

Rethinking Ethnic Mobilization: A Model and Three Theories of Sustained Minority Ethnic Mobilization

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This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding sustained minority ethnic mobilization, using an A–B–C model to explain why some cases persist over time without subsiding or achieving core objectives. In critiquing dominant linear models of ethnic mobilization, I introduce three foundational theories of sustained minority ethnic mobilization: institutional, kin-driven, and structural. Each theory identifies a distinct mechanism through which mobilization endures despite changing political contexts and ongoing constraints. Together, the concept and accompanying theories offer a more flexible and temporally aware framework that challenges rigid assumptions and opens space for new empirical and comparative research on sustained minority ethnic mobilization.

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Introduction

The study of mobilization has been widely explored in academic literature, particularly with regard to the emergence of movements, the actors who initiate them, and the mechanisms that drive their initial phases. However, this article seeks to reframe mobilization not as a linear or episodic phenomenon, but as a dynamic and evolving process that may, in some cases, persist over extended periods. To advance this reassessment, I propose the concept of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, which serves as the central analytical focus of this article. I define sustained minority ethnic mobilization as a process through which an ethnic minority group continuously masses support and secures resources over time, regardless of whether its original objectives are achieved, redefined, or indefinitely deferred.

Existing scholarship has typically treated mobilization as a linear process—emergence, a ramp-up phase in which resources and support are amassed, and a peak where a movement reaches mass mobilization and approaches its objectives (see: Hroch 1985). Yet most of this work focuses on how movements begin and reach critical mass, paying little attention to why some mobilizations persist long after initial objectives are set. This linear model cannot explain why mobilization sometimes persists for years or decades without resolution, failing to achieve objectives or culminate in autonomy or collapse. In these instances, mobilization endures beyond a single instance or sequence, calling into question the assumption that movements inevitably culminate in either success or dissolution once mobilization peaks.

Environments in which mobilization persists tend to be marked by overlapping and reinforcing factors. Entrenched structural inequalities can keep grievances alive; robust minority institutions can maintain organizational capacity; and cross-border kin networks can supply resources or help amass support. Each of these elements, individually or in combination, helps

sustain collective action over the long term. By defining and theoretically situating “sustained minority ethnic mobilization,” I aim to show why certain groups continue mobilizing rather than achieving objectives and disbanding. In doing so, this theoretical development builds on prior critiques of Hroch’s model (see: Maxwell 2010) by shifting the focus from episodic or peak moments to the mechanisms that enable mobilization to become a protracted, adaptive struggle.

Accordingly, this article will first offer a clear definition of sustained minority ethnic mobilization. I then develop three complementary theories—institutional, structural, and kin-driven theories of sustained minority ethnic mobilization—to explain how different factors enable protracted mobilization. Drawing on established mobilization scholarship (including Hroch 1985; Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1998), I argue that mobilization is not a linear process but a dynamic one in which groups may enter and remain in a state of sustained struggle. The institutional theory explores how minority-run institutions provide continuity and resources for mobilization to persist. The structural theory examines how enduring inequalities, political exclusion and grievances keep mobilization alive. Whereas the kin-driven theory analyzes how cross-border ethnic kin bolster support, garner resources and identify objectives. While overlap in each theory may exist they are fundamentally focused on identifying the drivers of sustained minority ethnic mobilization. Finally, I discuss implications for future research and empirical testing, addressing an underexplored area of the literature by explaining how and why minority ethnic movements persist over time and by providing theoretical guidance for future studies.

Theories Ethnic Mobilization

To begin this section, I briefly define ethnic groups and ethnic mobilization. Drawing on an ethno-symbolist approach—useful for identifying group cohesion as a precursor to sustained

mobilization—Smith (1984, pp. 284-285) defines an *ethnic community* (or, here, an *ethnic group*) as a named social group that claims shared ancestry and history, possesses distinctive cultural features such as language, norms, and traditions, maintains a sense of territorial association, and demonstrates active solidarity. Turning to ethnic mobilization, consider work from Olzak (1983; 2004), Hroch (1985; 1998; 2004), and Gurr (1993), to name a few: ethnic mobilization is typically understood as the process through which a minority group acquires resources and builds mass support in pursuit of collective ends—whether political, cultural, or economic. In existing scholarship, this process is often viewed as linear, with a group moving from one phase to the next, unable to return or exhibit characteristics of multiple phases at once. In this framing, a group may have objectives such as self-determination, governing autonomy, or cultural, economic, and political equality—objectives that are often treated as the outcomes of mobilization. However, scholarship to this point tends to avoid fully defining these objectives, opting for more abstract accounts focused on what initiates mobilization and how the linear process unfolds. As I will argue in my development of sustained minority ethnic mobilization theory, these objectives—or collective ends—must be more concrete in order for a group to retain support and continue garnering resources over time. While these ends may be redefined, their initial identification, and at best a clear articulation, are central to what constitutes the collective ends of the mobilization process. The failure to acknowledge this represents a significant omission in existing literature and is a key distinction in my definition of ethnic mobilization. Now that we have a basic working definition, I will move on to a survey of the field, identifying these limitations before presenting my conceptualization of sustained minority ethnic mobilization and the theories I have developed. This section begins with a discussion of Miroslav Hroch’s A–B–C model of mobilization, which will serve as the foundation for my

theory, as it most clearly depicts the process and also illustrates the limitations of conceptualizing mobilization as a strictly linear, progressive sequence.

Miroslav Hroch's (1985; 1998; 2004) work on mobilization will help to create the foundation for this discussion, as it best depicts mobilization as a process, which can be instrumentalized in this paper. Hroch (1985) details the process of mobilization in terms of three phases which will be further detailed using his A-B-C model later in this section. To briefly apply it in a definition of the process of mobilization, the model first focuses on scholarly interest, Phase A (Hroch 2004). The concept of scholarly interest in Hroch's model asserts actors begin to take a particular interest in features of a group that help to garner group cohesion.

The second phase in the process of mobilization, Phase B, is national agitation which can manifest itself as a complex set of culture, values and identities. Hroch (2004) emphasizes the breakdown of traditional identities forging a set of new identities as a potential example for national agitation. This stage constitutes the main period of mobilization activity. Examples are grievances, existence of political entrepreneurs, networks, promotion of nationalist literature, efforts to expand national language or culture, political activism and organizations representing the group (Hroch 1985; 2004; Gurr and Moore 1997).

Hroch discusses the transition from national agitation to a movement gaining mass support, identified as Phase C in his model. Much of this phase centers on the influence of elites or intellectuals—mobilization 'protagonists'—whose authority, the strength of information networks, and rapid political changes may all contribute to this transition. In this context, Hroch draws on Gellner's modernist theory of nationalism (1983; 1997), which explains nations and nationalism as outcomes of modern political and economic transformations. Political changes such as constitutionalism, equality, or freedom of speech serve as key examples. A crucial

element in this final phase is the construction of an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. Hroch notes that “By declaring national solidarity, protagonists of national movements contributed to the awareness of an opposition between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’” (2004, p. 653). This concept is particularly relevant to minority ethnic mobilization, where the relationship between a minority group and the ethnic majority is central to collective action. While Hroch’s model was developed to explain national movements, it can be adapted to explain ethnic mobilization, the process by which an ethnic group pursues collective ends.

Hroch’s model provides a solid framework for understanding the process of mobilization but does not account for cases where mobilization sustains for decades. It presents A-B-C as a linear sequence, where movements advance through each phase without backtracking. However, I argue that mobilization is a more dynamic process: some cases exhibit characteristics of both Phases B and C, while others may experience setbacks after reaching Phase C due to state-imposed limitations. Additionally, some movements remain in a protracted state of mobilization, advancing from Phase B but never fully achieving Phase C. While Hroch’s model effectively categorizes mobilization phases, it cannot explain sustained mobilization. Therefore I employ his framework as a widely accepted structure but extend and reinterpret it to account for sustained mobilization.

As illustrated in Hroch’s depiction of mobilization, ethnic mobilization relies heavily on the ‘us’ vs ‘them’ dynamic. As ‘us’ vs ‘them’ is a manifestation of self-identification, it is a fundamental precursor to ethnic mobilization. However, self-identification alone does not explain the occurrence of ethnic mobilization. This bears the question: what causes an ethnic group to mobilize? To begin, Vermeersch’s (2011) survey of ethnic mobilization theories offers a basic overview of the factors that cause and shape ethnic mobilization. While these theories are

fundamental to the study of ethnic mobilization, as this section will assert, they continue to have valuable insights but fail to explain mobilization over time. Nonetheless, Vermeersch (2011) suggests that ethnic mobilization theory can be generally broken up into four theorizations.

The first theory is the ‘culturalist,’ which focuses on the strength of ethnic lineage in the creation of ethnic mobilization. This perspective asserts that ethnicity is ancient and, as a result, cultural "givens" are a fundamental aspect of social and political life (Fearon 2004, p. 6 in Vermeersch 2011, p. 4). These ‘givens’ suggest that ethnic mobilization is inevitable and a fact of nature. The ‘culturalist’ theory is limited in that it assumes ethnic mobilization is an inevitable outcome and as a result is no longer taken seriously by contemporary scholars. This perspective fails to account for cases where ethnic groups maintain a distinct identity while actively participating in society without engaging in mobilization. In the context of this paper, the culturalist theory provides little explanatory power in understanding the persistence of mobilization in certain cases.

The second theory is ‘reactive ethnicity,’ which suggests that ethnic mobilization occurs when there are economic inequalities. The theory focuses on economic competition between ethnic groups in the working class (Vermeersch 2011, p 5). This theory is limited in explaining the problem identified in this paper as it only explains what initiates mobilization. This is exemplified in Bates’ (1974) application of ‘reactive ethnicity’ approach to explain the initial onset of ethnic mobilization in Africa, attributing it to economic modernization and competition over resources. As such Vermeersch’s (2011) depiction and Bates’ (1974) usage of this theory is limited in that it solely focuses on economic inequalities. Although this theory fails to account for sustained minority ethnic mobilization, it provides valuable analytical tools similar to those I will employ in the development of my structuralist theory of sustained minority ethnic

mobilization. Economic, as well as political and cultural inequalities, persisting over several decades, could indeed contribute to sustained mobilization of an ethnic group. However, the theory of reactive ethnicity remains limited in that it explains the initial onset of mobilization, rather than its prolonged sustainability.

The third theory is the ‘competition’ perspective, which suggests that leaders of a particular ethnic group use ethnicity as a rallying cry in the pursuit of political power. This aspect involves a more calculating approach to leadership when defining the ethnic group. This perspective suggests a redefinition of the ethnic group which lacks the core elements of how the group may previously have been identified. This perspective is generally based on elite competition, in which the elites act based on economic or political circumstances. Research on elite-driven mobilization emphasizes the role of political actors in activating ethnic identities to achieve political goals, particularly during the onset of mobilization (see: McCauley, 2014). Similar to the aforementioned theories, the competition theory focuses on the initiation of mobilization and is unable to explain why mobilization sustains. While a revised version of this theory might offer some insight into actors involved in sustained mobilization, it currently only addresses the initiation of mobilization. As such, the theories of sustained mobilization introduced in this paper provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding this complex process, addressing both the mechanisms through which minorities sustain mobilization and the ways in which governing systems create spaces that minorities can leverage.

The fourth and final perspective is that of the ‘political process,’ which links the development of ethnic mobilization with the macro-political context. This perspective has multiple elements that are regarded as key to “the activities of those who present themselves as leaders of ethnic minorities, their resources, their ability to make public claims in the name of the

minority, and their attempts to garner mass support” (Vermeersch 2011). This perspective links the occurrence of ethnic mobilization with political institutions, suggesting that it is a two-way street. This means that discourse on ethnic mobilization exists and the institutional elements also exist, creating a political framework for ethnic mobilization with or without elites to guide it. Like the prior two theorizations of ethnic mobilization, this perspective relies heavily on resource competition, and traditional political elements like discourse and national political structures. This theoretical approach has been extensively developed by Tilly (1978; 2004) and Tarrow (1998), whose work on political opportunity structures (POS) explores how the broader political environment shapes the prospects for mobilization. Although limited in scope, the political process theory offers a foundational perspective for the development of my institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, particularly through its emphasis on how state structures influence the persistence of mobilization. This theory also acknowledges that the political context can shape and constrain the formation of mobilization, a crucial factor when analyzing mobilization over an extended period. However, like the other theories discussed by Vermeersch (2011), it remains focused solely on the initiation of mobilization and does not account for its sustainability. Nonetheless, certain aspects of this framework will inform the development of my theory of institutional sustained minority ethnic mobilization.

While briefly touched upon earlier, the presentation has left out the key question: what is the process of mobilization? A series of theories takes this problem into account by looking at the process of mobilization and what may bring a group to mobilize whether through politics or means of conflict (Gurr 1993; Gurr and Moore 1997; Hroch 1985). In these theorizations, each phase of the mobilization process is outlined to identify shared assumptions and patterns across existing frameworks.

To help discuss theories of mobilization that focus on mobilization as a process we return to Hroch. Hroch's (1985) A-B-C model is unique in its flexible approach, allowing for the interpretation of mobilization movements with distinct characteristics. The A-B-C structure has three theorized phases for nationalist movements in which there are two periodizations (or stages). Stages mark the gradations of a movement's organization, participation, and political activity, while phases provide a broader overlay for understanding overall development, from early cultural awakening to mass mobilization. This means that the phases (A-B-C) may fit in different stages depending on the circumstances of the cases. In a majority of Hroch's cases, Phase A occurred within the first stage, while "The transition to Phase C, to the mass movement [...], took place in some cases in the first, but in most cases in the second stage" (Hroch 1985, p 25).

Hroch's work provides a framework for understanding the emergence of minority ethnic mobilization in addition to the process it takes, while also establishing a broad framework that attempts to account for nuances depending on a given case. "Hroch is arguably most famous for distinguishing between three phases of nation-forming, which he originally applied to the 'small nation' or 'non-dominant ethnic group': Phase A (scholarly interest), Phase B (national agitation) and Phase C (the rise of a mass national movement)" (Bakke et al, 2022, p 746). The stages on the other hand are regarded as indicators for the movement becoming a fully-fledged nationalist movement. As mentioned, the phases can straddle the stages or sit firmly within them. The variations of the nationalist movements as characterized by Hroch are further broken down into four types of nationalist movements. Type one puts both phase A and B in the first stage with phase C straddling both stages. Type two has both A and B positioned the same as type one with Phase C firmly within stage 2, making it a fully-fledged nationalist movement. Type three has

phase A, B and C all within stage one, suggesting the case did not reach a full nationalist movement. Type four has phase A within stage one and phases B and C within stage two, showing national agitation occurred within the full national movement. Hroch's framework provides a valuable conceptual tool for visualizing the development of national movements, particularly in mapping distinct phases and situating cases historically. While referencing his typology is important to acknowledge foundational work on mobilization, its focus on premodern and modern national awakenings limits its applicability to contemporary contexts of sustained minority ethnic mobilization. Furthermore, the model's linearity implies a fixed progression—either toward successful nation-building or toward failure—which does not accommodate cases in which mobilization persists without achieving full national consolidation. As other theorists have noted (see: Maxwell 2010), Hroch's A-B-C schema provides a useful comparative terminology, but its broad application can oversimplify complex nationalist movements, highlighting the need for frameworks—such as the present one—that identify the mechanisms sustaining minority ethnic mobilization. As such, the A-B-C model remains useful for structuring the phases of mobilization; its rigid staging does not reflect the cyclical or enduring nature of contemporary minority mobilization. Nevertheless, Hroch's model is instrumental in shaping how mobilization is theorized and provides a foundation upon which more flexible, contemporary interpretations—such as sustained mobilization—can be built.

Gurr (1993) created a format for understanding mobilization, and similarly identifies a three-step process. Gurr's work looks at what may trigger a desire to mobilize and how the process takes shape. The model for ethnic mobilization uses a grievance based theorization which is described below.

[The model] consists of three interdependent core variables, Active Grievances, Mobilization, and Communal Political Action, and three blocs of exogenous variables: (1) predisposing conditions, which determine the (unobserved) intervening variables of persisting grievances and potential for mobilization; (2) international diffusion and contagion of communal conflict; and (3) state characteristics that shape the costs and benefits of political action (Gurr 1993, p 168).

Gurr's model outlines the preconditions that may lead a minority group to initiate mobilization. It emphasizes factors such as collective disadvantage, group size, and spatial concentration as potential early indicators. In addition, Gurr (1993) identifies *active grievances*—defined as articulated demands expressed by a spokesperson—as another key driver that can precipitate collective action. He notes that these alone are not indicators of mobilization but can only be authenticated when mobilization does occur. Gurr (1993) describes three types of demands that may exist: political rights, economic rights, and social and cultural rights. The final portion of the model shows the outcome if the previous developments arrive at the point of mobilization. As noted in the discussion of Hroch, Gurr also conceptualizes mobilization as a linear progression, though he makes an effort to acknowledge its dynamic nature. While his approach contributes to understanding mobilization, it remains limited in explaining why it persists or the internal dynamics that sustain it over time, highlighting the need for the theories developed here.

Later work further describes the process of mobilization and the interaction with governing structures. In reference to Gurr's (2000) work Regan and Norton (2005, p 322) write

“The evidence he presents points to a combination of three factors as the critical determinants of civil conflict: domestic structures, opportunity to mobilize, and the structure of incentives.”

While their work is rooted in the causes of civil wars, it references important considerations that are adapted into my theories of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, such as the impact of domestic structures and opportunities. Although incentives may be important in the context of civil war it does not offer explanatory value in why mobilization sustains over time. Regan and Norton (2005) conclude that grievances are the root to civil wars, but armed conflict occurs out of the response of states. In the discussion they assert that higher levels of democratic institutions mitigate the risk of rebellion. Although, this does not have an impact on nonviolent protests. They go on to assert that highly autocratic states are less likely to see civil wars but also conclude that state repression is one of the most likely indicators of civil war. This suggests that absolute control by an authoritarian regime decreases the likelihood of civil war but any capacity for an oppressed group to organize increases the likelihood of rebellion and or civil war drastically. Thus, Regan and Norton argue that disaffected minorities in democratic societies may engage in nonviolent action (mobilization), whereas minorities in politically repressive societies, though less likely to protest, are more inclined to organize violent mobilization when opportunities arise. Governing systems play a crucial role in shaping a group’s capacity for sustained mobilization and thus inform the development of my theoretical framework. Moreover, Regan and Norton’s (2005) emphasis on grievance aligns with my structural theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, which posits that systemic grievances underpin the persistence of mobilization.

Thus far this subsection has discussed grievance based ethnic mobilization. While grievances will be the primary theorization used in analysis of this paper, an alternative variation

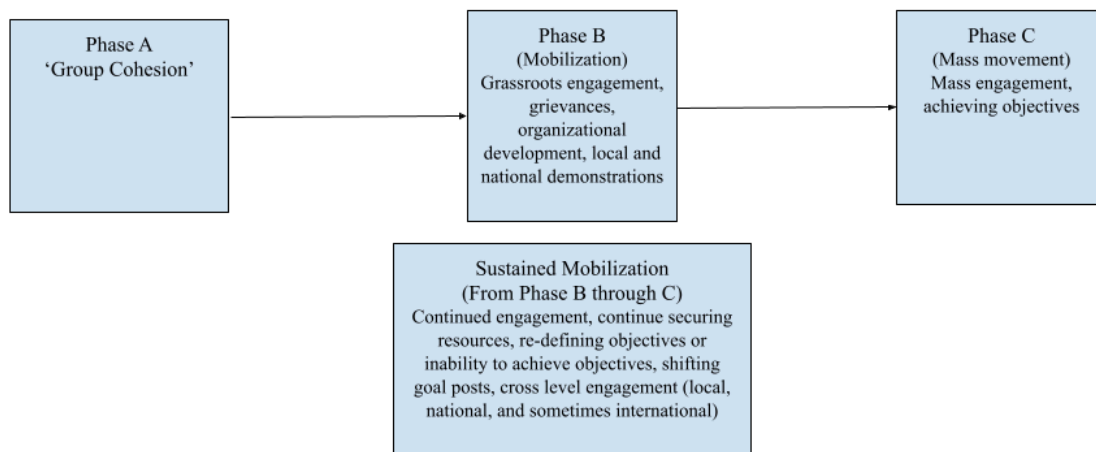
of mobilization has been debated in ethnic mobilization scholarship: greed based mobilization. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2004) discuss greed vs grievance in the risk of civil war, in which they assert that there is little explanatory power based on quantitative models to explain grievance based civil war. They found that “level, growth and structure of income” is fundamental in assessing the risk for civil war, while aspects like ethnicity and religion have little impact (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, p 34-35). While the impact of greed cannot be disregarded in the occurrence of minority ethnic mobilization, this quantitative approach does not give weight to grievance narratives in mobilization. To simply disregard ethnicity and religion, lines that continue to divide societies around the world, is to ignore the new borders that continue to be drawn based on these social lines. David Keen (2012, p 777) contests that while greed may take hold in some armed conflicts, grievances may in fact perpetuate violence in post-war periods. While this point does not explicitly argue for sustained mobilization, it underscores the importance of considering grievances in cases of protracted mobilization—a core element of my structural theory.

Sustained Minority Ethnic Mobilization

To date, only one study has explicitly defined sustained mobilization. Koinova (2015) provides an initial conceptualization. In her work, Koinova (2015, p. 8) states, “Sustained mobilization occurs when organization of claim-making and material and symbolic resources takes place without interruption to address a common issue. Despite inevitable competition among individuals, there are common grievances, targets, action-oriented frames, and formal and informal networks engaged to proactively channel discontent.” While this definition is a valuable reference point—particularly for conflict-generated diaspora mobilization—it does not fully

capture the dynamics of sustained minority ethnic mobilization within states. Building on but distinct from Koinova's work, I develop a definition focused on the sustained mobilization of ethnic minorities within state boundaries.

Model 1: Sustained Minority Ethnic Mobilization



As illustrated in Model 1, sustained minority ethnic mobilization does not fit neatly within the A-B-C model but rather amends it. Prior to this discussion, mobilization has largely been conceptualized as a linear process, wherein once a group transitions from one phase to the next (e.g., from Phase B to Phase C), it does not revert to a previous phase. I challenge this assumption, arguing that in cases of sustained mobilization, this progression is not strictly linear. Instead, groups may exhibit characteristics of a particular phase—such as the grievances, organizations, or demonstrations typical of Phase B—yet maintain this stage for an extended period. Alternatively, groups may display elements of both Phases B and C without fully belonging to either; for instance, they may experience ongoing grievances and demonstrations (Phase B) while simultaneously developing large-scale national organizations and engaging in

mass participation, though without mobilizing the full minority population (Phase C). Sustained minority ethnic mobilization is not a universal phenomenon but rather a specific state of certain cases of minority ethnic mobilization. While some instances of mobilization may follow a linear process, I argue that sustained mobilization often arises under particular sets of circumstances.

As depicted on the Model, Phase A is a necessary precondition for mobilization and happens prior to mobilization and sustained mobilization. Termed as ‘Group Cohesion,’ this phase is when a group shares common traits or characteristics, such as a common language, history, ancestral homeland and culture, creating a sense of kinship and cohesion, in line with an ethno-symbolist understanding of minority nationalism. Although, these traits alone do not lead to minority mobilization but rather are the platform for which mobilization can occur. While a group can share important characteristics, such as language or an ancestral homeland, groups can further subdivide which diminish the likelihood for mobilization itself, or create competing veins of mobilization within an ethnic group.

I accept that Phase B begins with national agitation and argue that grievances, be it cultural, economic or political, begin this phase. Local and national demonstrations, developing organizations associated with the ethnic group and developing engagement. In standard theories of the process of mobilization, once a group enters Phase B, it would either continue into Phase C or mobilization would subside due to a litany of reasons such as authoritarian suppression or lack of resources or inability to garner larger support. Entering Phase C of mobilization would entail building large umbrella organizations, achieving mass support. By my definition, Phase C would only complete once an ethnic group achieved their objectives, which could be autonomy, representation or economic parity for the ethnic group, to name a few. This linear progression of mobilization fails to explain why a group can sustain a protracted state of Phase B, or be in Phase

B but also have characteristics of C, or enter Phase C, without completing objectives, or enter Phase C and return to Phase B while sustaining mobilization. So this brings us to the question: what is sustained minority ethnic mobilization?

Sustained minority ethnic mobilization is when a group continues to appeal for popular support, garner resources and pursue objectives, or redefine objectives for a prolonged period of time. This can be conceptualized as prolonged mobilization, suspended mobilization (between Phases) or as I term it, sustained minority ethnic mobilization. My definition of sustained mobilization encompasses ethnic groups that are minorities within states, either ethnic majority states or plural states. Groups can be depicted as in a single Phase (B or C) or in between Phases B and C, exhibiting elements of both. For a group to sustain, they must retain popular support, either through appealing to their ethnic population, continue engagement in elections and/or see participation in demonstrations or other political activities. Likewise, as is necessary for mobilization, a group must continue to garner resources. Resources can come from many places but this is best identified using the theories of sustained minority ethnic mobilization below.

Sustained mobilization differs from standard mobilization in that it extends over years or decades. However, not all groups enter sustained mobilization. This only occurs when a group fails to achieve significant progress yet continues to mobilize rather than mobilization subsiding. A temporary stall lasting a year, or a lack of immediate mass support, does not in itself qualify a movement as sustained. Instead, sustained mobilization occurs when a group remains active for an extended period of time, maintaining resources and support despite being unable to achieve objectives. When obstacles arise, such as regime change, the group must still be capable of sustaining mobilization.

Although objectives are often shifting, they are always identified in mobilization movements, either abstractly, such as saying further political and cultural representation, or firmly, such as autonomy for an ethnic majority region. These objectives provide key actors the rationale for broad engagement and justification for continuing to garner resources. In cases of sustained mobilization, objectives are either perpetually out of reach, as in autonomy movements, or they become moving goalposts—continually redefined, whether because an objective has been achieved or remains unattainable. While a group may achieve its stated objectives and continue mobilizing beyond this stage—what could be conceptualized as a hypothetical 'Phase D'—this article does not explore that possibility. Instead, it identifies it as a potential avenue for future research.

Theories of Sustained Minority Ethnic Mobilization

Having established the definition of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, this section turns to the question of why and how it persists, presenting three competing theoretical explanations: institutional, structural, and kin-driven. While each theory has some conceptual ties to existing literature, together they offer a foundation for future research on this understudied phenomenon and begin to advance a theoretical debate. The institutional theory posits that minority institutions—emerging either through allowances in democratic systems or power vacuums in authoritarian ones—are the primary drivers of sustained minority ethnic mobilization. The structural theory asserts that systemic inequalities—whether cultural, political, or economic—sustain mobilization by fostering grievances that persist over time. While minority institutions may come and go, grassroots and national organizations maintain engagement and secure resources. The kin-driven theory argues that cross-border ethnic kin—whether from a

kin-state, diaspora community, or kin minority in a neighboring country—serve as the key force sustaining mobilization. This theory requires that mobilization is entirely contingent on the ability of cross-border kin to define objectives, garner resources and rally support. Each theory offers a distinct understanding for how mobilization sustains. Although there might be some interconnectivity between theories, such as cross-border kin supporting institutions or prevalent systemic inequalities, the sole drive of mobilization can only be explained by one, absent which mobilization would be unlikely to sustain.

Institutional Theory

Building on previous empirical work (Mutnansky 2025), this paper develops the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization in a comprehensive generalizable form. This theory asserts that the endurance of mobilization efforts is primarily driven by minority institutions, which both operate within and respond to the governing structures that either enable or limit their capacity to influence. As noted earlier, this framework builds on the theoretical concept of political opportunity structures (POS) (see: McAdam et al. 1996; Tilly 1978, 2004). POS focuses on the political environment that enables a group to initiate mobilization, highlighting conditions such as state openness, elite divisions, and levels of repression. Its utility lies in explaining when and how mobilization emerges—rather than why it endures. This limitation reveals a critical gap in a foundational pillar of mobilization theory, reinforcing the need for the framework developed here, particularly the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization.

Institutions, as my definition asserts, are enduring and universally recognized by minority populations, allowing them to continue to garner resources and support, allowing them to sustain mobilization effectively. Institutions can be local or national. For example, at the local level,

minority language schools and religious institutions can serve as key platforms for sustaining mobilization by acting as central hubs for organization, maintaining community support, securing resources, and advancing collective objectives. Nationally, institutions may have the most power and are likely the best institutions for sustaining mobilization. Political parties or national minority advocacy institutions have the proper infrastructure to sustain mobilization through objective defining, resource allocation and organizing the population. This can be particularly effective when a national institution is embedded in the state structure either through constitutional allowances or political inclusion. Within the institutionalist framework, not only are institutions associated with the group taken into account but the governing structure that they exist within.

At its core, the institutional approach contends that the endurance of mobilization efforts is anchored in the presence of stable organizations that operate within—and are shaped by—the broader governing environment (see: Mutnansky 2025). This theory can be applied to cases in both authoritarian and democratic settings. Authoritarian or repressive regimes with power vacuums may create opportunities for both formal and informal organizations to gain support and resources (Tarrow 1998). This can be applied to the institutional theory, in which these organizations that form can develop strength and influence within these power voids. Applying this in the context of sustained mobilization, if the power vacuum endures, it could enable the continued persistence of mobilization but also limit its successes. For example, if a group is geographically isolated in a region with natural barriers, such as mountains, the federal government may have less influence over local organizations. If the organization persists but has limited resources or lacks the capacity to garner widespread support, it may still be able to sustain itself without fully completing the mobilization process, such as gaining greater

representation or governing autonomy. This effectively allows for mobilization to continue indefinitely through this organization. Through the institutional theory, a group may be successful in garnering resources and support while also limited by the very system they exist within. In contrast to repressive systems, democratic regimes may accommodate minority movements within formal political structures, offering them avenues for participation while simultaneously constraining their capacity to achieve certain goals. Electoral politics, for instance, can provide minority institutions—such as political parties—with the legitimacy and infrastructure needed to sustain collective action over time. However, these same institutions may face systemic limitations that prevent them from advancing more transformative aims, such as territorial autonomy. A minority political party may successfully mobilize support, amass resources, and advocate for incremental policy gains, particularly around cultural or linguistic rights, while remaining structurally restricted from pursuing more radical objectives. This theoretical perspective underscores the dual role of institutions: they are instrumental in maintaining mobilization across time, yet are also shaped—and often bounded—by the political systems in which they operate. Crucially, this framework diverges from the structural theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization by emphasizing the agency, continuity, and adaptive strategies of institutional actors, rather than viewing persistence as a function of static or shifting structural conditions.

To demonstrate the applicability of the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, I identify the following indicative features: organizational endurance, broad support and legitimacy, resource accumulation, embeddedness in political or state structures, and the capacity to pursue and adapt objectives over time. Endurance can be measured by an organization's sustained visibility and relevance across electoral cycles, particularly through

consistent performance in national or regional elections. Legitimacy and broad support are reflected in voter behavior, membership levels, and public engagement—evidenced through electoral results, surveys, and public endorsements. The ability to amass and manage resources may be inferred from an organization’s long-term survival, though more direct evidence—such as access to financial documentation—would clarify funding streams and strategic allocation. Embeddedness in the political system can be evaluated by examining the organization’s presence in governing coalitions, constitutional guarantees of minority representation, or de facto administrative control in specific regions. Finally, institutional actors’ capacity to pursue and redefine objectives—a hallmark of sustained strategic engagement—can be established through content analysis of party manifestos, public statements, and legislative initiatives. This adaptability signals institutional resilience and responsiveness to shifting political contexts. Each of these features can be assessed through both qualitative and quantitative methods, providing a robust basis for testing the institutional theory and reinforcing its relevance for understanding long-term ethnic mobilization.

By assessing how minority institutions can continuously garner resources, massing support and political influence, this theory identifies the mechanisms that underpin long-term collective action. It advances existing scholarship by moving beyond viewing mobilization as a linear process to show how embedded organizational structures maintain momentum over time. In doing so, it offers a nuanced, analytic lens that can guide both theoretical inquiry and empirical analysis on sustained minority ethnic mobilization.

Kin-Driven Theory

Kin-driven mobilization will be an additional framework used in analysis of sustained mobilization, which focuses on kin states and organized ethnic kin living abroad, building on

previous work (Mutnansky 2025). While existing scholarship has examined the role of cross-border ethnic kin in ethnic mobilization—particularly through diasporic networks or kin-state activism (see: Koinova 2015; Liebich 2017; Waldinger and Shams 2023)—the theory developed here is the first to offer a comprehensive framework that explicitly centers cross-border kin as the primary driver of minority ethnic mobilization, and more specifically, sustained minority ethnic mobilization. For this theory the kin must not be an exiled governing institution but rather a cross-border kin originating from and organizing outside of state borders. This distinction is important because exiled governments represent the interests of the minority or nation they claim to govern, effectively functioning as extensions of those groups rather than as independent actors. In contrast, kin-states and organized cross-border kin operate as separate political entities with their own agendas, making their role in cross-border mobilization fundamentally different and central to the kin-driven theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization. These actors sustain mobilization by channeling resources, political influence, and symbolic legitimacy—and by identifying objectives across borders—thereby reinforcing the minority’s capacity for long-term collective action.

For this theory, the source of mobilization is identified as cross-border ethnic kin. This may involve providing essential resources—whether physical, economic or ideological—or establishing organizations that foster support and political engagement. This approach frames the continuation of mobilization not as a purely internal dynamic, but one that is transnationally maintained through sustained interaction with ethnic kin groups beyond state borders. This theory asserts that political parties, cultural organizations, and even institutions must rely on such transnational kin support; without it, mobilization efforts are likely to cease.

In this framework, mobilization is seen as an open-ended process—one that persists as long as external kin support continues to reinforce, but not resolve, collective political aims. As kin-support continues—through the creation of objectives, allocation of resources, and massing of support—a group may be unable to achieve these objectives, thereby effectively sustaining mobilization insofar as cross-border kin maintain channels of material and organizational backing. Domestic constraints—legal, political, or institutional—can obstruct mobilized groups from fulfilling key goals, even when external kin support remains strong. While a democratic system may allow a minority political party to be financed and propped up by cross-border kin, the system may limit their ability to achieve objectives, effectively allowing mobilization to sustain as long as cross-border kin continue to maintain it. Likewise authoritarian systems may continue to have power voids, which cross-border kin can exploit, effectively sustaining mobilization as long as the void exists.

To explore how kin involvement contributes to prolonged mobilization, one can assess several factors: the presence of consistent financial or political engagement, evidence of aligned ideological goals, and the formation of networks—both official and informal—that facilitate coordination. In addition, longitudinal evidence of these dynamics—seen through recurring patterns of engagement or ideological alignment—can underscore their enduring impact. Consistent financial and political engagement can be identified through financial records, official statements, and sustained political engagement between cross-border kin and minority organizations or leadership. Evidence of aligned ideological objectives can be identified in shared political objectives of the cross-border kin and the minority group. Kin involvement may manifest through the maintenance of heritage centers, educational initiatives, or formal and/or informal alliances that reinforce group identity and maintain political coordination. Lastly, the

endurance of these features over time, along with evidence that they are the primary drivers of sustained mobilization, is essential. These elements may be examined through historical analysis, content analysis, and semi-structured interviews, providing a comprehensive framework for assessing the kin-driven dimension of ethnic mobilization.

The kin-driven perspective enriches the literature on sustained mobilization by establishing a theory that emphasizes that sustained mobilization can be driven by transnational actors. This theory offers a completely distinct explanation for sustained minority ethnic mobilization in identifying the primary drivers being cross-border ethnic kin. As described, the local and national levels must be dependent on the international level (cross-border kin), meaning that while domestic minority organizations, institutions or networks may exist they must be entirely reliant on financial and ideological support from supporting kin. While I acknowledge that this theory may have some overlap with both the institutional and structural theories and may be useful in future studies, when assessing the root of sustained mobilization this is a distinct and competing theory. The kin-driven theory provides a valuable lens for understanding not only sustained minority ethnic mobilization, but also the broader dynamics of ethnic mobilization, especially the underexplored role of external kin. By emphasizing the role of kin in supplying resources, reinforcing identity, and providing symbolic resources, the theory expands our understanding of mobilization beyond domestic factors alone.

Structuralist Theory

In contrast to the institutionalist approach, structuralist theories emphasize the significance of social interactions within the existing structures in which individuals or groups operate. The structuralist argument is often framed through class struggle and is how it will be instrumentalized in this analysis. While often characterized as a classic structuralist framework,

the contemporary counterpart—neo-structuralism—offers a more nuanced analysis of social interactions and interpersonal relationships among peers in the context of collective action (see: Lazega 2018). However, the neo-structuralist approach falls outside the scope of this framework as it focuses on microdynamics within social interactions. Instead, this study adopts a broader focus on the structural factors that sustain mobilization over time. This structuralist theory aligns more closely with the classical structuralist approach, which emphasizes structural divisions and perceived economic, political, and cultural deprivation as key factors. However, while classical structuralism primarily examines the conditions that initiate mobilization, my theory of structural sustained minority ethnic mobilization contends that structural inequalities not only trigger mobilization but also sustain it over the long term.

In this interpretation of the structuralist framework Tilly's (1978) work will be used again with a particular focus on his discussion of work from Karl Marx. In this framework, class and economic deprivation act as catalysts for mobilization. "In analyzing readiness to act, Marx attached great importance to the ease and durability of communications within the class, to the visible presence of a class enemy. When Marx's political actors acted, they did so out of common interests, mutual awareness, and internal organization," (Tilly 1978, p 13). This quote shows that the class sets an equal playing field for organization allowing for pre-established networks to exist, making a class capable of mobilization. In this framework, an ethnic group or class identifies a common enemy—another group or class perceived to be depriving them of resources or economic opportunities. While Tilly recognizes some rigidity to the class based assumption this can be unpacked and used in my classical structuralist interpretation of sustained ethnic mobilization. In my interpretation, sustained minority ethnic mobilization is driven by the persistent perception of economic, political, and cultural deprivation. When an ethnic group

perceives itself as economically, politically or culturally marginalized this perception fosters ongoing agitation and, consequently, mobilization. This dynamic reflects the concept of reinforcing cleavages, wherein a group experiences disadvantage across multiple intersecting dimensions—such as economic marginalization compounded by ethnic or religious discrimination (see: Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The structural theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization asserts that grievances that occur from perceived marginalization towards a defined group of people leads to the creation of organizations, demonstrations and leadership regularly over an extended period of time. In this theory there is interchangeability in leadership and organizations that rise depending on the time or issue they seek to address. While individual leaders and organizations may come and go, continuity in mobilization is maintained through the persistent presence of leaders and organizations that consistently address or redefine key issues within the ethnic community based on changes in the political environment. The theory of structural sustained mobilization should not be confused with episodic mobilization, which is when mobilization comes in waves with periods of dormancy, where there are not any active leaders or organizations. Structural sustained minority ethnic mobilization must have consistency in mobilization without having extended periods where there are no existing organizations, grassroots movements or leaders present. While this theory has some flexibility in that there may be higher points of agitation and mobilization, there must be some identifying characteristics of mobilization over an extended period of time.

This theory, as with the previously discussed, also accounts for the inability to complete the process of mobilization. Structural sustained minority ethnic mobilization inherently contains limitations that explain why mobilization remains incomplete. Specifically, a collective of organizations or leaders may struggle to achieve key objectives, such as autonomy or equal

rights, without undergoing full institutionalization. The very process of sustaining mobilization, therefore, constrains its capacity for completion. When governments—whether democratic or authoritarian—consistently repress minority organizations or leaders, but these movements continue to persist, mobilization is sustained precisely because structural barriers prevent the achievement of core objectives. As previously discussed, this theory provides a distinct explanation for the sustained mobilization of minority ethnic groups by identifying grievances as the primary driving force. It emphasizes how persistent economic, political, or cultural grievances create opportunities for new organizations and leadership to emerge, enabling them to address the most issues faced by the community and effectively sustaining mobilization.

While this article does not test this theory empirically I propose a distinct set of indicative features that differentiate it from the kin-driven and institutional theories: interchangeability of actors, persistence of grievances and non-centrality of formal organizations in mobilization. The first feature is the interchangeability of leadership and organizations, continuity and overlap over time. While political parties and organizations may emerge and dissolve depending on the political climate, mobilization persists. Although these entities may share overlapping agendas or memberships, no single organization or leader dominates the mobilization process—a key distinction from the institutional framework. This stands in clear contrast to the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, which emphasizes institutional endurance—evidenced by long-term dominance of a single party and consistent voting patterns. In contrast, the structural approach may be demonstrated through the continued presence of ethnic parties more broadly, even if no single party maintains dominance over time. Moreover, mobilization sustains despite changes in the political environment; for example, a transition from a liberal to an illiberal democracy that bans minority political parties may prompt increased

grassroots mobilization, the rise of informal organizations, or the formation of radical groups. The second feature is the persistence of unaddressed grievances—whether economic, political, or cultural—which suggests that mobilization continues because core issues remain unresolved. These grievances can be identified through content analysis and semi-structured interviews, where respondents highlight systemic challenges that endure despite organizational efforts. Third, is a lack of centrality in formal organizations in mobilization, where local and national actors remain interconnected, but no single entity dominates the mobilization landscape. This absence of a central driver further differentiates structural sustained mobilization from the institutional explanation. Together, these features form a coherent structure through which structural conditions—rather than institutions or cross-border kin—can be understood to sustain minority ethnic mobilization over extended periods.

The structural theory offers a distinct lens for understanding sustained minority ethnic mobilization by centering the enduring nature of political, economic, and cultural grievances. While some overlap exists with other theories—particularly in acknowledging that grievances often initiate mobilization—this framework uniquely positions grievances not merely as catalysts but as the very mechanisms that sustain mobilization over time. By foregrounding the structural conditions that continuously reproduce discontent, this theory contributes a valuable perspective to an underexplored area of mobilization studies. This theory provides a foundation for empirical research on how persistent inequalities and exclusions sustain mobilization, even without formal institutions or kin-state support.

Conclusion

This article has established an in-depth conceptualization of sustained minority ethnic mobilization through an A–B–C model, presenting it as a distinct state in which certain cases of ethnic mobilization find themselves. In doing so, it critiques and extends current understandings by showing that minority ethnic mobilization is not always a linear process, but can instead be dynamic and adaptive—enduring through shifting political obstacles over time. Building on this conceptual contribution, I have developed three distinct theories that explain why mobilization sustains. The institutional theory argues that minority institutions are the core vehicles of mobilization, adapting to political shifts while continuing to attract community support and resources. The structural theory posits that sustained mobilization emerges from persistent structural inequalities, with grievances continually activating new actors even as others fade. Finally, the kin-driven theory highlights the role of cross-border ethnic kin in perpetuating mobilization by sustaining resource flows, galvanizing community engagement, and identifying ongoing political objectives.

These theories offer foundational explanations that can inform future case-specific, comparative, and historical research, and they open the door for further theorizing on sustained minority mobilization. One direction for future work lies in identifying historical cases from the 20th century that can be reassessed to examine whether, how, and why minority ethnic mobilization endured over time. Another is the study of more contemporary instances that reflect similar patterns of persistence under evolving political conditions. Theoretically, further frameworks might extend those developed in this article by exploring *elite-driven sustained minority ethnic mobilization*, where the endurance of a movement is closely tied to one or a set of charismatic figures, or by developing a *legacy mobilization theory*, which could examine how mobilization in earlier periods creates institutional or symbolic foundations that later movements

draw upon when new opportunities emerge—allowing mobilization to persist or reappear in episodic waves. While the framework presented here is intended to be generalizable, it does not apply to cases where mobilization follows a straightforward linear trajectory—though such cases may be less common than often assumed, given the enduring constraints that minority movements typically face. Ultimately, this framework contributes to the study of ethnic mobilization by reinterpreting how and why mobilization can persist even when its core objectives remain out of reach.

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