New Patterns of Protest in the Aftermath of Austerity Policies

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Abstract: The 2008 economic collapse has brought severe austerity to many European countries. As some governments have already paid the price at the polls for the persistently poor economic situation, citizens have also become equally active politically with demonstrations and other protest activities. The link between unconventionality and economic performance is not so clear cut and easy to assess. Countries in worse financial shape should register higher levels of protest, as the economy becomes a stronger variable in explaining why citizens act unconventionally. The two hypotheses tested with the use of European Social Survey data suggest that in the end the economic situation of an individual is not useful in predicting participation in protest activism, and even when a financial crisis corresponds to higher unconventionality among the population, the economy is not the real dependent variable behind it.

Keywords: Austerity, Protest, Europe, Public Opinion, Great Recession

Introduction: People and Austerity in Europe

The fall of 2008 marked the beginning of a severe economic downturn for many countries. Both established economies and developing nations suffered from the global financial crisis that crippled the economic system without discrimination. The initial collapse of financial markets and investments companies quickly led to slow growth, loss of wealth, increasing government debt and overall economic instability. Members of the Eurozone, in particular, struggled to maintain the minimum required criteria needed to satisfy their membership. The initial assessment of the crisis guided European governments towards austerity measures to stop the economic fall and support recovery. Political elites provided some financial aid to citizens hit by the crisis, although still opting for critical budget cuts, especially in social policies. As the austerity measures have continued for a few years, citizens in Europe have become more disillusioned about their country’s ability to solve the financial crisis and restore acceptable standards of living. The overall lack of success of many of the financial interventions and the ongoing disagreement between citizens and governments over the choices made has sparked an increased commitment to activism. People in Europe are now ready to use protest as a preferred means of political expression following the past few years of poor economic development and financial recession.

Scholars of activism and social movements have tried to assess whether the vocal and manifest unconventionality of European citizens could represent the development of a transnational, global action (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005) in response to the economic and political crises people have experienced (Mew, 2012; Fominaya and Cox, 2013). As a potential motivating factor for protest, economic suffering represents a form of deprivation people will endure when unable to financially provide for themselves or their families (for instance due to unemployment or a low paid job position). Gurr (1970) claimed that deprivation leads to grievances, which are responsible for the choice of political action. Conventional political participation (i.e. voting, contacting a politician, working for a political campaign, etc…) represents the initial attempt of activism by many citizens. Yet, when deprivation and anger appear, unconventionality becomes more likely, due to a sense of despair and lack of confidence in the political system’s readiness to hear citizens out. From the more well known cases of revolutions to smaller local riots, grievances can destroy political systems. Without many hopes of a quick recovery, European anger caused by a prolonged economic recession is often directed at states, governments and the entire national and European Union (EU) level systems as well as political elites (Roth et al., 2011).

Previous research on the link between economic wealth and protest has also revealed that this relationship may not be so straightforward (Dalton et al., 2010). Whereas in the past, low income was a potential incentive for aggressive activism as showed by sudden riots for instance, recently and after a more consistent economic development, countries with higher income have equally showed a higher propensity for protest action. This was indirectly addressed by Inglehart (1977) who stated that individuals who are more stable financially and better educated (Postmaterialists)
tend to focus on other important causes other than materialist needs, in a newer style of elite challenging political participation. Both economic deprivation and wealth seem to matter in predicting protest. In both situations, the increasing challenge to the established political system by anti-systemic and angry citizens may compromise the survival of democratic practices (Norris et al., 2006).

The 2008 global financial meltdown has caused a deep fracture in European societies: the severity of the economic consequences of such event is an opportunity for an empirical assessment of political unconventionality in Europe after such historic event. From 2008 to 2012, all European countries have been virtually affected financially and citizens on the continent have taken to the streets to demonstrate, in low income and high income economies alike. The 2008 financial collapse can be the instigator of an “eventful protest” situation (Della Porta, 2012), where the impact of protest cases has altered the typical preference for political activity in Europe. As in most cases, economic crises hit primarily shaky economies, the EU crisis over the last five years is a unique opportunity to study how stronger and weaker economies may have affected the levels and preferences of unconventionality among Europeans. When economic dissatisfaction is widespread, the likelihood of its negative impact on people’s views of the government increases (McAllister, 1999: 189). Countries with a prolonged economic recession see a rise of the relevance of the economy as a political issue in people’s minds, when making electoral and activism related decisions (Singer, 2011). Since the personal economic loss in Europe has been severe and long term, research on levels of activism in a post-austerity society helps testing, once again, the relevance of deprivation theory in economies where Postmaterialist values prevailed, yet more materialist needs suddenly became relevant.

This paper studies the link between economic austerity in Europe and protest, assessing whether economic suffering has impacted citizens’ choice of political action and whether the long term use of unconventionality, due to a prolonged economic crisis, may conventionalize protest to the point of political inefficacy (Kriesi, 2012). If indeed the 2008 financial crisis and its ongoing effects have been so severe among people in Europe, the deprivation theory relationships may have strengthened: countries with lower financial wealth would show a higher propensity for protest participation, defeating previous assessments where nations with stronger financial positions recorded higher political unconventionality (Dalton, 2014: 54). If some countries show a mixed record of some economic dissatisfaction, and yet still high political unconventionality, then the impact of the economic conditions on peoples’ decision to go unconventional may not be so strong after all. Studies have previously discovered that other variables, including political culture and the historical circumstances, are more relevant than deprivation in predicting protest behavior (McAllister, 1999: 201). Whether demonstrators are dissatisfied or not, it may not be enough for a protest event to take place (Dalton, 2014: 75).

This study focuses on six countries in particular: France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. The selection represents countries that are all democracies, members of the Eurozone (with one exception), with a variety of political and party systems, economic and
political activism records pre-austerity. The next section of the paper will present initial evidence on the level of economic downturn and protest activities in the case studies, whereas the following section will highlight models of unconventionality useful for explaining the European context, and finally the last part of the paper will present the data, hypotheses and findings. The final section will discuss the overall conclusions from the research.

**Austerity and Resistance to New Policies**

Since 2008 many European countries have recorded poor economic performances. Whether the initial financial downturn or the policy responses from national and international elites are responsible for the economic performance is still disputed nowadays. After an initial expansion of financial support to save the economies (the bailouts), governments overall reacted to the economic downturn with policies of austerity, namely with many budget cuts in social policy areas, that have brought huge social costs (Gros, 2013). Some economists have portrayed austerity as the only option for a renewed long term growth (Gros, 2013). Previous economic systems could not be sustainable in the long term without critical structural reforms, affecting for instance pension programs, tax codes, workers’ benefits, national expenses, education cost subsidies, welfare payments and others.

When assessing the quality of economic performance, four main criteria are generally and consistently employed: unemployment rates, inflation, GDP growth and government debt (Roth et al. 2011). These variables are also related to citizens’ assessment of their government’s abilities, national policies and overall acceptable performance. For instance, higher unemployment rates, inflation and government debt are correlated to lower public support for the national (Kriesi, 2014) and European government (Roth, et al. 2011). Unemployment itself has been linked to protest directly in Europe before the crisis erupted (Lahusen, 2013). Equally, lower GDP growth is associated with a weaker support for the government and trust in public officials. Citizens seem ready to use evidence of economic failures to punish the elites in power, a concept of government’s responsibility for the nation’s economic results that the literature calls “economic voting” (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007).

Some of the more recent studies involving an empirical assessment of economic measures in Europe portray a dual interpretation of the link between popular satisfaction and government support. Kosmidis (2014) presents data on public support in Greece, where citizens are able to discern who really holds the blame for the catastrophic financial situation of the country when deciding between the national and European levels of government. As soon as Greeks consider the national government responsible for the serious austerity measure in the country, exempting the EU from the imposition of those decisions, the economic voting model explanatory power increases, as levels of trust in the national government are negatively affected. However, research on industrialized countries by Giger and Nelson (2010) demonstrates that government responsibility can be avoided, even when social policy cuts are implemented. Parties in government may actually select austerity measures and claim credit for their choice and impact,
because they are able to shift the blame for the retrenchment of the national welfare system. Whereas this type of literature refers primarily to voting, the same rationale applies to unconventionality and economic performance. As the economy does poorly, people are more inclined to use all modes of political participation to express their discontent and hopefully cause a change in policies in their favor (Kriesi, 2014). Punishing the parties in power is not enough, loud and repeated protest actions are considered more effective in accomplishing policy changes, especially when trust in any parties is very weak.

Data from Eurostat for the four economic factors selected in this paper and concerning the case studies are summarized in Graphs 1-4 below. The time periods run from 2006 to 2012, starting two years before the 2008 crisis to record a baseline and make sure that the data from 2008 were not unusual. Of all the countries, Spain is undoubtedly in the worst possible position as its unemployment rate tripled from 2006 to 2012 (Graph 1). Portugal and Ireland are in a worse situation in 2012, with an unemployment rate over 10%, with the second case showing a rate doubled its original value from 2006. Germany, Great Britain and France all remain under 10% four years after the crisis, with an easier long term stabilization of unemployment in their countries.

[GRAPH 1 ABOUT HERE]

[GRAPH 2 ABOUT HERE]

With regards to inflation (Graph 2), the overall economic situation of the countries in the study is much better. All the cases recorded an inflation rate under 3%, with the United Kingdom and Portugal at the top and Ireland at the bottom around 2%. It is fair to say that inflation is unlikely to have played a major role in people’s perception of the economy since 2008, whereas the indicator may have been more critical for the national governments that had to respect the inflation criteria set up for the Eurozone members (3%).

[GRAPH 3 ABOUT HERE]

[GRAPH 4 ABOUT HERE]

Graph 3 represents the evolution of the real GDP growth levels for the six countries from 2006 through 2012. Of all the cases, once more Spain reflects the most dramatic change: from the second highest GDP growth rate in 2008 (0.9%) to the second lowest (and negative) in 2012 (-1.6%). The growth rate in Spain reversed itself over a period of six years, from over 2% in 2006 to close to -2% in 2012. On the same Iberian peninsula, Portugal’s economic measure is even worse. The country recorded a -3.2% GDP loss in 2012, a sliding change from 0% growth in 2010 and a decent 1.9% at the beginning of the financial crisis.

Both the United Kingdom and Ireland started in 2008 with a negative GDP growth and managed to improve and register a positive growth by 2012. Germany’s GDP growth rate in 2012 was the
highest in the group, after remaining consistently above the other countries’ rates for the period, but it reached only 0.9%, about 20% of the rate value increase in 2006. Even giant economies suffered.

The last economic indicator from Graph 4 represents data on government debt levels for the same period. As Eurozone members are required to respect strict GDP debt ratio limits, the relevance of this measure is more important for five of the cases in this paper. With the exception of Germany, all other countries recorded a severe increase of their debt level. Four years after the recession started, numbers for Portugal and Ireland are over 100%, France and the United Kingdom are around 80%, whereas, surprisingly, Spain has the second lowest debt level recorded in 2012, under 80%, and right above Germany’s level. All countries’ debt levels have progressively increased, at different rates.

Overall, the four indicators describe a reality in which Spain looks like the country in the group that had the worst possible situation after the crisis, followed by Portugal and Ireland. At the other end of the spectrum, Germany is instead the best positioned country in 2012, with France and the United Kingdom behind. Data from surveys of Europeans in 2012 support the macro level analysis of the cases’ financial situation. The Standard Eurobarometer 78 (2012) on Europeans and the crisis collected answers on an item regarding the economic situation of households: “Your current situation does not allow you to make any plan for the future. You live day by day.” The EU members’ average over four years for people who agreed with the statement is a stable 34%. Yet, in 2012, 54% of Portuguese and 47% of Spaniards agreed with that statement, whereas at the bottom of the ranking only 14% of Germans agreed with the same assessment. Ireland’s values represented 41% of the national sample and the UK and France both scored 35% (European Commission, 2012: 16). The sequence and ranking of the economic situations in the sample of countries corresponds: both macro and micro assessments of the economy concur. People’s perceptions of their economic status have been confirmed to be more in tune with objective measures when an economic crisis is present (Anderson and Hecht, 2014: 45).

Similar data on European economic performance have presented a persistent pessimism among citizens about a possible recovery (Barchet, 2013). Since the economic downturn started, the six nations in this study have evidenced different levels of unconventionality. From a long term perspective, in historical terms, the expectations for protest differed. Spain and Portugal represented cases of generally low participation politically, with Germany and France instead as cases of high and prolonged activism. The UK and Ireland fall in between the two extremes.

Since 2008, research on protest in Europe has often highlighted unconventionality as the preferred choice for participants across the continent. Although Spain is historically considered a more apathetic country (Teorell et al. 2007: 349; Hughes, 2011), when it comes to political involvement through multiple means of participation, the literature on the Spanish protest wave
over the past few years has added a new finding. The movement of the Indignados, developed in 2011, has become a primary actor for unconventionality, possibly changing the repertoire of activism in the country (Calvo, 2013). Spain has witnessed a series of demonstrations, public square occupations, group organizations and social movement network creations in large cities to reinforce a resistance to the austerity policies imposed by the Spanish government. The high participation in these events over a period of time represented to some scholars an ethical revolution (Hughes, 2011), with the movements making bold requests to the government and aiming for a complete restructuring of the political system in place. Protesters in these cases (the 15M movement as an example) employed both person to person communication as well as global social networks to maintain the resistance and ask for changes in the national economic policies to support social groups affected the most by the economic collapse. Young individuals, college students and well educated overall became participants (Calvo, 2013), confirming personal traits already revealed in other protest activities elsewhere (Dalton, et al. 2010).

Citizens in Portugal tried to follow the example of the neighboring Indignados movement. Yet, the overall level of activism during the first period of the crisis remained sporadic in comparison to the Spanish example. Historical data (de Sousa and Nunes, 2004) and empirical cross national analyses (Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002: 313; Dalton, 2014: 54) consistently agreed on the assessment that political activism in the country was weak. The sudden spark of protest in 1974 with the Revolution of the Carnations that led the country to democracy remained an outlier. In 2011, Portuguese groups jumped onto the active protest scene in Europe by organizing public square occupations in solidarity with the Spaniards’ resistance to the police evacuations attempts in their own country. The spread and intensity of the protest wave in Portugal was understandably limited. Only few cities joined in and no significant and new long term group organizations developed afterwards. Members of the activist groups worked with established organizations, such as trade unions, to remain active and keep the protest alive. Yet, this choice of referring primarily back to pre-existing institutionalized groups became the critical factor responsible for the different intensity of contention in the country after the crisis and austerity. The Portuguese experience of political unconventionality turned domestic after 2011, weakening any real internationalization of the protest fight in the country and limiting the demands of the groups to national issues (Baumgarten, 2013). The softening of activism reflected the previous lack of strong civil society and confirmed previous research on the overall lower levels of protest in the country in comparison to other European democracies (Dalton et al, 2010: 63).

At the opposite spectrum from Portugal, scholars have often identified both France and Germany as high protest activism cases (Gabriel et al., 2012). Multiple studies of France over the years (Vassallo, 2010; Waddington et al., 2009; Murphy, 2011) presented evidence highlighting a particular preference among French citizens for unconventionality. Even when the financial situation in France was well above economic standards of other European countries, a minor policy change by the government caused a serious unconventional, and at times violent, reaction by the many social groups, like in 2010 with the two-year increase of the minimum retirement
age by the French government as a budget saving measure during austerity (Ancelovici, 2011). Besides the actual higher levels of protest, the French case in particular shows a broader level of involvement among citizens, social groups and political organizations, whether part of the political system (like political parties) or more unconventional (like GMO-resistant environmental groups). Instances of protest since the beginning of the financial crisis have hit equally parties on the left and the right, with different political groups often demonstrating in the streets against policies and proposals of new austerity measures, well before the government or the parliament approved them. Overall, the level of austerity in France has consistently remained strong across decades (Dalton et al., 2010: 63), consequently the austerity situation may impact citizens’ choices for change differently. In the case of France, the real question is whether high protest levels can become even higher, not whether French citizens became unconventional due to austerity.

In a similar situation, Germany has recorded different types of unconventionality over time (Riva
t and Stauer, 2012). Even before the crisis paralyzed the Eurozone, unemployment in Germany sparked protest events that became more progressively better organized and prepared (Lahusen, 2013). As the country is the largest economy on the continent and historically better off in comparison to other neighbors, its healthy levels of political activism reflect the interpretation of a positive relationship between economic development and activism. It was no surprise to see many protest events in between 2009 and 2012, linked at times to broader causes such as the Indignados movement or the Occupy wave in other countries (Kaindl, 2013). Yet, even the direct confrontation of the perceived source of the financial crisis with its responsible actors in May 2012, with an Occupy protest in Frankfurt, outside the seat of the European Central Bank, did not materialize a long term organization of the movement. Causes for such long term weakness appear to be linked to the citizens’ views of the economic system in the country and the role of Germany in the Eurozone. A more moderate position in the end, after the initial reaction, seems to prevail among potential demonstrators in Germany. Once again, the lack of proper long term movements and structures affect the long term presence of protest, fewer groups or associations connected to activism mean lower level of both conventional and unconventional activism (Dekker and Uslaner, eds., 2001; Morales, 2009).

The last two cases in the sample, Ireland and the United Kingdom, belong to different levels of activism. Ireland paid the price of a historically low level of civil society and did not show many instances of protest per se during the austerity measures era (Cox, 2011; Murphy, 2013). Occasional demonstration events against the government did not spark any large opposition to the economic model chosen by the country, the Irish protest was against the actual economic results, not the neo-liberal structure embraced by the government. Strikes organized mostly by trade unions took place in 2009 against pay cuts and social spending reductions (Kriesi, 2014: 320). Most of the austerity measures in the country had been agreed with the IMF (2010), as the Irish government tried to please the international community. This position limited the size and strength of the unconventionality and presented a picture of relative apathy and disillusion
without a strong and prolonged reaction. The Irish showed a “resigned acceptance of the inevitable” (Kriesi, 2012: 522). Although the initial economic downfall was equally painful, the Irish did not resemble the Indignados, and they even later agreed with more economic sacrifices as requested by the international community in 2011 (Kriesi, 2014: 322).

Protest events in Great Britain appeared repeatedly from 2010 through 2012 (King et al. 2012; Ketelaars, 2014). Following a rioting tradition (Waddington et al., 2009), people in the UK reacted strongly to the hard choices of their government, some of the most severe austerity policies in Europe (King et al., 2012). All citizens, including in particular students, had to pay the price of the austerity and became very vocal about their opposition with strikes, street marches and campaigns that witnessed the collaboration of social groups and trade unions. The British case demonstrated a level of popular activism that reflected previous experiences.

The six cases represent together instances of varied levels of economic hardship and protest involvement, as measured by economic factors from Eurostat and descriptions of protest activities and demonstrations covering the four years studied in this article.

Unconventional Activism Models

Research on protest has slowly evolved since the 1970s. The longterm view on the presence of contention in political activism has demonstrated that the general public has embraced the use of unconventionality over time. Protest activity is now more likely and more frequent than a couple of decades ago (Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002; Norris, 2002; Norris et al., 2006; Dalton, 2014). Even more relevant in this assessment is the fact that the rate of increase of protest activism is higher compared to other forms of conventional participation (Norris et al. 2006: 296). Protest has earned a reputation as a valid and effective means of political expression, away from the original position that linked its unconventionality to deprivation primarily. The repertoire of political involvement is now broader and with more options to any citizen (Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Teorell et al., 2007; Jennings and van Deth, 1990; Dalton et al., 2010). There is no trade off among the modes of participation generally employed, as citizens are ready to use different means of political activism depending on the situation. Old and new democracies alike register healthy protest action (Dalton et al., 2010), as movements are connecting across borders, forming cross-national and transnational protest movements around common goals (Imig and Tarrow, 2001).

The advancement in the study of political contention has benefited from a focus on resources and opportunities. The political opportunity structure (POS) of the protest event (Kriesi et al., 1995) impacts the likelihood and success of a citizen movement. Access to information and planning (Feigenbaum et al., 2013), focus on one or more issues (Corrigall-Brown, 2012) and overall organizational experience determine whether a protest event will take place and what type of appeal it will have.
Further studies on unconventional activism have highlighted instead institutional links to the probability of citizens getting involved. Quaranta (2013) researched the link between protest activities and level of decentralization of a country. Due to multiple accesses to political decision making and more actors, nations that are more decentralized tend to see more protest engagement than countries with a more centralized (and shielded) government. Along the same lines, Nam (2006) focused his work on the type of legislature a country had. Countries with weaker legislatures correspond to cases of high protest, whereas nations with stronger legislatures were less likely to be interested in any political expression that was unconventional and consequently registered lower levels of protest.

As the focus of the analysis moved away from institutions and macro level variables, scholars started to look at the role of protestors as a primary factor to explain unconventionality. Individual level variables help understand who will choose to protest and why the person may become politically active. Effective explanatory models include variables that identify the individual based upon age, gender, education as well as political ideology. Somehow, regardless of the specific issues a protest movement may address, individuals with certain demographic characteristics are more prone to unconventionality. Findings from multiple studies (Norris et al. 2006, 296; Dalton, 2014: 74) have linked younger people to protest more often, as generally they tend to have more free time or are more likely to choose less institutionalized forms of expression to support their causes. Studies involving the gender of the demonstrator have evidenced that men are usually more likely than women to choose protest (Quaranta, 2013: 9), although an interaction between age and gender favors younger women as being more likely than older men to become unconventionally active (Barnes and Kaase, 1979). More education has consistently been linked to more protest, as individuals who have completed a higher level of education are more likely to engage in a protest activity (Quaranta, 2013: 9; Dalton et al., 2010: 67). Ideological placement on the left-right scale confirms also to be relevant to predict protestors: individuals on the left of the ideological spectrum are associated with more protest activity (Norris et al., 2006: 296; Dalton, 2014: 74).

Other sets of variables are often included in explanatory models on protest. Levels of trust in the political system, political parties and politicians are negatively associated with the propensity for unconventionality: the more trust in the political system a person has, the less likely the individual will be to engage in protest rather than conventional forms of political activism (Quaranta, 2013; Norris, 1999). As a measure of political sophistication, political interest is employed to assess whether the level of involvement in protest is present more often in people who are particularly connected to politics. A stronger level of interest in politics is positively correlated with political activism, both conventionally and unconventionally (Norris et al., 2006: 297).

Finally, as previous studies have tried to test whether grievances, economic deprivation in particular, are associated to protest likelihood, variables linked to personal perception of the economic situation of an individual, such as satisfaction with the economy, government
protection from poverty, unemployment experienced, or whether life in general is improving are all relevant factors that can explain contention.

If overall disaffection with the political system may not be linked to protest as initial suspected (Norris et al., 2006), forms of economically-driven disaffection as experienced at the time of a recession may induce citizens to choose protest more often once again.

**Hypotheses and Data**

The cases selected to test the link between protest and the economic crisis are all European democracies. They represent a variety of political systems (parliamentary, semi-presidential) and party systems (from two and a half party systems to multiparty systems), as well as different levels of centralization of government: from mostly centralized in France to completely federal in Germany. As listed previously, all countries, with the exception of the United Kingdom, are members of the Eurozone. The group includes nations with small populations (Ireland and Portugal) and cases with large ones (Germany, the UK, France).

The first hypothesis in the research is based on the expectations that:

**H1: Countries with lower economic performance register higher levels of protest activity.**

As the literature on deprivation has discussed and the first findings on the impact of the crisis have highlighted (Kriesi, 2014), countries experiencing a worse financial position after 2008 would have citizens punishing the political elites and choosing unconventionality to express themselves politically. Data from rounds 3 through 6 of the European Social Survey are employed for the quantitative analysis, providing information from 2006 through 2012, with a two-year interval and a good variety of variables measuring different components of activism (Tables 1a, 1b, 1c and Graph 5).

The second hypothesis in the study deals with the actual relevance of the economic situation in comparison to other factors employed to assess levels of protest:

**H2: Personal economic assessment of the financial situation of a country is more significant to predict protest than an individual’s social and cultural variables.**

As the global financial downturn and its austerity related consequences have been present for quite some time, the impact of the economic assessment can be more long term than in a usual economic voting situation. The presence of a permanent austerity contributes to the reinforcement of the economic assessment variable on the protest prediction: the longer the economic hardship, the more it impacts protest levels. Since the economic situation is concerning and persistent in some countries, citizens would feel its impact and their own deprivation more clearly. Data from round 6 of the European Social Survey collected in 2012 are used in a binomial logistic regression to test how relevant the economic assessment of the personal situation is when predicting protest action, four years after the crisis began (Table 2). The main
dependent variable in the model is the public demonstration participation variable, where respondents answered whether they participated in a lawful public demonstration within the previous 12 months. Following the literature on unconventionality, independent variables included in the model are age, gender, education level, left/right scale, a set of political variables linked to trust in the political system, and a group of variables reflecting the individual’s assessment of the personal financial situation (from satisfaction with the economy to personal assessment of the government’s citizen protection from poverty, among others).

Findings and Interpretation

a) Levels of Political Activism: Pre and Post Crisis

For the first hypothesis in the research, levels of political activism in the case studies are presented in the three tables below. Table 1a considers data pre-crisis from 2006, Table 1b includes data at the beginning of the crisis, 2008, and Table 1c introduces data from four years after the start of the recession in 2012. These three time points allow for a more balanced assessment, making sure that the 2008 data were not already an anomaly, thanks to the use of 2006 as the baseline.

[TABLE 1a ABOUT HERE]
[TABLE 1b ABOUT HERE]

From a look at Table 1a the different countries included in the project present a variety of political activism levels. In regards to forms of conventional engagement, Germany, France and the United Kingdom are at the top of the ranking, considering values for interest in politics, voting and contact with politicians, yet with a good number of people who thought politics was too complicated. Following soon behind, Spain and Ireland score high on voting, contact with a politician, work for another organization and display of a campaign sticker. At the bottom of the list, Portugal has overall strong voting, yet very low measures of anything else that is conventional.

For the second half of the table, the ranking is very similar. The UK, France and Germany come in at the top with regards to signing a petition, participation in lawful demonstration and boycotts of a product. Spain and Ireland are in the second tier, with good petition signing, and for Spain in particular excellent levels of street demonstration participation. As predicted by the literature, Portugal’s levels of unconventionality are very low on all fronts.

[TABLE 1c ABOUT HERE]

The data from 2008, as the crisis started, show comparable patterns. The ranking for conventional and unconventional levels of involvement is very similar, with some increases for both Germany (political interest, contact with a politician, work for another organization and boycotts) and Ireland (interest in politics and in particular participation in a lawful public
demonstration). All the other cases remain at the 2006 levels, with the exception of Spain which shows a decline in most categories of political activism.

In Table 1c levels of activism and overall rankings suggest some significant change, with some countries registering different levels of activism in comparison to when the crisis began. For instance, the most crucial value change seems to be the Spanish case. The country shows some strong increases in levels of declared engagement, for every single category recorded! In particular, the percentage value of individuals who stated to have signed a petition within the previous 12 months almost doubled from 17% to 33.2%. Respondents who confirmed their participation in a lawful public demonstration went from 15.9% to 25.9%. Spaniards who boycotted a product in 2012 more than doubled in comparison to 2008 (7.9% vs. 17.5%). Spain’s political activism skyrocketed four years after the recession severely impacted the country.

In an analogous situation, Germany’s values for political involvement in 2012 show some healthy increases across most of the different categories. This similar pattern for two countries in the opposite economic situation after the crisis confirms that many variables affect political involvement beyond the individual’s perception of the economy. The cases of Ireland and France in 2012 contribute to the interpretation, as both of them registered lower levels of political activism, conventionally and unconventionally. France’s values of engagement decrease across most categories, whereas Ireland’s data show a decline only in conventional involvement, with a substantial stability for unconventionality. The Irish case is intriguing considering the steep austerity situation in the country and yet the minor political reaction from the citizens, as highlighted by the literature and confirmed empirically in Table 1c.

Finally, Portugal remains a country of weak political involvement. Four years after a brutal recession, Portugal registers mild improvements in conventional (work in another organization) and unconventional (petition signing and participation in a lawful public demonstration) political activism. Although the percentage for street demonstration almost doubled (3.7% vs. 6.8%), the overall level of activism in the country still places it at the bottom of the ranking in the post-crisis austerity phase. Portugal’s activism reaction to austerity was not in line with the energetic awakening of political engagement measured for Spain and Germany. Ireland’s political apathy in 2012 confirms what already suspected, whereas the UK and France remain overall stable when it comes to activism in post-crisis austerity.

To better assess comparatively the level of unconventionality in the case studies in 2012, Graph 5 presents data on the Protest Index for each country. The index is the sum of the political activities recorded as: petition signing, participation in public lawful demonstration and boycott of certain products. If an individual declared to have done any of the three possible actions, the corresponding score for each activity would be 1. Instead, if the respondent declared no

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1 The index was created after using principal component analysis on the three separate variables in the datasets. In all cases, one single component was extracted, following previous similar work (see Dalton et al., 2010 and Vassallo, 2010).
participation in such activities, the corresponding score per variable for the index is 2. Each respondent to the survey could have a final score for the index that ranges from 3 (yes to all unconventional actions) to 6 (no to any of the three possible actions). The bars in the graph below highlight the percentages of individuals within each of the countries for any of the possible values of the Protest Index (3, 4, 5, and 6): the lower the index score for a country, the stronger the unconventionality registered in 2012.

[GRAPH 5 ABOUT HERE]

Once more, the results confirmed the assessment from the previous tables. Portugal has the highest percentage of respondents declaring no unconventional action (over 80% of the sample), followed by Ireland with about 70% of the respondents. At the opposite end, the rank of most unconventionally active citizens in the group shows Spain at the top, with France and Germany close. The overall percentages of individuals in each country who came in as the most unconventional are still very low, suggesting that although overall involvement in protest activities has increased, it still remains very limited, with few true protest devotees and most of the populations in a protest avoidance attitude. With the exception of Germany, all of the other case studies in the group register at least 50% of the sample with no unconventional action at all.

b) Relevance of Economic Perception on Protest Action

Findings for the second hypothesis in the study are presented in Table 2 below. The case of Spain is highlighted in this section to test the link between austerity and protest, due to possible deprivation. As Spain is the case that recorded the highest increases in unconventionality, it is at the same time the best situation to verify any predicting power for the economic variables in the model.

[Table and description to be added to final version of paper]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Conclusions

The austerity measures brought by the 2008 financial crisis and its long term effects have convinced Europeans to take to the streets. Although levels of protest vary across the countries studied in this paper, the findings on the link between perception of economic downturn and demonstrations are mixed. Other previous scholars have proved that the economy does matter when dealing with politics in the form of elections (Kriesi, 2014). Economic voting seems to make a difference and provide a useful explanation to predict how citizens will vote at a time of economic recession, in Europe in particular. In general, the same link between the economic situation and political unconventionality has failed to be supported consistently in previous research (Dalton et al. 2010). Although deprivation theories from the past connected political protest to economic reasons among citizens, more recent studies have not confirmed the link.
In this project the link between protest and the failing economic situation of a country as perceived by its citizens was tested in the first hypothesis. As only Spain, among the case studies, clearly followed the expectation of a positive correlation between economic austerity and unconventional political activism, the overall assessment from the first hypothesis is that it has to be rejected. Its findings are mixed with Portugal and Ireland showing low unconventionality although registering very high austerity. At the opposite end, Germany, the best positioned financially in 2012, recorded high unconventional activism without having the same degree of deprivation. The expected relationship between economic austerity and protest does not hold for the most part.

The second part of the study tested the strength and significance of the economic variables in the model when the expected link between the independent and dependent variables was present: the Spanish case. The binomial logistic on the Spanish data used participation in a public demonstration as its dependent variables and included many independent variables from an individual’s personal characteristics to levels of political sophistication and trust, as well as the person’s assessment of the economic situation. The findings from Table 2 highlight that an individual’s assessment of the economic austerity was not linked to the level of political unconventionality, even in a case where the country registered higher protest after the recession. Variable such as voting, satisfaction with the economy, the government’s role in protecting citizens from poverty and its involvement in reducing income levels were not significant to explain lawful street demonstrations in 2012 in Spain. Instead, other personal characteristics that were already associated to predict protest in previous research result significant in this project. Age, education, political interest and the left-right ideological scale help predict political unconventionality. Younger respondents, individuals on the left and people with a higher political interest are more likely to participate in a public demonstration. Education is also positively correlated to protest, with citizens with higher educational levels taking part in demonstrations. Gender as an independent variable in the logistic model was not significant, in a same way the person’s assessment about whether life is getting worse in general was not helpful in predicting unconventionality in Spain in 2012.

In the end, the austerity measures that took over Europe after the economic recession have caused a lot of financial and political instability in many countries. Citizens in some countries have showed a strong political reaction, by voting the incumbents out, as expected in some ways, and also by expressing themselves unconventionally, with protests, street demonstrations, boycotts and occupy events. In this situation, a direct link between the economic hardship experienced and the intensity of protest measured could have supported previous theories of economic deprivation in political behavior studies. The research carried out in this article with the use of the European Social Survey datasets for a time period that covered 2006 through 2012 does not find the expected relationship. Some Europeans are indeed very actively involved in unconventional political behavior, especially since the 2008 economic recession began, but the perception of the economic situation per se is not the real independent variable behind this wave
of protest on the continent. The economic voting rationale still does not seem to apply to unconventional activism.
References


European Social Survey Round 6 Data (2012). Data file edition 2.0. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.


Hughes, N. “Young People Took to the Streets and All of a Sudden All of the Political Parties Got Old: The 15M Movement in Spain.” Social Movement Studies 10, n. 4 (2011): 407-413.


Unemployment Levels 2006-2012

Eurostat, 2006-2012

Inflation Levels 2006-2012

Real GDP Growth Levels 2006-2012

Graph 4

General Government Gross Debt Levels 2006-2012

### Table 1a: European Social Survey 2006: Political Activism Measures (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European Social Survey</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Portugal</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>France</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interested in Politics(^1)</td>
<td>45.5</td>
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<td>25.8</td>
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<td>61.0</td>
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<td>15.1</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
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<td>3.8</td>
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<td>13.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>20.2</td>
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<td>7.7</td>
<td>9.3</td>
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<td>4.3</td>
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<td>10.2</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>23.3</td>
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1. Question is: “How interested would you say you are in politics.” Percentages are sum of “very interested” and “quite interested” answers.
2. Question is: “Politics is too complicated to understand.” Percentages are sum of “occasionally” and “regularly”.
3. Question is: “Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
4. Question is: “During the last 12 months, have you contacted a politician, government or local government official?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
5. Question is: “During the last 12 months, have you worked in a political party or action group?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
6. Question is: “During the last 12 months, have you worked in another organization or association?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
7. Question is: “During the last 12 months, have you worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
8. Question is: “During the last 12 months, have you signed a petition?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
9. Question is: “During the last 12 months, have you taken part in a lawful public demonstration?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
10. Question is: “During the last 12 months, have you boycotted certain products?” Percentages are “yes” answers.
## Table 1b: European Social Survey 2008: Political Activism Measures (%)

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<tr>
<th>European Social Survey</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Portugal</th>
<th>Spain</th>
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<td>11.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
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<td>27.7</td>
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Source: European Social Survey, Round 4, 2008.
Table 1c: European Social Survey 2012: Political Activism Measures (%)

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<td>Interested in Politics</td>
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<td>Voted last national election</td>
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<td>72.9</td>
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<td>15.9</td>
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<td>Participated in Lawful Public Demonstration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boycotted Certain Products</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
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<td>35.8</td>
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</table>

Source: European Social Survey, Round 6, 2012.

$^{11}$ Unfortunately, in this round of the European Social Survey, the question “Politics is too complicated to understand” was not asked.
Protest Index by Country 2012