The Class Cleavage, Minority Influence, and Brazil’s 2013 Protests

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In June 2013, Brazilians mobilized in the largest wave of protest the country has witnessed in decades. The protests occurred in every single state capital and more than 400 cities and towns and peaked on June 20, when about two million people took over the streets. Though the Brazilian mobilization has been likened to the Arab Spring revolutions, there are evident limits to the comparison. During the past two decades, Brazil has consolidated a stable democracy, characterized by weak political polarization and very high levels of government popularity - just weeks before the protests ignited, President Rousseff’s approval ratings hovered around 65%. The protests were not directed against any political figure in particular, but instead demonstrated profound dissatisfaction with the entire political system. They also advanced a wide diversity of demands, from improvements in public services (public transport, education, and health) to the defense of gay rights and political reform. As a result, the events in Brazil provide a considerable challenge for the major theories advanced in the literature on collective action and social movements. This paper seeks to address this challenge by providing an integrative explanation rooted in social psychology: minority influence through identification. I argue that the protests in Brazil achieved such a vast scale because a minority of citizens became influential and swiftly expanded as a result of three complementary conditions: 1. a collapse in political differentiation and polarization during President Rousseff’s tenure, triggered by political strategies to deal with a crystallized class cleavage; 2. a universalistic, apolitical discourse frame centered on citizen rights; 3. the explosive growth of social media. Beyond clarifying the causes, timing, and impact of the Brazilian protests, this account promises broader theoretical implications for the literature on mass protest.
1. INTRODUCTION

When a group of university students organized the first protests against a modest increase in bus fares in São Paulo on the 6th and 7th of June 2013, nobody expected this to grow into one of the largest mass mobilizations Brazil has ever witnessed. After all, the Brazilian government had weathered much more powerful storms: huge corruption scandals, controversial infrastructure projects (such as the construction of the Belo Monte dam or the transposition of the São Francisco River), and damning media condemnations of wasteful spending and policymaker incompetence. The “mensalão” affair, one of the biggest corruption cases in the history of Brazilian politics that directly implicated the leadership of the Worker’s Party is perhaps the most obvious example of the mass protest that wasn’t, in spite of huge media focus and public proceedings against the accused by the Supreme Court.

And so, as the protests escalated virtually everyone declared surprise, from politicians, to political analysts, and to the protestors themselves. Asked by a New York Times reporter why the protests had grown so much, one of the organizers of the very first march stated “We really don’t know” (Romero and Neuman 2013). Fernando Henrique Cardoso warned against drawing premature conclusions about the causes of the mobilization and called on opposition politicians to reflect rather than try to score any political points prematurely. And while President Dilma Rousseff acknowledged that protestors were “demanding more” from the government and assured them of her government’s willingness to deliver more, her assessment and proposals remained initially quite vague. They also failed to placate the demonstrators or to appease public opinion, which overwhelmingly consolidated in approval of the protests.

Though the international news media has portrayed the events in Brazil as a continuation of the “Arab Spring,” some even talking about a “Brazilian Spring” or, seeking to keep up with the change of seasons, a “Brazilian Autumn” (Borba de Sa 2013), the similarities between the mobilization occurring in
the Arab world and the one in Brazil exhibit important limitations. Indeed, in both cases social media played an important role in spreading awareness and sharing information about the protests; it was used as an effective platform for attracting the participation and support of an ever-growing number of people; and it served as an effective instrument for collaborative planning and organizing. And yet, this could have hardly been different in the case of any major demonstration. It is difficult to believe that social media could not have played this role given the massive spread of its use in recent years in both Latin America and the Middle East. As of July 2013, Brazil had more than 102 million Internet users and 76 million Facebook users out of a total population of about 200 million (Sbarai 2013). Given their newfound strength, portals such as Facebook or Twitter are undoubtedly central to social mobilization, particularly in the context of dwindling union membership and the decay of other mass organizations that has been attributed to the rise of neoliberalism (Weyland 2004). Nonetheless, a crucial distinction must be drawn between the causes and resources of social mobilization. Social media may be an incredibly potent resource, but it cannot be considered the sole trigger of protest. The origins of the events in Brazil must be sought elsewhere and it is exactly this question that is the core focus of this paper.

If in the case of the “Arab Spring” countries the demonstrations had a clear core demand – the overthrow of the “tyrant” and the reversal of authoritarian rule (which is summed up in the motto “The people demand the fall of the regime”), Brazil is clearly a much more complicated story. A vibrant democracy with high levels of government approval and politician popularity, particularly when compared with its Latin American neighbors, Brazil has defied the international financial crisis, displaying stable economic growth, low unemployment, and remarkable improvements in social equality for more than a decade. Up until the protests, not only the president but also most mayors and governors displayed approval ratings of above 50%, reflecting the generally positive evaluation of the population regarding the

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1 An in-depth analysis of how Resource Mobilization Theory as it relates to social media is developed in the third section of the paper.
individual performance of the political leaders elected to high office. Moreover, the degree of polarization characterizing Brazilian politics has been decreasing to impressively low levels during the government of President Rousseff, continuing a trend of ideological convergence that also characterized President Lula Da Silva’s two terms in power between 2003 and 2010. Therefore an important distinction has to be made between the protest movement in Brazil, with its universalistic discourse and catch-all appeal, and protest movements in Turkey, Spain, or the United States. The Brazilian crowds taking over the streets of cities across the nation were not seeking the collapse of federal or state governments, were not aligned to any political party or leader, displayed a wide multiplicity of demands (protestors used cardboards to convey the demand they best identified with), and refused to organize themselves hierarchically. As shall be argued in detail in the second section, these aspects not only drastically set apart the Brazilian experience from other large-scale protest movements, but they also make it difficult to provide a causal account by simply employing the conventional approaches of the political science literature on collective action and social movements.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the chronology of events; Section 3 describes five alternative theoretical approaches to the study of social movements and analyzes their applicability to the Brazilian case; Section 4 presents the theoretical argument supported by evidence; and Section 5 concludes.
2. THE PROTESTS OF JUNE 2013 IN BRAZIL: A CHRONOLOGY

On the 6th of June 2013, a few hundred students organized under the banner of “MPL- Movimento Passe Livre”\(^2\) (Free Fare Movement) staged the first protest against a public transportation fare increase in São Paulo that had been announced just a few days before by the newly-elected mayor, Fernando Haddad. The fare increase from 3 to 3.20 reais was quite modest, considering that the last tariff increase had been adopted in January 2011 and that the 6.7% adjustment was lower than the rate of inflation accumulated throughout this period (Souza and Monteiro 2013). Nonetheless, protests against public transportation fare increases are quite common in Brazil, among a vast repertoire of small-scale protests staged by diverse organizations that very rarely garner sufficient popular support in order to put decisive pressure on policymakers. Therefore, the fact that some protests would occur against the fare increase was to be expected. That they would evolve into one of the largest mass mobilizations Brazil has ever seen is an entirely different matter.

From the very first day of protest, the mobilization blocked traffic on three busy avenues and acts of vandalism occurred. Bus and subway stations were vandalized and garbage bins were set on fire. The traffic jams created by a small group of protestors were huge and MPL appeared keen to create havoc and deliver on its main slogan – “If the fare won’t fall the city will stop”. On the 7th and the 11th of June, new protests were organized following the same pattern. It is safe to affirm that during this first phase of the protests media coverage was not exactly sympathetic to the protestors, regardless of MPL’s attempt to distance itself from the actions of anarchists. As TV images depicted arson and vandalism, media commentators and political figures alike lamented the tactics of the protestors (e.g. Estado de São Paulo 2013). Although political archenemies, mayor Fernando Haddad of the PT and governor Geraldo Alckmin

\(^2\) MPL – Movimento Passe Livre was founded during the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. It is a horizontal, sporadic, and sparse movement of students, most of which belong to larger organizations – either radical left-wing parties (PSOL, PSTU, PCB, etc.) or university students groups. The movement proclaims independence from any party or political interference.
of the PSDB both condemned the violence of the protests and affirmed that the fare increase could not be reversed. Alckmin went even further, calling the protestors “vandals and troublemakers” and asked for a more active role for the police in containing the manifestations (Netto 2013).

On June 13th, around 12,000 people gathered for the fourth protest organized in São Paulo. This time the police had received instructions to act decisively and stop the protestors from achieving their key goal – another blockade of Avenida Paulista. The result was a massive number of arrests (130 detained) and injuries (105 wounded) (Manso and Ribeiro 2013). Accusations of police violence gained wide repercussion in the news and in social media. Videos of students being detained for simply carrying vinegar in their backpacks (vinegar helps one deal with teargas intoxication) were used to denounce arbitrary police action. So were images of police officers shooting rubber bullets and teargas cans into the peaceful crowds. But the story that gained most repercussion was that of journalist Giuliana Vallone of Folha de São Paulo.

Vallone posted on Facebook a picture of herself after being shot in the eye with a rubber bullet. The photo was accompanied by an explanation: “There was no violent protest around me, I didn’t manifest myself in any way against the policemen, I was bearing a Folha ID, and I wasn’t even videotaping. I saw the policeman look towards me and my dear colleague Leandro Machado and shoot. I was shot in the face. The physician told me that my eyeglasses possibly saved my eye. I covered two protests this week. I don’t regret at all to have taken part in this coverage (although my family will go crazy with me saying this). I believe that what happened with me, other journalists, and protestors shows that there does exist a right and a wrong side in this story. Whose side are you on?” (Vallone 2013). As one could expect, Vallone’s story was shared thousands of times and became a major news story. A group of well-known Brazilian artists joined the initiative of photographer Yuri Sardenberg and released portraits of
themselves with a blackened eye on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. They protested what had happened to Vallone and declared their support for continuing the mobilization.

Figure 1: Left, journalist Giuliana Vallone after being shot in the eye with a rubber bullet. Right, a group of Brazilian artists photographed by Yuri Sardenberg protest police violence. The hashtag used to share the photos was #doiemnostaos / #ithurtsusall

After June 13th, the protests took a completely different turn. From a few thousands, they grew to hundreds of thousands, and from one city they spread to every single state capital and more than 200 towns. As they grew, the protests renounced an exclusive focus on public transportation or even police violence. The wide spectrum of grievances included excessive spending for the 2014 World Cup, the poor quality of public schools and hospitals, rising criminality (particularly in northeastern cities), perceptions of widespread corruption among politicians and government officials, and two highly controversial legislative projects – PEC 37, which would restrict the power of public prosecutors to investigate government malfeasance and PDC 234/2011, which would allow psychologists to perform treatments aimed at curing a patient’s homosexuality. The breadth of grievances, demands, and messages was made clear by the manner chosen by most protestors to voice them – thousands of individual hand-written cardboards – each of which conveyed a very personal relationship contribution to the mobilization and an individual message for the country’s political class.
The protestors took advantage of the on-going Confederations Cup being held in various Brazilian state capitals as a test for the 2014 World Cup to embarrass political leaders and demonstrate their disapproval with what they considered excessive spending for holding the event (Brazil will spend around USD 12 billion for the 2014, World Cup, more than four times more than South Africa and about three times more than Germany spent to organize the cups they hosted), particularly as the spending priorities for the country should be entirely different (O Globo 2013). On the 15th of June, more than 2,000 protestors attempted to block access to the Mané Garrincha Stadium in Brasilia which was hosting the opening game of the Confederations Cup – Brazil vs. Japan and President Dilma was booed loudly during her speech ahead of the game. Soon enough, the protests became a routine ahead of each game hosted during the cup, and some of them prompted violent confrontations between the police and the crowds.

On the 17th of June, in an act charged by substantial symbolism, thousands of protestors invaded the Esplanade of Ministries in Brasília and pushed their way onto the roof of the Brazilian Congress, which they occupied for several hours. The next day, President Dilma gave the first public remarks about the protests, stating that her “government hears the voices for change” and that “because of more social inclusion, because we increased incomes, because we created jobs, because we gave access to more people to education, citizens have emerged that demand more and have a right to receiving more.” The president also declared that “the ones who took over the streets yesterday sent a message to the society as a whole, and primarily to politicians at all levels. This direct message from the streets is for more citizenship, for better schools, better hospitals, better medical clinics, for the right to participate. This direct message from the streets demands public transportation of better quality and at a fair price. This direct message from the streets is for the right to influence the decisions of all governments, the legislative

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3 The largest protests outside of stadiums hosting the Confederations Cup occurred in Fortaleza on the 19th and the 23rd of June, and in Belo Horizonte on the 26th of June (each of these protests had at least 20,000 participants).
and the judicial branch. This direct message from the streets is a rejection of corruption and of the improper use of public funds” (Mendes 2013).

**Figure 2: The intensity of Protests**

Source: data compilation from major media outlets and Datafolha estimates

The peak of the protests occurred on July 20th (see Figure 2). According to police and expert estimates, between 150 and 200 thousand people demonstrated in São Paulo, 300 thousand in Rio de Janeiro, and more than 900 thousand people in other cities. This occurred even though the previous day the mayors of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and other major cities had decided to cancel the public transportation ticket increments and to revert to the old fares. These figures are rather lower-bound estimates and the actual attendance may have been up to 100% higher. The fact that the protests actually

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4 The estimates provided here may have a large margin of error, but most likely to the upside. The way the Brazilian Police, the Datafolha Institute, and other research institutes measure the number of protestors is by dividing in multiple sectors the area occupied by a protest at a moment in time, estimating the density of people in each sector at that moment, and adding up all the sectors. The estimates therefore do not reflect the fact that 1. Given the fact that the protests last for hours, most protestors do not participate for the entire length of the event – some leave and they are replaced by others who arrive later; 2. The research institutes and the police may
included much more people than the estimates made public is supported by an Ibope national poll conducted between the 16th and the 20th of June, according to which 6% of the Brazilian adult population (aprox. 9 million people) reported to have taken part in the protests (Ibope 2013).

As the protests grew, political militants attempted at times to use them as a platform for advancing the visibility and discourse of their party (the case of PSOL or PSTU)\(^5\), or at least to protect its public image (the case of the PT)\(^6\). These attempts failed, and the militants came under the attack of anti-party protestors, who chanted swear-words and attempted to tear or burn the party flags. Through these actions, the messages that could be read on cardboards, and the chants that could be heard during the protests, what became clear as the mobilization advanced in scale was that the overwhelming majority of the protestors did not feel represented by any political party and directed their anger not towards a party or a political leader in particular but against the entire political class.

This diagnosis is supported by an opinion poll conducted at the height of the protests (on June 20th) in eight Brazilian state capitals (see Figure 3). The survey revealed that more than 80% of the protestors did not feel represented by any political party (Ibope 2013b). A few other aspects about the make-up of the protestors that were confirmed by the IBOPE survey deserve special attention. Public transportation was a major grievance for only about 40% of the protestors, confirming that the rationale of mass mobilization had morphed as the crowds grew. The protest movement was far from a cross-

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\(^5\) PSOL and the PSTU had supported the original protests against the fare increases and many MPL activists were in fact members of these parties.

\(^6\) The PT has always considered itself to be Brazil’s only mass party. On June 20th, PT’s president, Rui Falcão, called on the party militancy to adhere to the manifestations and declared that the fight for better public transportation had always been a key part of the party’s program. The decision was controversial given that the initial root of the protests was a fare increase decided by PT’s own Fernando Haddad. Only a few hundred party militants joined the June 20th protests in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Under pressure from the rest of the protestors, who would chant swear-words against the PT and attempt to burn the PT party flags, they left both demonstrations early.
section of Brazilian society – it was much younger, considerably richer, and better educated than the average. All in all, this was a protest dominated by a clearly defined social group - the younger generation of the urban middle class. Nonetheless, as revealed by another opinion poll with a representative national sample, the protest was approved by a staggering 75% of Brazilians, while 36% displayed a willingness to get involved should the protests continue (Ibope 2013a).

**Figure 3: Key attributes of participants to protests**

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*Source: Ibope Poll in Eight National Capitals – June 20th 2013 (Ibope 2013b)*

After June 20th, the magnitude of popular mobilization began to decrease, even as the number of individual protests remained high and the manifestations began to espouse more specific, narrowly-defined, and local goals. The tendency has been one of pulverization rather than fading of protest. The goal of some of the protests has been to denounce political figures perceived as corrupt or authoritarian. The governor of Rio de Janeiro, Sergio Cabral, was confronted with an enduring chain of small-scale protests in front of his family’s residence after revelations of police violence and unjustified expenses with helicopter trips for leisure. Similar protests were organized against São Paulo’s governor, Geraldo Alckmin, and against the President of the Brazilian Senate, Renan Calheiros. Other protests were aimed at
challenging certain legislative projects. Yet others sought to pressure local governments into cancelling controversial infrastructure investments, either because of their cost or their environmental impact. In Fortaleza, for example, a group of students occupied the construction site of an elevated road that would destroy a portion from the area of the city’s largest park. Though mobilization strength fell considerably from its peak around the end of June, as of August 2013 it remained distinctly higher than before the start of the wave of protests.

As the protests wound down, the political class entered in damage-control mode. President Dilma Rousseff proposed a plebiscite on political reform, which would have to first be approved by Congress before being subjected to popular approval. The key tenets of the original proposal made by the President included new rules for public campaign financing (with an emphasis on the establishment of a public fund), a reformulation of the electoral system (the possibility of replacing the open-list PR with a majoritarian or mixed majoritarian system), and less flexibility in terms of forming opportunistic electoral coalitions among parties. This proposal failed to attain a majority in Congress and the President was compelled to engage in prolonged negotiations on a much less ambitious version, which is still being discussed. Though 84% of Brazilians have declared support for political reform (Ibope 2013c), only 7% consider themselves well informed about the changes that are being contemplated by political leaders. Therefore, the prospects for political reform remain greatly unclear.

Nonetheless, the protests appear to have pressured Congress on other decisive issues. The bill that would have limited the investigative powers of public prosecutors (PEC 37), which had been widely criticized as a major blow to the fight against corruption was rejected almost unanimously. Another controversial bill mandating psychologists to treat homosexuality as a mental disorder was buried by the Chamber of Deputies. Congress also approved a law mandating the spending of all petroleum royalties
received by the government on education and health. It remains to be seen whether these legislative decisions will prove resilient in the long-run.

Perhaps the most evident impact of the protests has been their toll on levels of government approval and politician popularity across the entire ideological spectrum. According to Datafolha data, President Rousseff’s popularity fell from 57% to 30% within less than three weeks (Datafolha 2013a). Just two months earlier, Rousseff’s approval rating stood at a record 65%. Rousseff’s loss was not translated in an immediate advantage for the main opposition parties or her arch-rival for the next presidential election, Aécio Neves – the candidate of the PSDB. Neves saw his prospective vote share decline from 17% to 13%. All state governors saw their popularity decline as well. For some, such as Rio de Janeiro’s Sergio Cabral the drop was particularly abrupt (from 55% to 12%), while for others, such as Pernambuco’s Eduardo Campos it was considerably softer (from 79% to 58%) (Datafolha 2013b). The only major political figure for whom the protests resulted in a marked boost in popularity is former Minister of the Environment and prospective presidential candidate, Marina Silva, who now appears with 26% of electoral support for the upcoming presidential elections compared to 16% before the protests had taken place (Datafolha 2013c). Silva had long denounced the Brazilian political establishment and her discourse, though meager in specifics, has emphasized environmental and social sustainability together with the need to develop innovative mechanisms of representation.

3. FIVE KEY THEORIES AND THEIR EXPLANATORY POWER FOR THE BRAZILIAN PROTESTS

A review of the previous literature on the causal processes associated with mass protest reveals five key theoretical strands, each of which claims universal applicability. These are the theories of relative deprivation, efficacy, resource mobilization, political opportunities, and protest framing. While it is impossible to describe in detail the intricacies and debates linked to each theory, this section aims to
provide a minimal sketch and demonstrate that neither of these approaches considered independently provides a satisfactory solution for understanding the dynamics of the 2013 Brazilian protests. This insight motivates the development of an alternative framework, which shall constitute the focus of the next section.

Perhaps the most widely employed explanation for mass protest is relative deprivation, understood as the discrepancy between “value expectations,” i.e. what individuals feel entitled to receive, and “value capabilities” – what individuals actually obtain (Gurr 1970). A key distinction has been made between egotistical deprivation, which is felt by an individual independent of any group membership, and fraternal deprivation, which results on the basis of group comparison (Runciman 1966). To the degree that the frustration between expectations and capabilities is fraternal, broadly shared among a group of people, and acute, loose ideologies and beliefs about the origins of deprivation emerge, motivating and shaping collective action (Gurr 1970; Smelser 1963). Pointing to numerous examples of high relative deprivation that didn’t lead to social unrest and comparing them to cases of much lower relative deprivation when protest took place, numerous studies have disputed that the expected relationship between relative deprivation and collective action actually exists (Crawford and Naditch 1970; Mueller 1972; Snyder and Tilly 1972; McCarthy and Zald 1987; Ekiert and Kubik 2001). Another problematic aspect of the relative deprivation approach is the unstable relationship between objective and subjective deprivation. Since the theory does not specify the triggers of subjective deprivation, it is necessarily incomplete and can hardly be used to formulate hypotheses or attempt causal inference on the basis of structural conditions.

The usual criticisms of the theory of relative deprivation are validated by a consideration of the case analyzed here. According to the theory, we should expect that the protests were triggered by a massive wave of popular discontent. And yet, both objective circumstances and the evidence available
from public opinion polls on the mood of the Brazilian population suggests otherwise. During the last
decade, rapid Brazilian economic growth was accompanied by an unprecedented reduction in poverty
levels and social inequality. Government social programs, such as a massive conditional cash transfer
program, Bolsa Família, played an important role in achieving these outcomes and high approval ratings
attest to the fact that the vast majority of the population was satisfied with government performance.
Prior to the beginning of the protests, less than 9% of Brazilians were dissatisfied with the Rousseff
government (Datafolha 2013a). While tail effects may contribute to explaining why the initial bus fare
protests ignited, they can hardly account for their explosive growth. According to the evidence from
opinion surveys cited earlier, more than a third of the Brazilian population showed willingness to
participate in protests and about three quarters approved of them. A scenario more consistent with this
pattern is that the protests themselves altered reference points and augmented subjective levels of
relative deprivation, resulting in protest scale growth and a plummeting of government approval ratings
and public satisfaction with the quality of life in general. While relative deprivation may contribute
important insights about psychological triggers at the individual level once certain subjective perceptions
exist, it fails to clarify the origin of those perceptions.

Rejecting the centrality of grievance intensity as the key trigger of protest, a series of studies have
emphasized the role of political efficacy (Campbell et al. 1954, Klandermans 1984, Mummendey et al.
1999), or, conversely, political cynicism (Capella and Jamieson 1997). Perhaps the most detailed account
belongs to Klandermans et al. (2008), who argues that individuals will be the more likely to participate in
protest the more they are certain that participation will lead to a fulfillment of their demands and the
lower the costs of participation. Since this line of research is also centered on perceptions of efficacy
rather than absolute levels, it is perhaps more appropriate to denote it as “relative efficacy.” If relative
deprivation is routinely criticized for overpredicting protest incidence, then relative efficacy’s key
weakness is underprediction. A large number of protests occur and persist even as they fail to reach any
of their declared goals and in spite of sometimes huge costs for those involved (consider, for example, the case of Tibetans rioting against Chinese occupation in spite of brutal repression and heavy military presence more than fifty years after the Dalai Lama left into exile). Criticism to the relative efficacy approach parallels that of relative deprivation in yet another way: the incompleteness of the theory. Once again, we are dealing with subjective perceptions (this time of protest efficacy) whose origins are not traceable within the framework of the theory itself.

An argument centered on efficacy can hardly account for the Brazilian protests. The very nature of the protests - their huge diversity of demands - is testament to the fact that the protests were not focused on simply forcing the government into a set of specific decisions or policies. Better health care, better education, less corruption - these are not exactly the elements of a pragmatic protest agenda. The fact that the protestors refused to organize themselves hierarchically or to appoint any sort of delegates to communicate their pleas to the government or engage in negotiations reinforces this point. Another expressive fact is that the mobilization grew in scale just as the initial demand, the cancellation of the bus fare increase, had already been accepted by the government. And then there is also the issue of timing – there is simply no evidence of any particular development that could have led to a sudden increase in the efficacy of protest (or subjective perceptions thereof).

Another alternative to relative deprivation is the theory of resource mobilization. Its proponents (McCarthy and Zald 1973; Wilson 1973; Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1973) hold that social mobilization takes place first and foremost because groups are able to organize themselves and to muster a set of key resources (money and labor are essential among a broader set), without which they could not achieve their goals. This approach stresses the importance of rational and strategic planning, as well as the role of pay-offs and costs for individual participation in movement organizing. Protest is conceived of as a conventional instrument available to social movements within a wider repertoire of collective action.
strategies. Unsurprisingly, the theory of resource mobilization has been criticized for its narrow focus on resource aggregation, which denies any role to grievances and political context, for failing to account for highly successful but resource-poor social movements, and for conflating normative and non-normative forms of collective action (Piven and Cloward 1991). Nonetheless, recent scholarship has paid increasing attention to integrating insights about the importance of certain resources, in particular the availability of pre-existing networks or communication platforms that can be used to reach out to broader audiences (see for example Yashar 2005).

What is remarkable about the Brazilian protests is exactly the weakness of the core organization that organized the initial protests and its peripheral role once the mobilization grew. The core elements of the resource mobilization theory – money, activists, organization, and time – do not appear to play a central role. Brazil possesses social movements of impressive strength in both organization and membership size whose efforts at mass mobilization have never managed to reach such a scale (e.g. environmental NGOs, the landless peasant movement - MST, workers unions, of which the most powerful is the CUT, etc.). While the importance of social media as an alternative to conventional communication channels is uncontestable, one has to point out that social media is a resource broadly available to a virtually infinite spectrum of groups and social movements rather than constituting the private domain of any of them. Therefore, even though insights about the role of social media can become integrated in a theory of protest, they simply cannot constitute the whole story.

Shifting the focus from internal to external constraints of social mobilization, a group of scholars have advanced the theory of political opportunity structures, whose fundamental insight is that “political context and institutional structures shape the opportunities for dissent and channel its expression” (Meyer and Imig 1993). Eisinger’s (1973) pioneering study of social mobilization in American cities during the 1960s found that protest incidence was lowest where citizens dealt with either completely “closed”
institutions, which rendered protest ineffectual, and in the case of “open” institutions, which meant that citizens had more direct avenues for influencing change. It was in the case of moderately closed institutions that protest was most likely to occur. Tilly (1978) applied Eisinger’s findings to the sphere of national governments, while Kitschelt (1986) expanded the focus of the theory beyond institutional inputs (openness vs. closure) to institutional outputs (the effectiveness of policymaking), suggesting that the incidence and type of protests actually depends on the interaction of both of these elements. Eventually, the political opportunities literature has crystallized on the analysis of four different types of conditions that increase the scope for protest activity: the relative openness and closure of the political system; the stability of elite unity or alignments; the existence of elite allies; and the state’s repressive capabilities and willingness to employ them (McAdam 1999).

Though in recent years the political opportunity structure approach has become the method of choice for political scientists studying protest phenomena given its relatively straightforward operationalization and the possibility of conducting cross-national comparisons, its applicability for the case of the Brazilian protests is clearly deficient. No major change in terms of institutional closure and elite alignments can be observed prior to the explosion of mass mobilization. Similarly, one cannot talk about a decrease in the Brazilian’s state repressive capabilities. Perhaps the best word to describe the Brazilian institutional and political environment of the last decade is “inertia,” in particular if one puts this period into historical perspective. The presidency of Dilma Rousseff was characterized by a continuation of the economic policies, social programs, and political alliances that have crystallized during the first presidential term of Lula da Silva.

More recently, scholars have begun to emphasize the cultural aspects of social mobilization, seeking to disentangle the dynamics of “the struggle for cultural supremacy” (Tarrow 1998) among the state, media, and social movements as each of these actors seek to influence the individual perception of
political, social, and economic realities (Melucci 1989; Benford and Hunt 1992). These efforts have been centered on the role of frames for triggering individual responses to specific events and social processes. Following Snow and Benford (1992), a frame is “an interpretative schema that simplifies and condenses ‘the world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action.” According to Valocchi (2005), “the key to framing is finding evocative cultural symbols that resonate with potential constituents and are capable of motivating them to collective action.” Valocchi’s assessment embodies at the same time the essence of the framing theory as well as its key predicament: its conceptual ambiguity. Though scholars have attempted to specify more precisely the origin of “evocative” symbols – Benford and Snow (2000) develop a model of frame resonance that is traced to frame credibility and frame salience – the operationalization of the theory continues to pose considerable difficulties. Indeed, a potential pitfall of the framing theory is that it can explain any protest event post-factum but can hardly be used as a platform for formulating hypotheses or deriving patterns of collective action. A potential remedy may emerge from a more careful consideration of the compatibility between underlying social and political structure and protest framing, that is from an integration of key insights of framing theory with elements of some of the alternative approaches described above.

Was the specific framing of the Brazilian protests the key to their rapid escalation? In attempting an answer to this question, one must first recognize the evolution of protest framing. If the first marches had a pragmatic logic and a punctual demand – “If the tariff won’t fall, the city will stop,” the growth of the protests is associated with the consolidation of a different, much broader, more ambiguous, and universalistic frame, which is well encapsulated by slogans such as “It’s not only the 20 cents!” or “Sorry for the inconvenience, we’re changing Brazil!” In other words, the frame of the protests appears to have evolved jointly with the protests rather than anteceding them, complicating the possibilities for causal inference. Neither the origins of the second, universalistic frame, nor the reasons for which it could have
suddenly proven so potent are immediately obvious. After all, the anti-politics / anti-corruption frame does not represent a major innovation in discourse in a country whose political system has been struggling with major corruption scandals throughout its entire period of democratic consolidation. Whether during the “cara-pintadas” movement that led to the impeachment of President Collor in 1992 the relationship between political developments – the scandal in which Collor had been implicated – and the anti-corruption frame employed by the protestors, was evident, the link between context and framing is much less clear in the case of the June 2013 protests. Why is it the case, for example, that the mensalão scandal proved to be a less propitious setting for protests making use of a similar framing?

4. MINORITY INFLUENCE: AN INTEGRATIVE THEORETICAL APPROACH

All in all, a review of the state of the literature on mass protest fails to provide a satisfactory interpretation of the developments in Brazil and calls for the development of an alternative approach. In this section, I seek to develop such an alternative by drawing on the social psychology literature on minority influence, which is based on the foundational works of Serge Moscovici (1976; 1979), to develop a synthetic account of key insights derived or inspired from the theories of mass protest recapitulated above. I then proceed with an illustration of how the evidence provided by the June 2013 events corroborate within this tentative theoretical framework.

No protest ever starts with a million participants within the very first hour. In fact, most protests never manage to attract more than a few hundred individuals. Even though we are interested in protest first and foremost because protest grows and once it has grown it possess the ability of sending shockwaves through politics and society, conventional theoretical accounts do not recognize the simple fact that before they grew, most protests started on a very small scale. Instead, we are offered static accounts which present the incidence of protest and the number of participants as mechanistic outcomes
of certain structural conditions or exogenous shocks. The more salient a certain structural condition or the greater the exogenous shock, the larger the expected magnitude of protest.

Challenging this view, I seek to account for spontaneous mass protest (protests reaching vast proportions in the absence of a powerful machine) by focusing on minority – majority dynamics. I posit that such protests achieve critical mass because a minority’s tactics influence a larger group and are replicated by it. The intersection of several necessary conditions acts as a catalyst for minority influence. These conditions are political proximity, compatibility between the specific nature of political proximity and the protest frame, and network density linking minority members to the majority.

Each of these elements bears some resemblance to the theories presented previously, but follow a markedly different logic. The theory of political opportunity structure identifies the availability of certain institutional openings, processes, or actors as a favorable context for protest. Political proximity shifts the focus from the institutional to the societal context. I define political proximity as the availability of non-minority individuals with similar political preferences and ideological placement. This group amounts to a potential pool of converts or sympathizers of the movement. Conditions of either very high or very low political polarization result in more aggregate political proximity, since they are characterized by an agglomerations of individuals either at the center or at the extremes of the ideological self-placement scale.

The second condition, namely the compatibility between the protest frame and the political proximity context is sensibly different from previous accounts of the role of protest framing. Though more recent works put emphasis on the concept “frame resonance,” the operationalization of this concept and accounting for the origins of resonance remain challenging questions. The hypothesis advanced here is that resonance will depend on the fit between the frame and circumstances of political polarization. Given a high level of political polarization, a conflicting frame would result in a greater potential for mobilization
than a universalistic frame. Conversely, a universalistic frame is better suited for triggering mobilization given conditions of weak polarization.

The third element in the framework outlined above, network density ensures that members of the minority have the ability to communicate relevant information to non-members. Lacking the existence of such social relations, the minority may fail to achieve substantial influence even if the conditions of political proximity and adequate protest framing are present. Rather than focusing on the role of money, labor, and social movement organization – the key elements of the resource mobilization theory – this approach acknowledges the ability of resource-poor minorities or social movements to achieve social influence as long as they possess a certain degree of social embeddedness.

The intersection of the three elements just outlined above alters individual reference points in terms of both grievances and expected protest efficacy. As individuals experience a greater sense of deprivation and increased perceptions of protest efficacy, they are more likely to sympathize with the minority or come to consider themselves among its members. This in turn leads to an automatic increase in protest scale. Therefore, rather than theories of causality, relative deprivation and relative efficacy can be conceived of as automatic psychological triggers in support of identifying with a group or a group tactic.

The causes, timing, and key characteristics of the 2013 Brazilian mass mobilization are best understood following the logic just described. The mobilization resulted from the ability of a small group to exercise broad influence due to a singular intersection of three elements: an unprecedented collapse in political polarization and differentiation, a protest movement benefitting from a universalistic framing anchored in a discourse demanding citizen rights and checks on political corruption and waste, and the embeddedness of protest participants in dense networks via social media, which allowed for the viral spread of information about the events that were taking place.
Figure 5: Argument overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical level</th>
<th>Minority crystallization and protest</th>
<th>Collective Mechanisms of Influence</th>
<th>Individual Mechanisms of Identification</th>
<th>Protag scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Particular level (Brazilian protest movement)</td>
<td>Alienated political militancy adopts protest agenda with immediate goals</td>
<td>Collapse in political polarization and differentiation</td>
<td>Repressed universalistic and legitimate demands</td>
<td>Mass mobilization on unprecedented scale</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Political opportunity</td>
<td>Network resources</td>
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The roots of collapsing political polarization and differentiation in Brazil are to be found in the Worker’s Party drift to the center since 2002, and which has become more accentuated during president Rousseff’s presidency. After three failed attempts to win the presidency, the PT and its leader, Lula da Silva, seemed determined to convey a different political message to the electorate for the 2002 presidential elections. Instead of the confrontational approach of the past, PT’s government platform this time emphasized continuity. There was hardly any mention of agrarian reform or nationalization of strategic industries. In stark contrast with his past attire, Lula sported impeccable suits and ties. The press referred to this campaign strategy as “Lula, paz e amor” (Lula, peace, and love), and attributed this radical change in to PT’s chief campaign marketer, Duda Mendonça. Hoping to diminish opposition to his election among business circles, Lula also chose as his vice-presidential mate a businessman from the rightist PL (Partido Liberal), one of PT’s historical rivals.

It is impossible to ascertain with precision the degree to which Lula’s change in campaign strategy contributed to his electoral victory in 2002 and what would have occurred had he stayed faithful to his traditional rhetoric and political platform. Yet the move towards the center of the ideological center was definitively confirmed once Lula assumed office. Lula’s first two appointments meant to reassure international investors that the PT had effectively abandoned its older economic program, in particular the plan to default on external debt and increase levels of taxation. Lula’s pick for Central Bank president
was Henrique Meirelles, a former president of BankBoston. Antonio Palocci, one of the leaders of the rightist, market-friendly faction of the PT, was named minister of finance. Within a year from assuming office, the right turn of PT’s leadership generated a profound rift in the party’s rank and file. The reform of the pension-system enacted by the Lula government in 2003 especially enraged the leftist core of the PT, which deplored the continuing privileges afforded to civil servants and military officers even as the legislation failed to result in higher pensions for workers and peasants. PT senator Heloísa Helena, who had fiercely attacked the neoliberal economic policies pursued by the government, was expelled from the party and became the leader of a new political movement, Socialism and Freedom (PSOL), which claimed to represent PT’s abandoned ideology. She was quickly joined by more than 10 PT legislators, some of whom had been founders and historical leaders of the party. One of them, federal deputy Chico Alencar, famously commented on his desertion: “It wasn’t us who abandoned the PT, it was the PT which abandoned itself.”

Surveys of legislator ideological positions confirm the party’s shift towards the center during President Lula’s first term. Power and Zucco (2009) and Zucco and Lauderdale (2011) estimate each party’s position on the ideological spectrum during each legislature since 1990 using a series of surveys in which legislators were asked to self-position on a numeric left-right ideological scale and also provide the locations of all legislative parties. Figure 6 tracks the positions for Brazil’s four largest parties: PMDB, PT, PSDB, and PFL. PT’s move to the right associated with the 2003-2007 legislature is by far the largest ideological shift by a major party registered during the 20-year period being analyzed. By the end of 2006, PT’s ideological placement was comparable to that of the PSDB and the PMDB during the early 1990s.

Even as the discourse and program of major political parties converged during the period of Lula da Silva’s two presidential terms (2003-2010), a stark electoral class cleavage crystallized. Lula da Silva’s resounding electoral success among the Brazilian poor in 2006 has been widely attributed (Hunter and

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7 PFL changed its name to DEM in 2007.
Power 2007; Nicolau and Peixoto 2007; Zucco 2008) to Bolsa Familia, a conditional cash transfer program established by the federal government in 2003. Bolsa Familia targets families with school-age children and monthly incomes below approximately $70. The size of the benefits is based on the number of children attending school, with an additional flat benefit for those families earning below $50. Eligibility is centrally determined by the Ministry of Social Development, which is also responsible for disbursing payments directly to individual beneficiaries through banking offices. Though initially analyzed from the perspective of retrospective pocketbook voting (Hunter and Power 2007), the pattern of socioeconomic polarization in voting has become firmly established, as demonstrated not only by the 2010 presidential elections, but also by major governor and mayor races across the country. Rather than a temporary electoral phenomenon, the extent and durability of class voting indicate the consolidation of a class cleavage in Brazilian politics, with the PT clearly standing out as the “party of the poor” (Roman 2012).

Figure 6: Party positions on ideological left-right scale (legislative survey estimates)

Note: Based on legislator survey data. Estimates by Zucco and Lauderdale (2010).
Rather than generating incentives for political polarization and differentiation, the class cleavage appears to have pushed the PT further to the right and the PSDB further to the left, i.e. it has exacerbated the collapse in political polarization and differentiation. To understand how and why this happened, a rapid consideration of the 2010 presidential elections is illuminating. Faced with a wide majority in support of the Dilma Rousseff that had a strong class character, PSDB’s candidate, José Serra attempted to compete by matching and outdoing her agenda on social spending and poverty alleviation. Instead of a minimum salary of 538 reais in Rousseff’s government platform, Serra proposed 600. Confronted with Bolsa Família’s huge electoral payoff for the PT, Serra promised to double the number of beneficiaries, as well as each year’s last monthly payment.

In the aftermath of Dilma Rousseff’s presidential victory, political polarization has continued to erode. Analysts have noted Rousseff’s focus on gaining back the upper-middle class, both through more moderate political discourse and specific policies (reductions in the level of taxation for various goods, the privatization of airports, etc.). Just as importantly, her symbolic association with either early PT militancy and fiery left-wing rhetoric or with social spending through programs such as Bolsa Família was incomparably weaker than that of Lula. By de-emphasizing a sole focus on the poor, Dilma Rousseff was able increase her support among the richer segments of Brazilian population and to rapidly achieve a major rise in popularity ratings. As of March 2009, her government was considered poor by just 8% of the Brazilian population (Datafolha 2013b). Looking back at historical figures on presidential approval, this was a remarkable feat and it is an unambiguous mark of a collapse in political polarization and differentiation.

This conclusion is supported by the behavior of opposition forces. In 2011, seeking to establish a bridge of collaboration with the government, a large group of opposition deputies and senators led by São Paulo mayor Gilberto Kassab defected from the DEM and the PSDB and founded a new party, the PSD.
In just a matter of weeks, the PSD had become the third largest party in Congress and was negotiating political support for the Rousseff government. It eventually declared support for Rousseff’s 2014 reelection campaign.

All in all, both quantitative and circumstantial evidence supports the argument that the Brazilian political context prior to the June 2013 events was marked by an unprecedented collapse in political polarization and differentiation, leaving a large share of the Brazilian population more susceptible to political stimulus by a minority and to major swings in public opinion. Yet these conditions are not sufficient for explaining the diffusion of social mobilization. One also needs to account for the distinctiveness of the protests organized by the “Free Fare Movement.” Why was it that it was these protests that succeeded in growing in scale rather than so many others benefitting from both stronger organizations or apparently graver motivating factors (examples can include the mensalão scandal, mobilization by landless peasants, environmental or indigenous movements, etc.)?

The answer has to do with the crystallization of a particularly potent protest frame in the aftermath of brutal police action against the protestors on June 13th. If before June 13th, the framing of the protests was contested – protestors claimed they represented a peaceful, broadly representative movement, while politicians and media commentary tended to depict their movement as violent, intent on provoking havoc in the city, and motivated by obscure political interests, after June 13th a positive, universalistic frame becomes consolidated.

Two inadvertent features of the initial political response to the protests were particularly salient for this to occur. First the fact, although political arch-rivals, both the mayor (representing the PT) and the governor of São Paulo (representing the PSDB) condemned the protests and refused to consider any concessions. Although the demonstrations targeted a decision taken by the mayor, it was actually the governor who took the most uncompromising stance, going so far as to call the protestors “troublemakers
and vandals.” Moreover, the police forces in charge of containing the protests were under the control of the governor. The unity of position between the two political leaders helped crystallize a contrast between the “people” and the “politicians,” perceived as a compact group. The second salient feature has to do with the contrast between the apparently modest nature of demands – the cancellation of a bus fare increase of merely 20 BRL cents and the brutal methods used against the protestors. These two factors pulverized the credibility of the critical, particularistic framing for the protests that had been dominant at the outset. Instead, a universalistic frame centered on citizen rights and irresponsible government crystallized. Key slogans heard during the protests - “It’s not just about the 20 cents!” or “The people, united, govern without any party!” mark the definitive consolidation of a universalistic frame that was highly compatible with prevailing conditions of weak political polarization and differentiation. In other words, the universalistic frame employed by a minority protest was crucial for it to attain influence and grow, but only as a result of the suitable underlying circumstances of political polarization.

If low political polarization provided the potential conditions for a minority of protestors to influence a much larger group and the protest frame explains how they were able to achieve this influence at the individual level, the third part of the explanatory framework heightens the importance of an extensive yet at the same time intensive communication channel connecting the minority to a broader population. Traditionally, such networks emerged in Latin America as a result of a movement’s own organic growth over time and of the alliances it established (e.g. the gradual consolidation of the Worker’s Party), the borrowing of the network resources belonging to another group or organization (e.g. the Catholic Church), or the corporatist efforts of the state, which suppose the amalgamation and integration of many movements into a sole hierarchy of representation. Yet studies have drawn attention to the decay of such networks in the context of neoliberalism (Weyland 2004) and have related this evolution to a dramatic fall in social mobilization and political participation that affects the intensity and affects the quality of democracy (Kurtz 2004). The recent rise of social media provides a potential
replacement of the conventional mechanisms of network mobilization, a fact that is well illustrated by the June 2013 protests in Brazil.

Between February 2011 and June 2013, the number of Facebook users in Brazil grew from 10 to 76 million (Sbarai 2013). These figures imply that more than half of the Brazilian electorate uses Facebook. Not only Facebook, but other social media technologies, such as Twitter or Instagram, have found in Brazil their second largest markets in terms of the number of users after the United States. Technology analysts point out that the intensity of social media usage and the level of engagement demonstrated by Brazilians is considerably greater than that of other nations. The last episode of a Brazilian telenovela generated more commentary on Facebook than the US Super Bowl occurring around the same time (Cruz 2013).

Social media provides a free, extensive, and highly effective communication channel for any protest movement that is well integrated within it. The profile of the Brazilian protestors – urban, young, with an above-average income – meant that virtually all of them were social media users, allowing the movement to leverage the personal networks of each of them. Moreover, it meant that they were each relatively important nodes within their networks, given the high density of connections they tend to establish in comparison to users characterized by different demographics.

From the very beginning of the demonstrations, they were characterized by a massive sharing of information on social media. It was through social media that protestors were able to convey directly their motives and goals, share images and videos providing evidence of police abuse, and communicate the date and time of new mobilizations. Social media essentially provided an uncensored platform for reaching out to a very sizeable segment, if not a majority, of the Brazilian population. Lacking this platform, the protest frame triggering mobilization may have either failed to crystallize or to reach a critical mass.

5. CONCLUSIONS
This paper has attempted to develop an initial, rough causal framework for explaining a major protest movement that defies conventional theories and expectations. I argue that the scale of social mobilization can be better understood by paying attention to a process of minority influence, through which a small group is able to secure the participation or sympathy of an impressive share of the population. Minority influence is catalyzed by the intersection of three distinct factors: political proximity, protest framing, and social network density. Though the importance of protest frames and social media has been recognized before less attention has been paid to the role of extremely weak political polarization in generating social mobilization on a mass scale. I argue that this factor that was indispensable for the distinctive character of the Brazilian protests, for their magnitude, and for their timing.

If this analysis is correct, the greatest cause of concern emerging from the protest movement is that rather than providing a remedy for the challenges of Brazilian democracy, it may further reinforce negative dynamics, by further weakening party control over individual politicians, strengthening incentives for clientelism and political corruption, and renewing the potential for massive popular movements against the political class. The failure of the Brazilian political system to fully crystallize even during a period of high economic growth, falling social inequality, and relative high levels of government approval and politician popularity emphasizes once more the daunting challenges of democratic consolidation.
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