



MEASURING REVOLUTIONS

By Adam E. Casey



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In his new book, *The Revolutionary City*, Mark R. Beissinger uses original data on revolutionary episodes to build a compelling argument about how urbanization has transformed modern revolution.¹ Beissinger's book weaves high-quality empirical data with an elegant argument tested at multiple levels of analysis.

At its core, the book relies on a data set which covers 345 'revolutionary episodes' from 1900-2014.² Beissinger defines a revolution as "a mass siege of an established government by its own population with the goals of bringing about regime-change and effecting substantive political or social change."³ Beissinger understands revolutions to be relatively broad yet still restrictive: military coups without any mass mobilization are not revolutions, neither are electoral turnovers or political reforms by existing governments (including 'revolutions from above'). For Beissinger, all revolutions seek to "achieve power and to bring about substantive change."⁴

In addition to providing the empirical support for his argument, Beissinger's data set is a considerable asset to the field of comparative politics. There are three principal advantages to the way Beissinger has gathered and structured his data. First, the data are contextually rich. Entries in the data set are given as revolutionary episodes (n=345, 1900-2014) with narrative descriptions. Episodes include information on the location and timing of revolutionary contention (down to the month and day); the goals of the rebellion; forms of contention; features of incumbent regimes before the contention; peak participation size estimates; rebellion dynamics; violence and death; relationship to other revolutionary episodes; and outcomes of contention. The data set also includes information on 131 episodes that came close to meeting the threshold for inclusion but nevertheless fell short.

Revolutions are also disaggregated by type, allowing scholars to distinguish social from political revolutions as well as the urban or rural nature of the contention.

Second, the data set includes both successful and failed revolutions. This allows scholars to examine the determinants of revolutionary success as well as the consequences of successful revolution for other political and economic outcomes. This will allow scholars to assess systematically why some countries and time periods saw 1) no major revolutionary challengers emerge; 2) mass revolutionary challengers emerge but fail; and 3) revolutionary challengers emerged and succeeded in seizing power. By merging Beissinger's data with other data sets, scholars can examine the relationship between successful and failed revolutions and repression, democratization, international and domestic conflict, economic growth, and authoritarian durability.

Third, the data set meets rigorous standards of data transparency. Coding decisions are given in narrative form with citations from the source materials used to make the assessment. This is the gold standard for cross-national comparative historical data collection. Unlike popular data sets which rely on opaque expert surveys where contemporary experts are asked to retrospectively assess how they would code historical cases on a variety of indicators, the Beissinger data follows other high-quality data in comparative politics like the Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) autocracy data set⁵ and the Colpus coup data set⁶, in providing transparent sourcing materials. This enables other scholars to see on the basis of which information inferences are made and challenge the individual coding decisions of the data set.

[Comparison with Other Data on Revolutions](#)

Beissinger's conceptualization of revolution is less restrictive than the definition used by Lachapelle, Levitsky, Way, and Casey (LLWC) in their recent and forthcoming work on revolutions.⁷ These authors restrict their focus to "social revolutions" which are defined as "the violent overthrow of an existing regime from below accompanied by mass mobilization and state collapse, which triggers a rapid transformation of the state and the existing social order."⁸ Beissinger also acknowledges a difference between social and political revolutions, both in his manuscript and in his data set.⁹

Beissinger and LLWC agree that revolutions are distinguished from other modes of irregular regime change by the nature of the core actors presiding over the removal of the incumbent regime. Revolutions emerge 'from below' in that they are led by outsiders and not current incumbents or members of the existing state. They are also events that feature mass participation. The two data sets differ in the emphasis placed on the transformation of the state, the necessity of violence, and the nature of revolutionary goals.

Unlike LLWC, Beissinger does not consider the use of violence or the transformation of the state as necessary for a mass-led regime change to constitute a revolution.¹⁰ He also allows for a broader conception of the transformative goals of revolutionaries. For LLWC, revolutionaries seek "radical change" that attacks "the core interest of powerful domestic and international actors or large societal groups."¹¹ For Beissinger, revolutionaries need only seek to "bring about substantive change."¹² Beissinger considers social revolutions to be those espousing leftist goals, or as he puts it, goals "aimed at the transformation of the class structure of society." LLWC are broader in their conceptualization of goals aimed at radical social transformation, allowing for any actions which include attacks on powerful domestic and international actors or large societal groups. This includes coercive land redistribution, campaigns to destroy preexisting cultures, religions, or ethnic orders, efforts to impose new rules governing social behavior,

and foreign policy initiatives "aimed at spreading revolution and transforming the regional or international order."¹³

Unsurprisingly, these conceptual differences lead to different codings of social revolutions. In general, there is broad agreement between Beissinger and LLWC on successful social revolutions. However, there are some notable disagreements. Beissinger includes seven successful social revolutions not included by LLWC: Afghanistan (1978), Congo (1963), Namibia (1990), Portugal (1974), South Africa (1994), South Yemen (1967), and Zimbabwe (1980). LLWC exclude these cases as non-revolutionary for emerging within the state (Afghanistan 1978, Congo 1963, Portugal 1974),

Beissinger and LLWC data for an assessment of the emergence of mass social revolutionary movements, their success and failure, the pursuit of post-revolutionary social transformation, and the durability of postrevolutionary political order.

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refraining from fundamentally transforming the state after coming into power (South Yemen 1967, Zimbabwe 1980), refraining from attempting radical social transformation by the end of the first year in power (Namibia 1990), or for ushering in democracies which do not engage in attempts at radical social transformation or fundamentally change state structures (South Africa 1994).¹⁴

LLWC include Finland 1918 (coded as a failed revolution by Beissinger), Afghanistan 1996 (coded as an Islamist rather than social revolution by Beissinger), Rwanda 1994 (coded as an ethnic rather than social revolution by Beissinger), and the Albanian 1944 and Yugoslav 1945 revolutions, which are not included in Beissinger's data set.¹⁵ The remaining revolutions coded by LLWC also appear in Beissinger as social revolutions.

Given the broad agreement on case codings and the conceptual alignment for the category of social revolutions, it is possible to merge the

Notes

- ¹ Beissinger, Mark R. 2022. *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- ² Beissinger 2022, 48.
- ³ Beissinger 2022, 25.
- ⁴ Beissinger 2022, 24-25.
- ⁵ Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. 2018. *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁶ Chin, John J., David B. Carter, and Joseph G. Wright. 2021. "The Varieties of Coups D'état: Introducing the Colpus Dataset." *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 4: 1040-1051.
- ⁷ Lachapelle, Jean, Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, and Adam E. Casey. 2020. "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability." *World Politics* 72, no. 4: 557-600; Levitsky, Steven and Lucan A. Way. 2022. *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- ⁸ Lachapelle et al. 2020, 559.
- ⁹ Beissinger 2022, 3-4, 10, 66, 69-70, 442-59.
- ¹⁰ Beissinger 2022, 3, 25.
- ¹¹ Lachapelle et al. 2020, 560.
- ¹² Beissinger 2022, 3, 25.
- ¹³ Lachapelle et al. 2020, 560.
- ¹⁴ Casey, Adam E., Jean Lachapelle, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan A. Way. 2020. "Revolutionary Autocracies, 1900-2015." *Codebook*, 31, 33, 48, 52-53.
- ¹⁵ Beissinger 2022, 443.

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- Casey, Adam E., Jean Lachapelle, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan A. Way. 2020. "Revolutionary Autocracies, 1900-2015." *Codebook*. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OMDQI9>.
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RESPONSE TO ADAM CASEY

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I thank Adam Casey for his careful review and analysis of my “Revolutionary Episodes Dataset,” which is currently available for download by researchers at my website (<https://scholar.princeton.edu/mbeissinger/software/revolutionary-episodes-dataset>). Let me add a few further observations.

The most contentious issue in the study of revolutions is the definition of revolution itself. In *The Revolutionary City*,¹ I defined a revolutionary episode as a mass siege of an established government by its own population with the goals of bringing about regime-change and effecting substantive political or social change.² I understood revolution as a distinct mode of regime-change and chose a broad definition precisely because I was interested in examining how revolution as a political project of regime change from

below has evolved over the past century. As I detail in the book, since its invention in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, modern revolution has been used for a wide diversity of purposes: transforming the class structures of society; converting monarchies into republics; attaining civil liberties, establishing a democracy, or containing the abuses of a despotic regime; liberation from colonial rule or independence from a multinational state; inverting a racial or ethnic order; substituting a religiously based political order in place of a secular one; and other aims. Over the last hundred years, revolutions have altered in their purposes

and locations, the forms they have assumed and the processes that they involve, the social forces that they mobilize, and the consequences that they bear for politics and society. My definition sought to provide a sampling frame for capturing these variations.

I considered social revolution to be one type of political revolution that is distinguished from others by its focus on the transformation of the class structures of society. This accorded with Skocpol’s definition of social revolutions as “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures that are accompanied and in part carried

through by mass based revolts from below.”³ In contrast to Lachapelle, Levitsky, Way,⁴ and Casey and Levitsky and Way,⁵ I put class at the center of my definition of social revolution, as class relations and animosities have played a principal role in most major

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I also extracted the degree of violence associated with revolution and the actual changes achieved after revolution from the definition of revolution, instead turning these issues into empirical questions meriting their own investigation.⁷ Too often these questions have been overlooked in the study of revolutions through a definitional sleight of hand, with the study of civil wars separated from the study of revolutions,⁸ and the consequences of

revolutions (as well as of failed revolutions) largely ignored. These questions need to be placed centrally in our research agendas. I used the revolutionary episode as my basic unit of analysis, including both successful and failed attempts at revolution, in order to probe why revolutionary opposition succeeds or fails in gaining power and the factors associated with this. A full conceptualization of revolutionary episodes and how they relate to other political phenomena and modes of regime-change can be found in the data description accompanying the dataset.

The data description accompanying the dataset also compares the coverage of the “Revolutionary Episodes Dataset” with that of two other somewhat analogous datasets: Djuve, Knutsen, and Wig’s “Historical Regime Data” on instances of regime-change from 1789 to 2016;⁹ and the NAVCO 1.3 data on so-called maximalist campaigns from 1900 to 2019.¹⁰ The former does not include failed revolutions in its purview, while the latter includes numerous episodes that do not qualify as revolutionary by my definition.

Hybridity is an inherent element of revolutions in that they can simultaneously involve multiple purposes (for instance, liberal demands and independence from a multinational state, or class transformation and liberation from colonial rule), use multiple tactics (e.g., riots, strikes, armed insurrection, and demonstrations), or occur predominantly in the city, the countryside, or both. Some revolutions precipitate military coups. Others end in power-sharing agreements. The coding scheme used in the “Revolutionary Episodes Dataset” remained sensitive to these issues by allowing episodes to be classified in multiple categories when appropriate, avoiding some of the pitfalls of exclusive, dichotomous categorizations. Relatedly, I did not classify revolutions as “violent” or “nonviolent,” since all revolutions involve some degree of violence or threatened violence, and “nonviolent” revolutions can evolve into significantly violent rebellions. Rather, I preferred to code revolutions as armed or unarmed and to record the number of people who died in revolutionary contention to measure the degree of violence involved.

Finally, as Adam Casey noted, the dataset aimed at a high degree of transparency. For each episode, a short narrative was composed and is hyperlinked into the dataset; it provides a quick reference for researchers on the events of the episode and notes on classification. The dataset also includes hyperlinks to the sources consulted for each episode and a bibliography of further sources, so that researchers can follow up with these sources as need be.

Notes

¹ Beissinger 2022.

² For similar definitions, see Trotsky 1932, Tilly 1978, Tilly 1993, Goldstone 2001, 2013.

³ Skocpol 1994, 5.

⁴ Lachapelle, Levitsky, Way, and Casey 2020.

⁵ Levitsky and Way 2022.

⁶ As I show in *The Revolutionary City*, a universal theory of the causes of revolutions more generally remains elusive, largely because of the variety of purposes and social forces involved in revolutions.

⁷ Among other topics, the book explores the changing relationship of violence to revolution as well as the evolving character of post-revolutionary regimes and the substantive changes that they introduce.

⁸ For a critique of the artificial division between the literatures on revolution and civil war, see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

⁹ Djuve, Knutsen, and Wig 2020.

¹⁰ Chenoweth and Shay 2020.