

The Impact of the Economic Recession on Protest Participation in Europe

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Abstract: The European recession from 2008 has been linked to higher political unconventionality across countries in recent studies. Research on the impact of the economic downturn on people’s engagement in protest has focused on data mostly from 2008 to 2012. Recent findings have supported a relative deprivation theory based explanation of why Europeans choose to participate in street marches. This article assesses the relationship between the economy and protest in 2014, six years after the crisis took place, a long enough period for countries to have improved their economic situation and for people’s interpretations of the economy to be less relevant. Does the economy still matter to explain protest if it is not as salient any longer? This research employs data for 13 European Union member states from the 2014 European Social Survey to test the importance of national level objective economic indicators as well as individual level evaluations of the economy to study the link between confrontational activism and economic variables well after the economic recession. Some of the findings suggest a limited relevance of the economy in the explanation of protest, for objective economic variables, yet a more salient role for personal interpretations of economic wellbeing.

Keywords: austerity, economic recession, European public opinion, deprivation theory, protest activism

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Introduction

Over the last few years Europeans have generally experienced a poor economic situation, with higher unemployment rates and painful austerity measures. In most cases, citizens in Europe reacted to this sharp economic decline in their daily lives with a strong opposition to their own government (Della Porta, 2015; Trezz *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 unconventional 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 2014 round. 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 measure 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 scholars 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, embracing 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 resource 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 article introduces the literature on protest and economic performance, whereas the third section presents the data and the hypotheses. A section on discussion of the findings follows, with the conclusions at the end of the article to summarize its main contributions.

How the Economy fits in Protest

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 article, 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 factors: 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 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 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 individual assessments of the 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: 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 from participating in politics. 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). It seemed that 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 milder economic situation and a new perception with regards to personal economic wellbeing that can invalidate the relationship between a poor economic state and protest action in Europe.

Modelling 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 matters six years after the economic collapse hit in 2008. This research uses 2014 data from the ESS Round 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 will 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, lower levels of unemployment and economic inequality will still lead to more protest.

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 13 EU member states³ from Round 7 of the European Social Survey. The analysis employs a multilevel multinomial logistic regression, with a categorical 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 by country and the estimate of the variance component of the country effect is 0.273, with an overall prediction accuracy of 60.6%. 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 scale⁴ (Protest Index) for each respondent in the survey and it ranges from 0 (no protest) to 4 (high protest level)⁵.

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 reduced 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 to 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 (Rüdig 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 model tested includes 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 1 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 demonstrations⁶. 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.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

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 higher scores in 2014. In general, 11 out of the 13 countries studied showed some mild increase in protest activism. 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 doubled 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**) 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, regardless of the improved financial situation and the possible lack of economic grievances among citizens. If the 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 more often confrontational actions into their repertoire of activism.

[GRAPH 1 ABOUT HERE]

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 associated 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*), 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 1, 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 highlights the same disparity: with Belgium and Sweden, again, as examples of an overall strong correlation (.712**) between the variables, but very dissimilar numbers for their protest index score.

[GRAPH 2 ABOUT HERE]
[GRAPH 3 ABOUT HERE]

The two significant correlations still underscore the meaning of the resource-based theory of protest, as countries with a better off society are associated to higher levels of protest rather than lower values of unconventionality, as the relative deprivation theory would instead posit. In this circumstance, data for 2014 undermines a grievance approach explanation to protest. In a related context, correlations for protest and unemployment or economic inequality 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.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

To better understand how different predictors can explain protest, Table 2 presents the results from a multilevel multinomial logistic regression, whose data analysis was performed in SPSS. Most of the findings correspond to previous results dealing with unconventionality across countries. In 2014, women were still less likely to be involved in high protest action (which is the reference category in the regression), as well as older individuals, who generally are more prone to choose conventional forms of political participation, since they are less demanding and risky. In contrast, citizens with more education as well as respondents who positioned themselves on the extreme and center left of the political ideology scale are more likely to engage in high protest action. The analysis also suggests that citizens who did not experience unemployment for at least 3 months are still more likely to get involved in protest, undermining a deprivation oriented explanation of unconventionality in 2014, despite many studies on the impact of the unemployed in Europe on mobilization levels for confrontational actions, especially among younger participants. 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 with a higher interest in politics, a lower level of trust in politicians, not close to a specific political party, but who have voted, are more likely to engage in more protest. In this group of predictors, the only variable that does not behave as anticipated is the existence of proximity to a political party. It seems that citizens who do not feel close to a specific political party have more reasons to become unconventional participants, likely because they do not have a party to go to in case they want their specific interests represented, and consequently they have to take matters into their own hands, so to speak.

Another group of variables that showed surprising findings concerns the satisfaction level with the national government and how democracy works. Both predictors are positively linked to higher protest levels, suggesting again that even individuals who are satisfied with their government and the way democracy functions in their country are prone to embrace more protest, likely because unconventionality is part of their political behavior repertory and they feel safe enough to choose confrontational actions. The lack of grievances about the performance of the national government or the functioning of democracy 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 economic evaluations, the results from Table 2 suggest that people's opinions of the economy do linger, longer than the actual state of the economy. Subjective economic interpretations support mostly a grievance oriented theory of protest, whereas objective economic values present evidence in favor of a positive link between economic stability and confrontational activism. For instance, citizens who were extremely dissatisfied with the economy or strongly agreed that the government should reduce the income gap in society were associated with protest. Some type of economic deprivation still matters in predicting why some respondents choose protest. However, even individuals who stated they were very satisfied with the state of the economy were more likely to engage in confrontational actions, supporting the positive link between wealth and unconventionality.

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

To sum up, H_2 can be accepted as personal evaluations of the economy are still mostly significant and linked to a deprivation theory to explain why Europeans protest in 2014. Even if the economy may have improved, citizens' interpretations of their economic situation take longer to adjust to the new financial state. H_1 can be accepted in part only 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.

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 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 economic 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.

The analysis of the 2014 data from the European Social Survey supports the claim that 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 resource 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 subjective economic assessments, citizens seem to still be living in the crisis era. Personal evaluations of the state of the economy and the need to close the income gap confirm mostly a deprivation based explanation. Individuals who were extremely dissatisfied with the economy and strongly agreed with the expectation that the government should reduce the income gap were more prone to protest. Yet, people who also were quite satisfied with the state of the economy were more likely to engage in unconventionality as well.

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 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.

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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 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

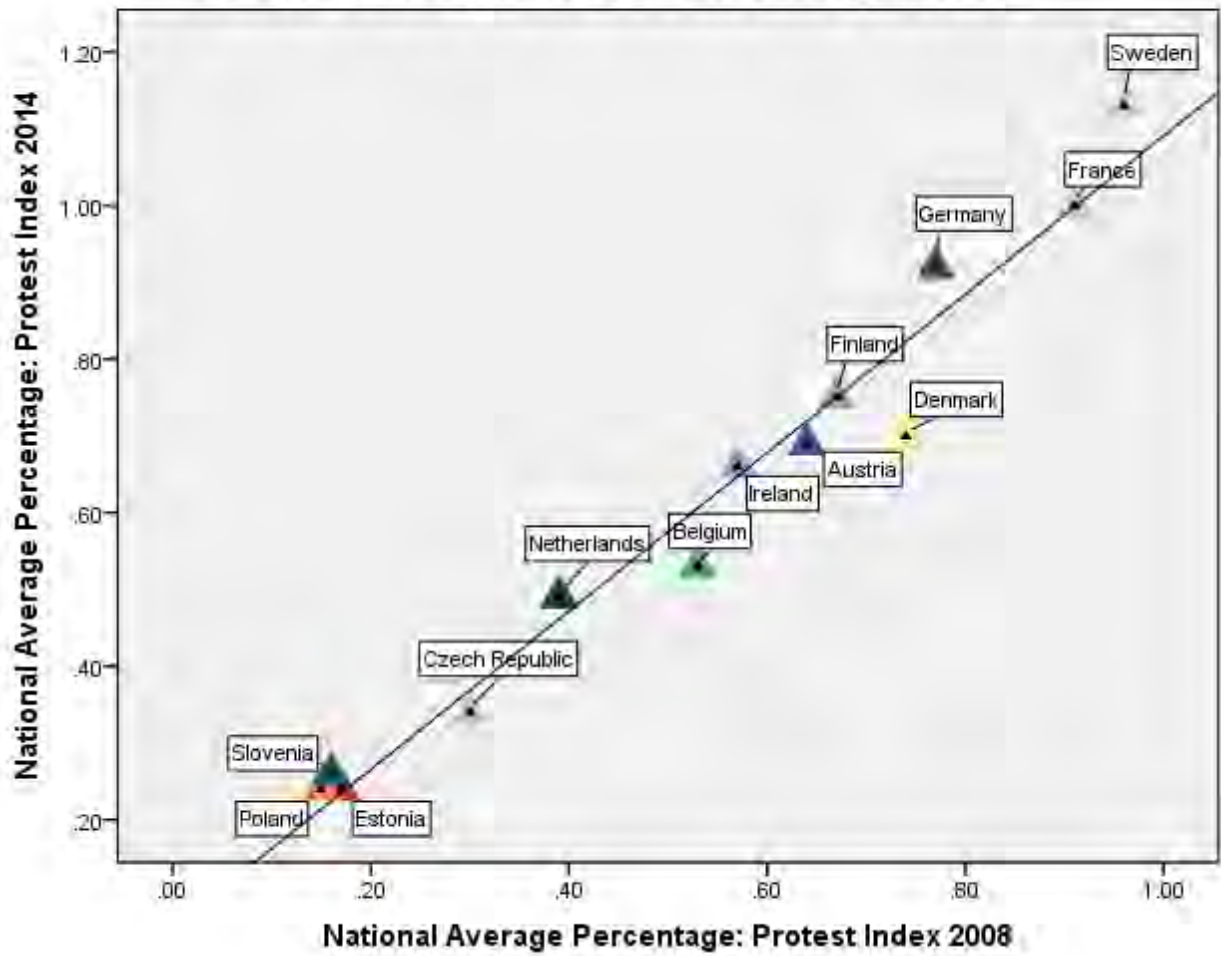
TABLES AND GRAPHS

TABLE 1: 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	0.64
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
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
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

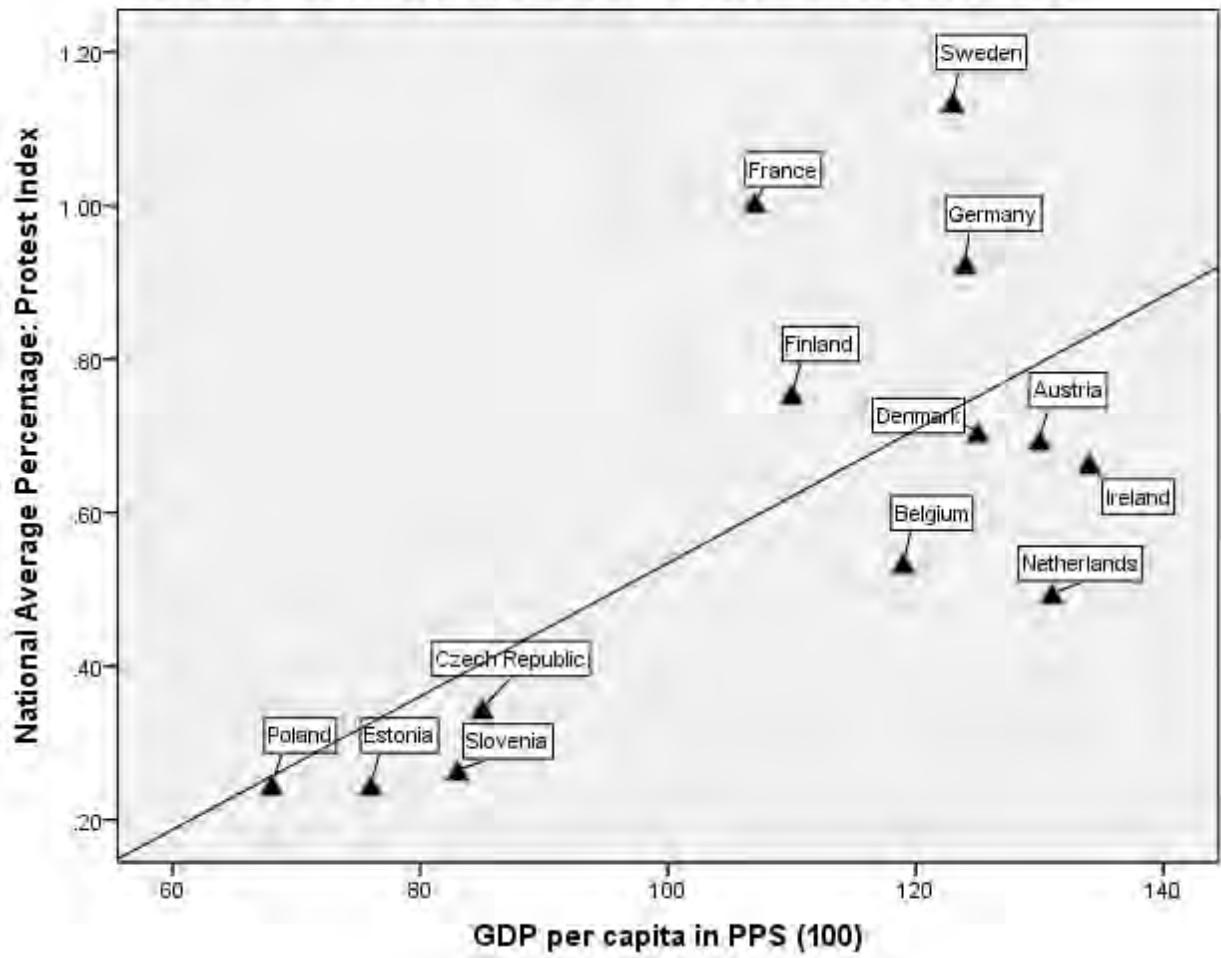
Data source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2008 and 2014. Samples were analyzed with weight variable DWEIGHT (design weights). Some countries were not included in each wave of the survey, while data for others for the 2014 wave have not been released yet at the time of data analysis. Values are national percentages of individuals who declared to have done that specific action during the previous 12 months. Protest Index is average national 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. EU average is for countries in that specific wave only.

GRAPH 1 - Scatterplot: Protest Index 2008 against 2014



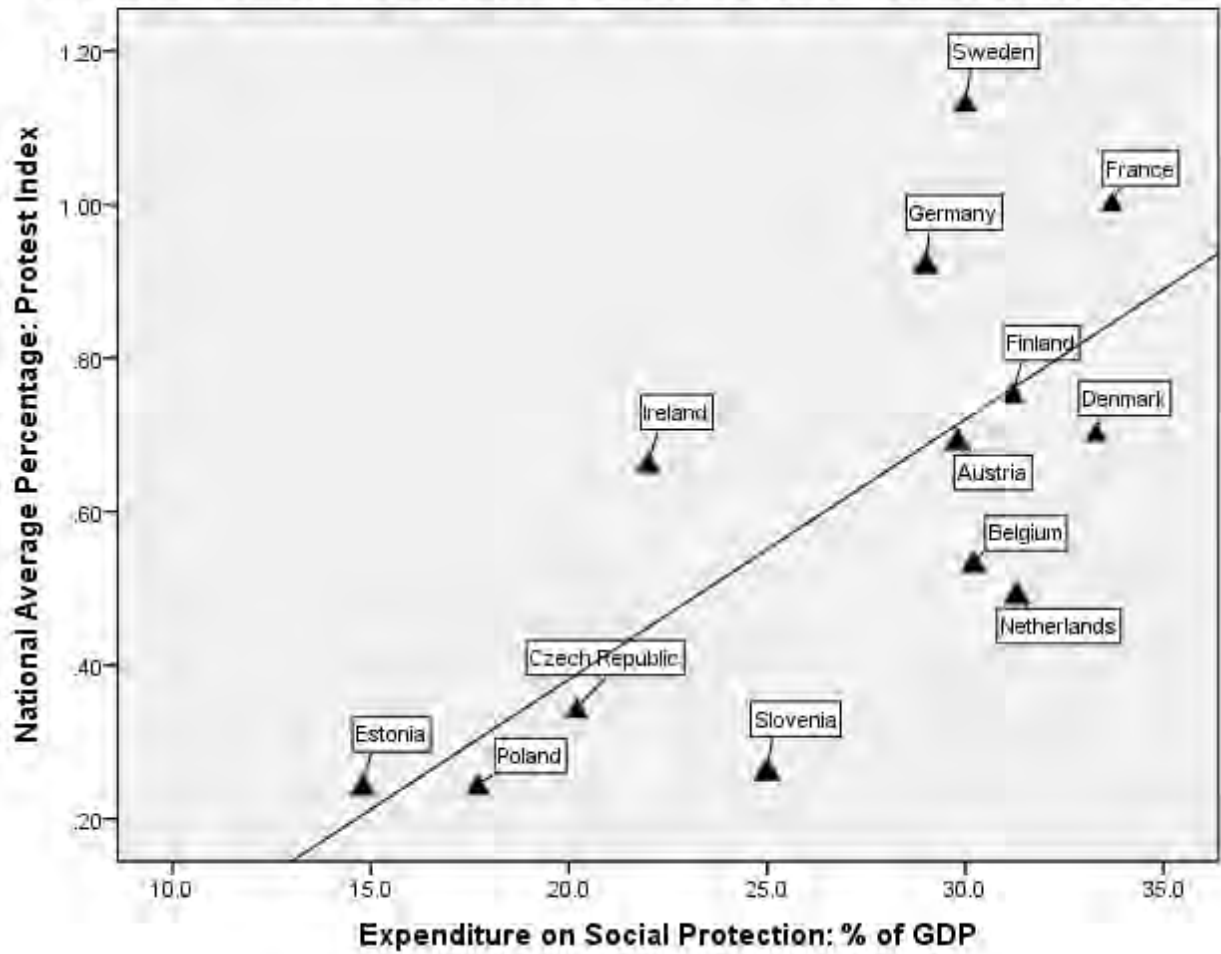
Pearson's R= .982** p.< .01

GRAPH 2 - Scatterplot: GDP PPS and National Protest Index



Pearson's R= .677* p.< .05

GRAPH 3 - Scatterplot: Expenditure on Social Protection and Protest Index



Pearson's $R = .712^{**}$ $p < .01$

TABLE 2: Multinomial Logistic Regression: Parameter Estimates and Significance

Variables	Protest Index (2014)	
	Coefficient and S.E.	p values
Individual Level (N=19,964)		
Protest Index		
0 – No Protest	6.307 (1.448)	.000
1 – Little Protest	7.778 (1.456)	
2 – Some Protest	9.106 (1.482)	
3 – Moderate Protest	9.853 (0.031)	
Individual Demographics		
Gender: Male	-0.253 (0.031)	.000
Age	-0.015 (0.003)	.000
Education	0.079 (0.011)	.000
Left/Right Scale		
0 Left	0.677 (0.189)	.000
1	0.811 (0.233)	
2	0.619 (0.151)	
3	0.454 (0.149)	
4	0.307 (0.141)	
Unemployed > 3 Months: Yes	0.162 (0.017)	.000
Individual Political Sophistication		
TV Politics News	-	.692
Political Interest		
1 Very Interested	1.470 (0.131)	.000
2	0.968 (0.105)	
3	0.401 (0.103)	
Trust in Politicians - 0	0.430 (0.201)	.032
Close to a Political Party	0.325 (0.054)	.000
Vote (Yes)	0.330 (0.103)	.000
Personal Economic Perception		
Satisfaction with Present Economy		
0 Extremely Dissatisfied	0.315 (0.147)	.000
4	0.317 (0.127)	
7	0.248 (0.117)	
8	0.272 (0.089)	
9 Extremely Satisfied	0.342 (0.102)	
Household Income Perception	-	.094
Government Should Reduce Income Differences – Strongly Agree	0.257 (0.094)	.006
Personal Satisfaction with Political System		
Satisfaction with National Government	mostly positive	.000
Satisfaction with how Democracy Works		
7	0.173 (0.073)	.000
8	0.267 (0.067)	
9 Extremely Satisfied	0.229 (0.097)	
Country Level (n=13)		
GDP PPS	0.010 (0.006)	.080
Unemployment (Adult)	0.033 (0.048)	.491
Inequality of Income Distribution	0.076 (0.164)	.645
Social Protection Expenditure	0.060 (0.029)	.039

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. All economic values are for 2014, with the exception of Social Protection Expenditure, which is for 2013 (with the value for Poland from 2012). For categorical variables, only significant coefficients are shown due to space limit.