

Protesting in 'hard times': Evidence from a comparative analysis of Europe, 2000–2014

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Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate that during an economic crisis political protest increases. Recently, the economic performance has suddenly worsened in Europe after a period of relative prosperity. The economic crisis affects citizens, who may turn to political protest to voice their discontent. However, the literature on social movements has often dismissed the link between economic performance and political protest, arguing that dissatisfaction is not sufficient for mobilization. Despite this argument, in the wake of the 'Great recession' that hit Europe, some scholars have argued that the economic crisis has been one of the factors in the mobilization of political protest. Nonetheless, a broad assessment of the link between the economic crisis and political protest has yet to be carried out. Based on a comparative longitudinal analysis of 25 European countries between 2000 and 2014, this article complements recent publications on the topic, and shows that economic performance, measured using both objective and subjective indicators, has a strong association with the number of political protests. The literature on the topic has not always presented conclusive results on this association. In contrast, this article provides updated and clear findings showing that the state of the economy matters for mobilization.

Key words: Political protest; Economic crisis; Economic performance; Protest event analysis; Europe.

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Introduction

The recent wave of mobilization in many European countries calls for a renewed interest in the relationship between the economy and protest. Various movements have emerged during the last economic crisis to protest against the rise in unemployment and prices, budgetary cuts, and in general against the worsening of the economic situation. During this time, governments have been under deep stress. Several cabinets have fallen, leaders have lost their appeal, traditional parties have come under attack for being irresponsible, and new populist parties have been born and attracted many voters. In brief, trust has been lost in democratic institutions, given their inability to cope with the crisis (Bartels and Bermeo, 2014; Kriesi, 2014). Although the argument linking economic conditions and the emergence of popular protest is not new in the literature, evidence on this relationship is not conclusive (see van Stekelemburg and Klandermands, 2013). For this reason, this article aims to demonstrate that a worsening of the economy is associated with more protest.

In modern democracies, citizens expect the political system to provide for reasonable standards of living, as the notion of democracy often overlaps with the idea that such systems are able to guarantee affluence and prosperity (Thomassen, 1989). Of course, economic downturns cannot explain protests alone. Nevertheless, the role of changing economic conditions should not be discounted. The recent crisis was ‘unexpected’: it hit European economies suddenly and violently after a period of security. Just before the Eurozone crisis, unemployment was around 8% on average, GDP growth was about 3%, and these figures were even lower and higher respectively in economies that were dubbed the ‘Spanish economic miracle’ or the ‘Celtic tiger’ (see Armingeon and Baccaro, 2012). European democracies had been guaranteeing relatively high levels of wealth, which rapidly worsened with the coming of the economic crisis (Di Meglio, 2013).

This article holds that economic crises favor mobilization. There is some evidence regarding the relationship between economic conditions and protest present in the literature. However, very few studies have taken a comparative approach to this issue. Early research already underlined that changes in countries’ economies, such as changes in consumer prices, growth and general national economic performance, might be factors in protest (Gurr, 1968; 1970). A worsening of the economic situation has consequences for individuals, who may engage in protest to voice their discontent (see Tejerina et al., 2013). Changing economic conditions have an effect on citizens’ lives and threaten their security, especially when conditions change abruptly. An economic crisis means rising prices and unemployment, and lack of growth, which in turn mean that citizens have less disposable income and have less capacity to provide for themselves. As Langman argues, ‘when people find themselves facing sudden economic reversals [...], when they feel marginalized as either workers without work or underemployed and/or politically

powerless, they experience “moral shock” and are likely to be angry, frustrated, indignant, anxious about the future, and impelled to seek amelioration’ (2013: 514).

By using a cross-national and longitudinal dataset, this article finds that economic conditions matter for protest. Few studies have systematically related economic cycles to the emergence of protest using a comparative perspective. Recent studies have focused on specific countries (see Bensi et al., 2013), providing valuable theoretical and empirical insights into the possible relationship between protest and the economy, but do not allow their results to be generalized. Instead, a comparative approach enables broader findings that are not dependent on time contingencies or contexts. The article reviews the debate linking the economy and protest and provides fresh empirical evidence about this long-studied association. Indeed, it is hard to find studies that cover multiple countries across a relatively long period of time. Tracking protest before and after the 2008 crisis provides the opportunity to have an ideal ‘pre-post look’ at how the economy may matter. The data used have the advantage of being the only updated and freely available source following protest events for a large number of countries. Other freely available datasets contain similar information but they have a limited time range that does not cover the years of the recent crisis. Moreover, they are limited in the countries covered. In addition, this article does not simply describe the trends in protest, as much of research on protest events has done, but it uses multivariate analysis testing the association between protest and the economy, while controlling for other confounding factors (see Hutter, 2014b). In the end, this article adds new evidence that can be of interest to social movements scholars and to the general scholarship analyzing the consequences of the economic crisis in Europe.

Protest and the economy: an overview

Since the early 1960s, deprivation and grievances have been considered factors in popular protest. The argument is that protest is the means by which individuals express their feelings of frustration, injustice, and dissatisfaction. When citizens perceive ‘deprivation’, they engage in protest actions to demand a change in the people in power. This argument rests on a psychological mechanism: when expectations about individual or group conditions are not met, discontent and anger spread, acting as stimuli motivating protest. Thus, the greater the deprivation, the more likely it is that protest will occur (Gurr, 1968; 1970). This approach sees protest as instrumental, as it aims to influence the social and political context (Klandermans, 2004).

Several studies have attempted to show that economic changes are associated with protest, with different degrees of success. Davies (1962) argues that social unrest might occur when the population’s aspirations and expectations are not satisfied by the political and economic system, and in particular when after a period of economic affluence the situation changes rapidly. Barnes, Farah and Heunks (1979) link individuals’ assessments

of their own economic situation to protest, finding a weak correlation between the two. Isaac, Mutran and Stryker (1980), studying the orientations towards protest of black and white citizens in the US, find that the deprivation hypothesis seems to hold, but only for black citizens. Kerbo and Shaffer (1986) argue that previous attempts to prove a relationship between economic hardship and protest are flawed by methodological and conceptual issues. They show that mobilizations originating around specific issues, such as unemployment, are indeed related to the emergence of protest in the United States. In a later article, they maintain that unemployment produces hardship but that this is not sufficient to lead to significant protest (Kerbo and Shaffer, 1992). Thomassen (1989) develops a model linking economic crisis to protest. Crises, he argues, widen the gap between what citizens want and what they actually get, providing the basis for mobilization. However, data for Germany, the Netherlands and the United States do not support the hypothesis that economic hardships lead to protest. Opp (2000), studying East Germany, finds that personal living conditions, in particular the housing and financial situation, may constitute incentives for engagement in protest. Dalton, van Sickle and Weldon (2010) also use the grievance theory to explain cross-national variation in protest participation, among other factors. They show that forms of personal dissatisfaction, often stemming from the state of the economy, are associated with the likelihood of joining protest activities. Brancati (2014) shows that when the economic performance of countries declines pro-democracy protests emerge in less democratic states. When these are not able to ensure satisfactory levels of affluence, the population asks for a regime change. Hutter (2014a) argues that globalization produces a new cleavage and, in turn, conflict over economic, cultural and political issues. Citizens who lose out from globalization because they do not take advantage of the transformations it brings – neo-liberal reforms opening markets to international competition – are those who are likely to protest to express opposition to such processes. However, despite the increase in the level of globalization in Western Europe, it seems that protest regarding economic issues is far less salient over time than protest regarding cultural issues. It is also argued that in a period of economic crisis, citizens call for change using an extra-representative form of participation – protest – without necessarily waiting for the next electoral cycle (Kriesi, 2014). In brief, protests are more likely when the economy is bad or when it suddenly changes.

Other recent studies provide additional evidence of the link between economics and protest in Europe. Beissinger, Sasse and Straif (2014) explore how protest has changed during the recent 'Great recession' in post-communist European countries. They indicate that in this area the economy contracted notably. They argue that the citizens of post-communist countries were 'patient' after their transitions to democracy, despite their expectations of economic improvement not being met. However, the recent economic crisis appears to have produced a response in terms of protest in the area. In their analysis

of 18 countries between 2007 and 2010, economic growth has a significant and negative association with protest. Diani and Kousis (2014) show that in Greece between 2010 and 2012 protests were mobilized in opposition to austerity measures and were mainly led by unions. Protest further increased when other actors, such as radical left parties, entered the process. In the end, the authors argue that 'there is no doubt that the roots of the campaign lay in the massive and sudden depletion of economic and social rights and wellbeing that Greek working and middle class citizens have suffered as a consequence of "readjustment" policies, and that economic factors have mattered' (Diani and Kousis, 2014: 401, emphasis added). Therefore, protest can be seen as a consequence of a suddenly changed situation, which forces citizens to cope with new, yet worse, living standards. Other scholars have also used Greece to show how a recession can lead to mobilization. It has been argued that in Greece the 'objective conditions for social turmoil were all there' (Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013: 445). The announcement of the 'austerity packages' by the 'Troika' led to the first gatherings in Athens in 2010, followed by general strikes, blockades, rallies and clashes with the police (Psimitis, 2011; Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013). Others show that personal economic deprivation and feelings of injustice are factors relevant to protest in Greece (see Rüdig and Karyotis, 2014). Studies on two other southern European countries offer similar findings on the relationship between the economic crisis and protest. It is argued that the international financial crisis spurred protests in Spain. The Indignados movement started organizing demonstrations from May 2011 to express discontent over the economic situation (Perugorría and Tejerina, 2013). In Portugal, rapidly worsening economic conditions led several institutional organizations to ally with independent movements to protest against the government's policies and the rising unemployment rates (Baumgarten, 2013).

Although this may seem compelling evidence, the link between the economy and protest has often been challenged. It has been argued that protest is not a product of social tensions, e.g. changing economic conditions, deprivation, or frustration, but of other factors. Discontent, per se, is not sufficient for mobilization, as it is always present in societies (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Of course, the link between economic hardship and protest should not be seen in a deterministic way, but it should be acknowledged that other elements too, like interests, group solidarity, resources, political opportunities and the political context, can be at play (see Kriesi et al., 1995; Edwards and McCarthy, 2004). What emerges from the literature, however, is a broad dismissal of the approaches linking social strains and protest (see Buechler, 2004).

Not looking at the conditions that produce discontent – e.g. the economic crisis – might hinder interpretation of the recent protests. It is undoubtedly true that discontent is always present, but some contextual conditions, in this case a very deep and widespread economic crisis, could make this factor more salient. The recent economic downturn was sudden and it affected large parts of the European populations, not only those who are

at the margins of society. To cite just a few figures, in 2007 there were about 17 million unemployed in the member countries of the European Union, while the figure grew to about 26 million in 2013 (European Commission, 2014a). This means that about 9 million individuals exited the labor market. It is evident that much more discontent can now be potentially present in Europe than in the past. The recent economic downturn was 'exceptional' in these terms, and may have produced 'exceptional' discontent. For this reason, it is argued that the link between the economy and protest should be re-evaluated. It may be expected that economic crisis provides the grounds for mobilization, especially when economic conditions change rapidly. Protest can be seen as a form of reaction when citizens perceive institutions as not being receptive (see Tejerina et al., 2013). Thus, it is expected that the (positive) state of the economy will be (negatively) associated with protest in Europe.

Research design

Sample

The claim that economic conditions affect protest is tested using a cross-sectional time-series dataset made up of 25 European countries with repeated observations from 2000 to 2014. The observations are thus 375 country-years. The time range analyzed allows the economic conditions both before and after the crisis to be looked at, ensuring variation in the data.¹ The choice of countries also guarantees variation in the institutional settings allowing other relevant confounding factors to be controlled for.

Dependent variables

Measuring protest has always been difficult. One strategy used employs newspaper data. However, the main criticisms of this approach are that such data suffer from selection bias – i.e. not all protest events are reported – and description bias – i.e. the reports may not be accurate (Earl et al., 2004; Ortiz et al. 2005). A possible solution to these issues is enlarging the coverage by using multiple news sources (see Earl et al., 2004).²

This article uses the Global Dataset on Events, Locations and Tone (GDELT, 2015), which machine-codes events from a number of news reports that are publicly available.³ It

¹The countries are: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

²Ortiz et al. (2005) disagree with this strategy arguing that it does not necessarily provide a benefit to the data. However, they discuss specific cases involving US newspapers, such as the Times, the New York Times or the Washington Post. They admit that using electronic media sources can be a viable strategy.

³Unfortunately, a deep discussion on the coding procedures and sources used by the GDELT cannot be done here due to space limitations. Detailed information can be found on the GDELT website, at

uses information on everyday events and it relies on various independent texts, reducing potential bias.⁴ The coding is performed by an open-source program, TABARI, which is able to identify the 'who', 'what', 'to whom' and 'where' of events by aggregating multiple news reports into one event. The GDELT uses twenty categories of events based on the Conflict and Mediation Event Observations (CAMEO) framework (Gerner et al., 2002).⁵ One of these categories is protest.

The dependent variable, labeled All protests, is the count for each year of all events classified as protests, that is the 'what', in each European country, that is the 'where'. These events are: demonstrations, defined as 'dissent collectively, publicly show negative feelings or opinions'; rallies, defined as to 'gather to protest a policy, action, or actor(s)'; strikes or boycotts, defined as to 'protest by refusing to work or cooperate until certain demands are met'; blocks, defined as to 'protest by blocking entry and/or exit from a building or area'; and riots, defined as to 'protest forcefully, in a potentially destructive manner'.⁶ The dependent variable selects only protests started by civilians, the opposition, labor organizations, the media, and non-governmental and human rights organizations to make sure that protest events are initiated by civil society actors. This selection identifies the 'who'.

This study also uses another dependent variable, labeled Anti-government protests, which only takes into account protests targeting the government, i.e. the executive, governing parties, coalition partners or the executive divisions. By doing this, the variable identifies to 'whom' the actions were addressed. This dependent variable specifically tests whether mass mobilizations targeting the government are driven differently by the state of the economy.

The dependent variables, being counts of protest events, aim to measure the frequency of protest in each country basically providing an indication about how often citizens mobilize. Therefore, this measure is suited to test whether with a change in the economic conditions the 'volume' of protest changes as well, i.e. citizens mobilize more likely.

It should be born in mind, however, that this is not a perfect measure. It could be possible that this measure does not take into account the 'size' of protest events, the 'intensity', the 'conflict', or the 'duration', to cite a few other aspects. Nevertheless, using the number of protest is a very popular measure in the field (see, among many, Kriesi

the documentation section: <http://gdeltproject.org/data.html#documentation>. Furthermore, for a discussion of its reliability and comparison with other datasets see Leetaru and Schrodt (2013).

⁴Studies on protest events often rely on the Monday editions of newspapers, which might lead to a biased selection (see Hutter, 2014a).

⁵The GDELT uses all the international news coverage from AfricaNews, Agence France Presse, Associated Press Online, Associated Press Worldstream, BBC Monitoring, Christian Science Monitor, Facts on File, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, United Press International, the Washington Post, the New York Times, and all the national and international news from Google News.

⁶See the CAMEO codebook (Schrodt, 2012).

et al., 1995; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004; Soule and Earl, 2005; Jung, 2010; Hutter, 2014a; Murdie and Peksen, 2015; Yen-Pin, 2015). Being aware that this is not an ideal measure, in a separate analysis a different operationalization is used (see 'Further analyses'), which accounts for the number of 'mentions' protest events receive in the media. This should give an indication about the relevance of protest events, assuming that more important events receive broader news coverage. The two measures are, of course, similar as the number of mentions may reflect the number of events, but at the same time they do not measure the same thing: one accounts for the frequency of events, the other tries to account for how many times protest events are covered by the news.

This discussion about the dependent variables should also come with a 'warning'. The debate about the measurement of protest opens the issue of how good news data are. Here, the advantages and disadvantages of using news data are discussed to acknowledge that this is a sub-optimal, yet very useful, strategy to address measurement in protest analysis. News data have the advantage to be unobtrusive; to deal with large amount of information that can be accessed through automated procedures which expedites data collection; using multiple international news wires allows covering several countries and time ranges; it allows avoiding a 'day' bias given that the data used retrieve information from everyday news; it provides information about different protest events, as in this case; and it allows applying quantitative techniques of data analysis (see Earl et al., 2004; Hutter, 2014b). Of course, news data come with a cost. They might suffer from some problems – very difficult to solve – that should be acknowledged. A strategy to cope with these issues is, first of all, admitting that these data have limitations (see Ortiz et al., 2005). Besides suffering from potential selection bias, news data are subject to issues related to the logic of media systems. Media can be interested in covering specific events that are of interest to their audience; certain events might get attention for a limited time and can then disappear from the media; the political positioning of a newspaper might influence the way events are covered; the representation of events might not be correct or they might be over/under-reported (see Ortiz et al., 2005).

Thus, it should be clear that the data employed in this article are not flawless. Nevertheless, as Earl and colleagues argue: 'researchers must approach newspaper data with a humble understanding that although not without its flaws, it remains a useful data source' (see Earl et al., 2004: 77), as no better alternatives are available (Koopmans, 1995; Hutter, 2014a).

Independent variables

The key independent variables measure the objective and subjective state of the economy, to ensure that protest is actually a function of perceived economic conditions, as well as actual ones. On the one hand, what should matter for protest is the perception

that the economy is running badly (see Gurr, 1970). On the other hand, perceptual measures suffer from problems of endogeneity, as the occurrence of protest may influence a perception that the economy actually is in a bad state (see Duch and Stevens, 2008). Therefore, also using objective economic indicators that do not suffer from this problem has been suggested.

The first variable is the 'Economic Performance Index' (EPI) (Khramov and Lee, 2013), a composite weighted index providing a parsimonious measure gauging how an economy runs and its deviations from the desired levels. The index accounts for objective economic factors that have direct effects on three important segments of society – firms, households and governments. It accounts for inflation, unemployment, deficit and growth,⁷ and avoids collinearity among macro-economic indicators that are likely to be dependent on each other. When the index is above 95, economic performance is 'excellent', above 90 is 'good', above 80 is 'fair', above 60 is 'poor', and below 60 is 'bad'.

The second variable is a subjective measure: the 'Consumer Confidence Indicator' (CCI), providing a general assessment of citizens' perceptions of the economic situation. It parsimoniously summarizes perceptions about different characteristics of the economy, and is made of four sub-indicators: household financial situations, the general state of the economy, employment, and savings expectations (European Commission, 2014b). It is also a prospective measure and allows evaluation of whether expectations matter for protest. The indicator ranges from -100 – all respondents have negative opinions about the economy – to +100 – all respondents have positive opinions.

Alternative factors

As discussed, the economy has not been considered a sufficient factor to explain protest. This section briefly reviews some of the alternative factors that could confound the relationship between economic conditions and protest.⁸

Opportunity structure. It has been widely argued that political systems determine the 'opportunity structure' for protest (Kriesi et al., 1995). The degrees of decentralization and separation of powers matter for protest, as they define the points of access to the political system. A centralized system increases the costs of protest, while a decentralized one reduces them as it implies a higher number of state actors, multiple points of access to

⁷Inflation is measured as the annual percentage change in average consumer prices; unemployment is measured as the number of unemployed persons as a percentage of the labour force; deficit is measured as government revenue minus total expenditure as a percentage of GDP; growth is measured as the annual percentage change in GDP. See Khramov and Lee (2013) for details on the construction of the index.

⁸Unfortunately, it is not possible to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of these variables in depth. See Edwards and McCarthy (2004), Kriesi (2004), and Della Porta and Diani (2006) for overviews on other factors of protest.

the political system and it reduces the capacity the state has to act (Kriesi et al., 1995). Similarly, power-sharing between and within institutions modify formal access to the political system and state capacity. Therefore, the models include two dummy variables distinguishing between unitary vs. non-unitary states and states with bicameral vs. unitary parliaments.

Parliamentary arena. The parliamentary arena also matters to define the opportunities for protest. The proportionality of the electoral law and representation thresholds determine the patterns of competition between established parties and potential challengers, who can ally with social movements (Kriesi et al., 1995). To control for the degree of disproportionality of the electoral law, the models include the 'least squares index' (Gallagher, 1991). The number of parties also influences the access to the system, as movements are more likely to find allies where parties are numerous (Kriesi et al., 1995). Conversely, a high number of parties may complicate the system's ability to act, leading to more protest (Arce, 2010). Therefore, the models include the effective number of parties, computed using seats (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).⁹

It has been argued that a strong left may help the mobilization of movements as they can find allies to promote their issues (Tarrow, 1998). However, a strong left may reduce protest, as movements' demands can be more easily addressed within the legislature (Jung, 2010). Therefore, the models account for the strength of the left – i.e. social-democratic and communist parties – and the 'new' left – i.e. green parties – in the parliament as the percentage of seats held by such parties.

It is also argued that the larger the opposition camp the more likely it is to try to mobilize citizens to change the current political situation (Kriesi et al., 1995). Thus, the models include the percentage of seats held by parties in opposition. At the same time, a large opposition may not be a source of mobilization if it is divided. A united opposition made up of few parties is more conducive to protest, as it is easier for social movements to identify possible allies (Rucht, 2004). Accordingly, the models include an indicator of opposition unity (Meada, 2010).

Resources. Others argue that protest is often the product of the resources present in a context (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In particular, material resources are argued to be quite important for social movements (see Edwards and McCarthy, 2004). Comparative

⁹The polarization of political elites might also have a role in the mobilization of protest. Highly polarized political systems can in fact exacerbate conflict and mobilize citizens along the class cleavage (see Kriesi et al., 1995). Despite its relevance, this variable could not be included in the analysis as for Latvia the party manifestos data (Volkens et al., 2015), necessary to build a measure of party system polarization (Dalton 2008), are not available after 2002. Nevertheless, this variable was used in a different analysis excluding Latvia, which presented very similar results to those presented here.

research has shown that general wealth is correlated with protest, meaning that richer contexts provide more opportunities for mobilization (Dalton, van Sickle and Weldon, 2010). Therefore, the models control for GDP per capita (logged).

Another argument underlines the importance of inequality. In highly unequal contexts, poor citizens can easily compare their personal situation with that of well-off citizens and the difference can become more evident when inequality grows across time. Growing inequality, in fact, means an increase in the relative power of the more affluent and contradicts a fundamental democratic principle (see Solt, 2008). As a consequence, when inequality grows protest may increase. This point is also confirmed by the recent waves of mobilization, as one of the protest claims has concerned the unequal income distribution in contemporary democracies, which is seen as unjust and unfair (Langman, 2013). Therefore, the models control for the Gini Index, measuring the income distribution.

Electoral cycle. Protest may increase during an election year, as issues coming from mobilizations are more likely to be heard during an election campaign (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). Thus, the models control for whether a parliamentary election was held in each year by including a dummy variable. They also include a dummy variable indicating a post-election year. Protest may increase after an election year, as citizens wait for the government to fulfill promises it made during the election campaign (Yen-Pin, 2015).

Other controls. As the dependent variables count protest events, larger countries have more protests and are exposed to wider media attention. Therefore, the models control for population (logged). To account for area-specific effects, the models include the following dummy variables: Eastern (as reference category), Continental, Southern, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon countries. These should single out potential unobserved factors due to geographical proximity, modes of state organization, e.g. welfare states providing different social security nets, and historical, cultural and political legacies.¹⁰ The descriptive statistics and data sources are reported in Table A1 in the appendix.¹¹

Models

As the dependent variable counts the number of protests for each year in the 25 European countries, negative binomial regression is used. This model accounts for overdispersion, given that the variances of the dependent variables are much larger than their means (Cameron and Trivedi, 1998). The models use Huber-White robust standard errors to control for potential heteroskedasticity and do not include country dummies,

¹⁰A recent study dealing with a similar subject uses the same strategy to control for unobserved regional effects (see Murdie and Peksen, 2015). Omitting the area dummies produces similar estimates.

¹¹A few missing values in the Consumer Confidence Indicator (n = 11) and the Gini Index (n = 10) were replaced using linear interpolation.

as the series is larger than the number of countries. Using country dummies would also absorb cross-national variation, impede the inclusion of theoretically important time-invariant predictors, and would make the inclusion of slowly changing predictors, such as GDP per capita or population, troublesome (Beck, 2001; Plümper, Troeger and Manow, 2005).

All the models control for the number of past protests (one-year lagged) to account for the effect that the previous year may have on the following, to capture the potential effect of unobservable predictors, to model protest as a dynamic phenomenon, and to control for auto-correlation (Greene, 2008). To limit endogeneity or simultaneity issues, the time-varying predictors are included in the models with one-year lags.

Results

Table 1 reports the models predicting the number of protests in the selected European countries from 2000 to 2014 using both dependent variables. The independent variables of interest are included in the models separately, along with the control variables. Indeed, they are quite correlated with each other ($\rho = 0.695$, $p < 0.000$), showing a clear overlap. This means that actually perceptions about the economy may reflect the objective conditions. To avoid collinearity, the models include these indicators one at a time.¹²

Model 1 shows that as the EPI increases by one point the log of all protest events is expected to decrease by 0.025 ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that objective performance in the previous year has a strong association with the number of all protests in Europe. The following model, instead, includes the CCI providing a subjective average assessment of the economy in a country. Also in this case the estimate shows that when the CCI increases by one point, the log of protest events decreases by 0.022 ($p < 0.010$). These two models certainly provide a first confirmation that the economic situation indeed matters for protest events. In fact, both the objective and subjective indicators measuring the economy show that when economic conditions improve protest declines substantially (see Gurr, 1968; 1970).

Table 1 also reports the estimates from the models predicting the number of anti-government protests. As with the previous models, the state of the economy, whether objective or subjective, is associated with anti-government protests. Model 3 shows that when the EPI increases by one point, the log of the number of anti-government protests decreases by 0.030 ($p < 0.010$). Likewise, when the CCI grows, the log of the number of anti-government protests diminishes by 0.025 ($p < 0.001$).

Graphic representation of the association between the economy and the number of protests may clarify its size. Figure 1 illustrates how the expected number of all protests

¹²The models are tested for the presence of multicollinearity, which is not found.

and anti-government protests changes along the ranges of the EPI and the CCI. The top left-hand panel shows that in a country where the economic performance is 'bad' (below 60), such as Romania around 2000, and Spain and Greece around 2011-12, the number of all protests is between 120 and 180. When economic performance is 'poor' (between 60 and 80), the expected number of protests ranges between 110 and 60. Instead, in countries where economic performance is 'good' (above 90), as in Finland, Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands up to 2008, the expected number of protests is less than 50. In highly performing countries the number of protests is about 30. This implies that the difference in the number of protests between a country where the economy is performing well and a country where the economy is performing poorly is larger than 150. Hence, protest is about 6 times more likely in countries where economic performance is poor.

Similar considerations apply for the CCI. When the perception of the economy is at its minimum – about 15% of citizens evaluate the economy as good – for instance in Greece in the midst of the economic crisis and austerity measures (2011–12), the number of protests is around 200. This falls to about 90 when about 30% of citizens evaluate the economy as good, and to about 40 when those evaluating the economy as bad are as numerous as those evaluating it as good. The number is expected to be about 25 where the economy is perceived to be doing well – about 60% of citizens evaluate the economy as good – for instance in Sweden or Finland before 2008 and after 2012. Therefore, protest is almost 9 times more frequent where the economy is evaluated as bad with respect to countries where it is evaluated as good.

The bottom panels tell the same story for the number of anti-government protests. The left-hand panel indicates that when the EPI is at its minimum the number of anti-government protests is expected to be about 30, while it is expected to be about 3 when it is at its maximum, which means that in bad times anti-government protests are 10 times more likely. Likewise, when the CCI is very low the number of anti-government protests is expected to be about 31, but about 3 when the CCI is very high.

The models clearly indicate that the status of the economy is very relevant to predicting protest in European countries, in contrast to the literature stating that protest is not the outcome of a worsening of economic conditions, but of contextual or political conditions. In fact, almost all the control variables included in the models appear to not be associated with either the number of all or anti-government protests. Thus, a bad economy fosters protests, whether generic or targeting the government. This may indicate that an economic downturn creates discontent, as citizens' expectations are not met (see Thomassen, 1989). Recent movements can be defined as 'movements of crisis', as they stem from acute changes in economic conditions and disrupt everyday life (Kerbo, 1982).

The models in Table 1 show that a few seem to be significant predictors. The variables that are more commonly associated with the number of protests are the bicameral parliament dummy, indicating that in bicameral systems protest is less likely; the op-

position size, suggesting that where the opposition is larger protest is more frequent; opposition unity, indicating that protest actions are more frequent when the opposition is not fragmented into several parties; the post-election dummy variable, which says that in the year after the elections protests are more possible; and the log of GDP per capita, which demonstrates that in wealthier contexts, where more resources are available, protest occurs more frequently. The population size is associated with the number of protests. This is not surprising, as the dependent variable counts the absolute number of protests in Europe, and thus larger countries are more likely to experience protest events. Finally, holding the other variables constant, it appears that in Eastern European countries there are more protests compared to the other areas.

Further analysis

This section describes some further analyses demonstrating the robustness of the results. One source of bias could be the presence of influential cases. For instance, Greece was dramatically hit by the economic crisis and its presence in the sample may affect the results. Therefore, the models were run using a modification of the *jackknife* re-sampling technique, which consists of excluding each country from the sample one at a time and checking whether removing the country affects the estimates. Even though the sample size shrinks due the exclusion of the countries, the coefficients of the variables of interest are still significant. Removing the countries that suffered heavily in the economic crisis, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, or countries with generally lower levels of economic performance, such as Romania and Bulgaria, does not affect the results. As mentioned above, another series of models is run using a slightly different measurement of the dependent variables. Instead, of using the count of protest events for each year, as dependent variables the models use the count of ‘mentions’ that the protest events received in the news. The results indicate that the economy variables are negatively associated with these alternative dependent variables too.

Austerity has also been deemed a factor in mobilization (Benski et al., 2013; Langman, 2013). Therefore, it is worth also testing whether budget constraints are associated with protest. As the cyclically adjusted budget is the reference measure for the EU budget deficit regulations, its year-to-year change can be considered a proxy of austerity measures, given that countries with negative balances have to cut their budgets to reduce the deficit (see Monastiriotes et al., 2013). This measure is positively associated with the two dependent variables, but only significantly with the number of anti-government protests. This may mean that austerity measures mainly mobilize protests targeting the government as a possible means of influencing its decisions, and not just general expressions of dissatisfaction. Finally, the models were run using a standard country fixed-effects specification, excluding the time-invariant predictors. The results are not

substantially different from those presented above.

Conclusion

Looking for an explanation of the recent wave of mobilizations in Europe, this article has attempted to link economic trends to protests, despite this argument often having been challenged. However, the latest studies focusing on movements arising in the years of the recent economic crisis have shown that most of the claims made have concerned economic issues. For this reason, 'the wave of protests requires us to "bring political economy back in"' (Tejerina et al., 2013: 381). By applying a longitudinal and comparative approach combined with the use of recent data, the analyses have demonstrated that a relationship exists between objective economic conditions and subjective economic evaluations, and the number of all and anti-government protests, and that this association is robust. The measure of austerity used in an additional analysis was only partially found to be associated with protest. It should be noted that the state of the general economy and austerity measures go hand in hand. Hence, it is not trivial to disentangle their effects.

It could be argued that at the heart of the various mobilizations there is discontent, originating from the worsening of economies in Europe, which has had a tangible impact on citizens' lives. Citizens mobilize during an economic crisis in response to a 'threat' (see Almeida, 2011). They protest to defend themselves from the bad consequences of worsening economic conditions. In Europe, many people lost their jobs, their houses and their benefits; they saw their businesses being shut down, their pensions or salaries being frozen or reduced, and taxes being increased. In this light, protest can be a way to express opposition to the current state of affairs. Indeed, the economic downturn revealed the weaknesses of political systems and this brought a 'crisis of legitimacy': 'economic crises [...] that create unemployment or underemployment, sudden price hikes and/or shortages [...] retrenchments of entitlements, and so on, that threaten survival or maintenance of living standards, or social status, undermine the legitimacy of political leadership and legitimating ideologies' (Benski and Langman, 2013: 529–530). This is a somewhat important point to note. The economic crisis should not be seen as the only factor in protest; there are many elements that should not be left out of the picture. Political factors should also be taken into account (see Kriesi, 2014). In this study other features have also been considered as potential factors confounding the relationship between the economy and protests. However, the models have shown that these factors have a negligible association with protest.

Of course, this article leaves some questions open. One of these concerns the social composition of the protestors. In fact, it has been argued that various social groups have allied together in the recent wave of mobilization. Other questions relate to ideology and identity, networks of collective action, and transnationalization of protest (see Benski et

al., 2013). Concerning these latter points, it should be mentioned that it has not been possible in this analysis to control for contagion or imitation across different contexts, i.e. Galton's problem, or to control for other exogenous factors. It is known, in fact, that citizens mobilize in networks and these often go beyond national borders, especially when two countries are geographically and culturally close (see Della Porta and Diani, 2006: 186-188). A partial solution to this issue was attempted by including area dummies in the models to control for geographical and cultural proximity. Another unsolved question regards the generalizability of the present findings to other areas of the world. It could be possible that in different contexts – be they developing economies, less democratic states or hybrid regimes – the association between the economy and protest might be different (see Brancati, 2014). Therefore, a next step in this research could be to expand this work to many other countries to test whether protest indeed increases when the economy becomes unsatisfactory in the eyes of citizens. Another point to improve is the quality of protest event data, which have some limitations (Earl et al., 2004; Ortiz et al. 2005). Unfortunately, these issues could not be directly addressed here. Future comparative research should try to bring such elements into the picture. In the end, the goal of this article has been to understand whether citizens turn to protest in 'hard times'. This indirectly allows answering this question: do protests end when the economy is back on track? The findings suggest that protest is less frequent when the economy runs well.

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Table 1: Table 1: Negative binomial models predicting the number of all protests and anti-government protests in Europe, 2000–2014.

	<i>All protests</i>						<i>Anti-government protests</i>					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	coef.	s.e.	sig.	coef.	s.e.	sig.	coef.	s.e.	sig.	coef.	s.e.	sig.
Intercept	-3.711	1.302	**	-5.413	1.182	***	-6.337	2.062	**	-8.451	2.034	**
Economic Performance Index	-0.025	0.007	***				-0.030	0.010	**			
Consumer Confidence Indicator				-0.022	0.007	**				-0.025	0.011	***
Unitary state	0.104	0.189		-0.014	0.192		0.154	0.272		0.023	0.285	
Bicameral parliament	-0.673	0.188	***	-0.396	0.175	*	-0.588	0.293	*	-0.307	0.256	***
Least squares Index	0.004	0.010		-0.001	0.010		0.013	0.012		0.007	0.012	
Effective Number of Parties	-0.022	0.056		0.000	0.051		-0.002	0.095		0.022	0.088	
Strength of the left	-0.003	0.004		-0.004	0.004		-0.004	0.006		-0.005	0.006	
Opposition size	0.013	0.008	+	0.010	0.007		0.021	0.012	+	0.017	0.011	+
Opposition unity	-0.827	0.430	+	-0.516	0.382		-0.076	0.631		0.212	0.566	+
GDP per capita (log)	0.888	0.096	***	0.798	0.097	***	0.888	0.151	***	0.797	0.159	***
Gini Index	-0.014	0.021		-0.015	0.020		0.002	0.030		0.001	0.029	
Election year	0.159	0.142		0.180	0.138		0.254	0.210		0.237	0.202	
Post-election year	0.244	0.116	*	0.275	0.111	*	0.357	0.160	*	0.408	0.159	*
Population (log)	0.850	0.075	***	0.778	0.067	***	0.750	0.116	***	0.691	0.103	***
Area (r.c. Eastern):												
Continental	-0.745	0.253	**	-0.572	0.291	*	-0.842	0.372	*	-0.664	0.424	**
Southern	-0.704	0.237	**	-0.575	0.239	*	-0.984	0.340	**	-0.840	0.346	**
Scandinavian	-1.291	0.274	***	-0.581	0.401		-1.659	0.399	***	-0.872	0.572	***
Anglo-Saxon	-0.108	0.314		0.199	0.356		-0.531	0.392		-0.193	0.461	
Past all protests	0.002	0.000	***	0.002	0.000	***						
Past anti-government protests							0.013	0.002	***	0.012	0.002	***
AIC	3765.821			3755.058			2334.877			2325.712		
Deviance	418.224			418.616			427.491			429.488		
N	375			375			375			375		

Note: s.e. = Huber-White standard error; sig. = + $p < 0.100$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1: *The effect of the Economic Performance Index and the Consumer Confidence Indicator on the number of all protests and anti-government protests in Europe, 2000-2014, with 95% confidence intervals.*

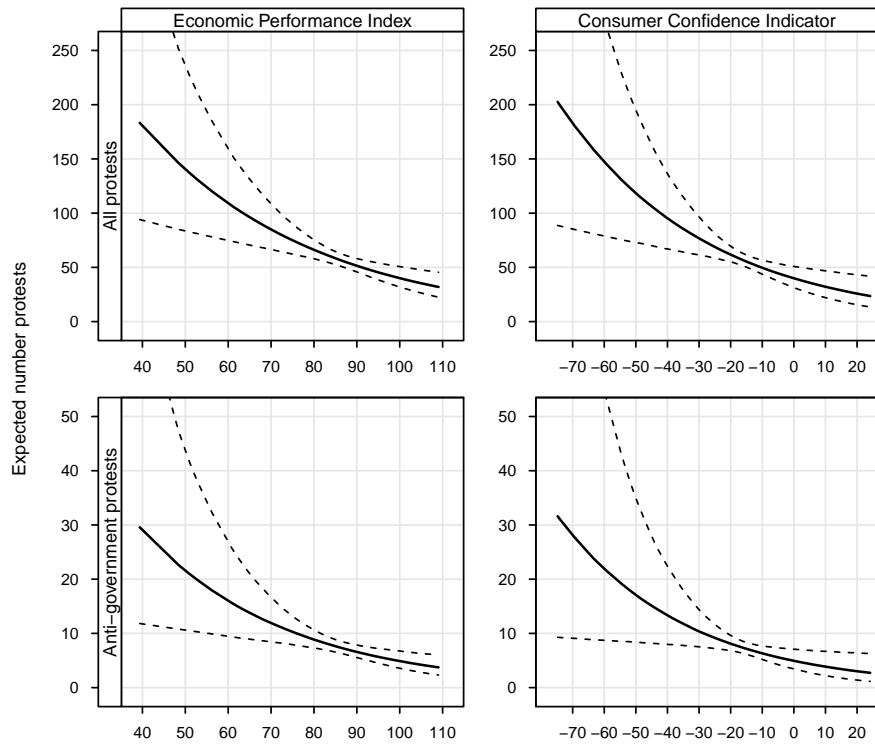


Table A1: *Descriptive statistics.*

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Source
All protests	127.360	254.972	0	1997	
Past all protests	112.067	230.042	0	1859	Elaboration on GDELT (2014)
Anti-government protests	14.077	28.647	0	212	
Past anti-government protests	12.589	26.781	0	212	
Economic Performance Index	87.610	9.549	39.378	109.044	
Consumer Confidence Indicator	-13.949	17.505	-74.750	24.158	European Commission (2014b)
Unitary state	0.600		0	1	Teorell et al. (2013)
Bicameral parliament	0.520		0	1	
Least-square Index	5.978	4.301	0.420	21.950	Gallagher (2014)
Effective Number of Parties	4.038	1.403	2.000	9.050	
Strength of the left	39.598	13.370	5.870	73.333	Elaboration on Döring and Manow (2014)
Opposition size	46.620	11.123	8.126	75.833	
Opposition unity	0.441	0.168	0.163	0.922	
GDP per capita	26923.769	19792.197	1586.436	112429.424	International Monetary Fund (2014)
Gini Index	29.296	4.046	20.645	36.716	Solt (2014)
Election year	0.264		0	1	International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2014)
Post-election year	0.264		0	1	
Population (in millions)	19.596	22.827	0.431	82.537	International Monetary Fund (2014)
Area:					
Eastern	0.400		0	1	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia
Continental	0.240		0	1	Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands
Southern	0.160		0	1	Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain
Scandinavian	0.120		0	1	Denmark, Finland, Sweden
Anglo-Saxon	0.080		0	1	Ireland, United Kingdom
N	375				