

Protest and Agenda-Setting

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The Comparative Agenda Project (CAP), originating within the domain of public policy, mainly deals with the issue attentiveness of political institutions like parliament (questions and bills) or government (laws, budgets, and speeches). The agenda approach in political science—an approach holding that political attention is scarce, that it is a pre-condition for policy-making, and that attention is consequential (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014)—has not only been used to study institutional politics, but also increasingly to examine how society is connected to and influences the political process. Indeed, the agenda-setting approach is gradually being used more to examine political representation and the responsiveness of politics to societal demands (Pitkin, 1969).

The responsiveness of political issue priorities to public issue priorities, and of political issue positions to public issue positions for that matter, is one of the most central benchmarks of democratic quality. Any notion of democracy inevitably implies that what politicians are doing and prioritizing matches to some extent what citizens want them to do and act upon (Miller and Stokes, 1963). To assess democratic quality, and more specifically the congruence between political priorities/positions and public priorities/positions, one needs data about what politics is prioritizing and doing on the one hand and what society demands politics to prioritize/do on the other. The CAP data are very useful in that respect.

There are, in particular, three *societal* agendas studied in CAP that allow us to assess the interaction between societal demands and political priorities: public opinion, news media coverage, and protest. Public opinion mostly measured by most important problem questions (Wlezien, 2005) grasps the raw issue priorities of the aggregate, mostly uninterested and unmobilized part of the population. Media coverage is not only a reflection of public opinion but also

of the real world problems hitting the system, of journalistic priorities and news selection processes, and of elites that are successful in placing their priorities in the media. Protest—the number, type, and size of protest events in a country or region—forms a useful measure of the priorities of a mobilized and active part of the citizenry, the so-called issue publics (Krosnick, 1990). Famously, Schattschneider (1960) has argued that politics is driven by the mobilization of bias (the interests of some specific but active groups). Protest agenda data are one way of assessing what the public, or at least a part of it, wants politicians to do.

27.1 The Agenda Effect of Protest

What people who protest want most is first of all attention. When social movements stage protest events or when groups of citizens spontaneously come together to express their grievances they most of the time cry out for politicians to care about the issue. Mobilization around issues with the aim of keeping those issues *off* the political agenda does not exist. In the broader field of social movement studies, the question whether protest matters is probably the most important one. Researchers have struggled with this fundamental question for many years, and the answers they have given have been mixed and contradictory (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su, 2010; Uba, 2009).

The reason for the inconclusive results is that scholars have disagreed about what exactly one should understand under movement “impact” (Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly, 1999). While we acknowledge that some movements might be less driven by the desire to gain political attention than others, we think it is safe to assume that all movements do want attention for their issues and cause. In that case, one can simply study the impact of social movements by examining whether their protests lead to political attention. If attention, or an increase of attention, for an issue on the parliamentary or governmental agenda is systematically preceded by protest on the same issue, chances are that the protest has an agenda-setting effect on what parliamentarians or government ministers are addressing. Similarly, also the reversed relationship can be studied—is the protest agenda influenced by the parliamentary or government agenda?

Such an agenda perspective on the impact of protest is not new and has been apparent in a great many studies published during the last few decades. Burstein and Freudenburg (1978) were probably the first to take movement size and protest activity as the independent variable and political attention, the number of US Senate votes on the topic, as the dependent. Another example is the work by Soule, McAdam, McCarthy, and Su (1999), that, in a

study of US congressional hearings and roll call votes about women's issues, found that protest incidence is a *consequence* of political attention and not a cause. In another study, King, Bentele, and Soule (2007) take protest as the independent variable when trying to model US congressional attention to a number of so-called "rights issues" while controlling for a whole range of alternative agenda-setters. The number of congressional hearings increases when the number of protests goes up, they find. By far most of these earlier protest-and-political-agenda studies are non-comparative: they use evidence from one country only, predominantly the United States, and they do not compare cross issues and, thus, across protests and social movements.

We know of two published studies that have employed an agenda perspective on protest impact and that drew on country- or issue-comparing evidence. Both these studies have relied on Comparative Agenda Project data. The work by Walgrave and Vliegenthart (2012) in Belgium found that, across all issues and movements, the frequency of protest is more important for the political agenda than the size of protest. The parliamentary agenda and the governmental agenda are both affected by protest, even the legislative agenda is influenced by preceding protest. Protest size has an effect, but it is largely mediated by media attention. Increasing the complexity of agenda power of protest further, their results suggest that these effects differ across issues. Some of the impact of protest frequency remains confined to specific issues only, more concretely the typical issues of the so-called news social movements, such as environment, peace, women's rights, and human rights.

A recent study by Vliegenthart and (many) colleagues (2016) includes comparative protest data in six Western European countries and basically asks the same question: Is protest followed by an increase in political attention for the protest issue? As in the Belgian case, they do find an effect of protest on parliamentary questioning. In their analyses, pooling the various countries in one dataset, they specify that the effect of protest is fully mediated by mass media coverage. Protests lead to increasing news coverage of the protest issue and this, in turn, affects what politicians are questioning about in the six parliaments under study. Maybe the most interesting thing is that the mediated impact of protest on parliament differs across countries. Countries under majoritarian rule do witness a stronger (mediated) protest effect than countries with proportional electoral systems. Clear government responsibilities mean that protest matters more.

So, the agenda-setting effect of protest is determined by the issue under investigation, as well as the political context in which the protest takes place. A third moderating factor that has been investigated is the political party: Do different political parties respond differently to protest? Hutter and Vliegenthart (2018) use the same CAP-coded data to demonstrate that parties are more likely to respond to protest when they are in opposition and if competing parties responded to those issues as well.

This chapter's aim is not to re-examine whether, how, and to what extent protest has an agenda effect on whom. Rather, we want to showcase the breath and relevance of the CAP protest data by providing an overview of the existing datasets as well as some more descriptive analyses to get a bit more insight into the data.

27.2 Methods

For this study, we rely on the protest dataset used in the study by Vliegenthart et al. (2016) on the agenda-setting impact of protest on parliament in six Western European countries. The following countries and periods are included in our analyses: the Netherlands (1995–2011), Spain (1996–2011), the United Kingdom (1997–2008), Switzerland (1995–2003), France (1995–2005) and Belgium (1999–2010).

Except for Belgium, data are not coded directly according to the CAP code-book, but the data are recoded from protest event data collected by Kriesi (2012) and colleagues. These data are an updated and extended version of the data used by Kriesi et al. (1995) that focused on the presence and breakthrough of new social movements in several Western European countries. When it comes to the coding of protest events, the selection of the source of information is a topic of serious debate. In this case, newspapers are used to collect information about protest events. More specifically, the following newspapers are included in the analysis: *The Guardian* (UK), *Le Monde* (France), *NRC Handelsblad* (Netherlands), *El Pais* (Spain), and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Switzerland). Only the Monday editions are coded, not only for pragmatic reasons, but also because these newspapers cover the events of the weekend before. Protest events are occurring a lot more frequently on Saturday and Sunday than on weekdays. All events that were reported on, including those up to a week before and after the publication date of the newspaper, are coded.

The first source of potential bias can thus be found in the partial use of newspaper material. The second source is the use of newspaper data as such. All kind of selection processes make it more likely for certain type of events to get into the newspapers than others. A lot of research has been devoted to which events are favored by journalists. Characteristics such as event size and the occurrence of violence and issue attention cycles are important, while also cross-media differences are found (see for example, Earl, Martin, McCarthy, and Soule, 2004; Ortiz, David, Myers, Daniel, Walls, Eugene, and Diaz, 2005). Biases cannot be totally avoided but the data selection is based on the idea of making the bias “as systematic as possible” (Koopmans, 1995: 271).

The selected newspapers are comparable. They are all quality newspapers, with a nation-wide reach and none of them has a very strong political leaning.

While the cross-national and longitudinal stability in the patterns of selection bias is still a contested topic, recent studies show that the sampling strategy used here does not deviate largely from encompassing strategies of data collection (Giugni, 2004; Hutter and Swen, 2014; McCarthy, Titarenko, McPhail, Rafail, and Augustyn, 2008). Most important, the results show that over-time dynamics in protest mobilization on particular issues is traced accurately with the chosen approach. Since those dynamics are key for agenda scholars, these data offer a valuable source.

The obtained dataset includes 4,925 protest events in five countries, involving around 49 million participants. One of the characteristics that was included in the coding was the “goal” of the protest. An extensive list of 103 goals was used. These goals were recoded by the authors to fit the CAP major issue categories. The recoded goals fall into only seventeen different CAP categories (16 for Spain and the United Kingdom where immigration is not a major category). The analyses we present in this chapter are based on those seventeen categories. As commonly done also for other agendas, our media-protest coverage measures gauge the relative share of protest events covered in the media that are devoted to an issue in a given country during a given month.

Note that for Belgium a separate protest dataset was collected. In this case, data come directly from police records and are coded directly according to the major CAP categories. Thus, these data were thus collected fully independently from media coverage. We use the same seventeen categories we use for the other countries for Belgium.

27.3 Results

In this chapter, we present three different exploratory analyses. First, we look at the overall descriptives and compare protest issues across countries (see Table 27.1). Second, we look at the extent to which issue attention is correlated (both cross-sectionally as well as over time) and to what extent we can speak of a transnational protest agenda, which would fit the argument in the social movement literature on the transnationalization of protest (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). Third, we single out two issues: defense and civil rights and liberties that might have become more salient on the protest agenda due to the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent political developments.

While the total N, the number of protests in the recorded periods, in the different countries, does not deviate tremendously—protest is ubiquitous and has become a normal way of doing politics—there clearly are similarities and differences in the six countries we study here. The number one topic overall is civil right and liberties. In four countries, the share of protest on this macro issue exceeds 10 percent and the average share is 19 percent; one fifth of all

Table 27.1. Descriptive statistics: Share (proportion) of attention for each issue per country across all recorded protest events per country

Issue	NL	ES	UK	CH	FR	BE
Macroeconomics	0.017	0.033	0.013	0.040	0.042	0.012
Civil rights and liberties	0.159	0.084	0.222	0.259	0.131	0.090
Health	0.025	0.030	0.055	0.031	0.041	0.035
Agriculture and fishery	0.024	0.003	0.008	0.027	0.033	0.020
Labor and employment	0.048	0.050	0.027	0.026	0.045	0.099
Education	0.039	0.031	0.009	0.006	0.060	0.040
Environment	0.070	0.020	0.100	0.043	0.028	0.058
Energy	0.013	0.001	0.014	0.014	0.017	0.007
Immigration and integration	0.068	0.028	0.085	0.055	0.102	0.130
Transportation	0.029	0.003	0.031	0.102	0.025	0.019
Law, crime, and family	0.015	0.004	0.006	0.025	0.031	0.085
Social welfare	0.020	0.003	0.005	0.004	0.061	0.022
Comm. develop., planning, and housing	0.019	0.021	0.108	0.001	0.021	0.012
Defense	0.035	0.002	0.012	0.044	0.021	0.027
Foreign trade	0.006	0.014	0.059	0.058	0.013	0.004
International affairs and foreign aid	0.086	0.454	0.021	0.158	0.041	0.055
Government operations	0.021	0.033	0.013	0.056	0.118	0.043
<i>N</i>	3,258	2,960	2,240	1,836	2,159	2,040

Note: Scores do not add up to 1 (or 100 percent) as some issues are left out because they are not part of the recoded protest agenda. Furthermore, the protest agenda has months when no events are staged or questions are asked, lowering overall means.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

protests deal with this topic. The topic that is least affected by protest is, a little remarkably, social welfare. In three of the countries less than 1 percent of protest is devoted to the topic, the average is 2 percent. All other topics are situated between these two extremes. Interestingly, there is a remarkable spread of protest over issues with most issues getting a fair deal of protest “attention.”

There are some differences across countries with protest on issues soaring in one country and being almost entirely absent in another. A case in point here is the issue of international affairs. In Spain, during the research period, almost half (45 percent) of the protests was about this issue. In the United Kingdom, the issue received scant attention and only one in every fiftieth (2 percent) protest event was about this issue. Another example is community development, planning, and housing. It is a particularly sensitive issue in the United Kingdom with more than one in ten protests (11 percent) dealing with it. Yet, in Switzerland, if there is any conflict regarding this issue, it is not fought out using a protest strategy at all: hardly any protests were recorded (0.1 percent).

The data allow us to make other observations that maybe go against what we expect when we think about protest. While we may think of the education sector, with plenty of highly schooled and politically skilled teachers, to be particularly contentious, this is not clearly the case in the six countries we look at here; in none of the countries does the share of educational protests exceed 10 percent. The topic of immigration is now widely divisive, and it

Table 27.2. Correlation between protest agendas (cross-sectional, aggregated over the entire research period)

	NL	ES	UK	CH	FR	BE
NL	1.000	0.448	0.746	0.840	0.591	0.599
ES		1.000	0.023	0.512	0.083	0.175
UK			1.000	0.634	0.438	0.356
CH				1.000	0.497	0.322
FR					1.000	0.569
BE						1.000

Note: $N = 17$, Pearson correlation.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

plays an important role in the recent electoral successes of populist parties and candidates. Yet, it is not an issue that attracted particularly frequent protest until a few years ago. It testifies again that right-wing anti-immigrant populism—the countries under study like Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France have about the strongest right-wing populist parties around—is not a phenomenon of demonstrations and protest but rather one of electoral discontent.

How do the countries compare? Are some countries' protest agendas more similar than other countries? Table 27.2 presents Pearson correlations of the full protest agendas between countries, aggregating the data into the seventeen issue categories. All correlations are positive, so there is a unified, underlying distribution of protest attention over issues. This matches the idea that attention to issues is similarly distributed in different countries, indicating that protesters in different countries care similarly about issues. Agenda scholars have used the concept of "issue intrusion" to refer to these strong similarities in allocating attention over issues (Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson, 2006).

Still, some of the cross-country correlations are very small while others are extremely high. When it comes to protest issues, the United Kingdom and Spain are the two most different countries ($r = 0.023$). Although both are majoritarian political systems, protest-wise they have almost nothing in common. The two most similar countries are the United Kingdom and Switzerland. What happens on the streets in these two countries is very much the same; people protest for almost exactly the same issues ($r = 0.840$). The United Kingdom and the Netherlands are very similar as well ($r = 0.746$), while France and, again, Spain are very different ($r = 0.083$). Overall, the Spanish protest agenda seems to be the most different while the United Kingdom's protests are most similar to what happens in the other countries.

Table 27.3 presents similar data but now aggregated at a monthly level, while controlling for systematic differences in issue attention by including dummies for all issues (fixed effects). This analysis thus focuses solely on over-time variation: Does attention for specific issues go up and down in a similar

Table 27.3. Correlation between protest agendas across time (cross-sectional, aggregated across (overlapping) months)

	NL	ES	UK	CH	FR	BE
NL	1.000	-0.002	-0.016	-0.041	0.027	0.004
ES		1.000	0.027	0.046	0.058	0.009
UK			1.000	0.058	-0.013	-0.008
CH				1.000	0.071	-0.073
FR					1.000	0.022
BE						1.000

Note: $N = 1, 500-4, 255$, Pearson correlation controlled for issue differences (fixed effects).
 Source: Comparative Agendas Project

way in different countries? The picture looks very different compared to the cross-issue analysis. It is not at all the case that countries are witnessing similar protest events at roughly the same point in time. In fact, none of the correlation comes close to being substantial; the largest correlation is $r = 0.071$ between the protest agendas in Switzerland and France. What these data tell us is that, while the *overall* agenda seems to be similar and the same issues impose themselves on different nations' streets, *when* precisely those issues receive attention varies heavily across countries. Thus, protest is still largely determined by local events, the national policy cycle, and the timing of local political decisions. For example, all countries may have witnessed increasing protest on bread-and-butter issues against the backdrop of austerity measures taken by European governments after the financial crisis; but they took different measures at different points in time and it is hard to speak of a common, transnational protest cycle challenging these austerity measures.

Agenda work has showed that real world events sometime forcefully hit a political system and that these events disrupt the existing agenda. The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 are such an event. They led to several wars, to stricter liberty laws, and to widespread security measures in many countries. Most of us will also remember the widespread protest against the War on Iraq with even the biggest worldwide protest event ever recorded in human history in February 2003 (Walgrave and Rucht, 2010). Has 9/11 and its violent aftermath left its traces on the protest agenda in European states? We look at protest of the issues regarding defense and civil rights and liberties before and after 9/11. Table 27.4 presents a comparison of means.

In four of the six countries under study, we see that, after 9/11, the number of protest events dealing with the defense issue is significantly higher. This shows that external events can impose themselves forcefully on the agenda and that even protest is following real world events. For the second topic, we only see a significant effect in one country: Belgium. This might actually reflect protests directed at the European Union, since many of those protests

Table 27.4. Mean comparisons between monthly protest attention for defense and civil rights and liberties before and after 9/11 (Twin Tower attacks in the United States)

	Defense			Civil rights and liberties		
	pre 9/11	post 9/11	Sign.	pre 9/11	post 9/11	Sign.
NL	0.050 (84)	0.024 (109)		0.157 (84)	0.160 (84)	
ES	0.003 (76)	0.034 (109)	*	0.081 (76)	0.086 (109)	
UK	0.033 (64)	0.172 (76)	***	0.233 (64)	0.212 (76)	
CH	0.032 (92)	0.112 (16)	*	0.274 (92)	0.171 (16)	
FR	0.021 (87)	0.020 (40)		0.124 (87)	0.147 (40)	
BE	0.014 (44)	0.035 (76)	**	0.057 (44)	0.110 (76)	*

Note: Number of observations in brackets. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

taking place in Brussels are targeting the European Union and its institutions that have been very involved in discussions on privacy issues.

27.4 Conclusion

This chapter was devoted to the protest agenda. Via protest, citizens try to draw attention to issues and, in many instances, protesters explicitly aim to set the agenda. We reviewed the literature that shows that protest can be successful: under specific circumstances protest can exert agenda power and push elites to increase their attention to the underlying issue. The number of studies that uses an explicit agenda approach to the effect of protest remains rather limited though. We still do not know much about the exact mechanism that translates protest issues into political attention. Protest was measured in a rather simplistic way, only the frequency of protest events on issues was taken into account. Following accounts that state that the number of participants, who the protesters are, and how they behave may affect the (agenda) power they can exert (Tilly, 2006) we would expect the agenda impact of events that are populated by numerous, worthy, unified, and committed protesters to be bigger than of protests that do not exhibit these features (Wouters and Walgrave, 2017).

Additionally, we have discussed protest here mainly as an input agenda to politics. Protest has other functions and political meanings, of course. In fact, much of what drives protesters is not an instrumental motivation to change or affect policy or to reach an external goal, but rather the wish to express oneself and to show that one disagrees (Van Stekelenburg, 2006). Following this idea, the protest agenda in CAP might be used to measure a kind of “mood” in public opinion (Stimson, 1991). Yet, what happens on the streets and which issues people protest about, is also determined by civil society that yield a

supply of events on the protest market and by the strength of the respective social movement sectors in a country. It is this versatility of the protest agenda that makes this data series particularly attractive but at the same time tricky and sometimes hard to interpret.

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