issue attitudes—and polarization effects.

Overall, both longitudinal (real-world) and experimental studies tend to find null or small positive effects. Brehm and Gruhl (2024) look at the effect of climate protest in Germany on concern about climate change. They report national increases both after salient Fridays for Future protests (i.e. school strikes) and Ende Gelände/Extinction Rebellion protests (i.e. coal mine and deforestation blockades). Valentim (2023) similarly demonstrates increases in support for climate policy in electoral districts that saw Fridays for Future protests, with more protests having more positive effects. He does not find the same effect on perceived importance of climate change, however. Kountouris and Williams (2023) find that after ten days of intense climate protest in London (largely consisting of road blockades), the general population's environmental attitudes were largely unchanged. However, they show small positive effects on support for pro-environmental behavior and for climate policy. Kenward and Brick (2024) study the same protest and also report mostly null effects, with the exception of a small increase in environmental concern. Özden and Glover (2022) poll UK residents before, during and after several weeks of disruptive climate protests and see no change in support for climate policies. Ostarek et al. (2024) show the same null effect on climate policy support after a week-long motorway blockade. Lastly, fielding questionnaires before and after a disruptive protest at a horse race, Ostarek, Klein, Rogers, et al. (2025) find that respondents who had heard about the protest became slightly more negative towards animal rights in the short term, but not six months later.

On the experimental side, Kenward and Brick (2024), Vandeweerdt (2025) and Kenward (2024) all treated participants with news content about real disruptive environmental protests—namely, road blockades, a sports event interruption, and a so-called guerilla wetland restoration. None found an effect on any of a number of general attitudes about the environment. Content created by the protest group itself caused small increases in dissatisfaction with current government action (Kenward and Brick 2024)—though in reality, groups would likely struggle to reach non-supporters with such content. Akehurst (2023) tested real media content about five different climate protests with a wide range of issue attitude outcomes. He found a mix of null and small positive effects, depending on the protest and the outcome. The effects on support for climate policies were largest. However, three protests also caused minor increases in agreement with an "anti-climate" message, while only one caused a moderate decrease. Finally, in an unusual design, Haas et al. (2025) randomly assigned participants to real-world exposure to a Fridays for Future protest and, in contrast to the longitudinal evidence from Brehm and Gruhl (2024), found no effect on pro-environmental attitudes.

Another set of experimental studies tested the effect of researcher-designed protest vignettes, which are typically less realistic but which allow researchers to compare effects between disruptive and non-disruptive protests that are otherwise identical. In Germany, Gonzatti, Hunger, and Hutter (2023) find that vignettes about road blockades and art attacks have no effect on support for policy when compared to a conventional march. Nylund, Thai, and Hornsey (2025) constructed news pieces about a climate protest that was described as either featuring disruptive tactics or not; the disruptive version resulted in more concern about climate change. On the other hand, in a very high-powered study in France, Fuller et al. (2025) find equally negative effects of *all* non-violent protest types, even a peaceful march, on policy support (and all effects are extremely small).

A natural question is whether this mix of results could be explained by differences in the protests examined. Different tactics and targets get varying approval ratings (Badullovich et al. 2024; Reimer et al. 2025), so they could be expected to have varying effects on public opinion as well. However, some of the studies above found positive effects even of disruptive protests that lie at the boundary our definition of non-violence: art attacks and spray painting buildings and cars (Akehurst 2023; Nylund, Thai, and Hornsey 2025). Moreover, the same protest regularly leads to both positive and null effects on depending on the specific issue-related attitude, in ways that are as of yet difficult to account for. A partial explanation may be that the true average effect of disruptive protests is small and positive, and that some studies find null effects on some outcomes simply due to statistical variation.

Effects on protesters' demands

A particular type of policy support that could be affected by disruptive protests it support for the specific demands of the protesters. This is tested with outcome questions where the wording either reflects the protesters' messaging exactly, and/or literally asks about supporting "the protesters' demands". The evidence suggests that respondents treat questions about protester demands differently from other questions about the broader political issue.

Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff (2020) conducted four experiments where US respondents read non-violent protest vignettes. In all cases, respondents treated with disruptive as opposed to conventional tactics were less willing to say they "supported the protesters' cause". Other experiments show that disruptive tactics result in small decreases in support for the protesters' specific policy demand (Kenward 2024; Vandeweerdt 2025), but have null effects on support for policies *not* mentioned by the protesters. For example, reading about a Just Stop Oil protest caused participants to be slightly less supportive of "a stop to all new UK oil and gas projects" (Vandeweerdt 2025). However, support did not drop for any other climate policies, including "regulations making it more difficult to profit from fossil fuel investments". Most likely, respondents strongly associate support for the protesters' specific demands with the protesters themselves, making them especially likely to use their feelings about the latter as a heuristic for the former.

Still, other studies find null effects even on support for protesters' demands. Joly, Wagner, and Carstens (2025) report no experimental effect of disruptive tactics on whether respondents say they "support protesters' demands". In another experiment, Polish respondents were just as willing to support concessions to a social movement if it used an occupation as opposed to a march (Huff and Kruszewska 2016). Lastly, in three longitudinal studies spanning real-world disruptive Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil protests, neither Kenward and Brick (2024), nor Özden and Glover (2022) or Ostarek et al. (2024) find any change in support for policies that mirror the demands of protesters, even among respondents who became aware of the movement due to the protest.

Polarization of issue opinions

Despite the fact that approval ratings of disruptive protests are very different for left- and right-wing respondents, there is almost no evidence for protests having a polarizing *effect* on attitudes. That is to say, we largely see insignificant differences between the persuasive effect of protests among respondents with different ideologies, partisan affiliations, or pre-existing attitudes about the issue (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020; Kenward and Brick 2024; Vandeweerdt 2025; Haas et al. 2025).[1] In fact, Shuman et al. (2021) find evidence for depolarization, showing that non-violent non-normative protest wins support for its demands from ideologically distant respondents only. This contradicts conclusions from self-reporting in polls, where conservative respondents are especially likely to say that their own support for the cause is negatively affected by disruptive protest (YouGov 2021b; Patterson and Mann 2022).

Effects on intentions and behavior

Of course, in order to see political change in the real world, the effects of protests need to go beyond awareness-raising and persuasion, into the domain of behavior. A number of studies have tested the effect of disruptive protests on either behavioral intentions or real-world political behavior. They have looked at four types of behavior: individual (private sphere) action, collective (public sphere) action, donations to the disruptive group itself, and voting.

In terms of intentions to take individual action on the issue, evidence is mixed. Fuller et al. (2025) see no effect of exposure to "extreme protests" on willingness to personally act on climate change. Nylund, Thai, and Hornsey (2025) find a small positive effect of a news piece about disruptive protest on intention to take individual climate action. In contrast, Kountouris and Williams (2023) find a fairly large *decrease* in willingness to pay for environmentally friendly goods after a major disruptive climate protest—though this is in line with the protesters' message that individuals are not responsible for climate change, and policy-level solutions are needed.

Experimental studies largely show null effects of exposure to disruptive protest on survey measures of intentions to take collective action. Kenward and Brick (2024), Kenward (2024) and Vandeweerdt (2025) detect no significant effect of climate protests on participants' intentions of engaging in (low-threshold) environmental activism behaviors. Fuller et al. (2025) showed participants vignettes where climate protesters used more or less extreme tactics, and find no effect of "extremeness" on their willingness to join a more moderate climate movement. Akehurst (2023), on the other hand, showed that two videos about real-world disruptive protests made respondents slightly more willing to take

1. Though (Ostarek et al. 2024) find a marginally significant interaction with pre-existing attitudes.

a campaign action, but three other videos had null effects. Similarly, Özden and Glover (2022) find weak evidence that after a series of disruptive climate protests, UK residents became slightly more likely to engage in collective climate action.

A few studies have looked at donations to the disruptive group. Participants in a conjoint experiment by Foxe, Dolšak, and Prakash (2024) were less willing to donate to a hypothetical organization if it used disruptive tactics. At the same time, Ostarek, Klein, Pomerenke, et al. (2025) and Ostarek, Klein, Rogers, et al. (2025) see short-term spikes in actual donations to disruptive groups when they stage a protest—presumably because it calls potential supporters to action via the media attention it generates. And when Haas et al. (2025) randomly assigned participants to witness Fridays for Future protests, those participants made significantly higher real donations to that organization (but were no more likely to subscribe to its newsletter or intend to vote Green).

Finally, several longitudinal studies look at disruption's effect on intended or actual Green party voting and find small positive effects. In polls in Sweden, the UK and Germany, disruptive environmental protests are followed by small increases in voting intentions for Green or pro-climate parties (Ostarek et al. 2022). Using electoral data, Fabel et al. (2025) finds that when local Fridays for Future protest activity goes up by one standard deviation, the German Green party receives an extra 0.76% of the vote share. Similarly, Valentim (2023) concludes that each additional Friday for Future protest in a municipality increased Green party performance by 0.5% of the votes. Both also see increased voter turnout.

Discussion

Summing up, we have seen that the use of non-violent disruptive tactics in protests has negative effects on support for the protest and group; large positive effects on media attention and salience of the issue being put forward; and mostly null or positive effects on broad attitudes and behaviors related to the issue (with the possible exception of the protesters' specific policy demands).

The combination of strong positive agenda effects but little or no persuasion effect reflects findings about protests in general, at least insofar as they are able to garner media coverage (Sisco et al. 2021; Gethin and Pons 2024). And while it might be surprising that unpopular disruptive tactics do not harm support for the wider cause, this complements research showing that even protest with violent elements can have either null or positive effects (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2022; Enos, Kaufman, and Sands 2019; Shuman et al. 2022; Dasch et al. 2024; but see Wasow 2020 for an exception). In terms of theory, this hints at the limits of messenger effects (or "source cues", Chaiken 1980): although disruptive protesters are disliked, this does not necessarily to harm the persuasiveness of their message. It also speaks to a long-standing debate in communication studies about whether or not movements face a trade-off between attracting media attention and doing effective messaging (Gitlin 2003; Sobieraj

2011; Seguin 2016).

So, whether disruptive protest pays off for activists depends on how they see the trade-off between the backlash against their group and (perhaps) its specific demand, versus media coverage of their issue and significant increases in its salience. By and large, it appears that disruptive groups are fairly unlikely to create backlash on support for their cause, or attitude polarization. At the same time, they should not expect noticeable positive effects. Evidence also suggests that they will struggle to convert spikes in salience to significant changes in behavior, though for climate protests, positive effects on donations and pro-environmental voting have been found. Lastly, of course, public opinion (and mass political behavior) is only one possible variable in the web of policy-relevant outcomes that disruptive protests might affect, both in the short run and over longer time horizons (Thomas-Walters et al. 2025; Fisher, Berglund, and Davis 2023; Shuman et al. 2023; Engler and Engler 2016).

Further research

Most of the papers in this review cover protests about climate change and related environmental issues (see Supplementary Information). It is less certain whether the findings transfer to other movements and issues, such as farmers' rights or pro-Palestinian movements. Indeed, we saw that people's absolute levels of support for disruptive protests clearly depend on the issue and the identity of the protesters (Le Corre Juratic, Wagner, and Bischof 2025; Kleer, Teutem, and De Vries 2024; YouGov 2023b). At the same time, some of the findings above suggest that (dis)approval ratings of a protest do not predict their effect. Positive effects on issue salience, concern and policy support were found even for widely disliked organizations, and despite the fact that right-wing respondents are far more disapproving of disruption, it affects their issue attitudes in the same way as left-wing respondents. The fact that protests tend to have similar effect on people regardless of their pre-existing attitudes about the issue also suggests that findings could extend to causes that are less popular than fighting climate change. Only one paper looks at opinion effects of non-violent disruptive protest on a range of issues (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020); it finds qualitatively similar effects across issues (though effect sizes vary). More such research is needed to confidently project findings to other movements and topics.

Another focus for future research could be which types of protest, if any, combine good odds of media attention with positive public opinion impacts. This could be about tactics and targets, but also other protest features. For example, movements could including sympathetic groups like mothers or scientists (making the protesters seem more "worthy", Tilly 2004), or create photogenic visuals. To study this, it would be fruitful to combine media studies with public opinion methodologies.

A related topic would be the issue of slant when protests are covered in real-world media. Most experiments in this review used either researcher-created vignettes or excerpts from centrist news media; only Kenward and Brick (2024) have experimentally tested the effect of exposure to slanted media content. Evidence on protests in general suggests that readers' opinions follow when an article portrays a protest in a negative or positive way (Brown and Mourão 2021; McLeod and Detenber 1999; Detenber et al. 2007). Some evidence confirming this pattern has been found for disruptive protests as well (Ostarek, Klein, Rogers, et al. 2025; Kenward and Brick 2024). Could positive framings of disruptive protests mitigate their negative effects on protester support? And in the real word, will news consumers be moved only by outlets they would normally consume or agree with, or would they be persuaded by other outlets as well? Lastly, as time passes and people are exposed multiple times to whichever protest frame their preferred news sources employ, will they continue to be persuadable by new content, or will they become entrenched in their points of view about both the protesters and their issue?

Other features of the media content could matter as well. Does the mode of communication matter; are videos (so far used experimentally only by Akehurst 2023 and Kenward and Brick 2024) more effective than text and photos? And what about the amount of attention to the protesters' message? Most newspaper articles on disruptive protest cover the name and demands of the organization behind it, though usually only briefly (Vandeweerdt 2025). How much attention does an article need to dedicate to the message of a protest for it to have the attitudinal effects documented above (potential backlash on the specific demand but potential positive effects on broader attitudes)? Would the effects change if more space was given to the message, and do they disappear if no message is repeated at all?

Finally, it would be productive for the research in this area to encompass more countries and time spans. For now, research has mainly focused on the UK and Germany, and occasionally on Sweden and the US, with other countries being covered in one study at most. But non-violent disruption is a global phenomenon. With respect to timing, most of the research collected here is experimental, and while that makes it possible to control every aspect of the treatment (namely, exposure to disruptive protest), it means outcomes are usually measured immediately after. This raises some questions: are backlash effects on the protesters' demands temporary or longer-lasting? What about issue salience and attitude effects? And do multiple exposures add up to more robust, long-term effects? A handful of longitudinal studies exist, measuring public opinion or behavioral outcomes days, weeks or even months after the end of a protest. More of this type of research is needed, along with experiments that try to document medium-term effects.

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