BROOKINGS

How technology is altering citizen protests

Darrell M. West

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→ Digital technologies give citizens tools to organize protests, document law enforcement actions, and seek accountability.

→ Law enforcement also uses technology—cameras, facial recognition, geolocation, and data mining—to track participants and monitor demonstrations.

→ The impact of these technologies depends on how they are used, and their role will shape political outcomes and public perception.

During the federal deployment of the military to assist police in Washington, D.C., I saw masked men in unmarked cars detain a person just a few houses down from where I live. It was early morning, and I was returning from the gym when I saw a commotion on my block. A neighbor, upset by the police action, was recording the scene with his cell phone, as many in the nation's capital do to document possible abuses and share them online for all to see. But in an unexpected move, an agent involved in the detention pulled out his own camera and recorded the citizen filming him. My neighbor then stopped recording and quickly returned to his home, uncertain what the agent's response might mean for him.

In this single and graphic moment, I saw two sides of technology's impact on citizen protests.

On one hand, ubiquitous smartphones (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/where-would-racial-progress-in-policing-be-without-camera-phones/) have turned many people into citizen journalists and documentary filmmakers. With instant access to cameras and social media platforms, people can easily record and post videos of arrests by masked men that then go viral around the world. Technology can expose problematic situations, provide a powerful counterweight to government abuses, and help people organize against them. The weekend before, protesters ↗ used social media outreach to organize a march on the White House with little notice, convening thousands of people to walk two miles from a neighborhood park to the heart of executive power. It was an impressive display of digital power and a vivid demonstration of how technology can empower ordinary people.

On the other hand, my early morning neighborhood encounter underscored that government agents also have their own cameras ↗. They can record protesters and, through facial recognition software, quickly identify participants. Combined with license plate readers ↗, subpoenaed geolocation data, social media monitoring, and drone surveillance, governments have new tools to track protesters ↗ and determine who opposes their actions. With some places outlawing protester masks ↗, there is little anonymity in citizen demonstrations anymore, and digital markers can provide an instantaneous means to crack down on ordinary citizens and usher in an authoritarian police state.

All these tech applications raise the question of how technology will shape citizen protests and law enforcement crackdowns in the future. Right now, there is no obvious winner in the employment of technology. Citizens have great digital tools at their disposal for organizing marches, documenting police actions, and seeking accountability, but law enforcement also has powerful tools—cameras, facial recognition, geolocation, and data mining—to identify protesters and harass opponents.

It is difficult to know how this tech standoff will unfold. Nearly all technologies are "dual use ↗" tools that can improve people's lives or serve as instruments of repression. Little in the technology itself dictates constructive or destructive applications; the impact depends on how people choose to use it.

Experiences in other countries that have shifted toward illiberalism or authoritarianism suggest that authorities often prevail in use of technology. In places such as Hungary, Turkey ↗, and Poland, law enforcement agencies have employed digital tools ↗ to surveil dissidents and target opponents, and when leaders seek greater control, these technologies can be used to restrict personal rights.

It is an open question what will happen in the United States as technology becomes more integrated into the broader political climate. Based on citizen videos and firsthand accounts, some voters may become disillusioned with President Trump's crackdown and conclude that police are abusing their powers and arresting people who have lived peacefully in the country for many years, paid taxes, and been constructive members of their communities. Alternatively, others may feel strongly about crime and the perceived security risks of a porous border, believing that tough methods are required and that the ends justify the means.

Whichever way things go, digital technologies are likely to play a central role in the standoff between citizens and authorities, and in the broader contest between democratic and authoritarian tendencies. The ultimate goals of citizen protest are to influence public opinion, shape election outcomes, and combat disinformation ↗. Whichever side uses technology most effectively ↗ could gain a political advantage. The national stakes are high, and digital tools will be a key factor in how Americans interpret and judge the current moment.

AUTHOR

Darrell M. West Senior Fellow - Governance Studies, Center for Technology Innovation (CTI), Center for Effective Public Management (CEPM), **Douglas Dillon Chair in Governmental Studies** X @