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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXPLAINING PROTEST IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE GREAT RECESSION IN EUROPE

The Relevance of Different Economic Indicators

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ABSTRACT: The European economic crisis has brought economic hardship and prolonged instability to many countries in the European Union. While economies are struggling to recover, citizens have opted to become more vocal unconventionally. Mass protest, public occupations and demonstrations have dominated Europe. Yet, numbers of people choosing to protest need to be assessed to verify whether the economic recession is indeed responsible for a surge in protest activism on the continent. With the use of multiple rounds from the European Social Survey (2006-2012), this article tests the hypothesis linking unconventional political behavior in Europe to the economy. Findings suggest that overall European protest levels are not higher after the crisis, although confrontational activism has spiked in few countries. Economic variables retain instead an important role in the explanation of protest in the post-recession era, with both objective and subjective economic measures supporting a grievance theory explanation of why Europeans protest. Economic decline matters in the selection of protest as a mode of political participation.

KEYWORDS: economic crisis, European public opinion, European Social Survey, grievance theory, protest

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1. Introduction

Political participation in Europe since the global financial crisis has proven to be very healthy. European countries have witnessed waves of protest demonstrations against the economic decline and lower standards of living experienced by citizens. As the economic standing of countries was deteriorating, Europeans became increasingly active, embraced unconventional modes of engagement and took over squares, streets and buildings with the intention of being heard (Della Porta 2015; Fominaya and Cox 2013). This article investigates the relationship between the economic crisis in Europe and the parallel development of confrontational activism among citizens in different countries. Did economic hardship lead to more people engaging in protest activity? Do all economic indicators correlate similarly with unconventional participation? As citizens experience over time a harder economic reality, personal assessments of their own economic wellbeing should have a stronger impact than objective economic indicators as the crisis continues. Subjective perceptions of the economy in Europe may have become a more important explanatory variable than the usual economic factors governments use to determine their citizens' approval of political decisions.

The prolonged impact of the economic collapse that took place in 2008 has left the European Union (EU) in shambles. According to Eurostat data, overall EU unemployment rates rose from 6.3% in 2008 to 10.6% in 2012. Even worse, corresponding levels of youth unemployment, a key component of street protests (Hooghe 2012), increased from 14.9% in 2008 to 25.2% in 2012. As jobs disappeared, economic growth stalled. Real GDP growth rates from Eurostat were around 1.2% for the EU in 2008, and 0% four years later, confirming the long term impact of the crisis. Another measure of the severity of the financial crisis is the overall level of national debt (Roth, Nowak-Lehmann 2011), which has led countries near a Eurozone exit (Kosmidis 2014).

In this context of economic downturn, studies on global waves of protest have inspired research on country-specific cases where unconventional activism was becoming dominant: from the Indignados movement in Spain (Calvo 2013), to the newly agitated Portuguese society (Accornero and Pinto 2015) and the more well-known case of Syriza and anarchists alike in Greece (Rüdig and Karyotis 2014). Countries across Europe have been experiencing frequent protest participation in the aftermath of the global recession, as levels of support for national governments and conventional politics declined (Armingeon and Guthmann 2013).

Previous scholarship on the relationship between the economy and unconventional activism has presented conflicting evidence on the predicting factors for protest. Whereas some scholars discussed a relationship between economic decline and con-

frontational modes of engagement, due to a higher economic deprivation for citizens (Gurr, 1970; Beissinger and Sasse 2014; Kern, Marien and Hooghe 2015), other studies have presented findings on a link between wealth and protest, as citizens more well off have more resources available and can use the full spectrum of political participation modes to engage (Inglehart 1977; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Dalton, van Sickle and Wheldon 2010).

This research plans to investigate empirically whether expectations about more citizens involved in protest after the economic crisis are accurate. In particular, this study also tests again the possible link between economic decline and unconventionality. If indeed the economic recession is responsible for more individuals taking to the streets, this can be measured by both objective economic variables as well as subjective interpretations of economic wellbeing. The following section of the article introduces the debate on protest and how the literature has explained unconventionality. The data, hypotheses and statistical methods section is next, followed by the discussion of the findings. The conclusions section at the end of the paper sums up the article's main contributions to the research on the economy and protest activism.

2. The Debate on Protest

The place of unconventionality in legitimate political activism started to be considered only in the 1970s. Barnes and Kaase (1979) brought protest into the main stream of political participation studies with their volume on different modes of political participation, including protest as a relevant example of citizens' political expression. Over the last four decades the literature on confrontational activism has progressively developed the role of contentious politics. An engaged citizen is now able to use both conventional (voting, working for a campaign, etc..) as well as unconventional (street demonstration, building occupation, etc..) actions to become active politically. Protest is today an accepted mode of activism across countries (Rucht 2007; Dalton 2014) and is part of the potential full repertory of actions available to today's assertive citizens (Dalton and Welzel 2014).

As contentious politics has become more present in democracies, studies have recorded its overall long term increase in frequency and size (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Norris 2002). This larger role for unconventionality among citizens has prompted sociologists, in particular, to recognize the development of a "movement society": citizens in different countries are now becoming more engaged in politics than before, especially through elite challenging actions and movements (Meyer and Tarrow 1998;

Dodson, 2011). The spread of protest has contributed to the normalisation of the protester (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001; Norris, Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). As more protest events take place, more people decide to participate and it is more likely for any individual to use unconventionality as a mode of political engagement¹. In this background, it is expected for citizens in Europe to embrace protest as a form of political expression in the wake of the economic collapse. Contentious activism was already widely accepted, even before the loss of economic status intervened.

a) The Negative Relationship: Grievance Theory

A link between economic decline and protest choice has been explained in the literature on protest with the use of relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970). As citizens experience a loss, often measured economically², they are more likely to react politically and try all possible actions available to be heard. An objectively lower economic status and a subjectively worse economic wellbeing collaborate to push citizens to demonstrate on the streets, occupy buildings, sign petitions and boycott products in the name of activism. As people feel the loss they suffered, their relative deprivation assessment convinces them to present their grievance to the political elites, hoping for changes. An economic loss turns into political dissatisfaction and political engagement.

The economy becomes a relevant issue as its salience is expected to increase at times of crisis (Singer 2011), when a poor economy appears to be an even more crucial factor leading to activism. Macro level variables, such as GDP per capita and GDP growth are therefore negatively associated with contentious activism (Auvinen 1997; Dubrow, Slomczynski and Tomescu-Dubrow 2008; Beissinger and Sasse 2014). Unemployment and inflation rates in general are instead positively associated with protest, as the loss of a job, for instance, brings out a strong grievance in citizens (Hooghe 2012; Solt 2015; Kern et al. 2015).

The personal interpretation of the economy does its part, with an individual's overall level of wealth filtering the assessment of the actual performance of the economy. Generally, citizens have a good grasp on the level of economic success the country is experiencing: there is indeed a good correspondence between objective economic in-

¹ Caren, Ghoshal and Ribas (2011) have disputed the development of such movement society in the US and have instead claimed that higher protest levels are associated with cohort changes, without evidence of a spread of protest across citizens from different age groups.

² The actual loss experienced does not have to be economic in nature. Issue-driven protest movements (groups protecting the environment or in support of same sex marriage for instance) can also quantify a possible loss without the use of economic measures.

dicators and subjective economic interpretations of personal wellbeing (Anderson and Hecht 2014). Micro level variables, such as satisfaction with income level or the economy at large, relevance of money in a person's life, and similar others, have been associated with unconventionality as well (Kern et al. 2015) Both macro and micro economic variables are useful to assess the explanatory power of the economy when predicting protest. As the economy and people's interpretations of its performance deteriorate, the likelihood of contentious activism increases, with more grievances driving an individual's choice to protest³.

b) The Positive Relationship: Resource Theory

Contrary to the expectations of grievance theory, a poor economic performance may not lead to more protest, according to scholars considering the level of resources available to an individual (Dalton et al. 2010; Welzel and Deutsch 2011; Jakobsen and Listhaug 2014). In this situation, the rationale actually suggests that economic success leads to confrontational activism. A better economic performance, assessed objectively and subjectively, encourages citizens to embrace all modes of political participation possible. Individuals in a context of wealth have more resources at their disposal to plan, organize and execute political action. They can find more time to organize, they can afford travel to participate in demonstrations and have generally a better access to information. In an interesting conundrum, governments whose policies deliver more wealth and growth overall, can indeed experience more citizen protest on different issues. Ultimately, resource theory claims that in a democracy where economic development is thriving, people will become more active citizens, learning to challenge the elites more consistently (Dalton and Welzel, 2014). Even when a personal interpretation of the economy is positive, citizens can still embrace protest, despite the lack of an economic grievance.

In the end, there are also other potential predictors of protest. While the discussion in this article focuses primarily on economic indicators, previous studies have also highlighted the relevance of other factors. For instance, men tend to be more likely to engage in protest than women (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Dalton 2014), although the gap

³ On this point, Solt's findings (2015) using income inequality and objective economic indicators disprove the validity of grievance theory, although the research includes data only up to 2009, right at the beginning of the economic crisis and probably too soon for citizens to feel the real cost of any loss. Kern et al. (2015) accept the relevance of grievance theory from 2008 to 2010, using a protest index, which includes petition signing, demonstration participation and product boycotts. The key economic measure in their study is unemployment.

is now closing (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001: 481). When it comes to age, younger individuals are more likely to engage in confrontational modes of participation (demonstrations, occupations, etc.), a finding that is still consistent today (Caren, Ghoshal and Ribas 2011; Melo and Stockemer 2014). Political interest and level of education equally contribute to push a person towards protest activity: higher levels of political interest and education encourage confrontational action (Vassallo 2010; Melo and Stockmer 2014). These two variables are often part of the overall level of political sophistication associated with a person. Information on politics, for instance, similarly supports a person's choice for protest. Finally, an individual's ideological position and the person's religious association membership have also been linked to protest. Citizens on the left of the political spectrum (Jakobsen and Listhaug 2014; Torcal, Rodon and Hierro 2015) are more likely to engage in contentious action, whereas people with a religious affiliation prefer conventional participation to confrontational activism (Norris et al. 2006). From the conventional side of activism, studies have also linked trust in politicians and voting to the selection of protest. The level of trust in politicians is inversely associated with protest activism, as citizens who trust politicians are more prone to let politicians solve their problems rather than challenge the elites they elected. Voting is directly linked to protest, as protesters have demonstrated to be able to employ all modes of political participation, without necessarily a preference for conventionality over unconventionality (Vassallo 2010; Dalton 2014).

3. Data, Hypotheses and Statistical Methods

In order to test the relevance of economic indicators for predicting protest activities in the EU, before and after the 2008 economic crisis, this study includes four rounds of European Social Survey (ESS) data from 2006 through 2012⁴. As ESS waves are conducted every two years, the data provide a good temporal assessment of when changes may have taken place in regards to levels of confrontational activism. Values from 2006 will be a baseline for the variables before the economic collapse started, 2008 will

⁴ Kern et al. (2015) employed the same ESS data, but focused on the 2002-2010 period instead, stopping only two years after the economic collapse. The study assessed the possible influence of economic decline in the very short term only, whereas it may take longer for people to feel the negative impact of a prolonged economic downturn, when the economy becomes a more salient issue. Additionally, this research focuses on EU member states only, excluding other ESS countries such as Russia or Ukraine, where individual perception of economic loss due to the historical background of those countries may not follow the standards of citizens in EU societies.

provide information at the beginning of the financial downturn, 2010 and 2012 will be time points to assess how all measures have progressed after the economic recession hit. The research includes 25 European Union member states in total: 21 for all the rounds included, with the exception of 2008, when 24 EU members were surveyed. This sample approach provides a good validity for the level of economic expectations in EU countries and the repetition of the same questions for all the rounds helps with the reliability of the measures.

This research focuses on protest activities measured with the use of three separate indicators: signing a petition, taking part in a lawful demonstration and boycotting certain products. All three measures have been employed in previous studies addressing the concept of protest (Dalton et al. 2010; Vassallo 2010; Solt 2015; Kern et al. 2015), as they are consistently part of the same dimension of protest across countries. In some cases, the three variables are also combined into a protest index (Vassallo 2010; Kern et al. 2015), whereas at times they are analyzed separately, due to its different characteristics (Dodson 2011; Melo and Stockmer 2014; Solt 2015): street demonstrations are more demanding than petition signing or product boycotting. In this article, when a protest index is used, it is a scale from 0 to 4, where 1 point was given to signing a petition or boycotting a product, whereas taking part in a demonstration contributes 2 points to the index, as it requires more effort⁵. By all accounts, these are all examples of non-violent protest, with participation in a demonstration as the only measure of a more confrontational action. When the three protest indicators are analyzed separately, each of them is a dichotomous measure of 0/1, with 1 meaning that the individual has done that specific protest action in the previous 12 months.

Two separate hypotheses are tested in the article. The first hypothesis deals with the possible shift in overall levels of protest in the EU at large, as well as in each EU member considered, after the economic crisis started. As the economy was becoming more dominant in people's assessment for possible satisfaction and political action, the expectations from grievance theory are that worse economic conditions after 2008 would lead to more citizens embracing protest, in comparison to before 2008. If instead resource theory is employed, protest levels after the financial meltdown are predicted to be lower due to a loss in resources.

H₁: Protest levels in the EU and in national EU members are higher after the economic recession than before.

⁵ See also Quaranta (2013) for possible issues and trade-offs in a protest index creation.

The second hypothesis in the study centers on the relevance of economic indicators. Expectations from relative deprivation explanations would be that a poor performing economy as well as a negative perception of economic wellbeing convince citizens to protest more. Scholars following resource theory would instead predict lower unconventionality when economic hardship and lower financial wellbeing are present. Data for the objective economic indicators included in the study come from Eurostat: GDP per capita in purchasing power standards (GDP PPS), youth unemployment⁶, real GDP growth, and inflation rate. Subjective economic variables in the analysis are from the ESS rounds: personal level of satisfaction with the economy, perception of satisfaction with household's income, and importance of money and expensive things. The innovative part of this hypothesis is testing the impact of citizens' subjective economic assessments in the presence of objective economic measures, which better represents the overall economic situation of a country. In light of the literature mentioned in the previous sections, the length of the economic crisis should contribute to underline the importance of a subjective economic perception in the determination of unconventional political activism.

H₂: Both subjective and objective economic indicators are associated with higher protest activism: lower GDP growth and GDP per capita measures are associated with higher protest levels, whereas higher inflation and unemployment rates are linked to higher unconventionality. Similarly, a worse subjective perception of economic wellbeing corresponds to higher levels of contention in political activism.

Finally, other variables are controlled for in the hypothesis testing, following the literature in the previous section: gender, age, education, left-right ideological scale, religious affiliation, personal unemployment, political news and interest, trust in politicians as well as voting. Descriptive statistics and binary logistic regressions with the three protest actions as separate dependent variables are employed to test the hypotheses. The binary outcome responses are from individual survey participants and these respondents can be considered "clustered" by countries, therefore there are two levels in the data, i.e., individual level and country level. A multilevel binary logistic regression is used to model the protest action and fit country as random effect, with the data analysis performed in SPSS (see Heck, Tabata and Thomas 2012). The coefficients

⁶ Youth unemployment was preferred to adult unemployment in this study as publications on protest movements in Europe since the crisis focused in particular on the role of young citizens in open protest against the system (Hooghe 2012; Calvo 2013; Della Porta 2015). Youth unemployment is expected to be a stronger predictor of protest than adult unemployment.

in the multilevel binary logistic regressions are estimated by maximizing the penalized pseudo-likelihood (Breslow and Clayton 1993). The estimates of the variance component of country effect are 0.237, 0.356 and 0.364, and the prediction accuracies are 79.5%, 93.7% and 85.1% for signed petition, public demonstration and product boycotting, respectively.

4. Findings

The discussion of the hypothesis testing is divided into three sections. The next section addresses primarily findings concerning H_1 , whereas sections b) and c) present results regarding H_2 .

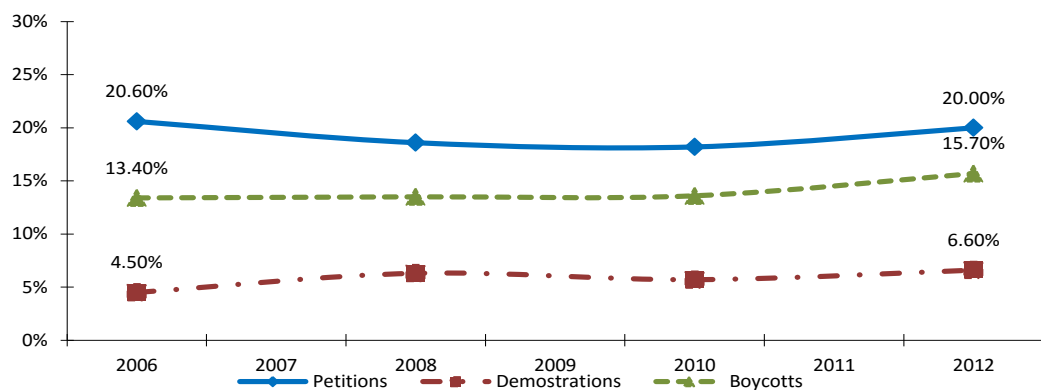
a) Levels of Unconventionality in Europe

Data on unconventional activism in Europe from 2006 to 2012 lead to different interpretations when European level values are compared to national level indicators. Figure 1 presents overall percentages of individuals in the EU at large who engaged in signing a petition, participating in a lawful demonstration and boycotting a product within the previous 12 months. There is virtually no change before and after the 2008 crisis, disputing claims of a protest wave across Europe. About 20% of Europeans signed a petition during the period considered, whereas the percentage of those who took part in a street demonstration in 2012 increased by about half from its original value in 2006. Yet, the final number (6.6% in 2012) is quite disappointing for a European society so deeply affected by economic hardship. The percentage of individuals in the EU who decided to boycott a product went up to 15.7% by 2012, a small jump from six years earlier.

If the overall percentage of individuals who did at least one of the three protest actions possible is overall stagnant, the actual number of actions EU citizens have declared is equally disappointing. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the protest index in the EU. From 2006 to 2012 at least 70% of EU citizens chose not to engage in any of the three possible protest activities recorded. Overall, less than 20% declared to have done only one of the possible unconventional activities, and on average less than 2% declared to have done all three actions the previous 12 months, even in 2012. From this preliminary analysis of the data it appears that the 2008 economic crisis and its long term impact have not quite affected protest levels in a way grievance theory scholars

generally predict. No visible change can be seen at the EU level, even four years after the economic hardship started.

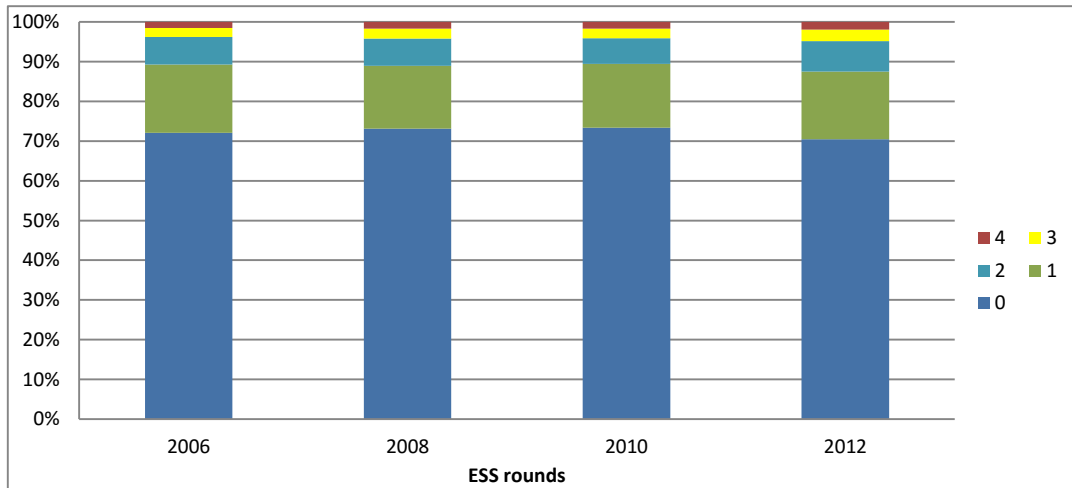
Figure 1 - Unconventional Political Activism (%): EU Citizens – Overall



Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012. “Petitions” is overall percentage of individuals from EU member states who stated they signed a petition the previous 12 months. “Demonstrations” is overall percentage of individuals from EU member states who stated they have taken part in a lawful public demonstration the previous 12 months. “Boycotts” is overall percentage of individuals from EU member states who stated they boycotted certain products the previous 12 months. The number of EU member states included in ESS waves varies depending on the year: 21 in 2006, 2010 and 2012; 24 in 2008. Overall number of EU countries in 2006 was 25, but 27 from 2007 to 2012.

A closer look at the individual EU member state provides instead a different picture. Tables 1a and 1b present individual country level data for each of the three protest activities, including the national protest index average from the country sample, for each ESS round in the study (2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012). The first finding is that there is a good variety of preferences for unconventional behavior in EU countries. The top ranking protest action group includes countries like France, Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK) in 2006. Their national protest index average is between 0.73 and 0.89. Whereas data for France show citizens employing each of the three possible protest actions significantly, for Sweden and the UK the national preference is for petitions and boycotts over demonstrations. It is relevant to notice

Figure 2 - Distribution of EU Protest Index



Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012. Index scale: 0 to 4. 1 point given for signing a petition or boycotting a product, 2 points given for participating in a lawful demonstration. Distribution is percentage of individuals at the EU level.

that Spain has actually the highest EU percentage of people declaring to have demonstrated in 2006 (17.8%)⁷. An assessment of the data for 2012 confirms some of the same countries still in the top rankings for protest activism: Sweden and France. Spain and Germany are also in 2012 scoring high on the protest index level. For the only time in the period considered, two EU countries have a national protest index average above 1: Spain with 1.02 and Sweden with 1.01. Four years after the economic crisis, Spain retains the highest percentage of people involved in demonstrations (25.9%), not a surprise with an unemployment rate that doubled over the same period (Eurostat). At the same time, levels of participation in street demonstrations have increased substantially in other countries. Both Ireland and Portugal more than doubled their respective percentage of citizens involved in demonstrations over the previous six years: 11.7% and 6.9%. Unemployment levels for both nations also doubled over the same period, and GDP growth equally struggled.

⁷ The EU average in 2006 for people taking part in lawful demonstrations is only 4.5%.

Table 1a - Unconventional Political Activism: National Level (%) and Protest Index

| COUNTRY | ESS 2006 | | | | 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 | 21.1 | 4.2 | 19.5 | 0.48 | 23.0 | 9.3 | 22.6 | 0.64 |
| Belgium | 30.4 | 7.6 | 10.5 | 0.55 | 27.6 | 7.4 | 11.2 | 0.53 |
| Bulgaria | 5.5 | 2.3 | 1.9 | 0.10 | 6.5 | 4.1 | 3.5 | 0.17 |
| Cyprus | 10.4 | 2.5 | 4.8 | 0.19 | 6.3 | 2.3 | 6.1 | 0.16 |
| Czech Republic | - | - | - | - | 15.2 | 4.5 | 7.4 | 0.30 |
| Denmark | 36.1 | 7.5 | 25.0 | 0.75 | 33.9 | 9.3 | 21.5 | 0.74 |
| Estonia | 6.6 | 2.3 | 4.8 | 0.15 | 8.0 | 2.1 | 5.6 | 0.17 |
| Finland | 32.0 | 2.2 | 28.3 | 0.64 | 32.3 | 2.5 | 30.3 | 0.67 |
| France | 33.9 | 16.5 | 26.1 | 0.89 | 33.6 | 15.3 | 27.7 | 0.91 |
| Germany | 27.5 | 7.0 | 23.3 | 0.64 | 30.8 | 8.1 | 31.1 | 0.77 |
| Greece | - | - | - | - | 4.3 | 6.1 | 14.4 | 0.30 |
| Hungary | 5.7 | 3.8 | 4.5 | 0.16 | 6.8 | 1.8 | 5.9 | 0.16 |
| Ireland | 25.0 | 5.2 | 12.3 | 0.45 | 24.1 | 9.8 | 13.6 | 0.57 |
| Italy | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Latvia | 8.0 | 1.5 | 2.1 | 0.13 | 5.5 | 6.5 | 5.2 | 0.23 |
| Lithuania | - | - | - | - | 8.9 | 3.9 | 2.0 | 0.18 |
| Netherlands | 20.5 | 3.0 | 9.3 | 0.36 | 23.5 | 3.3 | 9.4 | 0.39 |
| Poland | 5.4 | 1.4 | 4.0 | 0.12 | 7.5 | 1.6 | 4.5 | 0.15 |
| Portugal | 4.7 | 3.1 | 2.3 | 0.14 | 4.9 | 3.7 | 3.2 | 0.15 |
| Romania | 5.1 | 3.8 | 0.40 | 0.12 | 3.1 | 4.3 | 2.8 | 0.14 |
| Slovakia | 18.3 | 2.9 | 10.0 | 0.33 | 19.8 | 1.7 | 7.3 | 0.30 |
| Slovenia | 13.9 | 3.9 | 5.0 | 0.26 | 8.7 | 1.6 | 5.1 | 0.16 |
| Spain | 22.5 | 17.8 | 10.1 | 0.69 | 17.0 | 15.9 | 7.9 | 0.56 |
| Sweden | 44.3 | 4.8 | 30.6 | 0.85 | 47.2 | 6.4 | 37.3 | 0.96 |
| United Kingdom | 40.6 | 4.4 | 23.7 | 0.73 | 38.2 | 3.8 | 24.2 | 0.70 |
| EU | 20.6 | 4.5 | 13.4 | 0.44 | 18.6 | 6.3 | 13.5 | 0.44 |

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2006, 2008, 2012. Some countries were not included in each wave of the survey. 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.

Table 1b: Unconventional Political Activism: National Level (%) and Protest Index

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), 2006, 2008, 2012. Some countries were not included in each wave of the survey.

| COUNTRY | ESS 2010 | | | | ESS 2012 | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| | 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 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Belgium | 20.6 | 6.4 | 9.2 | 0.42 | 20.6 | 5.2 | 11.3 | 0.42 |
| Bulgaria | 7.2 | 3.1 | 4.1 | 0.17 | 7.8 | 5.8 | 3.7 | 0.22 |
| Cyprus | 7.0 | 5.0 | 4.7 | 0.21 | 10.7 | 4.5 | 10.2 | 0.29 |
| Czech Republic | 16.9 | 5.0 | 10.3 | 0.37 | 18.9 | 6.9 | 13.7 | 0.45 |
| Denmark | 29.3 | 7.7 | 21.9 | 0.66 | 25.0 | 4.3 | 25.7 | 0.59 |
| Estonia | 7.8 | 2.0 | 9.1 | 0.20 | 9.6 | 4.0 | 6.5 | 0.23 |
| Finland | 27.6 | 1.4 | 33.1 | 0.63 | 23.7 | 1.5 | 34.9 | 0.61 |
| France | 29.3 | 17.7 | 29.0 | 0.93 | 28.8 | 11.7 | 31.7 | 0.84 |
| Germany | 30.6 | 8.4 | 30.0 | 0.77 | 34.9 | 9.1 | 35.8 | 0.86 |
| Greece | 5.2 | 10.0 | 12.0 | 0.37 | - | - | - | - |
| Hungary | 2.8 | 2.7 | 6.1 | 0.14 | 3.0 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 0.13 |
| Ireland | 16.3 | 7.0 | 9.2 | 0.39 | 23.6 | 11.5 | 11.2 | 0.54 |
| Italy | - | - | - | - | 23.2 | 17.3 | 12.0 | 0.68 |
| Latvia | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Lithuania | 14.8 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 0.23 | 6.0 | 2.1 | 1.9 | 0.10 |
| Netherlands | 26.2 | 2.8 | 10.1 | 0.41 | 22.1 | 2.8 | 12.1 | 0.41 |
| Poland | 10.7 | 2.0 | 4.9 | 0.19 | 10.4 | 2.3 | 5.7 | 0.21 |
| Portugal | 5.0 | 2.4 | 2.0 | 0.11 | 7.5 | 6.9 | 2.9 | 0.25 |
| Romania | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Slovakia | 21.4 | 1.9 | 7.0 | 0.31 | 20.1 | 4.1 | 10.4 | 0.37 |
| Slovenia | 8.6 | 2.2 | 5.7 | 0.18 | 7.7 | 3.4 | 3.9 | 0.17 |
| Spain | 26.4 | 18.3 | 11.6 | 0.74 | 33.2 | 25.9 | 17.4 | 1.02 |
| Sweden | 37.2 | 4.9 | 35.6 | 0.82 | 43.6 | 7.3 | 42.8 | 1.01 |
| United Kingdom | 28.5 | 2.4 | 19.3 | 0.52 | 32.1 | 3.1 | 18.5 | 0.58 |
| EU | 18.2 | 5.7 | 13.6 | 0.43 | 20 | 6.6 | 15.7 | 0.48 |

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.

A second group of countries from the EU shows instead the opposite end of the protest index score. Bulgaria, Poland and Romania had a protest index average of 0.12 or less in 2006, yet three other Eastern European countries scored at the bottom of the protest ranking in 2012: Hungary, Lithuania and Slovenia, with a similar value. In this context, countries in the EU still show preferences for political action and when it comes to unconventionality, newest member states from the East still highlight a much

lower propensity for challenging actions against the elites, almost a decade after they entered the EU (Furusawa 2006).

All other countries included in the project present levels of unconventionality that either slightly increase or even decrease (UK) during the period studied. In brief, countries that already had good protest participation before the crisis continued, and even increased, their unconventional activism. At the same time, most EU countries with average or low scores on protest remain stagnant, with few exceptions: Ireland and Portugal for instance. H_1 can only be accepted in part, as protest levels surged in few countries, but remained mostly unchanged at the EU level as well as in many EU members.

b) The Impact of Economic Indicators: Subjective vs. Objective

Results from multilevel logistic regressions presented in Table 2 compare directly the association between various economic indicators and the three protest measures employed as separate dependent variables. The preference for the three separate protest measures in the analysis helps to assess the effect of each economic factor on three types of protest actions requiring different efforts. The first impression from the statistical findings is that most of the economic variables used are significant for all three protest measures. In the case of taking part in lawful demonstrations, all the coefficients for the objective and subjective economic factors are significant. Overall, real GDP growth and GDP per capita in PPS have a consistent association across all three protest measures. Yet the first economic variable supports expectations from the grievance theory analysis with higher GDP growth leading to a lower likelihood to demonstrate⁸, as there is no economic loss in growth. Coefficients for the second variable, GDP PPS, confirm instead the expectations from resource theory with individuals experiencing higher GDP per capita more likely to engage in all three protest activities included. For the remaining that Spain has actually the highest EU percentage of people declaring to have demonstrated in 2006 (17.8%)⁹. An assessment of the data for 2012 confirms some of the same countries still in the top rankings for protest activism: Sweden and France. Spain and Germany are also in 2012 scoring high on the protest index level. For the only time in the period considered, two EU countries have a national protest index average above 1: Spain with 1.02 and Sweden with 1.01. Four years after the economic crisis, Spain retains the highest percentage of people involved in demonstrations (25.9%), not a surprise with an unemployment rate that doubled over

⁸ The coefficients for petition signing and product boycotting are not significant with Real GDP growth as an independent variable.

⁹ The EU average in 2006 for people taking part in lawful demonstrations is only 4.5%.

the same period (Eurostat). At the same time, levels of participation in street demonstrations have increased substantially in other countries. Both Ireland and Portugal more than doubled their respective percentage of citizens involved in demonstrations over the previous six years: 11.7% and 6.9%. Unemployment levels for both nations also doubled over the same period, and GDP growth equally struggled.

For the subjective, individual level economic indicators, both satisfaction with the economy and importance of money have similar impacts on each of the protest measures. As the satisfaction with the economy increases, the likelihood of an individual to protest in any way declines. Citizens without any economic grievances seem to become more apathetic, at least unconventionally, and may easily resort to conventionality if needed. Economic satisfaction does not lead to more resources and contentious participation. When the economy is disappointing in the eyes of citizens, protest becomes a more relevant option, following the expectations from grievance theorists.

The importance of money and expensive things has an interesting effect on the likelihood to embrace protest. Individuals who do not consider money and expensive things important are actually more likely to protest, suggesting that economic grievances are not salient for them when choosing unconventionality: a check mark for resource theory expectations, in particular for the postmaterialist theory (Inglehart, 1977) predicting higher unconventionality among citizens, unrelated to economic grievances.

Finally, the impact of the household income perception on the person's ability to live comfortably differs, depending on which protest action is considered. As an individual's perception of the household income's adequacy to allow for a comfortable life deteriorates, the person's likelihood to engage in contentious politics increases. The subjective reading of a person's economic life quality affects participation in lawful demonstration, yet at the same time suppresses the likelihood of petition signing or product boycotting. In the case of this particular variable, it appears that its link to demonstrations supports the grievance theory predictions, yet the type of relationship it has with petitions and boycotts suggests a more resource theory based explanation. When the perception of a household's income appropriateness worsens, citizens seem to associate more strongly with more demanding types of protest (demonstrations), possibly skipping more moderate steps (petitions and boycotts) towards confrontational activism.

Overall, the comparison of objective and subjective economic variables in the prediction of protest in Europe depicts a scenario where at least five of the economic measures used support the expectations developed by grievance theory, with a poor economy and a declining subjective assessment of personal economic standing equally contributing to the selection of protest as a means of political expression. Economic

variables clearly matter when explaining unconventionality in Europe: H₂ can be accepted. Moreover, the subjective economic perception variables in the model are always significant, contrary to the objective economic factors.

Table 2: Multilevel Logistic Regressions: Parameter Estimates and Significance

| Variables | | Signing Petitions | | Taking Part in Lawful Demonstrations | | Boycotting Certain Products | |
|---|------------------|----------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------|----------|
| | | Coefficient and S.E. | p values | Coefficient and S.E. | p values | Coefficient and S.E. | p values |
| Individual Level (N=128281, 128506, 128225) | | | | | | | |
| Individual Demographics | | | | | | | |
| Gender: Male | | -0.251 (0.015) | .000 | 0.060 (0.025) | .015 | -0.238 (0.017) | .000 |
| Age | | -0.015 (0.001) | .000 | -0.021 (0.001) | .000 | -0.005 (0.001) | .000 |
| Education | | 0.077 (0.002) | .000 | 0.054 (0.003) | .000 | 0.086 (0.002) | .000 |
| Left/Right Scale | | -0.057 (0.004) | .000 | -0.148 (0.006) | .000 | -0.057 (0.004) | .000 |
| Belonging to Religion: Yes | | -0.061 (0.016) | .000 | -0.163 (0.027) | .000 | -0.081 (0.019) | .000 |
| Unemployed > 3 Months: Yes | | 0.080 (0.017) | .000 | -0.006 (0.027) | .817 | 0.160 (0.019) | .000 |
| Individual Political Sophistication | | | | | | | |
| TV Politics News | No time | -0.026 (0.038) | | -0.059 (0.060) | | 0.100 (0.044) | .004 |
| | Less than 0.5 hr | 0.042 (0.022) | .061 | -0.024 (0.035) | .091 | 0.082 (0.025) | |
| | 0.5-1 hr | 0.036 (0.020) | | -0.075 (0.032) | | 0.028 (0.022) | |
| Political Interest | | -0.449 (0.010) | .000 | -0.569 (0.016) | .000 | -0.535 (0.012) | .000 |
| Trust in Politicians | | -0.024 (0.004) | .000 | -0.001 (0.006) | .915 | -0.083 (0.005) | .000 |
| Vote | Yes | 0.370 (0.035) | .000 | 0.028 (0.050) | .000 | 0.308 (0.042) | .000 |
| | No | -0.100 (0.039) | | -0.440 (0.058) | | -0.021 (0.046) | |
| Personal Economic Perception | | | | | | | |
| Satisfaction with Economy | | -0.023 (0.004) | .000 | -0.035 (0.007) | .000 | -0.016 (0.005) | .000 |
| Household Income Perception | | -0.042 (0.011) | .000 | 0.034 (0.017) | .039 | -0.062 (0.012) | .000 |
| Importance of Money | | 0.060 (0.006) | .000 | 0.060 (0.010) | .000 | 0.069 (0.007) | .000 |
| Country Level (n=25) | | | | | | | |
| GDP PPS | | 0.020 (0.002) | .000 | 0.008 (0.003) | .013 | 0.017 (0.003) | .000 |
| Youth Unemployment | | 0.014 (0.002) | .000 | 0.012 (0.003) | .000 | -0.000 (0.003) | .961 |
| Real GDP Growth | | -0.000 (0.005) | .977 | -0.030 (0.008) | .000 | -0.006 (0.006) | .321 |
| Inflation | | -0.007 (0.008) | .394 | 0.048 (0.011) | .000 | -0.008 (0.010) | .407 |
| ESS Round | 2006 | 0.207 (0.031) | .000 | 0.067 (0.052) | .001 | -0.185 (0.035) | .000 |
| | 2008 | 0.126 (0.027) | | -0.076 (0.046) | | -0.141 (0.030) | |
| | 2010 | -0.074 (0.025) | | -0.060 (0.039) | | -0.159 (0.028) | |

Dependent variables are: signing a petition over the previous 12 months, taking part in a lawful demonstration over the last 12 months and boycotting certain products over the previous 12 months. All dependent variables are dichotomous values: no/yes.

c) Driving Factors of Protest

The complete picture for the prediction of likelihood of protest in an individual (Table 2) suggests that most of the other control variables in the study actually have a similar impact on the three protest measures, regardless of their different level of confrontational action.

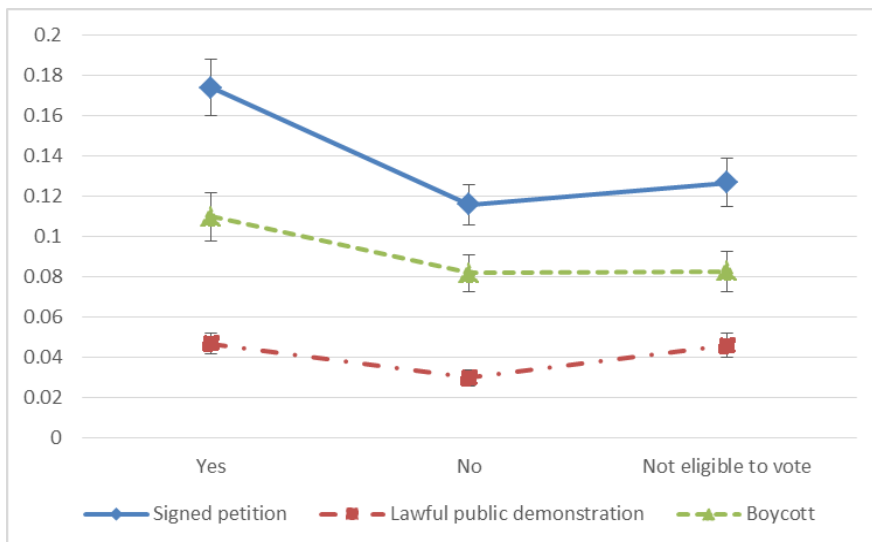
Regardless of the different levels of confrontational commitment required for the different protest actions. As already showed in previous research, older individuals are less likely to engage in protest activism at large, whereas men are more likely to take part in a street demonstration rather than signing a petition or boycotting a product. People with higher levels of education are more prone to engage in all unconventional activities, as are citizens on the left of the political spectrum. Significant positive coefficients for individuals who have ever experienced more than three months of unemployment confirm a higher propensity to use petitions and boycotts. Association with a religion instead lead people to become less engaged unconventionally. The direction of all the coefficients corresponds to the expectations from the literature and suggests stability across time for the association between individual socio-demographic variables and political activism.

In regards to the variables pertaining to the political sophistication sphere of an individual, political interest and trust in politicians retain a similar relationship with all the protest activities considered. Lower levels of political interest are associated with less contentious activism, and similarly higher trust values in politicians correspond to less unconventionality. Citizens who are not interested in politics are less likely to embrace protest as it is a demanding political action. Individuals who trust politicians are also less likely to become active in confrontational ways as they are less likely to challenge elites they trust. Finally, when vote is taken into consideration (Figure 3a), an example of conventional activism, the profile of the protester represents the complete picture of a political activist. Generally, citizens who declared to have voted at the last election were also more likely to engage in protest, while respondents who were not eligible to vote were more prone to protest than people who did not vote and the effect is more pronounced for the lawful public demonstration. In conjunction with the direction of the political interest variable, the ideal profile of the protester once again suggests a good correspondence between the use of conventional and unconventional actions.

The political activist is indeed a citizen who embraces the full spectrum of modes of participation, from voting to taking to the streets to demonstrate (Barnes and Kaase, 1979).

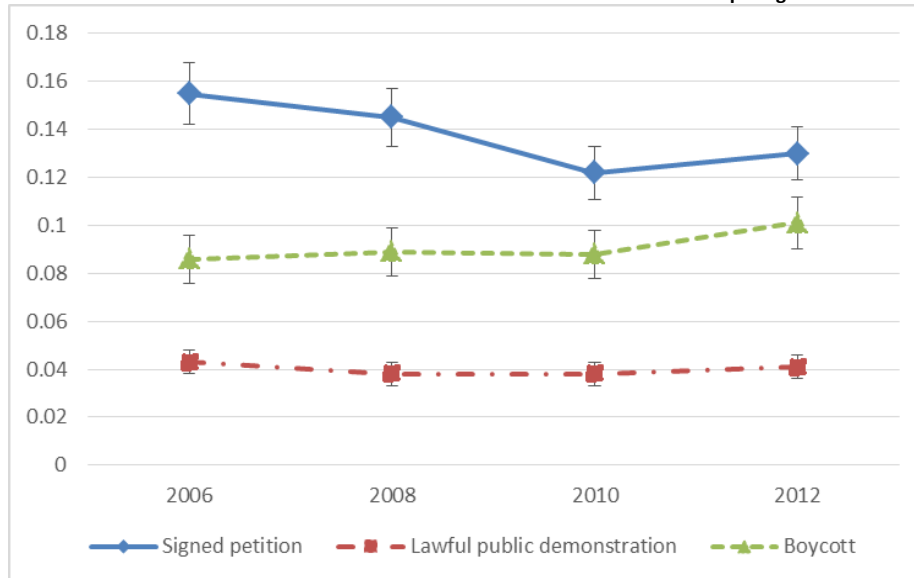
The relevance of time to assess the severity of the economic crisis is confirmed in the coefficients for the ESS rounds (Figure 3b). The biggest change is in signing a petition, which shows a decrease after the 2008 crisis, while the likelihood for individuals to boycott a product or take part in a demonstration remains flat. It is indeed two years after the crisis when the probability for boycotts and petitions start to rise, although in a small measure. The likelihood to demonstrate remains virtually the same during the period considered in this research. As citizens seem to have embraced petitions and boycotts more after 2010 at the EU level, people are not selecting more demanding forms of protests, even in 2012.

Figure 3a: Effect of Vote in Last Election on the Estimated Probabilities of an Individual Participating in Protest Activities



Note: Predictors are fixed at their mean values. The error bar is the standard error of the estimated mean.

Figure 3b: Effect of the ESS Rounds on the Estimated Probabilities of an Individual Participating in Protest Activities



Note: Predictors are fixed at their mean values. The error bar is the standard error of the estimated mean.

An analysis for the salience of independent variables in the multilevel logistic models suggests that most of the significant relationships were as expected, with the direction of the associations remaining unchanged from previous research. Yet, the role of the economic variables, objective and subjective, confirms that predictions from grievance theory are more in line with the protest activities requiring less commitment, i.e. signing a petition or boycotting certain products. The time from the beginning of the economic crisis did not make much of a difference in regards to participation in demonstrations, but the likelihood of petition signing and product boycotting increased only two years after the crisis hit, suggesting the importance of a delayed effect in the way the perception of the economy affects protest activism. A longer study on the role of subjective economic perceptions might reveal a stronger impact for personal economic evaluations in explaining protest.

5. Conclusions

The 2008 global economic crisis severely affected European countries. Citizens were experiencing a worse economic situation and a prolonged recession that affected many economies for years. Some scholars of political activism have explained waves of public protest as a manifestation of people's economic perception of their own wellbeing. With economic indicators deteriorating, mass demonstrations and square occupations were viewed as the activism choice of individuals reacting to their own economic grievances. An empirical assessment of the relationship between the economic downturn and unconventional political activism in the European Union suggests that the overall picture is not an example of a "movement society" (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998) or of an economically driven confrontational activism (Gurr, 1970).

This article has presented evidence disputing the increase in unconventional in European activism. Percentages of individuals signing a petition or boycotting certain products have remained stable, even four years after the crisis. Participation in street demonstrations has increased, but it remains quite low overall. The real jump in unconventional has taken place instead in few selected EU members: Spain, Ireland and Portugal, for instance. These countries have witnessed a relevant surge in unconventional since the recession started. After 2008 more people choose protest to express themselves politically, but only in few countries in Europe.

The significance of economic indicators, discussed differently based upon the direction of the association, remains high. Both objective and subjective economic variables contribute to the explanation of protest, in particular with regards to demonstrations, a more demanding type of unconventional activism. Grievance theory scholars can claim that the economy is indeed a key factor to predict protest in Europe since the recession, when it comes to signing a petition and boycotting certain products. Data suggest that citizens have a good understanding of their economic status as both objective measures and subjective assessments help predict unconventional. With the continuation of the economic decline overall, personal economic perceptions seem to be more relevant to understand unconventional.

Finally, the last contribution from the research is that economic decline still matters for political activism. Although the literature on political behavior over the last three decades has focused primarily on the role of resources and wealth to understand and explain protest, recent events are crucial to look back at the relevance of economic based grievances in predicting protest. When economies are shrinking and the impact of a recession is prolonged, grievance theory retains its significance, as the longer the economic hardship experienced in a country, the more severe the impact of economic

indicators on political behavior predictions. If economic safety is undermined, especially for a significant period of time, unconventionality becomes a more likely choice for citizens, despite previous levels of wealth. European governments can expect more mass protest and confrontational activism, if the economic recession persists, especially with an individual's economic perception of personal wellbeing becoming more relevant in predicting unconventional political activism.

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Appendix 1: Variable List

| Variable | Survey Question | Type | Source |
|-----------------------------|---|---|------------------------|
| Petition | During the last 12 months, have you signed a petition? | Categorical (no/yes) | European Social Survey |
| Demonstration | During the last 12 months, have you taken part in a lawful demonstration? | Categorical (no/yes) | European Social Survey |
| Boycott | During the last 12 months, have you boycotted certain products? | Categorical (no/yes) | European Social Survey |
| Gender | Sex of respondent | Categorical (female/male) | European Social Survey |
| Age | Age in years | Continuous | European Social Survey |
| Education | About how many years of education have you completed? | Continuous | European Social Survey |
| Left/Right Scale | In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Where would you place on this scale? | Scalar (0=left, 10=right) | European Social Survey |
| Belonging to a Religion | Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination? | Categorical (no/yes) | European Social Survey |
| Unemployed > than 3 months | Have you ever been unemployed and seeking work for a period of more than three months? | Categorical (no/yes) | European Social Survey |
| TV Politics News | On an average weekday, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs? | Categorical (More than 1 hr/0.5 to 1 hr/Less than 0.5 hr/No time at all) | European Social Survey |
| Political Interest | How interested would you say you are in politics? | Scalar (1= Very Interested, 4= Not at all Interested) | European Social Survey |
| Trust in Politicians | How much you personally trust... | Scalar (0= No Trust at All, 10= Complete Trust) | European Social Survey |
| Vote | Did you vote in the last national election...? | Categorical (Not eligible/Yes/No) | European Social Survey |
| Satisfaction with Economy | On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in your country? | Scalar (0= Extremely Dissatisfied, 10= Extremely Satisfied) | European Social Survey |
| Household Income Perception | Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays? | Scalar (1= Living comfortably on present income, 4= Very difficult on present income) | European Social Survey |
| Importance of Money | How important is it to be rich, have money and expensive things? | Scalar (1= Very much like me, 6= Not like me at all) | European Social Survey |
| GDP PPS | GDP per capita in PPS - Index (EU28 = 100) | Continuous | Eurostat |
| Youth Unemployment | Youth unemployment rate - % of active population aged 15-24 | Continuous | Eurostat |
| Real GDP Growth | Real GDP growth rate – volume. Percentage change on previous year. | Continuous | Eurostat |
| Inflation | Harmonised Index Consumer Prices - inflation rate. Annual average rate of change (%). | Continuous | Eurostat |
| ESS Rounds | Rounds 6, 5, 4, and 3 | Categorical (2012/2010/2008/2006) | European Social Survey |

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

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