Civilian Opinion & Nonviolent Resistance: Survey Evidence from Mexico

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Introduction

The study of why individuals utilize nonviolent resistance methods such as strikes, protests, marches, boycotts, and blockades to organize against abusive practices by states and non-state actors has made important progress and gained considerable attention over the last several years. However, a majority of this research has focused on nonviolent campaigns against authoritarian regimes, or other major maximalist movements.

More recently, research has shifted attention to also assess how localized civilian efforts can combat the oppressive forces in their own communities, such as local corruption and violence, via nonviolent methods. Today, critical questions remain as to why individuals choose nonviolent resistance over violent resistance, and in what ways organizers might be able to shift this choice towards alternatives to violence. Furthermore, previous literature has been limited in its ability to address questions on violent versus nonviolent mobilization in the context of armed conflict. Do civilians prefer one method of resistance to another? Do civilians view either form of collective action as effective within a violent setting? This survey was designed to address these questions.

The survey was conducted in Mexico in February 2014. The survey data are from a national sample, with an oversample near regions containing local, civilian self-defense forces. The instrument was created to enable researchers and practitioners to be better equipped to understand the conditions under which civilians view nonviolent versus violent conflict as more effective for addressing challenges related to the violence they face, as well as those individual level traits associated with preferences for these different methods. Finally, the over-sample is constructed to measure whether opinion towards resistance is significantly different near contested regions containing local, armed, and civilian self-defense forces."

This report provides a brief overview of key findings, a summary of other relevant variables from the survey, and the methodological process of the survey design.

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Key Findings Summary

1. Do people support civil resistance in Mexico?
   - About 41% of the population said they agree (somewhat or strongly) with the idea that civil resistance methods, such as strikes, protest, and blockages against the government are the most effective way to improve their situation. Similarly, about 49% of the population agreed that nonviolent civil resistance is more effective for improving security than violent action. This finding suggests that there is a high level of favorability towards nonviolent methods, and latent potential for participation in civil resistance campaigns in Mexico.

2. Does information about civil resistance increase support for it?
   - Yes. In further statistical modeling on the correlates of support for nonviolent resistance, the results show that those who are somewhat or very familiar with Javier Sicilia's movement (the Movement for Justice with Peace and Dignity) are significantly more likely to view civil resistance as more useful than violent resistance. Similarly, those who are not very familiar with Sicilia's movement are less likely to view civil resistance as effective. This finding is also true for respondents in oversampled regions near self-defense groups. Furthermore, those who are invited to a civil resistance event/action by a family member or close friend are more likely to attend the event. This suggests that information about civil resistance events carries a heavier weight when transmitted by those individuals who share close ties to the respondent; 30% of those invited to an event by a family member or close friend actually attended a civil resistance event. Comparatively, only 2% of those not invited to an event by a family member or close friend actually attended an event.

3. How does civil resistance start amid conflict?
   - The survey results and preliminary regression analysis suggest three key factors for understanding how civil resistance might begin within violent settings: (1) information about current campaigns increases the view that civil resistance is effective, and thus potentially increases latent support for campaigns; (2) information disseminated through trusted networks such as family and close friends activates participation; and (3) attribution of security responsibility to local authorities is associated with the perception that civil resistance is more effective than violent resistance. Specifically those who view local authorities as responsible for their personal security situation are more likely to perceive nonviolent resistance as an effective means of improving their security. This highlights the importance of governmental power: when civilians view their local governments as influential, they are likely to view nonviolent methods as useful. Yet, when they view distant powers such as federal actors as key influencers, they favor violent methods.

4. Do opinions about resistance methods predict a respondent's willingness to support local, civilian-organized resistance groups?
   - The results from the oversample and experimental treatment suggest that those who support local resistance groups or view them as effective are likely "supportive types"' who favorably view locally organized groups regardless of the tactics they employ. After further statistical analysis, the results show that those respondents who said that they believe nonviolent methods are effective are more likely to support any local group (regardless of methods used) by providing goods, donating funds, and sharing news. However, respondents who said that violent methods are effective are also more likely to provide goods, donate funds, and share news about a local resistance group regardless of which method a group employs. One key difference, however, is that those who responded favorably to violent methods are *also* more likely to take riskier actions, such as attend meetings or events of a resistance group, regardless of method employed. This somewhat counterintuitive finding might suggest that while citizens have clear attitudes about which method is most effective, those who regard either form of resistance as useful are more likely to support local resistance in general.

Methodology

The sample consists of individuals of 18 or more years of age who are Mexican residents and live in Mexico at the time of the survey. The sample includes a national sample of 1,000 interviews with an oversample of 300 cases (discussed further below). In coordination with a survey team based in Mexico, we conducted a national survey using a probabilistic sample design. The sample design is probabilistic to the selection of household with multiple stages. We used the Electoral Sections from the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) as a sampling framework. The electoral sections are the Primary Sample Units (PSU). These were stratified by five levels of violence and within these strata were randomly selected using a Probability Proportional to Size (PPS). A total of 130 PSU were selected. A total of 10 valid interviews were conducted in each PSU.

Within each PSU, neighborhood blocks were enumerated. A map of one of these neighborhood blocks is shown in Figure 1. After enumeration, two blocks were randomly selected using a simple random selection procedure. These constitute the Secondary Sample Units (SSU). In each SSU, a total of five interviews were conducted. The five households were selected using a systematic skip pattern with a random start and according to household density in each SSU. These constitute the Tertiary Sample Units (TSU).

Figure 1: Neighborhood Block

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In each TSU a single individual of 18 or more years of age was selected randomly using a last birthday method with quota control by gender and age (according to the 2010 census). The selection of these individuals constitutes the last phase of the multi-stage sample procedure. The national representative sample of 1000 valid interviews and has an estimated margin of error of +/- 3.1% at a 95% confidence level.

The distribution of the sample is shown below in Figure 2. In addition to the national sample (shown in blue) there is an oversample of civilians living in geographic proximity to communities with armed self-defense groups (*grupos de autodefensa*). The sample size of this oversample is 300 valid interviews and has an estimated margin of error of +/- 5.7% at 95% confidence level. The oversample was conducted within the states of Guerrero, Michoácan, and Hidalgo.

☐ Sample
☐ Oversample

Figure 2: Survey Sample Distribution

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Fieldwork

- Interviews were conducted from 02-13-2014 to 03-03-2014. All were personal interviews in the home of the respondent, which was selected using the sample design described above.
- A total of 32 enumerators, 8 supervisors, 5 data entry specialists, 2 analysts and 1 project director were involved.
- Training of enumerators and supervisors was conducted on 02-11-2014 in Mexico City and regional training sessions occurred with local teams between 02-15-2014 and 02-16-2014. The questionnaire had an average duration of 25 minutes.

To monitor the security situation within each region, enumerators were required to record whether they faced any security challenges during the survey process.

Demographics

The sample is composed of 49.6% men and 50.4% women. The most common level of education completed is secondary education, and the majority of respondents are married (see Figure 3). Roughly 36% of respondents self report as having experienced a lower intensity crime and 16% reported having experienced a high risk crime. The most commonly reported income range is 2,401 pesos (~$167 USD) to 4,000 pesos (~$273 USD) per month. The survey also recorded the number of light bulbs as an alternative measure of income and household status; the average number was 9 per house.
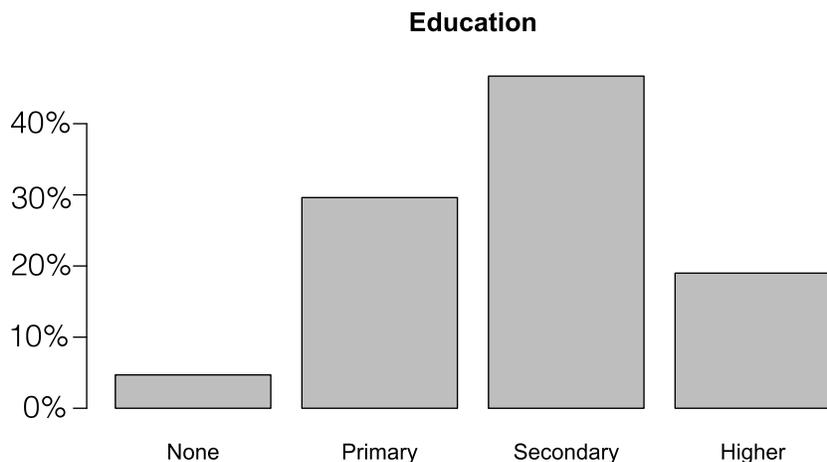
Education

Figure 3: Distribution of Education Level Completed

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Participation in Civil Resistance Events

Several questions address participation in civil resistance efforts. The question from the survey asks, "In the last 12 months, how many marches, strikes, protests, or blockades against the violence or insecurity have you participated in?" The respondent answers by providing a count. As is evident, the majority of respondents report no participation, and close to 4% and 2% report attending one or two events, respectively.

Participation in Nonviolent Actions	Percent
One	3.63%
Two	2.46%
Three	0.64%
Four	0.53%
Five	0.21%
Six	0.53%
Seven	0.11%
Eight	0.11%
Nine or more	0.00%
None	83.44%
NC/NS	8.33%
Total	100%

An additional survey question aims to understand whether people are influenced to attend civil resistance events via the invitation of someone they trust, or someone close within their social network. The question in the survey asks, "Did someone invite you to participate in a protest, march, demonstration against violence or security in the last 12 months?" The possible responses are no one invited me, yes someone close (family or friend), or other. The two most frequent responses are "yes, someone very close" invited the respondent, or no one at all.

The survey results show that those who are invited to a civil resistance event by a family member or close friend are more likely to attend. **About 30% of those invited to an event** by a family member or close friend actually report attending a civil resistance event. Comparatively, of those who never were personally invited, only about **2%** attended an event. This suggests that information about events carries heavier weight when transmitted by those individuals who share close ties to the respondent.

Knowledge about Civil Resistance Campaigns

To assess how familiar civilians are with different civil resistance campaigns, and thus the methods associated with civil resistance, the survey measures the respondents' familiarity with a contemporary Mexican movement as well as a historically famous case. The first question asks, "How familiar are you with the work of Javier Sicilia / the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MJPD)?" The possible responses are very familiar, somewhat familiar, a little familiar, not familiar, don't know." Surprisingly, **almost 40% of the population is unfamiliar with this movement,** which has organized nationwide marches and demonstrations since 2011 (and were still ongoing at the time of this survey). Only about 5% reports being very familiar with this movement. Importantly, however, further analysis shows that those who are familiar with the MJPD are significantly more likely to view nonviolent methods as useful. Respondents who answered that they were familiar with the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity are then asked, "How effective was Javier Sicilia / The Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity?" About **14% felt the movement was very effective, and 45% felt it was somewhat effective.**

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To measure familiarity with a historical, non-Mexican case, the survey asks, "How familiar are you with the story of Mahatma Gandhi?" The responses included very familiar, somewhat familiar, a little familiar, not familiar, or don't know. Similar to the response reported with respect to the Javier Sicilia movement (MJPD), **almost 40% of Mexicans were unfamiliar with Gandhi's story.** These results are shown in Figure 4 below. Respondents who answered that they were familiar with Gandhi's story were then asked whether they believed these methods could be effective in changing the situation in Mexico. **Of those who knew about Gandhi's story, about 32%** believed these methods could be used effectively in Mexico.

Familiarity with Civil Resistance Campaigns
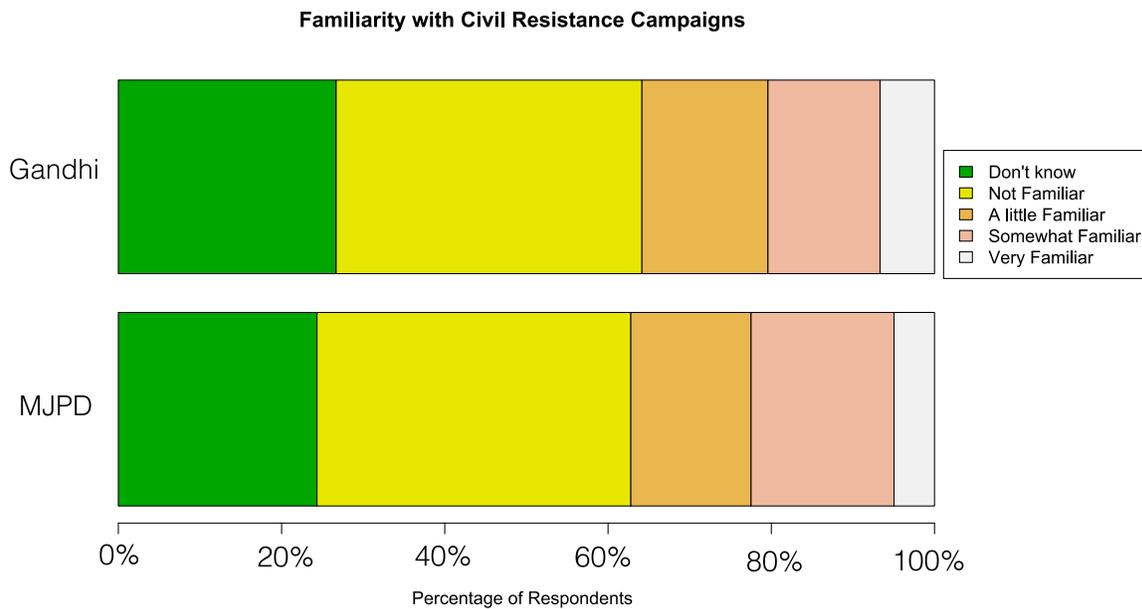
Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents Familiar with Different Civil Resistance Movements

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Opinions about Civil Resistance

Three key questions aim to assess beliefs about resistance. One question asks, "Some people think that nonviolent civil resistance (such as strikes, protests, and boycotts) is a more effective way to improve security than violent/armed self-defense groups. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?" **Nearly 50% of respondents believe civil resistance is *more* effective than violent resistance**.

A second question instead focuses on violence and asks, "Some people believe that violence against the government is the most effective way to improve their situation. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?" The results show that about 22% somewhat or strongly agree that violence is the most effective way to improve their situation. **Yet about 70% somewhat or strongly disagree with this statement,** suggesting that a large proportion of the population does not view violent resistance as a useful method for change.

Another question poses nonviolent action as effective without a comparison to violence: "Some people believe that civil resistance, such as strikes, protest, and blockades against the government is the most effective way to improve their situation." The population has a wide variation on this question. About 41% somewhat or strongly agree with this statement, while about 51% somewhat or strongly disagree with this statement and do not view nonviolent methods as effective. Overall, consistent with the previous question about violent resistance, these results demonstrate that **more people view nonviolent methods rather than violent methods as the most effective way to improve their situation.**

In further regression analysis, the survey tests which conditions best predict support for nonviolent methods versus violent methods. Importantly, results suggest that a respondent's attribution of responsibility — i.e. who they believe is responsible for changes of security — is a consistent predictor of favorable attitudes towards nonviolent action. The results show that the **predicted probability of viewing nonviolent action as more effective than violent action increases by 35% for those who attribute security responsibility to local authorities**, compared to other actors. The probability of favoring nonviolent methods decreases by 20% for those who attribute the responsibility of their personal security to federal police. While cross-national studies suggest that centralized governments are easier targets for mass protests, this subnational level research shows that citizens view nonviolent action as effective against a decentralized government. These findings suggest that when civilians think that the most powerful actors are more distant actors — such as a federal entity — they are actually more likely to feel that violent means are necessary to improve their security. In contrast, when civilians think their local authorities are driving changes in security, they are more likely to also believe that nonviolent resistance tools can be effective in forcing behavioral change among local officials and improve overall security. In this sense, different political tactics are seen as useful according to the varying distribution of influence across different levels of government.

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Conclusion & Lessons Learned

Safety and Security

While these survey results provide many new insights, next we must consider: (1) the challenges inherent in conducting research in high-risk regions, and (2) potential for future investigation. The development of this survey took many rounds of careful discussion with Duke University's Institutional Review Board. A primary concern from the outset was how to guarantee respondents' safety. An immediate issue of concern was how to prevent an ill-willed individual or political actor from forcefully acquiring survey respondents' personal information and questionnaire answers. In the case of Mexico, we were also legitimately concerned about the potential kidnapping of survey enumerators. In a case like this, the motive for kidnapping would likely be distrust and confusion; for example, a political actor could believe survey enumerators are collecting information about their actions or about a rival actor. To overcome these challenges, enumerators were required to wear identification badges and to be transparent about their identity. Additionally, the enumerators aimed to keep as few completed surveys on their person at any given time. Upon completion of surveys, enumerators transported survey responses directly to a secure central location as quickly as possible, diminishing the risk that respondents' information and questionnaire answers could be lost or intercepted.

The surveys were also completely anonymous. No identifying information other than basic demographic information was recorded. For example, the enumerator never requested the address or the name of the respondent. In addition, the surveys included a randomized numeric key. Prior to going into the field, each survey instrument was given an eight-digit key that was recorded in an encrypted file. Then, four random numbers of the eight digits were printed on the actual paper survey instrument itself. Immediately after recording the respondent's answers to the survey, the enumerator would shuffle the papers and mix the responses so that if they were confiscated or lost, no one survey could properly reorder the responses without the key.

Civilian Agency

Prior to this investigation, it was unclear whether or not civilians have faith in forming resistance and autonomy when faced with an unstable and insecure sociopolitical environment. This study demonstrates that when civilians in violent contexts are aware of ongoing campaigns and collective efforts, they view them as useful tools to change or improve their own situation. Furthermore, the study indicates that information about the existence of nonviolent efforts is influential in building favorable views towards nonviolent action. It is also associated with less favorable views of violence. This suggests that activists exercise powerful influence in the development of new methods of civilian autonomy.

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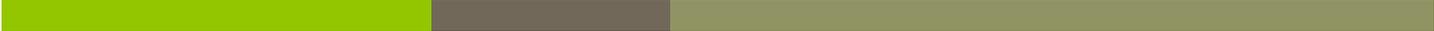
This study demonstrates that research on sensitive questions can be conducted in high-risk areas. While many researchers already recognize the benefit of studying ongoing conflicts, the analytical lens is typically pointed towards armed actors, such as rebel groups. This study demonstrates that civilians too are a critical and empowered population to consider. There are, however, numerous areas for future improvement.

First, additional surveys could collect evidence that allows us to investigate support for violence and nonviolent action as a kind of spectrum concept rather than as a strict binary. It is crucial that we investigate competing modes of struggle in diverse settings and in pursuit of a dynamic range of goals including civilian autonomy, political control, and/or policy change. This work serves as a first step in this direction, but future research must work further to decipher links between individual characteristics — such as risk-taking disposition, history of collective participation, and exposure to extreme violence — and favorable attitudes towards different methods of action. Secondly, while future research in Mexico is of utmost importance to further our understanding of a developing conflict, a comparison across surveys from different regions would enhance our understanding of how different kinds of violent contexts influence opinions on resistance. Researchers, policymakers, and activists require a deeper understanding of the different strategies and tactics civilians adopt to create autonomous political space. In doing so, we further our collective knowledge of civilians' daily efforts to foster autonomy and push back against the violence that surrounds them.