

Nonviolent Protest in Europe: The Role of Macroeconomic Conditions in Party and Union Members' Participation

Mario Quaranta, *European University Institute*

Economic conditions often are seen as factors for political mobilization. The basic argument is that in times of grievances, citizens are more ready to mobilize to make the political system, institutions, and actors hear their preferences (Gurr 1970). Nonetheless, citizens have various opportunities to pressure politics, primarily voting against incumbents in the hope that newly elected officials will better meet their requests. Indeed, literature provides evidence of this accountability mechanism in elections held during the recent European crisis (Hernández and Kriesi 2016).

Yet, elections are held only periodically. In the meantime, citizens find other means to influence politics, including forms of political action other than elections, such as petitions, boycotts, and demonstrations, that citizens use to communicate their needs. The question addressed in this article relates to who is more likely to be engaged in nonviolent protest during dire macroeconomic conditions. The research builds on a classic explanation for political engagement (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995), according to which members of politically oriented organizations are more likely to be involved in nonelectoral forms of participation (i.e., nonviolent protest). The article contends that parties and unions mobilize their members to protest more often, compared to nonmembers, when macroeconomic performance is poor. Recent literature on political parties indicates that these organizations can no longer mobilize citizens in electoral politics, gradually losing their standard functions of representatives, recruiters, and organizers (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Similar arguments have been put forward for the case of trade unions (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). However, parties and unions still might push citizens to become involved in political action. Although party and union membership often has been seen as forms of participation in contrast to unconventional action, some research has shown that they are not incompatible (Wauters 2016). Indeed, recent evidence on protest on selected European countries shows that parties and unions have played a non-negligible role in mobilizing citizens into protest actions (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015; della Porta 2015; Diani and Kousis 2014; Peterson, Wahlström, and Wennerhag 2015; Rüdiger and Karyotis 2013). Using survey

data from 26 European countries, this article generalizes the impact of these theories, showing that in a context of poor macroeconomic conditions, the mobilization potential of parties and unions is apparently stronger, which indicates that they may still matter as agents of protest mobilization.

PARTICIPATION BEYOND ELECTIONS: NONVIOLENT PROTEST

In democracies, citizens have the opportunity to engage in politics beyond elections. When voters want to express preferences outside of the ballot box, they might choose alternative means. Forms of nonelectoral political participation generally are directed at the state for its politics and therefore target and challenge society elites. Among the repertory of such forms of engagement are petitions, demonstrations, street blockades, building occupations, and strikes, which also are known as forms of contentious or nonviolent protest action.

The objects of this study are signing petitions, joining boycotts, and attending public demonstrations. The first—signing petitions—is a nonconfrontational action, characterized by being safe and undemanding and requiring relatively low effort and little cooperation. Demonstrations, however, are a confrontational, potentially disruptive form of engagement that requires more commitment and can be classified as a form of collective action (Quaranta 2015; Taylor and van Dyke 2004). Both are used often as protest tactics to influence the course of politics. To provide a complete analysis of the repertory of action, the article also analyzes participation in boycotts. Although this is considered a form of “consumer” participation, it is part of nonviolent protest and is a way of pressuring third-party actors—even though they might not include state actors—in times of crisis (Barda and Sardianou 2010).

AGENTS OF MOBILIZATION

It is widely argued that membership in organizations encourages political participation (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Organizations provide selective, purposive, and solidarity incentives for participation and emphasize the benefits of engagement (Leighley 1996). Organizations are “schools of democracy” (Putnam 2000), providing political lessons to

their members who become more politically skilled, informed, and sophisticated than other citizens. Through membership, citizens build or extend their social networks and learn how to cooperate to achieve common goals, strengthening in-group solidarity (Morales 2009). Organizations also can be seen as “pools of democracy” (van der Meer and van Ingen 2009); in fact, it is argued that organizations act as “filters” and that members are self-selected (Minkoff 2016). This means that members already have the resources, skills, and motivation to become involved in politics.

In summary, the general claim is that involvement in organizations translates into more participation. However, the goal of organizations is crucial for engagement (van der Meer and van Ingen 2009). Organizations with political goals, as in trade unions and political parties, aim to achieve collective goods and influence the decision-making process (Morales 2009). Trade unions promote and defend interests of specific groups (i.e., workers) mainly based on economic grounds. They communicate to their members the reasons why participation matters through a process of peer influence that is similar to what occurs in personal-communication networks (Radcliff 2001). Political parties or groups support interests beyond the economy that encompass ideologies and visions of society and provide identification and political efficacy for collective action (Finkel and Opp 1991). Ultimately, when these organizations call for engagement, their members are ready to mobilize.

When the economy performs poorly, more people are at risk of being laid off and may experience difficulties in coping with everyday life. In this situation, trade unions—as the natural defenders of workers—attempt to mobilize their members to make strong claims about the consequences of a poor economy. At the same time, parties might be viewed as increasingly missing in action. The increasing disaffection toward political parties may have resulted in the creation of movements and organizations that refuse them. Although “new” social movements emerged during the recent European crisis, political mobilization often is still led by traditional organizations (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015; Diani and Kousis 2014). Thus, it is worth assessing the role of parties as mobilizers of protest.

In summary, recent scholarly literature focuses on how “new” political organizations mobilize citizens. Nevertheless, “old” political organizations have not disappeared and still may provide incentives for political action. Ultimately, rather than assessing whether macroeconomic conditions bolster citizens’ political action, the goal is to illustrate that such conditions represent opportunities for the mobilization of some citizens (i.e., members) but not all. In fact, according to this argument, parties and unions serve as a “reservoir” of participants ready to be mobilized. This means that parties and unions are not expected to activate nonmembers’ protest. For instance, this process of mobilization was observed in protests against the Iraq war, in which parties and unions

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MOBILIZATION AND THE ECONOMY

Protest may spread because of the grievances to which citizens are subject (Gurr 1970; Kern, Marien, and Hooghe 2015; Quaranta 2016). The argument here is that unions and parties mobilize their members in forms of actions to pressure elected officials particularly in times of bad macroeconomic conditions. Therefore, the negative status of the national economy could prompt the “mobilization potential” of these organizations (Klandermans and Oegema 1987).

The role of these organizations as mobilization agents is emphasized in the recent literature on protest (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015; della Porta 2015; Diani and Kousis 2014; Peterson, Wahlström, and Wennerhag 2015; Rüdiger and Karyotis 2013). In the European context, and given the constraints of the European Union (EU), countries react to economic constraints by limiting public expenditures, cutting services, and freezing salaries due to the increasing public deficit. If elections will not be held soon, interest groups and political organizations also might voice their preferences by mobilizing their members and using the available repertory of political action.

used their members as a “recruitment pool” (Walgrave and Rucht 2010).

DATA AND METHOD

The argument was tested using 111 surveys drawn from the European Social Survey (rounds 1 through 5) with data available for 26 countries between 2002 and 2012 (European Social Survey 2014).¹ Nonviolent protest was measured using three dichotomous indicators that captured whether the respondent engaged in the following activities in the previous 12 months: signing a petition, boycotting certain products, and taking part in lawful public demonstrations.

Independent variables were measured at different levels of analysis. At the individual level, the key predictors were whether the respondent is (1) currently a member of a trade union or similar organization; or (2) a member of a political party.² Control variables at the individual level were selected following literature on the topic (Quaranta 2015, ch. 3). The controls were education, working condition, age, gender, being in a partnership, political interest, trust in parliament, and position on the left–right scale.

At the survey level, the key variable was the Economic Performance Index, which is a summary indicator accounting for unemployment, growth, inflation, and budget deficit. It provides an intuitive overview of macroeconomic indicators that affect relevant sectors of society (Khramov and Lee 2013). The index was reversed to capture poor macroeconomic conditions. At this level, a measure of decentralization (i.e., the Regional Autonomy Index), the effective number of parties to account for relevant features of the political-opportunity structure (Kriesi 2004), a dichotomous indicator gauging whether elections were held in a given year, and time were included as controls. Moreover, three dichotomous indicators gauging Southern, Eastern, and EU nonmember countries were included to control for, respectively, the harsher impact of the European economic crisis on Southern countries, authoritarian legacies of Eastern countries, and the independence that non-EU countries retain in their economic-policy response.³

Because observations are nested in surveys and countries, and the dependent variables are dichotomous, logistic multilevel models were used, including varying intercepts and slopes (Gelman and Hill 2006). This means that the levels

performance for nonmembers of unions because the marginal effect overlaps the zero line, whereas nonmembers of parties engage less in this form of action—and are even less likely in times of poor macroeconomic conditions. On the contrary, as macroeconomic performance deteriorates, members of these organizations show a higher likelihood of signing petitions. The central panels indicate that nonmembers of unions and parties join boycotts to the same extent at different levels of macroeconomic conditions. The behavior of union or party members is instead dissimilar. Members of parties have a higher probability of joining boycotts when macroeconomic conditions are worse. Members of unions seem to be unaffected by changes in the economy in terms of engagement in boycotts.

The right-most panels consider participation in demonstrations. It appears that nonmembers of unions and parties do not attend demonstrations more as macroeconomic performance decreases, whereas members do participate. In fact, the probability of attending demonstrations increases for members of parties as macroeconomic conditions worsen.

The difference in the probability of participation is due mainly to the fact that members engage more in nonviolent protest as economic conditions worsens, whereas the probability of participation of nonmembers does not change.

of engagement in the three forms of protest varied across surveys and countries while allowing the coefficients of membership capturing the association with the forms of protest to vary across surveys. Then, cross-level interactions were included to test whether the effect of membership varies with economic performance.

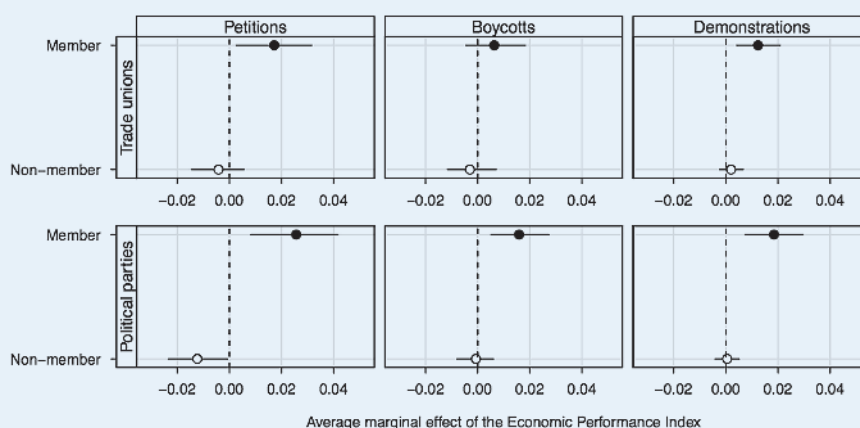
FINDINGS

The results of this study are presented in two figures. Figure 1 shows the average marginal effects of the Economic Performance Index—for members and nonmembers of trade unions and political parties—on the probability of engaging in the three forms of nonviolent protest. Thus, the figure reports the average change in probability of engagement for a unit change in the Index of Economic Performance for the two groups of respondents.⁴

The status of the economy does not seem to affect engagement evenly in the two groups of respondents. The left-most panels show that the probability of signing petitions does not change at different levels of macroeconomic

performance. Figure 2 shows that the gap in engagement between members and nonmembers increases as macroeconomic performance decreases, further suggesting that organizations might motivate members to participate in nonviolent protest.⁵ The dots represent these differences for each survey. When the economy is good, there are few or no differences

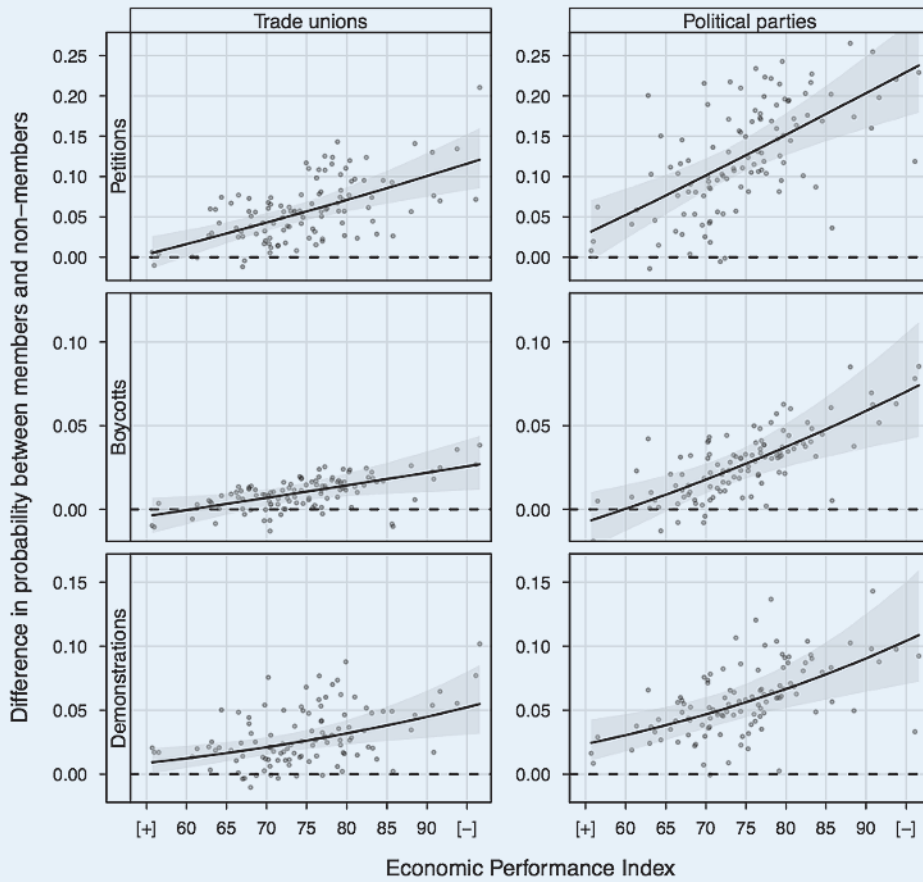
Figure 1
Average Marginal Effect of the Economic Performance Index on Various Political Activities



Average marginal effect of the Economic Performance Index on the probability of signing a petition, boycotting certain products, and taking part in lawful public demonstrations, for members and nonmembers of trade unions and political parties in Europe, with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2

Difference in Probability of Engaging in Various Political Activities between Members and Nonmembers



Difference in probability of signing a petition, boycotting certain products, and taking part in lawful public demonstrations between members and nonmembers of trade unions and political parties along the Economic Performance Index in Europe, with 95% confidence intervals.

in engagement between members and nonmembers. Thus, if the macroeconomic conditions are satisfactory, organizations might not need to mobilize their members unconventionally. Instead, as the economy worsens, members are mobilized to participate in nonviolent protest.

Indeed, members of trade unions have a probability of signing petitions, joining boycotts, and attending demonstrations of about 0.12, 0.03, and 0.05 points higher, respectively, compared to nonmembers when macroeconomic conditions are very poor. Members of parties, instead, engage in the three forms of nonviolent protest 0.24, 0.07, and 0.10 points more than nonmembers. The difference in the probability of participation is due mainly to the fact that members engage more in nonviolent protest as economic conditions worsen, whereas the probability of participation of nonmembers does not change.⁶ This suggests that with poor economic conditions, these organizations push their members to mobilize but they do not mobilize nonmembers.

CONCLUSION

This article shows that trade unions and political parties may encourage the political protest of their members when

economic performance is unsatisfactory. The results, based on survey data collected in 26 European countries over time, indicated that with bad macroeconomic performance, members of parties and trade unions are more likely to engage in forms of nonviolent protest. By contrast, nonmembers do not protest more when the economy is disappointing. This suggests, with all due precautions, that these organizations might have a role in mobilizing their members, who are part of their “pool” of potential participants and, therefore, are more ready to engage. However, the two organizations seem unable to mobilize their members in a similar manner if the economy fails to deliver adequately. Political parties appear to be stronger mobilizers of nonviolent protest, which may be due to their links to institutional politics. In other words, as parties link political institutions to citizens, it may be that their members—given their stronger political efficacy—will find engage-

ment an effective instrument to influence policy making. By contrast, unions are not always part of the policy-making process, which may weaken the ability of these organizations as recruiters of protesters.

Despite much recent research that focuses on “new” organizations suggesting a declining role of “old” organizations as mobilizers, the results reveal that “traditional” organizations are still mobilizers of nonviolent protest, especially when economic indicators are disappointing. Unfortunately, the data do not allow testing the mobilization potential of “old” versus “new” social-movement organizations. Future research should focus on the assessment of the mobilization potential of different types of political organizations, both old and new. Moreover, within these types, there may be potential for further distinction. Political parties, for instance, are not the same. Some might have more ability to mobilize their members than others. Thus, finding a way to classify members according to the ideological leaning of the party (using its manifesto) or government-status data may provide a more nuanced picture of the extent to which parties act as mobilizers of protest. It could be expected, for instance, that parties

with different ideological positions on the left–right spectrum or parties in opposition can mobilize more (or less) of their members (Wauters 2016). It also may be that parties in the center can act as mobilizers, depending on issues and various contextual conditions (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Unfortunately, this research agenda is too complex to be pursued in this article.⁷ Future research could focus on classifying respondents more precisely according to party family, status of their party (in government or in opposition), and positions or alliances in trade unions with respect to specific issues.

To conclude, this article shows that traditional organizations are still relevant in helping citizens to become active in a democracy, although they mainly ease participation of their members. In brief, these organizations still contribute to activate citizens to unconventional political action, especially during an economic crisis.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517001792> ■

NOTES

1. The year of the data collection is used as reference. Selected countries are consolidated European democracies, part of the European Social Survey (ESS) data-collection program.
2. Membership in political parties is available up to the fifth round of the ESS. To analyze the same period for both independent variables measuring membership, we limited the analysis to 2002–2011. Membership in trade unions was not available for Latvia and Romania. Given the selected time range, Iceland and Lithuania were dropped from the analysis because data were available, for the selected variables, only in one ESS round.
3. Sources of data and details on variables are listed in the online appendix.
4. See Long (1997) on average marginal effects. The Economic Performance Index is standardized. The estimates of the models are reported in the online appendix.
5. Differences in probabilities were computed holding the covariates at their means.
6. See figure A1 in the online appendix.
7. As preliminary evidence, the online appendix reports additional models addressing these issues. These models account for both the respondents' ideological position and distance from the government, interacting these factors with membership. The first set of analyses shows that individual ideological position does not condition significantly the association between membership and protest. The second set shows that distance from government strengthens only the association between party membership and protest.

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