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Effects of Democracy and Inequality on Soft Political Protest in Europe

Exploring the European Social Survey Data

ABSTRACT: In this cross-national study, soft political-protest behavior is defined as participation in a legal demonstration, signing a petition, or contacting government officials. We find that in Europe in 2006 (1) the proportion of political protesters is significantly higher in old democracies than in the new, predominantly postcommunist, democracies, and (2) the greater the income inequality in both old and new democracies, the lower the proportion of political protesters. These two regularities, established for country-level data, hold even if the democracy index and gross domestic product per capita are controlled. Using individual-level data, we find that in all countries included in the European Social Survey trust in both parliament and social position positively influences the probability of individuals' protest behavior. Combining both levels of analysis, we pay particular attention to the effects of two macro-characteristics: old/new democracies and income inequality. Both of these characteristics prove to be significant predictors of soft political-protest behavior.

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Classic and recent cross-national studies of political conflict tend to define protest broadly as both unadventurous and rebellious, combining long and short duration, legal and illegal, and violent and nonviolent behavior into a single construct (Dalton and van Sickle 2005; Jenkins and Schock 1992). Yet there is a variety of protest types, each with different country-level economic and political contexts that influence individual expressions of discontent. The most prevalent type of dissent in contemporary Europe consists of conventional performances (Jenkins and Form 2005; Tilly and Tarrow 2007) that we define as *soft political protest*. By this we mean claims directed toward government in a form that is (a) short term, (b) legal and legitimate, and (c) has little potential for violence. In contrast, hard political protest is a protracted conflict that is illegal and illegitimate and has significant potential for violence. In this framework, the adjectives “soft” and “hard” refer to the means of protest, not the content of the claim.

Although harder forms of protest are said to be more effective, there is good reason to remain attentive to soft protest (Jenkins and Form 2005). It remains one of the few popular means of claims-making toward government that has the potential to reduce inequality and positively alter the life chances of members of disadvantaged groups. This article examines the main macro and micro linkages of soft protest, democracy, and economic inequality at the country and individual levels of analysis. In terms of methods, we employ multilevel modeling to the latest round of the European Social Survey (2006).

Research Questions

At the country level, we focus on two frequently discussed issues pertaining to European politics. The first question deals with the division of Europe into “old and new.” Old refers to pre-2004 members of the European Union (EU), plus such countries as Norway and Switzerland. The new Europe refers to those countries that joined the EU in 2004 or later or represent non-EU postcommunist countries of the European continent. *To what extent is the old/new division important for the frequency of soft political-protest behavior?* The literature on the opportunity structures for dissent suggests that old democracies are more conducive to soft-protest behavior than new democracies, since the former have already developed responsive institutions for people’s claims, while the latter are still in the process of institution formation.

The second question pertains to the relationship between the frequency of protest behavior and income inequality. Since almost twenty years ago, when Lichbach noted that “economic inequality may either have positive, negative, or no impact on dissent” (1989: 465), considerable progress has been achieved in understanding the “economic inequality–political conflict nexus” (Reenock, Bernhard, and Sobek; see also Solt 2008). However, for soft political protest in the context of old and new Europe this relationship has not been explored. Thus, we ask: *What is the direction and the strength of the impact of income inequality on the proportion*

of people who engage in soft political protest? In Europe, one can expect differences in contentious politics depending on countries' levels of income inequality. Specifically, polarized societies should engage less in soft protest: as the elites controlling the distribution of resources have very little in common with disadvantaged groups, there is little reason for elites to be moved to protest; in turn, the disadvantaged feel apathetic, also refraining from protest. In contrast, one can argue that low income inequality fosters social integration, stimulating political participation (see also Solt 2008).

We also ask two questions dealing with individual-level characteristics. The first concerns the effect of prodemocratic attitudes: *Is trust in a country's parliament conducive to soft political-protest behavior?* Trust in parliament subsumes a belief that legislators are willing to hear the voice of the people and able to introduce changes in the conditions that bother citizens. In a democratic setting, those who trust parliament are more likely to consider soft political protest a worthwhile pursuit than those who mistrust this institution.

Second, we ask a question about the impact of social position as measured by education, occupation, and income: *Does social position influence the likelihood of soft political-protest behavior?* We expect that, similarly to other forms of political participation, availability of personal resources influences soft political-protest behavior (Gallego 2008; Solt 2008; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). The advantaged should be more likely to protest than the disadvantaged.

To answer questions pertaining simultaneously to the country level and the individual level, we apply two-level modeling. Technically, in the European Social Survey (EES) individuals are "nested" in countries, implying hierarchically structured data. We estimate the impact of country-level characteristics (old/new democracies and income inequality) and individual-level characteristics (trust in parliament and social position) on the probability of soft political-protest behavior.

Data and Measurement

The European Social Survey (2006) contains the following question on different forms of democratic participation:

There are different ways of trying to improve things in [name of a country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the past twelve months, have you done any of the following? Have you:

- a. contacted a politician, government, or local government official?
- b. worked in a political party or action group?
- c. worked in another organization or association?
- d. worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?
- e. signed a petition?
- f. taken part in a lawful public demonstration?
- g. boycotted certain products?

All of the items are political in a broad sense since they refer to the ways that people show their disapproval of the state of affairs controlled by those in power, or want to influence decisions of those in power. The context of the question and the phrasing of the first item, “politician” and “official,” most likely affect the respondent’s interpretation of all enumerated actions in political rather economic or cultural terms. However, only few items are political in the strict sense, as a claim toward the government (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Some people undertake actions such as wearing a campaign badge or boycotting certain products, but they do not direct their behavior toward the government. We also note that some items are not necessarily protest behavior, such as working in a political organization. Thus, lack of a strictly political nature in the case of some items (d, g), and lack of decisive discontent in the case of other items (b, c), do not make them strong indicators of political protest. They are void of face validity. The other items, when taken in a cross-national context, are forms of political protest since they imply claims made directly or indirectly toward government as an expression of discontent (a, e, f).

In conceptual terms, our measure of soft political protest has two dimensions: collectivistic and individualistic. Collectivistic means that the act is designed for the purpose of physical display and the building of solidarity and a person has a sense of being part of a gathering. Public demonstrations are a good example of collectivistic behavior. This can be contrasted with individualistic behavior, when a group’s collective consciousness is not stimulated. The participant is less likely to feel a part of a collective when contacting a politician, government, or local government official. Signing a petition contains both collectivistic aspects (preparing a petition requires cooperation) and individualistic aspects (petition signing is a personal act).

Soft political protest is similar to “conventional” protest, which is said to include legal demonstration and signing petitions (Jenkins and Form 2005). Here we add contacting a politician, government or local government official because we must take into account that soft political protest may be exercised in alternative forms in various countries. In particular, in one country signing a petition can be treated as the functional equivalent of contacting a politician or official in another country. This seems to be especially relevant in countries with weak petition-signing culture, as is the case in new democracies (see Inglehart and Catterberg 2002).

We classify a case as representing soft political behavior if the respondent provided a positive answer to at least one of the items (a, e, or f). In the collectivistic sense, soft political protest involves taking part in lawful public demonstrations. In the individualistic sense, soft political protest includes contacting a politician or official. Signing a petition is an in-between indicator on the collectivistic–individualistic dimension of protest behavior. Our initial approach was to analyze all three indicators along this dimension, giving the most weight to demonstrations and the least to contacting a politician or official. However, different cross-national

patterns of correlations among the three indicators suggest a weak universal underlying construct. Indeed, we noticed that in a few countries people demonstrate but do not contact politicians or officials. In some countries, contacting politicians and officials is much more popular than signing petitions; in other countries the opposite is true.¹

All of these idiosyncratic national patterns suggest that the three indicators under consideration should be treated as alternative expressions of soft political protest rather than cumulative ones—that is, those measuring the intensity of the underlying common phenomenon. Institutional analyses of various forms of protest in Eastern Europe confirm our assertion that the meaning of the protest indicators could be country-specific (for a general argument, see Tilly 2006; in the context of new democracies, see Ekiert and Kubik 1998; Szabó 1996). Thus, for each country included in the ESS-2006 wave we created a dichotomy, dividing all respondents into those who protested in any of three forms—demonstrations, petitions, contacts—and the rest.

At the country level, the proportion of protesters varies from 0.09 (for Bulgaria) to 0.51 (for Sweden), with a mean value of 0.31, and a standard deviation of 0.46. To explain this large cross-national variability, we classified France, United Kingdom, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, and Portugal as “old” democracies, and Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Cyprus, Estonia, Slovenia, Russia, and Ukraine as “new” democracies. We use the Gini index (CIA 2008) to reflect the level of income inequality. Control variables are the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) Democracy Index (Kekic 2007) and gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (purchasing power parity; PPP) (World Bank 2007).

We chose the EIU Democracy Index for two reasons. First, it is a very comprehensive measure, covering five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture (Kekic 2007: 2). Second, it correlates highly with other indexes of democracy, the Democracy, Market, and Transparency (Salvia and Alberro 2007), and the Everyday Democracy Index (Skidmore and Bound 2008) in particular ($r > 0.920$). In addition, we should note that the gross national product per capita correlates highly with the Human Development Index (UNDP 2006), with $r = 0.935$. Thus, our control variables capture a broad political and economic context.

In the case of individual variables, we measure trust in parliament on the basis of the following European Social Survey item: “On a scale of zero to ten how much do you personally trust parliament? Zero means you do not trust this institution at all, and ten means you have complete trust.” We moved this scale by one point, reserving zero for those who did not vote in the last parliamentary election. We assumed that if people did not vote in parliamentary elections, they had no faith in the institution.

Social position is a linear combination of education, occupation, and income. In the case of education we rely on years of schooling, corrected for some cross-national

inconsistencies. In particular, we noted that in some countries tertiary education exceeded its equivalent in other countries, so we limited this indicator to eighteen years, except in the case of Ph.D. degrees, for which we allowed twenty-four years. For the best synthetic indicator of occupation we experimented with socioeconomic status and prestige scores (Ganzeboom and Treiman 2003; Ganzeboom, De Graaf, and Treiman 1992), and found that having a skilled nonmanual job is most indicative of one's social position. Finally, in the measure of social position we included household income transformed into midpoint cumulative distribution of all descriptive categories of the ESS. Generally, all three indicators were highly correlated with the factor: education (0.818), occupation (0.776), and income (0.635). The eigenvalue of the factor is 1.676, and the proportion of common variance, 55.80.

Results

Country-Level Analysis

Table 1 addresses the question "To what extent is the old/new division important for the frequency of soft political-protest behavior?" The table provides the proportion of soft protesters for all countries included in the ESS-2006 wave, along with other country-level variables from other sources.

Old democracies have a higher mean proportion of soft protesters (0.395) than new democracies (0.176), a statistically significant difference ($F = 35.02$, $p < 0.01$; $\eta^2 = 0.625$). Figure 1 illustrates that the old/new democracy divide is a substantial factor in explaining soft political protest. In this figure, the x -axis represents the values of the democracy index (EIU) and the y -axis provides a proportion of soft political-protesters. There is a strong linear relationship between soft political-protest and democracy: old democracies cluster in the upper right quadrant, and new, post-communist democracies lean toward the lower left quadrant, with Russia as the extreme outlier.

Figure 2 addresses the question "What is the direction and strength of the impact of income inequality on the proportion of people who engage in soft political protest?" Countries are plotted using the predicted proportion of soft political protesters and the Gini index. Figure 2 demonstrates that income inequality has a strong, predominantly linear relationship to soft political protest, although the growth model provides somewhat better fit.

The Gini index is moderately correlated with the old/new democracy divide ($r = -0.193$), showing that current income inequality in postcommunist countries is, on average, higher than in the rest of Europe.² Taking this into account, we performed ordinary least squares regression of the proportion of soft protesters on these two predictors: the old democracy and the Gini index (Table 2). Initially, we analyze these variables in the basic model, without any controls. The effects of both variables are strong and statistically significant. In the extended model we control for the democracy index (EIU) and GDP per capita. In both models, the old/new

Table 1

Country-Level Variables

Country	Proportion of political protesters ^a	Old democracy (yes = 1, otherwise = 0) ^b	Democratization index (EIU) ^c	Gini index ^d	GDP per capita (PPP), in thousands of U.S. dollars ^e
Austria	0.37	1	8.69	0.26	36.000
Belgium	0.42	1	8.15	0.28	33.500
Bulgaria	0.09	0	7.01	0.32	10.300
Cyprus	0.24	0	7.60	0.29	25.900
Denmark	0.47	1	9.52	0.24	35.700
Estonia	0.16	0	7.74	0.34	19.000
Finland	0.42	1	9.25	0.26	33.000
France	0.45	1	8.07	0.28	32.000
Germany	0.35	1	8.82	0.28	32.300
Hungary	0.17	0	7.53	0.28	18.300
Ireland	0.39	1	9.01	0.32	40.300
Netherlands	0.30	1	9.66	0.31	36.600
Norway	0.50	1	9.55	0.28	50.100
Poland	0.10	0	7.30	0.36	14.800
Portugal	0.13	1	8.16	0.38	20.800
Russia	0.16	0	5.02	0.41	13.100
Slovakia	0.25	0	7.40	0.26	17.700
Slovenia	0.26	0	7.96	0.24	24.300
Spain	0.34	1	8.34	0.32	28.600
Sweden	0.51	1	9.88	0.23	34.200
Switzerland	0.42	1	9.02	0.34	37.200
Ukraine	0.16	0	6.94	0.31	6.200
United Kingdom	0.47	1	8.08	0.34	33.100
All	0.31	—	8.20	0.30	27.520

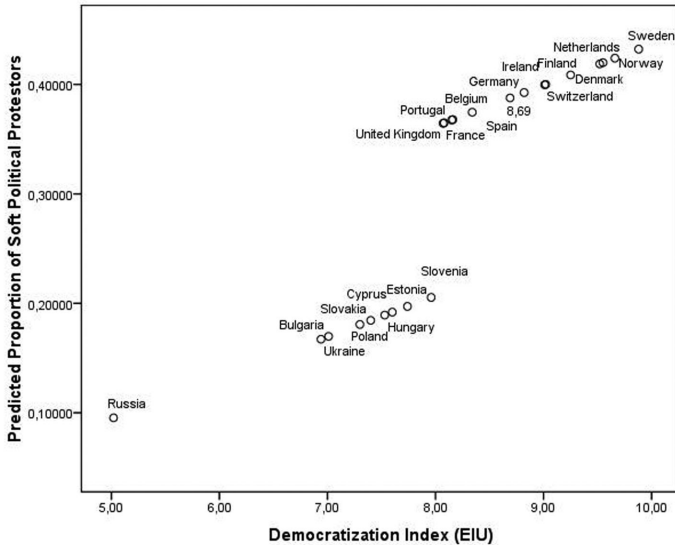
^aFor a definition of political protesters, see text.

^bOld democracies include pre-2004 EU members plus Norway and Switzerland; the category “otherwise” can be equated with “new democracies.”

^cThe Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit) is for 2006 but the most constitutive variables refer to earlier years (Laza Kekic, Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index [2007]; available at www.economist.com/media/pdf/DEMOCRACY_INDEX_2007_v3.pdf [accessed May 1, 2008]).

^dThe Gini index is for 2002–5 depending on the country, see Distribution of Family Income—Gini index, Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, updated January 24, 2008.

Figure 1. Predicted Proportion of Political Protesters for Old Democracies and Postcommunist Democracies



Notes: Old democracies—upper cluster; postcommunist democracies—lower cluster.

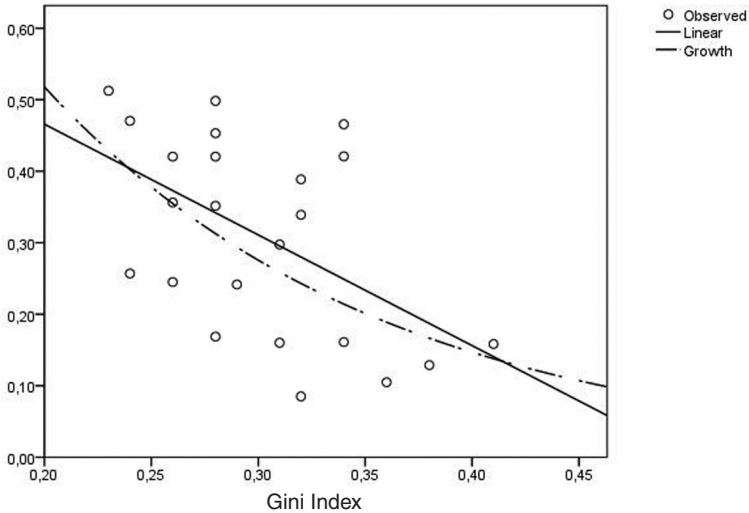
democracy divide and economic inequality are statistically significant. Protest is more frequent in old democracies than in new ones. As economic inequality rises, the proportion of soft political protesters declines.

In relative terms, as evaluated by beta coefficients, the greatest impact on the proportion of soft political protesters is the level of economic development (measured by GDP per capita). Protest is more likely to occur in wealthier countries than in poorer countries. According to the beta coefficient, a one standard deviation change in GDP per capita produces a change in the dependent variable of more than half a standard deviation. However, even if the level of economic development is taken into account, the effect of old democracies is greater than that of the remaining variables. Still, in countries with higher income inequality we observe less protest participation than in countries with lower income inequality.³ Controlling for all of these variables shows that within old and new democracies, the higher the level of democracy the lower the level of protest behavior. Altogether, we note a fairly high adjusted R^2 (0.835), indicating that our model explains a large proportion of the variance in soft political-protest participation.

Individual-Level Analysis

For individual-level variables, gender and age are standard predictors in political participation models, and thus are used as control variables here (Gallego 2008).

Figure 2. Proportion of Political Protestors and Gini Index



Model Summary and Parameter Estimates; Dependent Variable: Proportion of Political Protestors

Equation	Model summary					Parameter estimates	
	R^2	F	df1	df2	Sig.	Constant	b_1
Linear	0.270	7.771	1	21	0.011	0.775	-1.548
Growth	0.292	8.671	1	21	0.008	0.603	-6.306

In the context of these two demographic indicators, we test the hypotheses that the effects of trust in parliament and social position positively influence the probability of people’s soft political protest. The relevant analysis for all countries with appropriate data is presented in Table 3.

In almost all countries, the effect of gender is negligible, or men are slightly more prone to protest. However, in three countries—Denmark, Finland, and Sweden—women have significantly greater chances to protest than men. Age typically has a curvilinear relationship, with the young and the old less likely to participate than those in the middle of the age distribution. The effect of age is usually statistically significant.

Our analysis provides strong support for the hypothesis that trust in parliament and social position positively influences the probability of people’s engagement in soft political protest. In the case of trust in parliament, the effects are not statistically

Table 2

Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Proportion of Political Protesters on Old/New Democracies, Income Inequality, and Control Variables

Variables	Basic model ^a			Extended model ^b		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Old/new democracies (old = 1, otherwise = 0)	0.198	0.031	0.717	0.133	0.048	0.481
Income inequality (Gini index)	-1.136	0.329	-0.381	-1.168	0.345	-0.392
Democracy index (EIU)	—	—	—	-0.048	0.024	-0.390
Economic development (GDP per capita, PPP)	—	—	—	0.008	0.002	0.648
Constant	0.530	0.105	—	0.750	0.240	—

^a $F = 43.6$, adj. $R^2 = 0.742$

^b $F = 28.8$, adj. $R^2 = 0.835$

significant in only three cases—Belgium, Poland, and Sweden. In the remaining cases, we observe significant effects in the postulated direction although they are relatively small in magnitude. The exponent of the *B* coefficient indicates that increase in trust by one unit increases the chances of protest by about 5 percent, with the exception of Bulgaria, Portugal, and Switzerland, where it increases the odds by more than 10 percent.

In the case of social position, the effect is significant in each country. Advantaged social position leads to higher likelihood of soft political-protest behavior. In Austria, Norway, and Sweden an increase in social position by one standard deviation boosts the chances of undertaking soft political protest by 15 to 20 percent. In all other countries the corresponding figure is over 30 percent, and in some countries—Bulgaria, France, Poland, and Slovenia—it exceeds 50 percent. Thus, the hypothesis stating that social position positively influences the probability of people's soft political protest is strongly confirmed.

Multilevel Analysis

Do country-level effects influence individual soft political-protest behavior? If researchers want to account for the effects of country-level characteristics on the

Table 3

Logistic Regression of Soft Political-Protest Behavior on Gender, Age, Trust in Parliament, and Social Position, for Nineteen Countries

Countries ^a	Gender	Age	Age squared	Trust in parliament	Social position	Constant	Nagelkerke R^2
Austria	B 0.065	0.043 [#]	-0.050 [#]	0.073 [#]	0.180 [#]	-1.678 [#]	0.050
	Exp(B) 1.067	1.044	0.951	1.076	1.197	0.187	
Belgium	B -0.169	0.030 [†]	-0.049 [#]	0.027	0.335 [#]	-0.560	0.092
	Exp(B) 0.844	1.031	0.952	1.027	1.397	0.571	
Bulgaria	B 0.074	-0.006	-0.007	0.121 [#]	0.595 [#]	-2.464 [#]	0.104
	Exp(B) 1.077	0.994	0.993	1.129	1.813	0.085	
Denmark	B -0.368 [#]	-0.028	-0.004	0.070 [#]	0.358 [#]	1.082 [†]	0.144
	Exp(B) 0.692	0.973	0.996	1.072	1.430	2.949	
Finland	B -0.303 [#]	-0.018	0.012	0.077 [#]	0.358 [#]	0.663 [†]	0.154
	Exp(B) 0.739	0.982	0.988	1.080	1.431	1.940	
France	B 0.036	0.003	-0.019	0.049 [#]	0.433 [#]	-0.045	0.095
	Exp(B) 1.037	1.003	0.981	1.050	1.542	0.956	
Germany	B -0.255 [#]	0.032 [†]	-0.039 [†]	0.068 [#]	0.325 [#]	-1.192 [#]	0.068
	Exp(B) 0.775	1.032	0.962	1.071	1.384	0.304	
Ireland	B -0.046	0.039 [†]	-0.050 [†]	0.040 [†]	0.292 [#]	-1.195 [#]	0.053
	Exp(B) 0.955	1.040	0.952	1.041	1.339	0.303	

Netherlands	B	0.139	0.031	-0.038 [*]	0.045 [*]	0.354 [#]	-1.656 [#]	0.064
	Exp(B)	1.150	1.031	0.962	1.046	1.425	0.191	
Norway	B	0.004	-0.001	-0.021	0.061 [#]	0.246 [#]	0.226	0.080
	Exp(B)	1.004	0.999	0.979	1.062	1.279	1.254	
Poland	B	0.610 [#]	0.048	-0.058 [†]	0.062 [†]	0.571 [#]	-3.496 [#]	0.123
	Exp(B)	1.840	1.049	0.044	1.064	1.770	0.030	
Portugal	B	0.443 [*]	0.110 [#]	-0.107 [#]	0.108 [#]	0.509 [#]	-5.148 [#]	0.126
	Exp(B)	1.557	1.116	0.898	1.114	1.663	0.006	
Russia	B	-0.254 [†]	0.023	-0.009	0.056 [#]	0.375 [#]	-2.595 [#]	0.057
	Exp(B)	0.776	1.023	0.991	1.057	1.455	0.075	
Slovakia	B	0.342 [*]	0.024	-0.027	0.075 [#]	0.281 [#]	-1.916 [#]	0.055
	Exp(B)	1.408	1.024	0.973	1.077	1.324	0.147	
Slovenia	B	0.240 [†]	0.005	-0.036	0.080 [#]	0.512 [#]	-0.876 [†]	0.166
	Exp(B)	1.272	1.005	0.965	1.083	1.669	0.417	
Spain	B	0.099	0.087 [#]	-0.113 [#]	0.074 [#]	0.277 [#]	-2.185 [#]	0.134
	Exp(B)	1.104	1.091	0.894	1.077	1.319	0.112	
Sweden	B	-0.033	0.050 [#]	-0.058 [#]	-0.007	0.193 [#]	-0.723	0.038
	Exp(B)	0.968	1.051	0.944	0.993	1.213	0.485	
Switzerland	B	-0.020	0.064 [#]	-0.075 [#]	0.130 [#]	0.300 [#]	-1.695 [#]	0.137
	Exp(B)	0.980	1.067	0.928	1.139	1.349	0.184	
United Kingdom	B	-0.132	0.069 [#]	-0.057 [#]	0.062 [#]	0.297 [#]	-1.997 [#]	0.078
	Exp(B)	0.877	1.071	0.945	1.064	1.346	0.136	

^aCyprus, Estonia, Hungary, and Ukraine are not included due to a lack of appropriate data for the measurement of social position.
[†] $p < 0.10$; ^{*} $p < 0.05$; [#] $p < 0.01$.

Table 4

Logistic Regression of Soft Political-Protest Behavior on Individual and Aggregate Characteristics: Two-Level Model

Variables	Coefficient	Standard error	z-test	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Higher
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	0.283	0.064	4.40	0.157	0.410
Age (years)	0.039	0.011	3.62	0.018	0.060
Age squared (years × years / 100)	-0.055	0.011	-4.95	-0.077	-0.033
Trust in parliament (scale from 0 to 11)	0.083	0.011	7.67	0.062	0.105
Social position (normalized scale)	0.429	0.031	13.95	0.369	0.490
Old/new democracies (old = 1, otherwise = 0)	0.825	0.093	8.89	0.643	1.007
Economic inequality (Gini index)	-4.870	1.278	-3.81	-7.347	-2.366
Constant	-0.985	0.438	-2.25	-1.844	-0.126

Log likelihood = -12,229.05, Wald χ^2 (df = 7) = 504.07; *n* groups = 19, *n* observations = 28,360.

probability of individual behavior, they have to take into account that the variance of country-level characteristics is restricted. The main issue here is whether, controlling for individual-level variables, the effects of country-level variables remain substantively and statistically significant. Table 4 presents a standard two-level model in which individuals are “nested” in countries (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008).

As Table 4 shows, country-level variables of old democracy and economic inequality significantly and substantively influence the chances of being involved in soft political protest and are in the expected directions. Soft political-protest behavior is more likely in old democracies, while economic inequality depresses such behavior. In this model, all individual-level variables—gender, age, trust in parliament, and social position—are statistically significant and perform as hypothesized.

Conclusion and Discussion

In the field of political conflict analysis, cross-national studies that empirically examine multilevel linkages between political protest, democracy, and economic

inequality in contemporary Europe are underrepresented. Complicating this research situation is that conceptual and empirical models often group divergent forms of protest together in the same construct. We examine soft political protest—defined as participation in a legal demonstration, signing a petition, or contacting politicians or officials—as a particular form that has its own properties and determinants.

We find that in the old democracies of Europe the proportion of political protesters is significantly higher than in the new, predominantly postcommunist, democracies. This is in agreement with both “political opportunity” and “legacies of communism” theses. On the one hand, old democracies have institutions that are responsive to protest behavior. On the other, “many structural, institutional, and cultural legacies of communism have a demobilizing impact on contentious collective action” (Greskovits 1998: 17).

We also find that the greater the income inequality in both old and new democracies, the lower the proportion of political protesters, even if the democracy index and GDP per capita are controlled. We interpret this result as supporting the “egalitarian hypothesis,” according to which low income inequality fosters social integration, stimulating political participation (Solt 2008).

Using individual-level data, we find that in all countries included in the ESS both trust in parliament and social position positively influence the probability of individuals’ protest behavior. Combining both levels of analysis, macrocharacteristics of old/new democracies and income inequality proved to be significant predictors of soft political-protest behavior.

The implications of this study are that people in new, postcommunist democracies with weak trust in parliament and low social position—the ones who are most influenced by macro-level social inequality—disengage themselves from the political actions that can improve their life chances. As within-nation income inequality rises (Firebaugh 2000), we can expect polarization between income groups in obtaining the useful political experience of challenging the state. Divergent political biographies of the haves and have-nots can reduce social solidarity, leading to complacency and apathy on the part of the ever-increasing lower economic strata, and the creation of a politically insulated, self-interested elite.

We suggest the following research questions for future cross-national studies in political conflict:

(A) *What specific aspects of the political and economic transformation of new democracies depress soft political-protest behavior?* This study has shown that trust in parliament is conducive to soft political-protest behavior; it is also known that trust in parliament is weaker in new democracies than in old ones (Slomczynski and Janicka 2007). What are the interactions of radical social change and trust in parliament that influence soft political protest?

(B) *What are the consequences of soft political protest for income inequality?* Much of the research in political conflict examines the influence of income inequality. More research is needed on the economic consequences of political conflict in European democracies, including how long it takes for such protest to exert effects.

(C) *To what extent do the country and individual-level determinants of soft political protest hold for hard political protest?* This is an empirical question that cannot be answered with ESS data. We suggest research on hard political protest using survey data that has specific information on protracted, illegal and illegitimate, and high violence-potential protest behaviors.

Notes

1. For example, in Sweden signing a petition is almost three times as frequent as contacting politicians or officials; in Ukraine contacting politicians or officials is almost two times as frequent as signing a petition. Generally, in postcommunist countries the ratio of two frequencies, signing a petition and contacting politicians or officials, is lower than in the rest of Europe—on average, 0.960 to 1.817, respectively. However, in these parts of Europe the correlations between the two items are almost identical—on average, 0.185 and 0.182.

2. For an analysis of a radical social change in income distribution in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the transformation, see Atkinson and Micklewright (1992).

3. On increasing income inequality, see Gottschalk and Smeeding (2000) and Firebaugh (2000).

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