

Economic Crisis Conditioned: Individual Protest and Socio-economic Hardship

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Katerina Vrablikova

(kvrablik@mail.uni-mannheim.de)

Introduction

Most Western democracies have recently experienced remarkable mobilizations related to the economic crisis and growing socio-economic inequality, such as anti-austerity protests and Occupy movements. Protests of socio-economically deprived people, such as peasants' or poor people's movements (Piven and Cloward 1977; Jenkins and Perrow 1977), have appeared in the past; however, these mobilizations were rather sporadic. The novel aspect of recent developments is that protest under socio-economic hardship has become a remarkable political force in contemporary democracies (della Porta 2014; Grasso and Giugni 2015). Anti-austerity protests and Occupy movements challenge the status quo and aim at a radical renewal of democracy. Given the long-term trend of deepening wealth inequality in contemporary democracies (OECD 2011), we can expect political mobilization stemming from socio-economic hardships to increase in coming years (della Porta 2014).

What is the role of socioeconomic hardship for people's participation at protest? As protest has been mostly a matter of people, who are better-off and living in more affluent contexts, vast majority of empirically oriented literature has focused on this "affluent" type of protest. Also established theories in political participation as well as social movement literature neglect the mobilizing role of socioeconomic hardship or suggest that grievances do not matter for protest. The goal of this study is to address this lacuna. Following grievance literature the main argument developed in the paper is that protest under hardship is activated by the combination of individual and macro-structural socio-economic scarcity under a crucial

condition that macro-structural hardship is also politicized. High political saliency of macro-structural socio-economic problems opens political space for diverse actors and redefinition of identities and transforms individual socioeconomic deprivation into collectively perceived mobilizing grievances that activate people to protest.

To provide an initial empirical examination the study illustrates the theory on the data from the European Social Survey 2010 that are combined with macro-level data on unemployment and aggregated survey data (Eurobarometer) on public concern about employment. The results show that macro-structural hardship (unemployment rate) increases protest of socioeconomically deprived people only if the issue of unemployment raises a high concern. As suggested by the theory, this increased political salience of the problem ripples routines of everyday politics and opens political space for mobilization of – in other occasions politically excluded – socioeconomically deprived people. Interestingly, if fewer people consider unemployment as a severe problem macro-structural socioeconomic hardship loses its mobilization effect and in contrast even dampens protest of socioeconomically deprived people.

Protest and socio-economic hardship

Ordinarily protest has usually been a matter of affluent socio-economic resources with people of higher socio-economic status (SES) residing in wealthier countries protesting substantially more (Dalton, Van Sickle, and Weldon 2010; Schussman and Soule 2005; Stolle and Hooghe 2011; Teorell and Tobiasen 2007; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 190). Following the classical Civic Voluntarism Model most of political participation studies explain the positive effect of higher socio-economic status on individual protest with higher accumulation of individual resources (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Similarly, resource mobilization theory prevalent in social movement literature has emphasized the role of affluent collective resources in mobilization of people (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).¹ Also proponents of post-materialist theory have shown that residence in more socio-economically advanced contexts and experience of affluent socio-economic resources during socialization

¹ Unlike political participation literature, resource mobilization theory does not claim that individual affluence of resources is needed; rather, it suggests that organizational resources at the level of groups induce protest. However, mainstream social movement literature explicitly predicts zero effect of socio-economic hardship on protest and does not usually even take into account socio-economic hardship in empirical studies of protest (Snow and Soule 2009, 42–51; Buechler 2004, 51–53).

develop post-materialist values that induce individuals into “elite challenging” protest (Inglehart 1990; Inglehart 1997; Welzel and Deutsch 2012).

The mobilization of anti-austerity movements mentioned above or protest of socio-economically deprived people in general contravene some of these classical theories that expect primarily the well-off to protest in affluent contexts. In contrast, anti-austerity movements or protest of socio-economically deprived people in general is performed by socio-economically deprived people and appears in the context of economic deterioration. Available evidence shows that it was mostly well-educated but unemployed or underemployed young people with insecure jobs that took part in anti-austerity demonstrations reacting to the consequences of the economic crisis (della Porta 2014; but see Rüdig and Karyotis 2014). On some occasions also older and poorer people became politically active to protest economic hardship and political exclusion.² These observations suggest that, probably, the effect of socio-economic resources on participation at protest is hence more complex, i.e. not homogenously and unconditionally positive as suggested by conventional theories explaining primarily the “well-off” participants. To be sure, theories predicting positive effect of affluence on protest are probably still valid for most of the existing cases of protestors and picture an important mechanism of how socio-economic factors affect participation (Kerbo 1982; Wilkes 2004). However, there are rare and exceptional conditions under which a deteriorating socio-economic situation does not inhibit activism (as suggested by standard literature), but stimulates political action. The crucial question that has been basically left untouched by empirical research is what these conditions are and how these processes function.

Grievance theories have recognized that not all protests are driven by socio-economic resources, but instead by the lack of resources. Grievance theories suggest that “protests of crisis”, such as protest of poor and unemployed people, is caused by a deprived socio-economic situation that becomes a mobilizing grievance and triggers political action (Buechler 1999; Snow and Soule 2009, 24). However, grievance approaches have not explained yet in more detail why and under what conditions socio-economic hardship triggers protest (and does not inhibit it as in the case of “well-off” type of activism). Since the classical studies of collective behavior (Gurr 1970; Piven and Cloward 1977; Turner and Killian 1987; Smelser 1962) and after initial mixed

² For instance, 10 per cent of participants at the anti-austerity demonstration organized in Prague (7th April 2013) were unemployed and a large majority of them came from very poor households far below the country’s median income levels (Vráblíková 2015).

or unsupportive results, grievance theories have been heavily neglected in both, political participation and social movement literature (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Norris, Walgrave, and Aelst 2005; Schlozman and Verba 1979).

Though some studies kept developing the grievance approach, they mostly do not focus on individual participation in protest. Most of grievance studies analyze the effect of socio-economic hardship on timing and the amount of protest events at the aggregate level and do not examine why socio-economically deprived people protest (Jenkins, Maher, and Fahrer 2014; Ponticelli and Voth 2011; Richards and Gelleny 2006; Wilkes 2004; but see Opp 2000; Rüdig and Karyotis 2014). Besides, they mostly focus on radical forms of political actions like riots or rebellions but have not examined the role of socio-economic hardship for non-violent protest (Jenkins, Maher, and Fahrer 2014; Ponticelli and Voth 2011; Richards and Gelleny 2006; Van Dyke and Soule 2002). However, as some point out, rebellions are not the type of outcome that is expected to be produced by socio-economic hardship in democratic regimes (Wilkes 2004; Gurr 1993; Opp 2000). According to Gurr (1993) rebellions and riots are too costly and less necessary in democracies when more peaceful options of legal protest are available.

Recently, grievance theories have been revived in social movement literature to explain why individuals take part in non-violent protest (della Porta 2014; Snow and Soule 2009). But these studies are mostly theoretical (Snow et al. 1998; Snow and Soule 2009) and have not really systematically tested the grievance explanation in more advanced designs that would disentangle the role of socio-economic hardship from alternative explanations (della Porta 2014; Corrigan-Brown et al. 2009; but see Opp 2000; Rüdig and Karyotis 2014). More attention has been paid to the impact of grievances on individual political activism in social psychology (Klandermans, van der Toorn, and van Stekelenburg 2008; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008; Mummendey et al. 1999). This literature emphasizes that socio-economic hardship needs to be perceived as mobilizing collective grievance by potential participants and not as a personal problem in order to induce protest (Snow and Soule 2009; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008; Abrams and Grant 2012; Kawakami and Dion 1995). Interpretative strategies (frame alignment) (Benford and Snow 2000) and comparisons with situation of other people/social groups (relative deprivation) help individuals perceive their problem as collective, unjust and corrigible. These processes induce feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration and anger and motivate people to protest. Although

perceptions of reality are undoubtedly crucial for behavior and can work as mediating factors, the important question is how such interpretations are related to factual socio-economic situations (Opp 2000). The majority of socio-psychological studies does not examine factual disadvantages originating in socio-economic structure but study people's perceptions only (van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008). Hence, the question that is left unanswered by this literature is the role of structural socio-economic conditions in the activation of the individual psychological processes described.

Some of the classical collective behavior literature suggests that the conditions that might activate the socio-economic hardship to produce protest are macro-level processes such as crises, socio-structural strains, breakdowns, threats or a disruption of normal social routines (Gurr 1970; Kornhauser 2010; Marx and Engels 2014; Piven and Cloward 1977; Smelser 1962; Buechler 2004). For instance, strain theories suggest that macro-level structural changes (political, economic and demographic shifts resulting from wars or restructuring economic institutions) trigger protest of people, whose position is threatened and who experience serious losses because of such changes (Buechler 2004; Van Dyke and Soule 2002). Also, Snow's et al.'s theory of "quotidian disruption", which draws on the classical breakdown theory, suggests that events, such as natural disasters or economic crises, induce people hit by these events into protest by disrupting their everyday routine (quotidian) and taken-for-granted life (Snow et al. 1998).

While often theoretically disregarded and hardly empirically studied, a crucial implication of all these theories is that for socio-economic hardship to induce protest, both particular individual and structural factors need to be integrated. Specifically, the interaction of a large scale or disruptive macro-level structural change on one hand and the experience of individual-level hardship on the other hand seem to be the special conditions that activate protest under hardship. Recently studies analyzing the political consequences of the economic crisis that emerged in 2008 have revived this line of thoughts. Many agree that the economic crisis had profound effects on protest politics (Beissinger and Sasse 2014; della Porta 2014; Grasso and Giugni 2015; Kriesi 2014). However, these studies have not focused on the interaction between macro-structural and individual socio-economic conditions in more detail. They either examine aggregate level protest and do not focus on individual level protest and personal hardship (Beissinger and Sasse 2014; Kriesi 2014; Grasso and Giugni 2015) or they do not examine more systematically how the variation in macro-structural conditions triggers socio-economically

deprived individuals to protest (della Porta 2014; Rüdig and Karyotis 2014). Only a recent study by Kern and her colleagues (2015) has tested the effect of contextual and individual-level socio-economic hardship on individual non-institutional participation in a more systematic multi-level setting. Their results shows that unlike in previous times, people's discontent with the economy and unemployment enhances individual non-institutional after 2008. Still, a more elaborated theory that would specify exactly how and why the interaction between macro-structural and individual-level socio-economic hardship induces protest and a more developed analysis of these effects are lacking.

Multilevel Theory of Socio-Economic Hardship and Protest

In general, the paper theorizes about two main mechanisms of why the interaction of macro-structural and individual socio-economic deterioration should trigger participation in protest (Buechler 2004; Piven and Cloward 1977). First, the most often implied mechanism is that macro-structural changes, such as an economic crisis or a significant restructuring of existing economic arrangements, considerably alter material conditions of a large group of people. From this perspective, macro-structural socio-economic developments help constitute specific socio-structurally based constituencies (specific mobilization potential, Oegema and Klandermans 1994)) that could potentially protest.

Second, a theoretically more innovative and important reason of why macro-structural socio-economic deterioration should lead to protest of socio-economically deprived people is its effect on political processes. In summary, macro-structural socio-economic changes facilitate politicization of socio-economic problems and help mobilize potential participants. Public policy, social movement and risk management literature all agree that events that might have catastrophic or fatal consequences for a large number of people and are little predictable and unfamiliar, such as economic crisis or a nuclear accident, ripple the existing socio-political structures and disrupt familiar societal routines (Slovic 1987; Buechler 2004; Piven and Cloward 1977; Boin, Hart, and McConnell 2009; Keeler 1993). The important point is that such macro-structural changes do not only disrupt the quotidian of people personally affected by the crises as suggested by Snow et al. (1998), but that they also severely disrupt a "quotidian" of national politics. The stress that the political system experiences makes the macro-structural change extremely politically salient and results in an unprecedented opening of the political space for

various political actors and a radical redefinition of political issues and identities (Buechler 2004; Piven and Cloward 1977; Boin, Hart, and McConnell 2009; Keeler 1993). This process of politicization is a crucial moment that triggers the mechanisms (well-described by social psychology literature reviewed above) that transform individual socio-economic hardship into collectively perceived mobilizing grievances that then empower socio-economically deprived people into action. Hence the disruption of the political quotidian that opens the political space at the societal level provides the necessary theoretical link between macro-structural socio-economic and individual/social-group level processes leading to protest of economically deprived people/groups.

The project theorizes that, on the one hand, this empowerment takes place indirectly through a general politicization of socio-economic change. Some students of identity politics point out that the necessary cultural component of materially determined socio-economic statuses is to a large extent externally imposed by the state and general socio-political environments (Bernstein 2005). Next to the positioning of specific people in socio-economically vulnerable positions, macro-structural socio-economic changes simultaneously create (thanks to their politicization in the media and general political discourses) a politically salient category of the “poor” or the “precariat.” For instance, Monroe (1995) shows this process in his study of how a collapse of existing political structures in former Yugoslavia contributed to politicization of ethnic identities and then led to inter-ethnic political violence.

On the other hand, the politicization of socio-economically disadvantaged identities takes place through direct mobilization of deprived constituencies by political actors. In contrast to original collective behavior literature that pictured activism of deprived people as spontaneous and unstructured, recent studies on activism of socio-economically excluded people show that mobilization, social networks and cohesion, and collective identity might play an important role (Useem 1980, 366; Shefner 1999; Corrigan-Brown et al. 2009; Snow and Soule 2009; Snow et al. 1998). Though actually hardly empirically examined in studies on individual political participation in general, many agree that mobilization is crucial (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003, 5; Norris 2002; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Klandermans 1984; Abramson and Claggett 2001). Mobilizing actors make use of the fact that there is a politically recognized constituency of socio-economically deprived (open discursive opportunity structure, Koopmans and Statham 1999). Mobilizing actors get involved in consensus mobilization that, using

discursive framing described by social-psychology literature, helps transform salient socio-economic grievances into political consciousness among the constituency of potential participants and interpret their issue as unjust and changeable (Oegema and Klandermans 1994; Benford and Snow 2000). Mobilizing actors also directly recruit potential participants to take part in specific participatory events (action mobilization) (Oegema and Klandermans 1994). A crucial moment here is that the recruitment is not random but targeted to specific types of people (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). Though usually privileged people are more likely to be targeted, in this situation these are the socio-economically deprived people, who become the constituency targeted by mobilization. In this way mobilizing actors take over the costs of participation on their side and hence enable participation of socio-economically deprived people, who lack individual resources to participate (Uhlener 1989; Leighley 2001).

Importantly, the inclusion of politicization and mobilization into our theoretical framework does not mean that political activism is at the end of the day mainly about affluence of (mobilization) resources. In line with some other authors, the paper sees socio-economic hardship and particularly collective resources as complementary (Kerbo 1982; Khawaja 1994; Wilkes 2004). However, unlike standard literature, theoretical expectations developed in this paper suggest that the initial trigger is structural and originates from socio-economic scarcity and deprivation. In other words, in contrast to the conventional literature, the paper suggests that socio-economic hardship matters for participation in protest.

To sum up, the general theoretical expectation of this paper is that the two – individual and structural-level socio-economic hardship – will amplify each other's effect and lead to individual protest. The mechanisms of these effects are 1) existence of socio-economically deprived constituency and 2) politicization (political saliency and mobilization).

Data and Methods

The empirical analysis presented in this paper is only a preliminary illustration. The plan of the project is to examine four types of macro-structural and individual-level indicators of socio-economic hardship (1. Overtime decline/loss, 2. Absolute deprivation/immiseration, 3. Relative deprivation/status inconsistency, and 4. Expected deterioration/threat). Mainly the more developed analysis will use larger data. The problem is that protest of socio-economically

deprived is very rare and because of that the absolute numbers of socio-economically deprived people who protest that are captured by nationally representative surveys are very low (around ten cases). The plan of how to cope with this problem is to use repeated cross-sectional surveys (such as seven waves of European Social Survey in around 30 countries) that will include a huge number of observations at the individual level, which means that also the absolute number of covered protestors that are otherwise rare cases is also large enough for more robust analyses (King and Zeng 2001). The preliminary analysis shown in this paper uses only the fifth wave of the European Social Survey from 2010 in 22 countries (hence the number of cases on both, individual and country level, is very limited). Also a multi-level modelling will be later used to analyze the multi-level theory more adequately (particularly the interaction between the role of individual hardship and macro-structural conditions controlling for other individual and macro-level factors). The preliminary analysis presented here shows only results aggregated at the level of countries that illustrate this cross-level interaction.

Protest of socioeconomically deprived people

The dependent variable is the national rate of socio-economically deprived people, who took part in a demonstration in the last 12 months. Socio-economically deprived people are those, who answering the question “Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household’s income nowadays?” chose category “living very difficult on present income”. This country-level measure combining the two variables (protest and deprivation) captures the country distribution of the individual-level side of the interaction (i.e. protest of deprived people).

Macro-structural socio-economic hardship

As an indicator of macro-structural socio-economic hardship the analysis uses the national unemployment rate in 2009 reported by the World Bank.

Politicization

The general political saliency of the socio-economic hardship is indicated by aggregated public opinion on severity of employment situation in the country. Specifically, percentage of general population answering “very bad” to a question “How would you judge the current situation in

each of the following? The employment situation in our country” from Standard Eurobarometer 72 from autumn 2009 is used. The expectation is that macro-structural socio-economic hardship will increase protest of socioeconomically deprived people only in countries with high politicization of unemployment.

Specific mobilizing potential

One of the mechanisms why macro-economic hardship increases protest is that it helps constitute socio-structurally based constituency of people that can potentially protest. The idea is simple: if there are more of people who suffer, there is a higher chance that those people will also protest. To indicate specific mobilizing potential the same survey question that is used to construct the dependent variable is used, i.e. proportion of people, who said that living on their present households’ income is very difficult.

Demonstration rate

Protest of socioeconomically deprived people is probably driven not only by macro-level socioeconomic factors but also follows the cross-national pattern of general protest. Put bluntly, we can expect that protest of socioeconomically deprived people will be more likely in countries where protest in general is more common than in countries where general levels of protest are very low (e.g. Sweden will have more socio-economically deprived protestors because all people protest more than Hungary where protest in general is much less common). The analysis needs to control for this pattern. By taking this factor into account we model variation specific to protest under hardship and partly control for predictors explaining the cross-country variation in general participation at the demonstration. The analysis uses percentage of people, who indicated that they took part at the demonstration in last 12 months (the same variable that is used to construct the dependent variable).

Influential country cases

Since the number of cases is very low (22), there is a risk that the findings might be a result of a few influential cases and that the results will not be robust for most of the cases in the analysis. Because of that the analysis includes country dummies to control for cases that were above a critical threshold of Cook’s D. Substantively, the results are the same if the dummies are not

included. The only exception is Greece that is an outlier and a very influential case. If Greece is not controlled, the significant effects of our main interest disappear.

Results

Model 1 in Table 1 shows unconditioned effect of macro-structural hardship (unemployment rate in 2009) on protest of socio-economically deprived people. The results suggest that the level of protest of socioeconomically deprived people is not dependent on structural hardship as the coefficient is not significant. This effect is shown in Figure 1 that shows more or less a flat line (influential cases of Greece and Spain excluded) illustrating the nonexistent relationship. This finding is in line with our theory suggesting that the effect of socioeconomic hardship is much more complex than a simple unconditional effect.

The theory predicted that macro-structural hardship needs to be politicized in order to have a mobilizing effect on socioeconomically deprived people. This expectation is tested in Model II in the second row with the interaction between unemployment rate and very bad assessments of employment situation. The coefficient is positive and significant suggesting that the higher proportion of people thinking that employment situation in the country is very bad the larger the effect of unemployment rate on protest of socioeconomically deprived people. Figure 3 examines the interaction into more detail. It shows a marginal effect of macro-economic hardship on protest of socioeconomically deprived conditioned by politicization. As we can see, higher unemployment leads to higher protest of socioeconomically deprived only if politicized (i.e. if above 56 % of public sees the employment situation as very bad). This result is fully in line with our theory: macro-structural hardship facilitates protest of socioeconomically deprived people only when the problem is highly politically salient and can disrupt the national politics, which opens opportunities for mobilization of socioeconomically deprived people. The Figure 3 also shows that, in contrast, if unemployment is not perceived as a severe problem by a large majority of people (less than 40 %), the effect of unemployment becomes negative: greater macro-structural hardship dampens protest of socioeconomically deprived people.

The theory suggested that protest of socioeconomically deprived should also depend on the specific mobilizing potential, i.e. the magnitude of the socioeconomically deprived constituency that can be turned into action. Factor indicating portion of socioeconomically deprived people in the population tests this expectation. Not surprisingly, the effect is significant

and positive suggesting that countries that have larger amount of people, who find it difficult to live on their present income, also have greater levels of protest of these people.

- Table 1 -

- Figure 1, 2, and 3 -

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Table 1: Protest of Socioeconomically Deprived People, Macro-Structural Hardship, and Politicization

<i>DV: protest of SE deprived</i>	MODEL I			MODEL II		
	Coef.	Std. Err.		Coef.	Std. Err.	
Unemployment Rate	.014	.019		-.102	.026	**
* Very Bad Assessments of Employment Situation				.002	.001	**
Very Bad Assessments of Employment Situation				-.020	.005	**
SE Deprived People in the Population				.041	.006	***
General Demonstration Rate				.025	.006	***
Constant	.167	.174		.699	.217	**
Influential cases						
Greece	1.497	.235	***	1.106	.159	***
Spain	.429	.298		.273	.154	
Bulgaria				-.754	.199	**
Netherlands				-.356	.136	*
Adj R2	.77			.97		
N	22			22		

Figure 1: Macro-Structural Hardship and Protest of Deprived People



Figure 2: Mobilizing Potential and Protest of Deprived People



Figure 3: Effect of Macro-Structural Hardship on Protest of Deprived People Conditioned by Politicization

