

"The success of nonviolent civil resistance"

TEDx talk by Erica Chenoweth

Read the summary of the TED talk (provided by Gemini, 20 October 2026):

- **Initial Skepticism:** [01:02] Erica Chenoweth began her PhD studying how and why people use violence for political change, initially viewing nonviolent resistance as well-intentioned but dangerously naive.
- **Empirical Research:** [03:16] Challenged to study the subject systematically, she collected data on all major violent and nonviolent campaigns aiming to overthrow a government or achieve territorial liberation from 1900 to 2006.
- **Key Findings:** [03:52] The data revealed that nonviolent campaigns were **twice as likely** to succeed outright as violent insurgencies, and this trend has grown over time.
- **The "3.5% Rule":** [04:30] No campaign failed once it achieved active and sustained participation from just **3.5% of the population**, and every single campaign that crossed this threshold was nonviolent.
- **Inclusivity & Participation:** [05:11] Nonviolent campaigns are typically four times larger and far more inclusive across age, gender, physical ability, and class because anyone can participate [05:27], whereas armed struggle is physically demanding and exclusive [05:55].
- **Safety in Numbers:** [06:28] The high visibility of civil resistance tactics draws in risk-averse people, helping build critical mass [07:17]. When massive crowds mobilize, it often fractures regime loyalty as security forces and elites refuse to fire on friends, family, and neighbors [07:41].
- **Long-Term Outcomes:** [09:18] Countries that used nonviolent resistance were significantly more likely to emerge with democratic institutions and were 15% less likely to relapse into civil war.

Some major historical successes of non-violence protests (suggested by ChatGPT):

Indian independence movement (1919–1947) – often cited as the key example

Under Mahatma Gandhi and many other leaders and organisers, campaigns such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Salt March of 1930, and the Quit India Movement of 1942 mobilised millions. Boycotts, marches, refusal to cooperate with colonial institutions, and civil disobedience increased the political and administrative costs of British rule. Independence in 1947 had multiple causes—including wartime changes and wider political developments—so it should not be attributed to non-violence alone.

A critical examination of Gandhi's civil disobedience strategy is given here by [Tad Stoermer](#) 2025. Stoermer argues that Gandhi's campaign of non-violence was actually a decades-long movement, often deliberately provoking violence by the British, who were then shamed by international public opinion.

Women's suffrage movements

Across several countries, campaigners used marches, petitions, civil disobedience, hunger strikes, and public demonstrations to demand voting rights. Strategies and outcomes varied by country, and some campaigns also included militant tactics. Sustained mobilisation helped secure women's suffrage in stages, including in New Zealand (1893), the United Kingdom (with important extensions in 1918 and equal voting terms in 1928), and the United States (1920).

The US civil rights movement (especially the 1950s–1960s)

The Montgomery bus boycott (1955–1956), sit-ins, freedom rides, mass marches, and campaigns in Birmingham and Selma helped challenge racial segregation and disenfranchisement. The movement contributed to landmark federal legislation, notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It combined non-violent direct action with litigation, community organising, and political pressure.

Poland's Solidarity movement (1980s)

Independent trade union organising, strikes, underground publishing, and civil resistance challenged communist rule. After repression and martial law, Solidarity survived as a social movement and negotiated political change. The 1989 Round Table talks and partially free elections helped initiate Poland's transition away from one-party rule.

People Power in the Philippines (1986)

Mass demonstrations, defections within the armed forces, religious and civic mobilisation, and non-cooperation helped force Ferdinand Marcos from power. The uprising demonstrated how a broad coalition could weaken an authoritarian government without a conventional armed insurrection, although institutional and democratic problems persisted afterward.

East Germany and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)

Peaceful demonstrations, especially the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, grew in size and helped expose the government's loss of legitimacy. Public protest interacted with emigration, political changes elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and divisions within the regime. The Berlin Wall opened on 9 November 1989.

The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia (1989)

Student demonstrations, mass rallies, strikes, and broad civic mobilisation rapidly undermined the Communist government. The movement's largely non-violent character helped make a negotiated transition possible, and the Communist monopoly on power ended by the end of 1989.

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Serbia's Otpor! movement and the fall of Milošević (2000)

Student activists and a wider opposition movement used disciplined non-violent resistance, humour, mobilisation, and election monitoring. Mass protests following the disputed September 2000 election helped prevent the regime from overturning the result and contributed to Slobodan Milošević's departure from power.

WHY NON-VIOLENT MOVEMENTS SUCCEED

- Broad-based participation: movements become harder to isolate when they involve people across social groups, regions, and professions.
- Strategic discipline: a clear commitment to non-violent methods can help preserve public support and make repression more costly for authorities.
- Disruption and non-cooperation: strikes, boycotts, and refusal to comply can undermine the normal functioning of institutions without requiring armed force.
- Organisation and persistence: local networks, leadership, communications, and the capacity to adapt are often crucial.
- Shifts in loyalty: success becomes more likely when civil servants, business groups, the media, or security personnel withdraw support from the authorities.
- Political opportunities: elections, elite divisions, economic crises, international pressure, or changes in the wider geopolitical environment can open a path to change.

LIMITS, FAILURES, AND QUALIFICATIONS

Non-violent action does not always succeed, and it can be met with imprisonment, violence, censorship, or long periods of stalemate. Some movements have been defeated; others have won a formal concession without securing lasting equality or democratic institutions. Repression may also be severe even when a movement ultimately succeeds.

It is also misleading to describe major historical changes as the product of a single method or leader. In India, South Africa, and the United States, non-violent mobilisation interacted with legal challenges, electoral politics, international developments, economic pressure, and—in some cases—other forms of resistance. Historical outcomes usually have multiple causes.