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Economic Crisis and Protest Behavior in EU Member States: An Assessment after the Initial Impact

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Over the last few years Europeans have generally experienced a weak economy, with higher unemployment rates and painful austerity measures. In most cases, citizens reacted to this sharp economic decline in their daily lives with a strong opposition to their own government (Della Porta 2015; Trenz *et al.* 2015). The perceived deprivation at the family level from lower salaries, reduced pensions, limited public services and smaller social policy budgets was responsible for the general outrage. Citizens embraced protest as a clear demonstration of the level of anger towards the economic situation they were witnessing. In the most extreme cases of economic collapse, the so called PIIGS countries among others (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain), levels of confrontational activism (street demonstrations, building occupations, damages to property or general strikes) spiked, with more than the usual citizens participating in forms of confrontational action (Verney and Bosco 2013; Calvo 2013; Kosmidis 2014; Accornero and Pinto 2015). Even countries with an overall better financial situation experienced an increase in unconventionality (Vassallo and Ding 2016), pointing out the relevance of the economy in predicting protest, for countries whose level of deprivation was not as severe. As the intensity of the crisis has passed, the link between economic indicators and street marches may have weakened. Previous studies¹ on post recession Europe (Kern *et al.* 2015; Quaranta 2015; Vassallo and Ding 2016) used relative deprivation theory to explain protest and highlight the relevance of economic scarcity as a grievance strong enough to convince more people to take to the streets. Was this assessment in the recent literature between the economic recession and protest activism in Europe only registering a sudden and temporary association? Can the economy still explain protest when the overall financial situation is not as salient? Do people adapt to the new *normal*, with a lower standard of living, when expectations of their economic wellbeing are less demanding and consequently the deprivation is not felt as much any longer? This article tries to assess what the role of economic variables is in the explanation of protest in member states in the European Union (EU) six years after the 2008 financial meltdown, with the use of data from the European Social Survey (ESS) from the 2008 and 2014 rounds. As the post recession era has created new economic standards, high unemployment or low GDP growth may

not be enough to convince regular citizens to occupy a building as their form of political involvement. This study is ultimately attempting to assess the possibility of long term consequences from the 2008 economic downturn when predicting protest behavior today.

The impact of deprivation in explaining why people protest in Europe has already been challenged by other scholars. In his analysis of the PIIGS countries, Ancelovici (2015) states that relative deprivation is not a sufficient element to understand protest (205). The use of economic variables to predict unconventionality has also been disputed as researchers support different interpretations of how economic performance affects contentious politics. Originally, relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970) listed poor economic conditions, disappointment with economic policies, economic injustice, and a gap in personal economic expectations as driving factors for people “to rebel.” Beyond the individual level focus, this type of argument has also been studied at the country level, where economic downturns seem to rally citizens to challenge, revolt, and overtake governments and political systems through violent protest (Lichbach 1989). At the same time, research on the link between the economy and unconventionality has supported a positive relationship between economic performance and confrontational activism. In contrast to the relative deprivation driven explanation, wealthier citizens are also more likely to engage in contentious activism, take part in street demonstrations, general strikes, or square occupations, when the economy is actually performing well (Powell 1982; Verba *et al.* 1995; Dalton *et al.* 2010): a resources based explanation.

As some economic measures in Europe have been improving since 2008, it is useful to study once again how the economy drives people to protest, whether objective economic indicators are as relevant as subjective interpretations of wellbeing in explaining demonstrations, or whether social economic protection can actually limit the impact of deprivation in predicting protest. The next section of this paper introduces the literature on protest and economic performance, whereas the third section presents the data and the hypotheses. A section on the discussion of the findings follows, with the conclusions at the end of the article to summarize its main contributions.

Studying the Link Between Protest and the Economy

Studies on unconventional political activism have often presented a multitude of measures of protest. Driven primarily by the need to quantify the action, scholars have tried to emphasize the different components of protest when explaining how people act outside of the conventional realm of political behavior. Previous volumes on protest made the distinction between hard vs. soft action, confrontational vs. peaceful activism or disruptive vs. non-violent engagement (Powell 1982; Dubrow *et al.* 2008; Dodson 2011; Welzel and Deutsch 2012; Solt 2015). In the end, the focus on the type of protest studied depended on the measures available and the accessibility of data. For instance, information on violent protest activism is hard to gather and possibly dangerous to distribute. At the same time, few individuals are generally involved with a disruptive protest action, as people do not want to suffer negative consequences from their more challenging political activities against policies or actors. Yet, as confrontational protest may not be an option for most individuals in society, citizens in advanced democracies have increasingly embraced peaceful protest actions against their governments as a form of political involvement (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002).

Actual measures of protest usually vary across geographic locations and time. Even in Europe alone, participation in unconventional activism includes a myriad of possible actions at the local, national and European level (Imig and Tarrow, 1999). The typical examples of protest employed in the literature included signing a petition, taking part in a general strike, occupying a building, participating in a lawful demonstration, damaging property or getting involved in a violent riot (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Dalton 2014). In more recent investigations, scholars interested in updating the measure of unconventionality addressed how to incorporate newer forms of activism that could be considered outside of the realm of conventionality. A relevant example is the use of political consumerism (Stolle *et al.* 2005) as a new form of activism that is not institutionalized and yet challenging enough to be associated to protest. A citizen's choice to boycott a certain product may sound easy, but in the end it is a way to express a political opinion without the need of any party or election.

All of these types of protest are still examined when studying contentious politics, each of them is appropriately relevant in regards to how people can act. In this paper, the main focus is on protest as measured by participation in demonstrations, boycotts of products and support for petitions. These three items provide a good variety of actions with regards to people's ability to engage in them, allowing individuals to choose a fairly accessible action (such as signing a petition) or a more demanding activity (such as participating in a lawful demonstration). This balanced view on contentious political actions provides a middle ground in relation to the division present in the literature between hard vs. soft protest.

The use of economic indicators to predict protest relies on two features: the salience of the economy and the level of economic assessment employed. The link between economic performance and protest activism appeared to be complicated from the very first studies published on the relationship. Gurr (1970) presented early on a theory of unconventional political behavior that emphasized the individual level's relevance to explain how relative economic deprivation is conducive to protest. The severity of the economic crisis and the length of the crisis contribute to influence citizens' interpretations of their lower economic wellbeing. The gap between people's expectations of economic standards and their actual economic situation is at the base of the deprivation leading to action. At the same time, Powell (1982) had connected instead country-level GNP per capita with data on protest from the late 1950s through the late 1970s to underscore how a wealthier society supports protest involvement, defying the economic deprivation assessment. Later studies on unconventionality and the economy presented a similar conundrum. A good economy as well as a bad economy can lead to protest (for instance Auvinen 1997; Dalton *et al.* 2010; Vassallo and Ding 2016).

The relevance of the economic situation to assess a person's political action has been supported consistently in the research. Sanders (2000) addressed the level of understanding of voters when using economic information to express their political voice. In the end, citizens are prepared enough to correctly understand a good economy from a bad economy and consequently act politically. Although individual values filter people's assessments of their own financial situation (Duch *et al.* 2000), the economy does matter in explaining political activism. When the economic crisis persists, and citizens are exposed to the negative consequences of the economic recession for longer periods (Singer, 2011), politically driven protest is likely. Anderson and Hecht (2014) and Armingeon and Guthmann (2014) confirmed in particular the link between the objective economic indicators and the corresponding subjective assessments of the economic situation with regards to the economic recession in Europe after 2008: at times of crisis, citizens seem to show a good understanding of the state of the economy. It remains unclear how long the

economic downturn needs to last for people to notice and act, or how quickly people's perceptions can change for the better once economic growth picks up.

When looking at relevant works on this topic, the choice for the appropriate level of economic variables to employ shifts from the macro level (usually the country) to the individual level (a citizen in a country). Some examples of macro level economic measures used more often are GDP, unemployment, inflation, or government debt (Auvinen 1997; Kern *et al.* 2015; Beissinger and Sasse 2014). All of them are considered objective economic indicators that can easily be measured across countries. More in detail, economic affluence (as measured by GDP or GNP) has often been positively associated with protest due to people's resources to engage in unconventional activism (Verba *et al.* 1995; Jenkins *et al.* 2008; Dalton *et al.* 2010; Vassallo and Ding 2016). Unemployment rates have also been used often to test the relationship: some studies supported the interpretation of a positive relationship with protest, following the deprivation theory expectations (Lahusen 2013; Kern *et al.* 2015; Vassallo and Ding 2016), whereas others pointed out the negative association (Gallego 2007; Schussman and Soule 2005; Jenkins *et al.* 2008) when emphasizing that employed citizens were more involved in contentious politics, as they had more interests to protect. In certain recent publications, unemployment is not even significant when predicting protest action (Rüdig and Karyotis, 2014).

Similarly, investigations on economic inequality have presented findings that contradict the relative deprivation position: societies with higher levels of inequality are associated with lower levels of protest (Dubrow *et al.* 2008; Solt 2015). This evidence in particular is important as it includes a measure of economic wellbeing in comparison to other groups in society, and could have easily showed the deprivation felt by some citizens, but not others, setting up a comparison between personal economic expectations for people across different groups, but within the same national economic context. Lastly, measures of social protection at the national level have been useful to equally verify the link between economic grievances and protest: once more, expectations for a negative relationship between more social protection and lower protest have not been supported (Sanders and Bellucci 2012). Individuals who benefit from a higher level of social protection are actually more likely to explore unconventionality in politics, as they feel less concerned about possible negative consequences and can still count on enough resources to be able to participate.

For country level examples of a subjective economic evaluation, the national consumer index has supported a link between economically based grievances and protest activity in countries (Quaranta 2015). Studies that have focused equally on subjective economic interpretations at the individual level included a person's satisfaction with the economy, the perception of an adequate household's income or the importance of money (Kern *et al.* 2015; Vassallo and Ding 2016).

Recent studies on the relationship between the economic crisis and protest have emphasized mostly the role of relative deprivation theory to explain why Europeans increasingly chose unconventionality to express themselves politically (Kern *et al.* 2015; Quaranta 2015; Vassallo and Ding 2016). Few other studies have instead dismissed the positive link between deprivation and grievance as a predictor for protest action in the recent recession (Solt 2015; Rüdig and Karyotis 2014). Before 2008, the research had supported, at best, a minimal impact of economic deprivation on unconventionality (Dalton *et al.* 2010; Welzel and Deutsch 2012). Relative deprivation was overall useful in predicting protest only when there was a severe crisis and the prolonged impact of economic austerity remained dominant. These two conditions were present for the European recession, but have since weakened. Most countries have at least in part

recovered financially, with higher GDP per capita in comparison to the 2008 data² (Eurostat). In this context, the link between economic performance and unconventional activism can be reassessed to investigate whether the softening of the economic recession has once more tamed people's feelings of deprivation, including the possibility of a new normal, six year after the recession started. It is the combination of a more positive economic situation and a new perception with regards to personal economic wellbeing that can invalidate the possible relationship between a poor economic position and protest action in Europe. Six years after the global recession the link between the economy and unconventional activism may look in the end very similar to the initial relationship at the beginning of the crisis in 2008.

Modeling the Economic Impact: Data and Hypotheses

Research on the European great recession has presented evidence of a link between the economic downturn and protest activism, mostly employing data from the early 2000s through 2012. As the economic and financial situation in most European nations has improved, with citizens possibly adapting to the experience of lower economic standards for their wellbeing, it is reasonable to assess whether the impact of the economic crisis and its length still matter six years after the economic collapse hit in 2008. This research uses 2008 and 2014 data from the ESS Rounds 4 and 7 to test whether economic deprivation can still be relevant in explaining unconventional activism, as a comparison with the most recent findings.

Hypotheses

If indeed economic deprivation is no longer felt among Europeans and the severity of the economic austerity has softened, an analysis of 2014 data will highlight a positive relationship between economic performance and protest, supporting the resource based theory of unconventionality, once again. For this reason the first hypothesis in the research is:

H₁: Economic growth is positively associated with unconventional activism.

In particular, in the case of country level variables such as GDP per capita and social protection spending, the analysis can show that an improvement in economic performance and social spending is associated with a parallel increase in contentious political activity. At the same time, as deprivation is no longer effective in encouraging citizens to become unconventionally active, higher levels of unemployment and economic inequality will not be tied to more protest action.

In regards to subjective economic interpretations, citizens with a higher satisfaction for the economy, a better perception of income sufficiency and more expectations for the government to close the income gap will be more likely to engage in contentious action, regardless of the fact that their perception of the economic situation and the government's plan on income disparity is favorable. Even without a justified economic grievance, people will choose protest more, as individuals have the resources to become engaged and can be mobilized.

However, if generally it takes a while before individuals catch up to understand the actual reality of the economic situation they find themselves in, it is also likely that it will take

governments some time before they can convince their own citizens that the economy is doing better. Consumer confidence is an important part of the economy and unless citizens can believe the economy is improving, their level of contention will not decline. People's opinions take longer to change and the impact of the economic crisis may linger, even when the economy is showing improvements. If this is the case, citizens will still feel deprived and their grievances will drive them to protest, despite countries recording better economic performance values. Therefore, the corresponding second hypothesis in the study is:

H₂: Subjective economic measures are more likely to still be significant in predicting protest than objective economic indicators six years after the crisis.

The specific expectations for the role of objective economic variables are the same as in the first hypothesis, but it is questionable whether they will be significant in explaining protest in 2014. Instead, if economic grievances are still salient to most people, relative deprivation theory can still be useful in explaining protest in Europe, so late after the crisis. In detail, a lower level of satisfaction for the economy, a worse perception of income adequacy for the household and fewer expectations for the government to reduce the income gap will all lead to more protest activism as citizens still have grievances, if their own perception of the economy is worse. In brief, objective measures will support the resource based theory of protest activism, whereas subjective economic evaluations will still be associated with the economic deprivation explanation.

Variables and Data

The two hypotheses are tested on EU member states³ from Rounds 4 and 7 of the European Social Survey⁴. The dependent variable is an ordinal measure of protest that has been created using responses from the individuals in the survey in regards to signing a petition, taking part in a lawful demonstration and boycotting certain products, all within the previous twelve months. Individuals who stated that they indeed signed a petition or boycotted a product received one point for each action, whereas respondents who participated in a lawful demonstration received two points, as it is a more demanding type of action (time, exposure, possible consequences, risks). The final index is a scale⁵ (Protest Index) for each respondent in the sample and it ranges from 0 (no protest) to 4 (high protest level)⁶. The EU level distribution of the Protest Index values for individuals in the sample for 2008 and 2014 reveals that overall protest has indeed increased and is still higher in the European Union as a whole in 2014 in comparison to 2008 (Table 1). A lower percentage of people declared no protest activity at all in 2014 than six years before. The corresponding EU percentage of individuals engaged in high protest action in 2014 is almost twice as high six years after the crisis started. Yet, the severe disparity in levels of unconventionality at the national level within the EU sample is significant (as also pointed out more in detail further down in Table 2). For instance, a national breakdown of the protest index values (not shown here) confirms that in 2014 Slovenia recorded the highest percentage of individuals with no protest activity at all (83.3%), when Sweden and France only had 35.1% and 43.2% respectively. A similar assessment shows that these last two countries had the highest national percentage of citizens involved in high protest action: 6.5% for Sweden and 6.4% for

France. The same values for the countries at the bottom of the ranking were 0.7% for Estonia and 0.8% for Slovenia.

TABLE 1: Protest Index Distribution: EU Level (%)

Protest Index Levels	ESS 2014	ESS 2008
No Protest Action [0]	61.5	73.2
Little Protest Action [1]	22.5	15.8
Some Protest Action [2]	10.5	6.8
Moderate Protest Action [3]	2.7	2.5
High Protest Action [4]	2.8	1.7

Data source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2008 and 2014. Samples were analyzed with weight variable DWEIGHT (design weights), when available. Some countries were not included in each wave of the survey, while data for others for the 2014 wave have not been released yet at the time of data analysis. EU average is for countries in that specific wave only: 24 in 2008 and 13 in 2014. Values are European Union level percentages of individual Protest Index score for respondents in the sample. Protest Index is score of scale (0-4): 1 point for signed petition, 1 point for boycott of product and 2 points for participation in lawful demonstration, within the previous twelve months in each situation. No action on any of the possible contentious activities is 0 points.

Besides the specific objective and subjective economic variables discussed above, the list of independent predictors in the analysis includes sociodemographic factors, measures of political sophistication and personal satisfaction with the political system. Research on protest has often showed a link between age and unconventionality, with older individuals less likely to engage in a protest activity (Schussman and Soule 2005; Caren *et al.* 2011; Melo and Stockemer 2014).

Younger citizens are more quick to choose confrontational actions and less prone to contemplate possible negative consequences for their involvement in contentious politics. Studies on gender have equally and consistently demonstrated that women are usually less likely to choose protest (Rucht 2007), in particular when participation in a street demonstration is the actual measure (Gallego 2007). Similarly, when the actual activity considered is less risky, petition or boycott, the gender gap is less severe (Marien *et al.* 2010; Caren *et al.* 2011) or even reversed (Vassallo and Ding 2016), confirming discussions on the diminished relevance of gender to predict protest (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001; Schussman and Soule 2005). Education has instead revealed to be a very consistent predictor of protest activism over time: people with more education are associated with protest more often (Schussman and Soule 2005; Dalton *et al.* 2010; Dalton 2014), supporting the interpretation that personal resources (knowledge and information) have an impact in the choice to become unconventionally active. Citizens on the left of the political spectrum are also more likely to mobilize and embrace protest, especially during the great recession in Europe (Rüdiger and Karyotis 2014; Torcal *et al.* 2016). Contestation and confrontation against the regime seem to be important elements in the leftist ideology, besides voting.

In regards to the political sophistication realm, information about politics (TV news), level of political interest, proximity to a political party and voting are all useful predictors of whether a person will get involved unconventionally (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Marien *et al.* 2010; Dalton 2014). More knowledge of politics is associated with more protest, as citizens feel better prepared for other forms of political participation, beyond voting. Lower levels of trust in politicians are equally linked to more confrontational activism as people are not confident

politicians can indeed represent their interests. The interpretation of the political system is equally important in the study of mobilization, as people's perceptions of their government and democracy at large impact their choice to become political active, both conventionally and unconventionally. The relationship between satisfaction with the government or democracy and the state of the economy is salient in predicting protest. While the economy has demonstrated to have its own impact on people's levels of satisfaction of the government or democracy (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Cordero and Simón 2016), citizens with a higher level of satisfaction for their government or the functioning of democracy are less prone to choose protest, because they have no strong grievance with regards to the political system and do not feel the need to intervene politically.

In the end, besides the economy, the models that are being tested include all the above possible predictors as control variables in the explanation of high protest action in Europe in 2014.

Findings and Discussion

Levels of Protest After the Crisis

Protest activism in Europe since the global recession has increased unevenly across countries. Table 2 presents national level percentages of individuals who stated in 2008 and 2014 that they signed a petition, participated in a lawful demonstration, or boycotted a certain product. Overall, the EU average reveals a good jump in the number of citizens involved in petitions and boycotts, but a much smaller increase for people participating in street demonstrations⁷. If the economy was linked to confrontational activism, it seems it affected decisions to sign petitions or boycott products with more long term effects than for involvement in street marches. Additionally, the EU average Protest Index is about 38% higher six years after the recession (0.61), supporting claims in the research about an overall stronger mobilization in favor of unconventionality among European citizens, as also suggested by the findings in Table 1.

Yet, in this context of strong contentious politics, only few countries in the EU sample recorded a significant increase in unconventionality. With regards to the national Protest Index, Sweden, France and Germany had significantly higher scores in 2014. In general, 11 out of the 13 countries studied for 2014 showed some mild increase in protest activism⁸. In a comparative analysis for the 2008-2014 period, among the same 13 EU countries, France recorded the highest percentage of people participating in demonstrations (13.5%, although lower than in 2008). Sweden came in first for both petitions and boycotts with respectively 43.6% of individuals (down from 47.2% in 2008) and 47.5% of respondents (a meaningful jump from 37.3% in 2008). Moreover, Sweden still recorded the third highest percentage of demonstration attendance in 2014 (11.0%, almost double its 2008 value of 6.4%). Apparently, the Swedes know and master unconventional involvement.

When looking at the ranking of the countries in the sample, overall higher protest activity at the national level in 2014 confirmed the same top performers in confrontational politics. Graph 1 highlights the strong and significant correlation (.982, sig. $p < .01$) between the national Protest Index values for 2008 and 2014, despite different levels of economic downturn and austerity for the individual countries. For instance, although Ireland was more severely affected by the global recession than Germany, its increased protest activism did not overtake the German

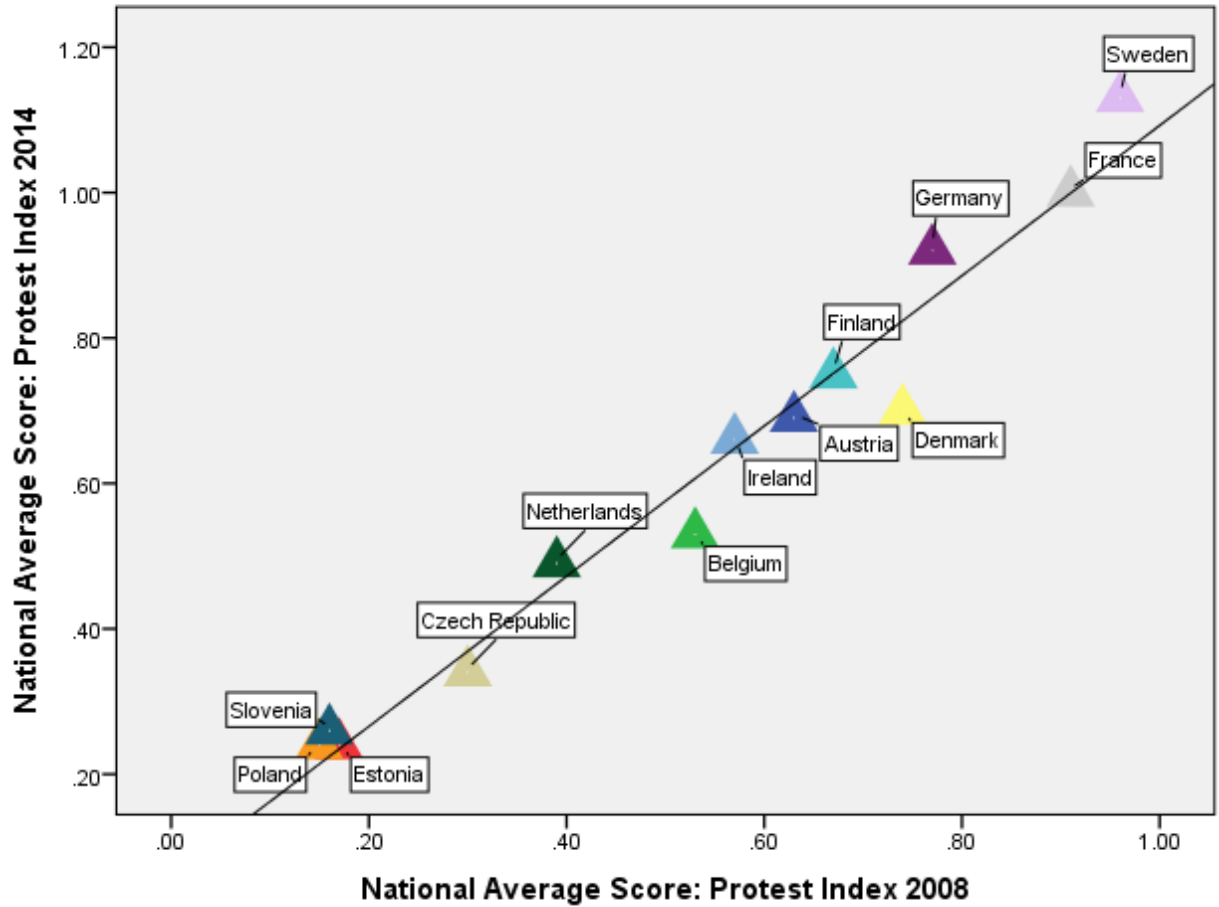
position in the group. The ranking of the most active protesters remains virtually unchanged. Six years after the crisis, protest engagement is still noticeably higher than at the beginning of the crisis, despite the improved financial situation and the possible lack of economic grievances among citizens. If a poor economy is associated with contentious politics, its impact seems to be long term rather than short term only. Once societies embrace protest more convincingly, people include confrontational actions into their repertoire of activism more often.

TABLE 2: Unconventional Political Activism: National Level (%) and Protest Index

COUNTRY	ESS 2014				ESS 2008			
	Signed Petition	Taken Part in Lawful Demonstration	Boycotted Certain Products	Protest Index	Signed Petition	Taken Part in Lawful Demonstration	Boycotted Certain Products	Protest Index
Austria	29.1	7.0	25.5	0.69	23.0	9.3	22.6	0.63
Belgium	23.1	7.2	15.1	0.53	27.6	7.4	11.2	0.53
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	6.5	4.1	3.5	0.17
Cyprus	-	-	-	-	6.3	2.3	6.1	0.16
Czech Republic	16.7	4.5	9.2	0.34	15.2	4.5	7.4	0.30
Denmark	30.5	5.9	27.6	0.70	33.9	9.3	21.5	0.74
Estonia	10.1	3.2	7.9	0.24	8.0	2.1	5.6	0.17
Finland	34.1	2.1	36.5	0.75	32.3	2.5	30.3	0.67
France	38.2	13.5	35.0	1.00	33.6	15.3	27.7	0.91
Germany	36.4	9.6	36.6	0.92	30.8	8.1	31.1	0.77
Greece	-	-	-	-	4.3	6.1	14.4	0.30
Hungary	-	-	-	-	6.8	1.8	5.9	0.16
Ireland	25.5	13.1	14.2	0.66	24.1	9.8	13.6	0.57
Latvia	-	-	-	-	5.5	6.5	5.2	0.23
Lithuania	-	-	-	-	8.9	3.9	2.0	0.18
Netherlands	28.6	2.9	14.6	0.49	23.5	3.3	9.4	0.39
Poland	13.1	2.5	5.7	0.24	7.5	1.6	4.5	0.15
Portugal	-	-	-	-	4.9	3.7	3.2	0.15
Romania	-	-	-	-	3.1	4.3	2.8	0.14
Slovakia	-	-	-	-	19.8	1.7	7.3	0.30
Slovenia	11.6	3.8	6.8	0.26	8.7	1.6	5.1	0.16
Spain	-	-	-	-	17.0	15.9	7.9	0.56
Sweden	43.6	11.0	47.5	1.13	47.2	6.4	37.3	0.96
United Kingdom	-	-	-	-	38.2	3.8	24.2	0.70
EU average	26.2	6.6	21.7	0.61	18.6	6.3	13.5	0.44

Data source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2008 and 2014. Samples were analyzed with weight variable DWEIGHT (design weights), when available. Some countries were not included in each wave of the survey, while data for others for the 2014 wave have not been released yet at the time of data analysis. EU average is for countries in that specific wave only. Values are national percentages of individuals who declared to have done that specific action during the previous 12 months. Protest Index is average of national Protest Index score of scale (0-4): 1 point for signed petition, 1 point for boycott of product and 2 points for participation in lawful demonstration. No action on any of the possible contentious activities is 0 points.

Graph 1: Protest Index 2008 and 2014

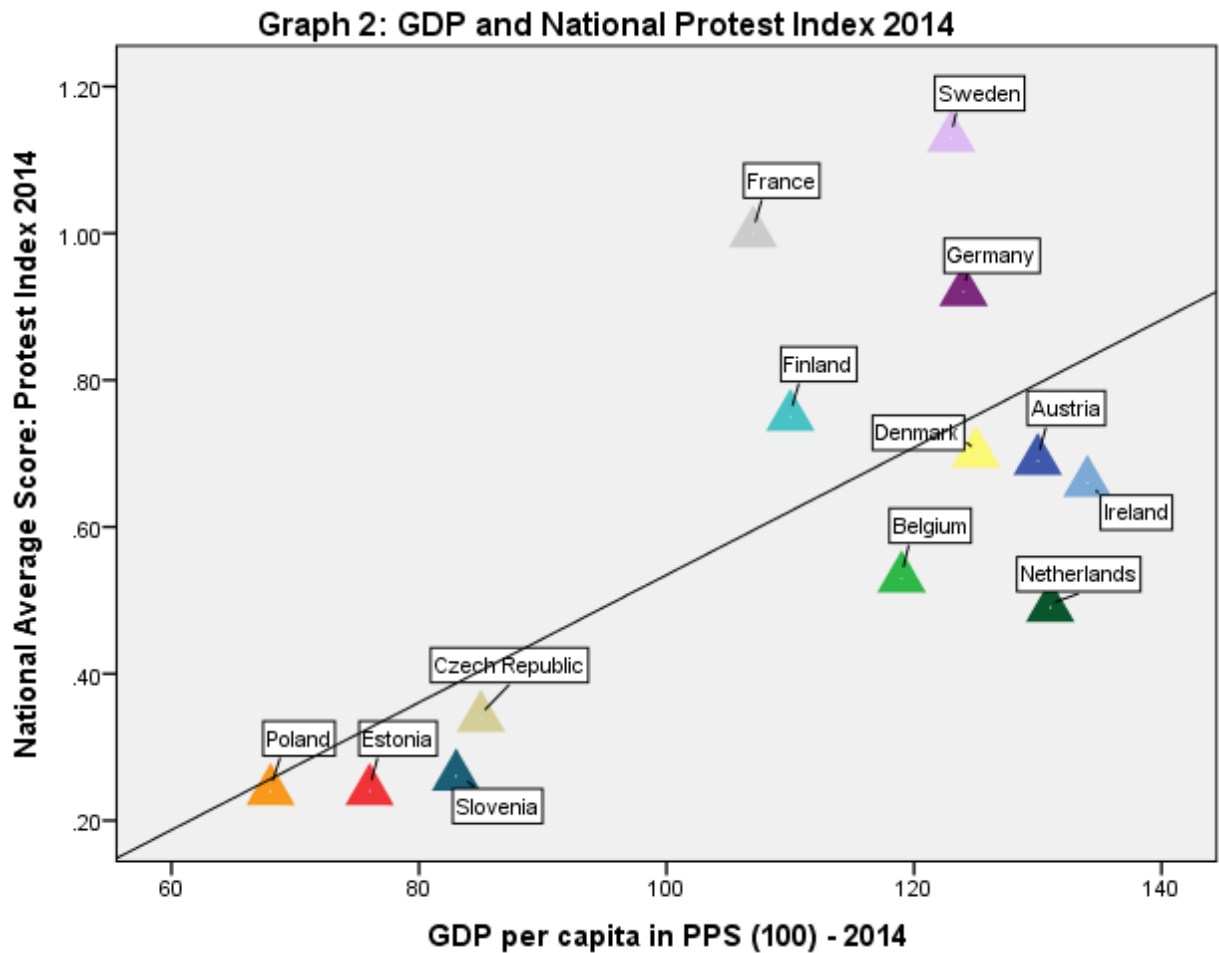


Understanding the Role of Economic Variables

The direction of the relationship between objective economic measures and confrontational action in Europe in 2014 confirms that previous studies on the link between wealth and protest activity are reliable. Well after the recession, GDP per capita and social protection spending are both positively correlated with protest activity. Countries with a higher GDP per capita tend to have a higher national average of protest in general (Graph 2). If the correlation between these two variables is significant and strong (.677, sig. $p < .05$), it is also important to point out that the sample of countries included shows some differences to the extent of this type of link. For instance, from Graph 2, Belgium and Sweden registered a similar GDP per capita value, yet their corresponding levels of protest differed significantly. In a similar case, the positive relationship between social protection expenditures and protest action (Graph 3) highlights the same disparity: with Belgium and Sweden, again, as examples of an overall strong correlation (.712, sig. $p < .01$) between the variables, but very dissimilar numbers for their protest index score.

The two significant correlations still underscore the meaning of the resources based theory of protest, as countries with a better off society are associated with higher levels of protest rather than lower values of unconventionality, as the relative deprivation theory would instead posit. In this circumstance, data for 2014 undermine a grievance approach explanation to protest.

In a related context, correlations for protest and unemployment or economic inequality (not shown here) are not significant, which supports the interpretation of a weaker fit for economic grievance as a driving force of confrontational political action in Europe, six years after the economic crisis.

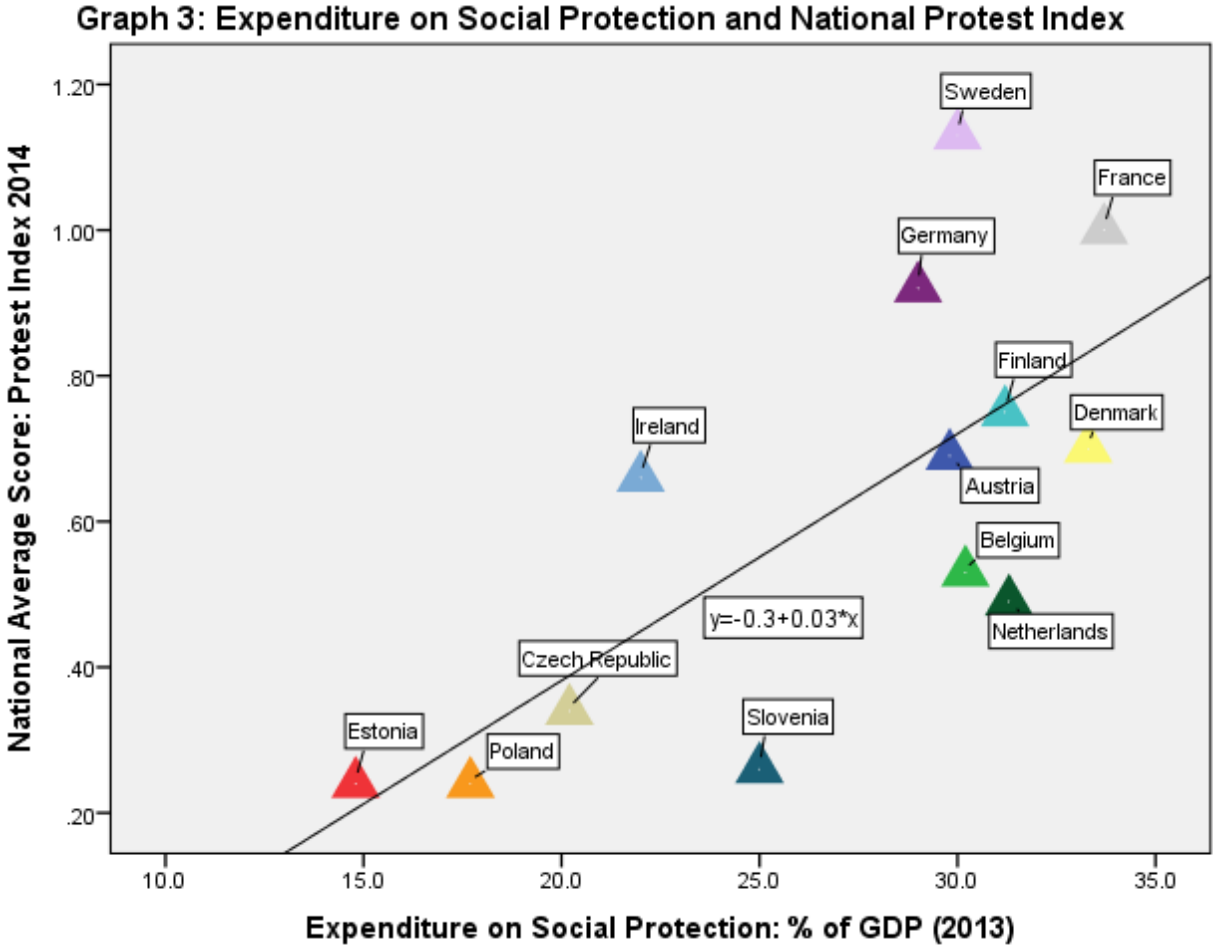


In brief, objective economic indicators are helpful to understand protest activity, but they are certainly not the only variables and their reliability may shift across different countries.

To better understand how different predictors can explain protest, the next analysis employs a multilevel logistic regression, with an ordinal outcome (Heck, Thomas, and Tabata 2012). The fixed effect component is the individual level, whereas the random effect component is the country level. Individuals are grouped within countries and the estimate of the variance component of the country effect in 2014 is 0.274 (sig .049), with an overall prediction accuracy of 60.6% (Model 2 in Table 3a). The same regression for 2008 (Model 2 in Table 3b) has an estimate of the variance component of the country effect of 0.238 (sig .003), with an overall prediction accuracy of 70.2%.

Most of the findings from the logistic regressions correspond to previous results dealing with unconventionality across countries. In the individual level model (Table 3a, Model 1) for 2014, women were still less likely to be involved in high protest action, as well as older

individuals, who generally are more prone to choose conventional forms of political participation, since they are less demanding and risky. People who positioned themselves on the right of the political ideology scale are less likely to embrace high protest as a form of political expression. In contrast, citizens with more education as well as respondents who experienced unemployment for at least 3 months are more likely to get involved in protest, following many studies on the impact of the unemployed in Europe on mobilization levels for confrontational actions, especially among younger participants (Hooghe 2012). Overall, the socio-demographic characteristics of an individual are still important factors to understand why citizens may be more likely to choose disruptive actions when getting involved in politics.



With regards to the political sophistication area of the individual, as mostly expected, people who are close to a specific political party or have voted in the last national election are more likely to engage in more protest. Consistently, individuals with a lower interest in politics are less likely to engage in high protest, as they lack the motivation. However, respondents who stated they watch more news about politics on TV seem to be more passive viewers than active protesters. Overall, a more politically sophisticated person is often linked to high protest action.

Another group of variables that showed interesting findings concerns the satisfaction level with the national government and how democracy works, where the respondents showed

that they can separate their positions towards the government in power from the overall functioning of the democratic system. Individuals who are satisfied with their government do not embrace protest, yet if they are satisfied with the way democracy functions in their country, they are still prone to engage in high protest activism, as citizens feel safe enough to choose confrontational actions and demonstrate a broader repertory of political behavior. The lack of grievances about the functioning of democratic system is not enough to mute protest activity.

When it comes to the main focus of this article, the direction and significance of coefficients for objective economic variables and subjective financial evaluations, the results from Table 3a (Model 1) suggest that people's opinions of the economy do matter. Subjective economic interpretations support mostly a resources based theory of protest, whereas in the multilevel regression (Model 2 in Table 3a) objective economic values present evidence in favor of a positive link between economic wealth and confrontational activism.

For instance, citizens who stated they were satisfied with the state of the economy were more likely to engage in confrontational actions, supporting the positive link between affluence and unconventionality. Yet, individuals who strongly agreed that the government should reduce the income gap in society were associated with high protest, suggesting that some type of economic deprivation still matters in predicting why some respondents choose protest. At the same time, people who stated that living on their household's income was difficult were also less likely to embrace protest, supporting the position that a lack of resources limits the protest choice for citizens in financial need. In brief, the rich are still more likely to choose contentious politics than the poor, a dilemma that remains valid with or without an economic recession.

Among the four national level economic variables in Model 2 (Table 3a), only social protection spending results significant, contrary to recent studies where the other predictors were useful in predicting protest, although looking at data closer in time to the post crisis period. Countries with higher social protection expenditures are associated with higher protest, underscoring again a positive link between the two variables.

As an overall observation, Model 2 (Table 3a) highlights how only one in three personal financial evaluation variables and one in four objective economic predictors are significant in the model. The economy is less useful to predict protest in 2014, when considering the significance of all the other predictors in the same model. In a comparison with data from 2008, at the beginning of the crisis, more economic variables (both objective and subjective predictors) are significant and in the expected direction overall, suggesting that the relevance of the economy was higher in 2008.

To sum up the discussion, H_2 can be accepted as personal evaluations of the economy are still mostly significant, although linked more often to a resources driven theory to explain why Europeans protest in 2014. Even if the economy may have improved, citizens' personal interpretations of their economic situation are more relevant to understand protest. H_1 can be accepted in part as only one of the four variables at the national level (social protection spending) is significant in the model and it does support a positive relationship with protest.

TABLE 3a: Multilevel Ordinal Logistic Regression: Protest Index 2014

Variables	Model 1 (Individual Level)			Model 2 (Individual & Country Level)		
	Coefficient and S.E.	p values	Exp.	Coefficient and S.E.	p values	Exp.
Individual Level (N=19,964)						
Threshold						
No Protest [0]	-1.116 (.143)	.000	0.328	2.284 (1.493)	.126	9.815
Little Protest [1]	0.263 (.143)	.067	1.300	3.746 (1.491)	.012	42.336
Some Protest [2]	1.546 (.146)	.000	4.691	5.066 (1.496)	.001	158.491
Moderate Protest [3]	2.280 (.149)	.000	9.773	5.809 (1.478)	.000	333.328
Individual Demographics						
Gender: Female	-0.226 (.029)	.000	0.798	-0.243 (0.032)	.000	0.785
Age	-0.013 (.001)	.000	0.987	-0.014 (0.003)	.000	0.986
Education	0.073 (.004)	.000	1.075	0.081 (0.011)	.000	1.085
Left/Right Scale	-0.096 (.007)	.000	0.909	-0.095 (0.019)	.000	0.909
Unemployed > 3 Months: Yes	0.253 (.032)	.000	0.798	0.170 (0.042)	.000	1.186
Individual Political Sophistication						
TV Politics News	-0.026 (.013)	.043	0.974	-0.016 (0.014)	.270	0.984
Political Interest	-0.555 (.021)	.000	0.574	-0.529 (0.038)	.000	0.589
Trust in Politicians	-0.015 (.008)	.080	0.985	-0.041 (0.009)	.000	0.960
Close to a Political Party: Yes	0.431 (.032)	.000	1.539	0.371 (0.050)	.000	1.449
Vote: Yes	0.356 (.067)	.000	1.427	0.321 (0.103)	.002	1.379
Vote: No	0.017 (.074)	.822	1.017	-0.038 (0.090)	.673	0.963
Personal Economic Perception						
Satisfaction with Present Economy	0.018 (.008)	.043	1.018	0.011 (0.010)	.300	1.011
Household Income Perception	-0.116 (.022)	.000	0.891	-0.018 (0.029)	.529	0.982
Government Should Reduce Income Differences	-0.059 (.014)	.000	0.942	-0.058 (0.026)	.025	0.944
Personal Satisfaction with Political System						
Satisfaction with National Government	-0.085 (.009)	.000	0.918	-0.051 (0.015)	.000	0.950
Satisfaction with how Democracy Works	0.044 (.008)	.000	1.045	0.007 (0.018)	.713	1.007
Country Level (n=13)						
GDP PPS				0.010 (0.006)	.092	1.010
Unemployment (Adult)				0.033 (0.048)	.493	1.033
Inequality of Income Distribution				0.066 (0.163)	.683	1.069
Social Protection Expenditure				0.062 (0.029)	.032	1.064
Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC)	40983.223			321980.026		
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	41141.256			321987.927		

Dependent variable is Protest Index (at the individual level) in 2014, a score from 0 to 4 (from No Protest to High Protest level). All independent variables at the individual level are from the European Social Survey round 7 (2014), whereas the variables for the country level are from Eurostat for 2014, with the exception of Social Protection Expenditure, which is for 2013 (with the value for Poland from 2012).

TABLE 3b: Multilevel Ordinal Logistic Regression: Protest Index 2008

Variables	Model 1 (Individual Level)			Model 2 (Individual & Country Level)		
	Coefficient and S.E.	p values	Exp.	Coefficient and S.E.	p values	Exp.
Individual Level (N=34,907)						
Threshold						
No Protest [0]	-0.717 (0.119)	.000	0.488	2.591 (0.885)	.003	13.339
Little Protest [1]	0.520 (0.120)	.000	1.682	3.929 (0.886)	.000	50.853
Some Protest [2]	1.645 (0.122)	.000	5.179	5.096 (0.920)	.000	163.294
Moderate Protest [3]	2.643 (0.127)	.000	14.053	6.108 (0.907)	.000	449.279
Individual Demographics						
Gender: Female	-0.235 (0.024)	.000	0.791	-0.254 (0.050)	.000	0.776
Age	-0.011 (0.00)	.000	0.989	-0.015 (0.002)	.000	0.986
Education	0.086 (0.003)	.000	1.090	0.086 (0.006)	.000	1.090
Left/Right Scale	-0.085 (0.005)	.000	0.918	-0.069 (0.014)	.000	0.934
Unemployed > 3 Months: Yes	0.228 (0.027)	.000	1.256	0.062 (0.050)	.216	1.064
Individual Political Sophistication						
TV Politics News	-0.062 (0.010)	.000	0.940	-0.041 (0.009)	.000	0.959
Political Interest	-0.473 (0.016)	.000	0.623	-0.482 (0.029)	.000	0.618
Trust in Politicians	0.026 (0.006)	.000	1.027	-0.015 (0.010)	.125	0.985
Close to a Political Party: Yes	0.468 (0.026)	.000	1.597	0.483 (0.058)	.000	1.622
Vote: Yes	0.071 (0.056)	.213	1.073	0.261 (0.068)	.000	1.298
Vote: No	-0.220 (0.062)	.000	0.803	-0.064 (0.069)	.353	0.938
Personal Economic Perception						
Satisfaction with Present Economy	0.016 (0.006)	.023	1.016	0.010 (0.013)	.434	1.011
Household Income Perception	-0.295 (0.016)	.000	0.744	-0.065 (0.025)	.009	0.937
Government Should Reduce Income Differences	-0.022 (0.012)	.076	0.979	-0.046 (0.023)	.044	0.955
Personal Satisfaction with Political System						
Satisfaction with National Government	-0.067 (0.007)	.000	0.935	-0.068 (0.010)	.000	0.935
Satisfaction with how Democracy Works	0.014 (0.006)	.035	1.014	-0.028 (0.010)	.005	0.972
Country Level (n=24)						
GDP PPS				0.016 (0.005)	.002	1.016
Unemployment (Adult)				0.095 (0.040)	.017	1.100
Inequality of Income Distribution				-0.016 (0.092)	.858	0.984
Social Protection Expenditure				0.043 (0.027)	.122	1.043
Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC)	60401.356			623822.166		
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	60570.565			623830.626		

Dependent variable is Protest Index (at the individual level) in 2014, a score from 0 to 4 (from No Protest to High Protest level). All independent variables at the individual level are from the European Social Survey round 4 (2008), whereas the variables for the country level are from Eurostat (2008).

Conclusions

In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, European citizens took to the streets or occupied public places when their economic grievances were not heard. The recession contributed to higher levels of political engagement, especially as individuals chose protest to express their anger at the political elites and national policies. This article investigated the role of economic variables in predicting unconventional political action in Europe in 2008 and 2014, and across a sample of 13 EU member states. Recent studies on the effect of the economic recession on political behavior have suggested that since 2008 Europeans have embraced confrontational action due to a feeling of economic deprivation: lower salaries, higher unemployment, and budget cuts in social protection and services have turned citizens into activists who want to be heard by their political elites. Yet, six years after the crisis people's perception of the economic situation may not be so dire. As economic growth and GDP per capita have showed to be improving, citizens may not feel any longer the sharp economic deprivation they experienced in the years immediately after the financial collapse. Moreover, the perception of economic standards may have changed, as a newer reality has become a new normal with lower expectations. At the same time, people in Europe may still be living with memories of the financial crisis and a lower confidence in the economy, using their own interpretation of their personal economic wellbeing to make decisions on political action, despite a more positive economic situation in reality.

The analysis of the 2014 data from the European Social Survey supports the claim that overall the economy still matters to understand higher rates of protest across Europe, but objective and subjective economic variables are salient in different ways. Objective economic indicators are not as significant as recent studies have stated in the explanation of protest, and when they are, such as the social protection expenditure variable, they actually present evidence in support of a resources based theory, where a better financial situation encourages citizens to be more politically vocal with their governments, despite the lack of economic grievances.

In regards to the impact of subjective economic assessments, citizens seem to protest due to availability of resources as well as economic grievances. Personal evaluations of the state of the economy and a more difficult financial situation confirm mostly a resources based explanation of protest. Satisfaction with the economy drove citizens to protest, yet dissatisfaction with their income situation kept them away from contentious politics. Individuals who disagreed with the expectation that the government should reduce the income gap were less prone to protest, following a grievances based approach.

In the end, more personal evaluations of the economy were significant in the statistical analysis than objective economic measures. People's interpretations of their own economic wellbeing still seem to matter more often six years after the crisis. Even if the economy is overall not as useful as before in predicting protest, the higher levels of unconventionality recorded in Europe suggest that people can still be mobilized for contentious action, regardless of the *actual* economic situation. The only overall confirmed long term impact from the 2008 recession is a renewed and stronger confrontational activism in Europe.

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Appendix 1: Variable List

Variable	Survey Question	Type	Source
Petition	During the last 12 months, have you signed a petition?	Categorical (no/yes)	European Social Survey
Demonstration	During the last 12 months, have you taken part in a lawful demonstration?	Categorical (no/yes)	European Social Survey
Boycott	During the last 12 months, have you boycotted certain products?	Categorical (no/yes)	European Social Survey
Protest Index	Score composed of petition, demonstration, boycott	Scalar (0=No Protest, 4=High Protest)	European Social Survey
Gender	Sex of respondent	Categorical (female/male)	European Social Survey
Age	Age in years	Continuous	European Social Survey
Education	About how many years of education have you completed?	Continuous	European Social Survey
Left/Right Scale	In politics people sometimes talk of “left” and “right”. Where would you place on this scale?	Scalar (0=Left, 10=Right)	European Social Survey
Unemployed > than 3 months	Have you ever been unemployed and seeking work for a period of more than three months?	Categorical (yes/no)	European Social Survey
TV Politics News	On an average weekday, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs?	Scalar (00=No time at all, 07=More than 3 hours)	European Social Survey
Political Interest	How interested would you say you are in politics?	Scalar (1= Very Interested, 4= Not at all Interested)	European Social Survey
Trust in Politicians	How much you personally trust...	Scalar (0= No Trust at All, 10= Complete Trust)	European Social Survey
Close to a Political Party	Is there a particular political party you feel closer to than all the other parties?	Categorical (yes/no)	European Social Survey
Vote	Did you vote in the last national election...?	Categorical (Yes/No/Not eligible)	European Social Survey
Satisfaction with Economy	On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in your country?	Scalar (0= Extremely Dissatisfied, 10= Extremely Satisfied)	European Social Survey
Household Income Perception	Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household’s income nowadays?	Scalar (1= Living comfortably on present income, 4= Very difficult on present income)	European Social Survey
Government should reduce Income Differences	The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels	Scalar (1= Strongly Agree, 6= Strongly Disagree)	European Social Survey

Satisfaction with National Government	Now thinking about the country government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?	Scalar (0= Extremely Dissatisfied, 10= Extremely Satisfied)	European Social Survey
Satisfaction with how Democracy Works	On the whole how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in country?	Scalar (0= Extremely Dissatisfied, 10= Extremely Satisfied)	European Social Survey
GDP PPS	GDP per capita in PPS - Index (EU28 = 100)	Continuous	Eurostat
Adult Unemployment	Unemployment rate represents unemployed persons as a percentage of the entire labor force (persons aged 15 to 74)	Continuous	Eurostat
Inequality of Income Distribution	Ratio of total income received by the 20 % of the population with the highest income (top quintile) to that received by the 20 % of the population with the lowest income (lowest quintile).	Continuous	Eurostat
Social Protection Expenditure	Expenditure on social protection - % of GDP	Continuous	Eurostat

For more information, check www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/questionnaire and ec.europa.eu/eurostat/.

Endnotes

¹ Kern *et al.* (2015) employ European Social Survey data from 2002 to 2010, whereas Vassallo and Ding (2016) use European Social Survey data from 2008 to 2012. Both of them opted for a multilevel analysis at the individual and country level. Quaranta (2015) focuses only on the macro level (countries) with data from 2000 to 2014.

² Among the EU member states studied in this article, only Finland, the Netherlands and Slovenia had recorded in 2014 lower GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards than in 2008 (Eurostat).

³ EU countries included in the analysis for 2014 are the only ones released so far from Round 7 (October 2015): Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, and Sweden. For the 2008 data analysis (Round 4) the EU countries included are 24 (see Table 2 for the full list).

⁴ For a complete list of variables and measures, see Appendix 1.

⁵ The Principal Components Analysis function in SPSS extracted only one component for each EU country and for the EU at large when the three specific actions were considered (demonstration, petition and boycott). The reliability analysis for the scale returned Cronbach α values from a minimum of 0.341 (the Netherlands) to a maximum of 0.612 (Ireland). The corresponding reliability value for the EU at large was 0.501.

⁶ The use of this type of scale is not always endorsed (see Quaranta 2013), but it is frequently used in the study of unconventional political activism (Dalton *et al.* 2010; Solt 2015; Kern *et al.* 2015; Vassallo and Ding 2016) as it is a good representation of different preferences for unconventionality among citizens, especially from a diverse group of countries.

⁷ This finding confirms the interpretation that participation in a legal demonstration may simply be more challenging and demanding than signing a petition or boycotting a certain product. The equivalence across the diverse protest activities also affects possible evaluations concerning unconventional behavior intensity across countries.

⁸ It is important to also mention the ranking of the four Eastern European countries (Poland, Slovenia, Estonia and the Czech Republic) in the 2014 sample: at the very bottom. This is not unusual, especially when compared to the position of the ten Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) in the larger sample of cases for 2008. The situation on unconventional political behavior in EU members from the former Eastern European area needs a paper in itself to be discussed properly.