

# 24. IS POLITICAL PROTEST IN WESTERN EUROPE BECOMING LESS OF A PREROGATIVE OF THE YOUNG AND OF THE LEFT?

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## **Abstract**

*In what seems to be a process of normalization or democratization of political protest, a shift appears to have taken place in the public that is willing to embrace political protest to further their political agendas, at least in Western Europe. After the upheaval of the 1960s and 70s, political protest was predominantly a vehicle of the young and of those wanting to change society along the lines of a progressive agenda. More recently, protest-proneness seems to have become spread more evenly over the population. Our analyses of developments in nine countries using data from the European Values Study for the period 1981-2017 show strong evidence for the growth of protest-proneness, loosening its ties with the young everywhere, but only in some countries with the political left. In all countries, protest proneness is higher in the 'protest generation' (born 1941-1955) than among people born before that period, but the differences compared with people born later fluctuate.*

## 24.1 Introduction

After the adoption of extra-parliamentary routes to make themselves heard by civil or social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus in the study of the political behaviour of citizens broadened from predominantly formalized or 'conventional' means of political involvement to include a range of 'unconventional' political action as well (Barnes & Kaase et al., 1979) – though it should be noted that this type of action was not altogether new, being predated by strikes by labour unions, marches by suffragettes and mass trespasses by walkers to preserve rights of way, for example. However, the broader uptake of political protest in the 1960s and 70s did pave the way for its recognition as part and parcel of political life. In hindsight, this can be interpreted as a first step in the process of normalization of political protest. Of concern here is whether that process has continued since, and whether it has also led to a democratization in the sense that it is not only accepted as a fact of life, but has also been adopted by broader segments of society. The latter implies not only that protest-proneness spread across a larger share of the population, but more specifically that it spread among groups within society other than those that initially adopted it.

Generally speaking, the ascent of political protest in the postwar era was predominantly rooted in the younger segments of society and those seeking to bring about change in accordance with a progressive agenda, whether it was to expand the rights of underprivileged groups (e.g., the working class, women and people of colour) or to oppose perceived threats (e.g. nuclear weapons and environmental pollution). A change-minded or progressive agenda inspired young people to political behaviour that went beyond conventional means (Kostelka & Rovny, 2019).

Recently, political protest seems also to have been adopted by people in later life-stages and by people seeking to further a conservative political agenda. This suggests a certain 'democratization' or 'normalization' (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001; Quaranta, 2014) of protest as a means of pursuing political ends, as predicted by Barnes & Kaase and their co-authors (1979). Proneness to adopt political protest seems to have become more common, in the sense of becoming widespread across the populations as a whole, both in terms of age

and of political preference. As regards the latter, just as in earlier decades the issues of contention are once again non-materialistic, but unlike earlier, the intention now is to oppose rather than to further societal change. What is at stake now more often seems to be the preservation of Western achievements and traditions that are perceived to be under threat from cosmopolitanization in general and immigration in particular.

The relationship between protest-proneness and age can also be reconceptualized as a relationship between protest-proneness and year of birth, or generation, though without seeking to get into the muddy waters of suggesting clear-cut generational differences, for which there is precious little empirical evidence (Van den Broek, 1999). The idea then is that members of some birth cohorts may be more inclined to turn to political protest than members of other birth cohorts. Barnes & Kaase et al. (1979) suggested that, following the rise of political protest achieved by a group of birth cohorts that can loosely be described as the protest generation (born in the period 1941-1955; cf. Van den Broek, 1999), the further spread of political protest would come about because birth cohorts born in later years would be even more prone to turn to political protest, possibly related to a continuing shift towards postmaterialist values (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002).

Below, we reformulate these observations and suggestions into hypotheses which we subsequently test empirically. We are pleased to acknowledge that being able to use the data of the European Values Study (EVS) to test these hypotheses was only possible because of the continued efforts of those who have worked hard to organize the EVS surveys in a number of countries in a consistent manner over the years. Perhaps pointing out the obvious, Loek Halman bore the brunt of the efforts to facilitate that. Without his perseverance and dedication, it is highly unlikely that this chapter could be written. Thanks, Loek!

## 24.2 Hypotheses

We first look at the situation from a 'static' point of view, asking ourselves whether protest-proneness has indeed traditionally been a prerogative of

the young and of the political left. To test this, hypothesis #1 posits that protest-proneness is greater among younger age groups than older age groups, while hypothesis #2 posits that protest-proneness is greater among people on the left of the political spectrum than among those more on the political right.

We then turn to a 'dynamic' view; hypothesis #3 states that, as predicted by Barnes & Kaase et al. (1979) in their groundbreaking work, 'unconventional' political participation has become more widespread over time.

As regards the dynamics of the normalization of protest-proneness, hypothesis #4 posits that, over time, protest-proneness has become less predominantly a characteristic of the young; and hypothesis #5 states that, over time, protest-proneness has become less something that is adopted mainly by people on the left of the political spectrum.

Finally, we look at the dynamics that may lie beneath the surface. Hypothesis #6 posits that differences between successive years are smaller after correcting for differences between generations. Our final hypothesis #7 builds on the dual expectation that the protest generation paved the way for protest, and hence is more protest-prone than people born before them, and that people born later than the protest generation carry the torch forwards and display even higher levels of protest-proneness.

## 24.3 Data, Indicators and Approach

The empirical basis for testing these hypotheses consists of data drawn from the European Values Study (EVS) covering the period 1981-2018 for the nine countries in which data were assembled in each of the five EVS-waves. Traveling from the northwest to the southeast, those countries are Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, (West) Germany, The Netherlands, Great Britain (thus excluding Northern Ireland), France, Spain and Italy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Denmark 1981-2017, France 1981-2018, West Germany 1981-2017, Great Britain 1981-2018, Iceland 1984-2017, Italy 1981-2018, The Netherlands 1981-2017, Spain 1981-2017, and Sweden 1982-2017, and in between 1990, 1999, and 2008 or 2009; per country the total sample size ranges from 5,019 (Iceland) to 9,159 (Italy) respondents. Until the last wave, CAPI was used in all countries, but in 2017/18 multimode fieldwork was used in four of

We use the following indicators for protest-proneness and political preference. To measure protest-proneness, we use the question "Now we would like you to look at this list of different forms of political action that people can take: Signing a petition / Joining in boycotts / Attending lawful demonstrations / Joining unofficial strikes / ...<sup>2</sup> We would like you to indicate, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you might do it, or whether you would never, under any circumstances, do it." For each of these four items, we dichotomized the responses 'have done' and 'might do' as 'protest-prone' (versus the other responses as not protest-prone) and then combined them in a scale ranging from 0 (no protest-proneness at all) to 4 (protest-prone in all four respects).<sup>3</sup> Note that we include protest-proneness rather than focusing solely on actual protest behavior, because the latter not only depends on a person's attitude but also on the opportunity structure at a given time in a given country.<sup>4</sup>

To measure political preference, we use a question about political left-right self-assessment: "In political matters, people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. Generally speaking, how would you place your views on this scale [printed on a card: 1 (= Left) - 10 (= Right)]?" We take 1-4 as an indication for 'left' and compare this with the rest, including respondents who are unable or unwilling to position themselves as politically left or right.

We take 18-34 years old as young (young) and compare this with the 35+ age group; and we use three categories for generations: the 'protest generation' (b.

our countries. In two of them we found small but significant differences (on a 5-point scale, CAWI respondents scored 0.1 lower than CAPI respondents in Denmark, and 0.1 higher in Iceland) and we have decided to use the full samples.

- <sup>2</sup> This is the common selection for all five waves of the survey; in the first four waves the item 'Occupying buildings or factories' was also included, and in the first wave there were two more: 'Damaging things like breaking windows, removing road signs, etc.' and 'Using personal violence like fighting with other demonstrators or the police'. These items were placed at the end of the list and we will ignore them completely in this chapter.
- <sup>3</sup> The reliability of the protest-proneness scale is moderate: the average value of McDonalds Omega is .70 for the five waves in the nine countries (lowest in Iceland (.61) and highest in Spain (.78). In only seven of 180 cases (5 x 9 x 4 items) could the reliability be marginally improved by deleting an item. Signing petitions is always the most popular mode and joining unofficial strikes always the most unpopular mode in all countries except Spain (where demonstrations are sometimes most popular and boycotts sometimes most unpopular). To give an impression of the popularity of the modes with the average percentage 'have done' + 'might do' in the nine countries: petitions range from 75% in the first wave to 85% in the fifth wave, boycotts from 40% to 60%, demonstrations from 52% to 71%, and strikes from 22% to 38%.
- <sup>4</sup> See e.g. Inglehart & Catterberg (2002) and Quarantana (2014) for alternative analyses of these items (for developments in a number of countries in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and for Italy, respectively).

1941-1955) versus those born earlier (pre-protest cohorts) and those born later (post-protest cohorts).

We test our hypotheses for each of the aforementioned nations separately. This is the hardest test for our general statements, and it is useful to know where they fail the test.

## 24.4 Results

We present our first set of findings in Table 24.1. It presents the results of nine multivariate regression analyses using two models, one with main effects only and one including two interaction terms.<sup>5</sup>

Our first hypothesis, that protest-proneness would be higher among the young, receives empirical support across the board. The young are more protest-prone than those aged 35+ (second row in Table 24.1).

Hypothesis #2 is also clearly corroborated in each of the countries investigated: those leaning to the left politically are more protest-prone than those in the middle, on the right or without a left-right identity (third row in table).

As regards our third hypothesis, protest-proneness was indeed higher in the late 2010s than in the early 1980s in all nine countries included in our analyses. There is a significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) linear increase in protest-proneness scores over time everywhere (fourth row in table). This finding is very much in line with the prediction of Barnes & Kaase et al. (1979) that what was then called 'unconventional' political participation would in time become more widespread.

Our fourth hypothesis posited that protest-proneness has become less exclusively a characteristic of the young over time. This hypothesis receives empirical support in eight nations (all but Italy), as the interaction effect between year and age is negative in those eight countries (second to last row in Table 1).

<sup>5</sup> We thus implicitly test hypotheses #1-3 combined in model 1, and #4-5 combined with all others in model 2, but separate tests of the hypotheses would not have resulted in different conclusions.

This strongly suggests that protest-proneness in the earliest years was not, or at least not only, a trait of being young, but that those who were protest-prone then at a young age still are so in later years at a more advanced age.

Table 24.1 Determinants of protest-proneness: Unstandardized regression coefficients

determinants (+ expected effect)	IS	SE	DK	DE(W)	NL	GB	FR	ES	IT
<b>Model 1:</b>									
<b>main effects</b>									
constant	2.18	2.40***	1.55	1.45	1.34	1.72	1.66	1.00	1.36
young (+)	.37***	.28***	.52***	.49***	.43***	.32***	.53***	.61***	.65***
left (+)	.50***	.56***	.74***	.79***	.89***	.67***	.81***	1.01***	.81***
year.10 (0-3.7) (+)	.18***	.08***	.28***	.15***	.21***	.11***	.19***	.13***	.15***
<b>Model 2:</b>									
<b>+ interactions</b>									
constant	2.08	2.27	1.27	1.36	1.15	1.65	1.51	.92	1.39***
young (+)	.62***	.65***	1.06***	.78***	.87***	.62***	.74***	.73***	.65***
left (+)	.54***	.58***	1.22***	.82***	.99***	.52***	1.07***	1.14***	.70***
year.10 (0-3.7) (+)	.22***	.14***	.41***	.21***	.29***	.15***	.26***	.18***	.13***
young * year.10 (-)	-.13***	-.19***	-.23***	-.17***	-.22***	-.16***	-.11***	-.09***	.00
left * year.10 (-)	-.02	-.01	-.19***	-.02	-.05*	.07*	-.13***	-.09***	.06**

a Reference category: 35-54 years old, not 1-4 or 7-10 on a 1-10 left-right scale, in 1981. To make time effects more visible, we use periods of 10 years (1981=0; 2018=3.7).

b Significance: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (one-sided).

Our fifth hypothesis was that over time protest-proneness has become less exclusively a strategy open to those on the political left. This hypothesis holds true in just four nations: Denmark, The Netherlands, France, and Spain. No trend at all was found in Iceland, Sweden or Germany, while the trend was actually in the reverse direction in Great Britain and Italy (last row in Table 24.1). Clearly, then, this hypothesis does not hold across the board. It is for future

research to seek to explain these diverging patterns.

Table 24.2 sets out our findings regarding the two generational hypotheses. Our sixth hypothesis that the (linear) effect of time diminishes after correcting for differences between generations is corroborated in all countries: the regression coefficients for year.10 reduce by at least one third after generations are taken into account. This decline is statistically significant everywhere ( $p < 0.001$ ).<sup>6</sup> This means that the change over time is not just a general change (period effect) applying to all people in equal measure. Rather, that change is in part embedded in different attitudes between people born in earlier and in later years (cohort effect). What we are witnessing here is the impact on society of the biological processes of birth and death: as more recent cohorts replace the dying cohorts, the proportion of people who are more prone to turn to political protest increases, while the proportion of people less likely to protest diminishes (a process aptly characterized as a ‘silent revolution’ by Inglehart, 1977).

Table 24.2 Time and generation as determinants of protest-proneness: Unstandardized regression coefficients

determinants (+ expected effect)	IS	SE	DK	DE(W)	NL	GB	FR	ES	IT
<b>Model 1: years &amp; age</b>									
year.10	.21***	.08***	.32***	.18***	.22***	.13***	.21***	.17***	.15***
<b>Model 2:</b>									
<b>+ generations</b>									
year.10	.13***	.00	.20***	.12***	.09***	.07***	.14***	.08***	.10***
pre-protest									
generation (-)	-.53***	-.60***	-.80***	-.35***	-.76***	-.47***	-.55***	-.34***	-.34***
post-protest									
generation (+)	.05	-.03	.08*	.05	.15**	-.01	-.09*	.21***	-.05

a Effects are adjusted for age (linear).

Significance: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (one-sided).

6 Significance tested with `suest`-command (from Jeroen Weesie) in Stata, as recommended and kindly executed by our SCP colleague Jurjen Iedema.

Our final hypothesis 7, the logical counterpart of the previous one, contains the dual expectation that members of the cohorts loosely referred to as the protest generation are more protest-prone than people born before them and that people born later in turn display even higher levels of protest-proneness. The first part of the hypothesis is clearly supported everywhere: compared to the protest generation, protest-proneness is considerably lower among their predecessors. The second part is only supported in Denmark, The Netherlands and Spain. The French ‘protest generation’ shows slightly higher levels of protest-proneness than people born later, while in the other five countries there is no difference between these two categories. Even in those countries, however, the biological process of cohort replacement makes itself felt, as the post-protest cohorts entering the population are more protest-prone than the dying-out pre-protest generation cohorts they replace.

## 24.5 Conclusions and Discussion

Are we, as suggested in the past by the authors of Political Action (Barnes & Kaase, 1979), witnessing the normalization or democratization of political protest-proneness? The answer is: yes, we most certainly are. Proneness to resort to political protest is on the rise significantly.

Notwithstanding that protest-proneness is still higher among the young, the impression that the normalization of political protest means that it is no longer the prerogative of the young holds true. This means that protest-proneness has spread more evenly across the population, including to people in later life-stages.

However, the same pattern does not apply for protest-proneness and being on the left politically. It is an error to think that the normalization of political protest means that it is no longer mainly a prerogative of the left. With national variations, the general picture is not that protest-proneness has spread more evenly, including to people who do not support a leftist political agenda.

A closer look at generational differences and the effects of cohort replacement

shows that members of the protest generation are more protest-prone than their predecessors everywhere, but they differ less clearly from their successors, if at all. Yet the gradual process of cohort replacement applies everywhere, as the cohorts who die out are less protest-prone than those who take their place.

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# COLOPHON

REFLECTIONS ON EUROPEAN VALUES:  
HONOURING LOEK HALMAN'S CONTRIBUTION  
TO THE EUROPEAN VALUES STUDY

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European *Values* Study



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b>	4
<i>Wim van de Donk</i>	
<b>Series Editors Preface</b>	8
<i>Inge Sieben, Vera Lomazzi</i>	
<b>Table of Contents</b>	10
1. Turning a Page in the History of European Values Research	14
<i>Ruud Luijkx, Inge Sieben, Tim Reeskens</i>	
<b>Theoretical and Methodological Reflections on the European Values Study</b>	
2. EVS and Grand Theory: A Fruitful Alliance	30
<i>Wil Arts</i>	
3. Conflicts of European Values in Times of Turbulence	44
<i>Georgy Fotev</i>	
4. Beware! Surveys Are Not Universal Tools	56
<i>Ole Preben Riis</i>	
5. The Data of the European Values Study from 1981 towards 2026: Achievements, Synergies, Impact and Future	68
<i>Ruud Luijkx, Angelica M. Maineri, Giovanni Borghesan</i>	
6. Challenges for Comparative Surveys in Europe: Five Theses	84
<i>Dominique Joye, Christof Wolf</i>	
7. What Do Changes in the EVS Questionnaire Reveal?	100
<i>Pierre Bréchon</i>	
8. Does Within-Country Agreement on Beliefs matter for Ranking Countries on Values Dimensions? Evidence from the European Values Study 2017	114
<i>John Gelissen</i>	
<b>Sociology of Religion</b>	
9. Modernization and Secularization in Spain: Evidence from Values Surveys	134
<i>María Silvestre Cabrera, Edurne Bartolomé Peral, Javier Elzo Imaz</i>	
10. Saints, Scholars, Sceptics and Secularists: The Changing Faith of	
<b>REFLECTIONS ON EUROPEAN VALUES</b>	<b>11</b>



Religious Practice in Ireland, 1981-2020 <i>Michael J. Breen, Ross Macmillan</i>	150	22. Income Inequality and Acceptance of Corrupt Acts <i>Ioana Pop, Caroline Dewilde</i>	334
11. The Transmission of Religious Values <i>David Voas, Ingrid Storm</i>	166	23. Income, Values and Subjective Wellbeing in Europe: Results From the EVS 1999-2017 Data <i>Ruud Muffels</i>	348
12. Between Romania and Hungary: Religiosity among Hungarians in Transylvania <i>Dénes Kiss, Gergely Rosta, Bogdan Voicu</i>	178	24. Is Political Protest in Western Europe Becoming Less of a Prerogative of the Young and of the Left? <i>Paul Dekker, Andries van den Broek</i>	362
13. Secularization and Values: Exploring Changes in the Religious Factor in Preferences for Obedience and Autonomy <i>Inge Sieben, Katya Ivanova</i>	196	<b>Research on Values in The Netherlands</b>	
14. The Impact of the Child Abuse Scandals on Trust in the Church: Empirical Evidence from Belgium <i>Koen Abts, Bart Meuleman</i>	208	25. Same Old, Same Old? Value Change and Stability in the Netherlands <i>Erwin Gielens, Quita Muis</i>	376
15. The Rise of the Nones in Iceland <i>Gudbjorg Andrea Jonsdottir, Inga Run Saemundsdottir, Gudny Bergthora Tryggvadottir</i>	222	26. You Can Look (But You Better Not Touch): Who Justifies Casual Sex Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic? <i>Tim Reeskens, Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld</i>	388
16. Trust Thy Neighbour. Contextualizing the Relationship Between Non-Religiosity and Tolerance <i>Peter Achterberg, Christof Van Mol</i>	236	27. Conditionality of Solidarity in The Netherlands: An Analysis of Three Waves of the European Values Study <i>Wim van Oorschot, Erwin Gielens, Femke Roosma</i>	404
17. Populism and Religion: Effects of Religious Affiliation on Populist Attitudes <i>Yilmaz Esmer</i>	248	<b>Values Insights from National Case Studies</b>	
<b>Comparative Studies into European Values</b>		28. The Nordic Exceptionalism Revisited <i>Susanne Wallman Lundåsen</i>	420
18. Living Arrangement and Values of Young Adults in 1990 and 2017: Bridging Generations <i>Guy Moors</i>	264	29. Danish Values: How Special Are They? <i>Morten Frederiksen, Peter Gundelach</i>	434
19. Gender Equality Values and Cultural Orientations <i>Vera Lomazzi</i>	282	30. Traditional and Post-Materialist Values About Family and Marriage in Greece <i>Penny Panaqiotopoulou, Aikaterini Gari, Anastassios Emvalotis</i>	448
20. Are Childrearing Values' Preferences in Europe Associated to Socioeconomic Development and Social Inequalities? <i>Alice Ramos, Jorge Vala</i>	300	31. Gender Role Attitudes in the Macedonian Sociocultural Context <i>Mihajlo Popovski, Antoanela Petkovska, Ilo Trajkovski, Konstantin Minoski</i>	462
21. Changes in Work Values Under the Influence of International Migration <i>Bogdan Voicu</i>	320	32. Transformation of Values in Croatia in Democratic Times <i>Josip Baloban</i>	474
		<b>Contributors</b>	<b>488</b>
		<b>European Values Series</b>	<b>504</b>
		<b>Colophon</b>	<b>506</b>