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Mind the Protest Gap: The Role of Resources in the Face of Economic Hardship

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1. Introduction

The 2008 financial and economic crisis sparked significant protests across the globe. From the 'indignados' movement in Spain to civil unrest in Greece or mass mobilization in Iceland, protests came to the fore. The severity of economic collapse, especially across European countries, created shared and emotionally charged opportunities for protest mobilization, bringing citizens onto the streets and encouraging different—old and new—modes of protest. As recent articles have reported (Kern, Marien, and Hooghe 2015; Quaranta 2015), economic performance during the Great Recession was associated with rising levels of non-institutionalised political participation. For instance, Genovese et al. (2016) have documented a significant upward shift in the number of strikes from 2008 to 2013. Similarly, data collected by Banks and Wilson (2016) shows that street protests, including violent riots and anti-government demonstrations, increased between 2010 and 2012, a period during which the number of protest incidents per year was already higher than in the entire 1960s (see also Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2016).

The upward shift in the number of protests represents a good opportunity to (re)test a long-standing pattern identified in the literature: the socioeconomic protest gap. Seminal

works, and much of the subsequent literature, have found that socio-economic characteristics have a considerable effect on explaining who participates in political protests. In a nutshell, the resource based theory has argued that some individuals do not have the resources (in terms of time, money or the capacity to acquire complex knowledge, among others) to become engaged in protest mobilization. In particular, this approach has shown that socio-structural conditions, such as being less educated, having lower income, being younger, rightist or being a woman, are correlated with a lower probability to engage in non-institutionalised political participation.

Despite this conventional claim, less is known about the persistence of this gap during bad economic times. In fact, the increase in the number of protests in recent years might have been caused by three non-exclusive observational events. First, the Great Recession might have equally mobilized everyone. If this was the case, and despite protesting more than before, low-resources individuals would still have had a lower probability to engage in protests and, as a consequence, the initial gap would not have disappeared. Second, the economic crisis might have increased protest behaviour among economically advantaged groups, while depressing it (or keeping it constant) among the disadvantaged ones. If this was the case, the protest gap would have become wider. Finally, the Great Recession might have increased mobilization patterns among the disadvantaged, closing (or reducing) the protest gap across groups.

In this article, we especially focus on the last aspect and address the extent to which (recent) bad economic times increased the likelihood of engaging in protest behaviour among individuals with low resources. In other words, did the Great Recession open a window of opportunity for individuals with a priori lower resources to protest? Or the recent economic crisis further deprived an individual's means, lowering even more the likelihood to protest among low-resources individuals? Overall, is the resources-driven approach still relevant to understand protest behaviour after the economic crisis?

We present empirical evidence based on cumulative data from the European Social Survey (ESS 2006-2014) and from Eurostat. To further distinguish the dynamics of protesting, we differentiate between low-cost (engaging in boycotts or signing a petition) and high-cost modes of protesting (taking part in a demonstration). Our findings show that bad economic situations enhance the likelihood of individuals participating both in low-cost and high-cost protests. However, while the protest gap increases when

considering high-cost protesting, it diminishes or remains stable in what concerns low-cost protesting.

2. Theoretical arguments: The Great Recession and the role of resources

The protest gap

The resources-driven approach to protesting has been very popular in political science or sociology. The tenet of this model is that individuals need resources to engage in political participation, the implication being that citizens who have time, money and civic skills are more likely to protest than the rest (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Scholars working on political participation have largely documented that the heterogeneous distribution of resources has led to socioeconomic and ideological biases in the likelihood of protesting. Among these, research has consistently shown that non-educated citizens and people with lower levels of income are less likely to participate both in institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Gallego 2010; Teorell, Sum, and Tobiasen 2007; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Similarly, gender has also been regarded as a significant factor in explaining political engagement, with men slightly but consistently more likely to take part in protest behaviour (Burns 2007; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Hooghe and Stolle 2004). Along these lines, the ideological continuum also portrays a protest gap, with leftist individuals engaging to a larger extent in political participation than centrist and particularly rightist ones (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Rucht 2003; Van der Meer, Van Deth, and Scheepers 2009; Dalton 2008).[1]

All in all, while some groups possess enough means to engage in protest events, others do not do it due to their low level of resources—that is, according to the resources-driven approach, they might not have other alternative than to focus on their own situation.

[1] The logic of the ideological bias in protesting is different, as it does not entirely stem from the lack of individual resources possessed by right-wing or centrist individuals. Hence, right-wing individuals would lack resources in terms of having a lower mobilization capacity (right-wing agents of mobilization do not generally use protest as a political tool) or particular values that deter them from participating (Torcal, Rodon, and Hierro 2016).

The effect of the economic crisis on the protest gap

Despite the protest gap has been consistently reported by the specialized literature, less is known about how (and whether) the state of the economy affects it. Do economic crises modify the propensity of the different socioeconomic and ideological groups to participate? Recently, during the Great Recession, Europeans experienced unprecedented economic shocks, such as slow growth, loss of wealth, increasing government debt, increasing inequality, limited public services, or reduced pensions. On this regard, the evidence seems quite conclusive at showing that the Great Recession, as it has occurred with previous economic crises, increased an individual's likelihood to protest (Calvo 2016; Rüdig and Karyotis 2014; Kriesi 2014; Quaranta 2015). However, previous findings do not clarify whether individuals with lower resources became more or less likely to protest and whether the long-standing protest gap diminished or even closed.

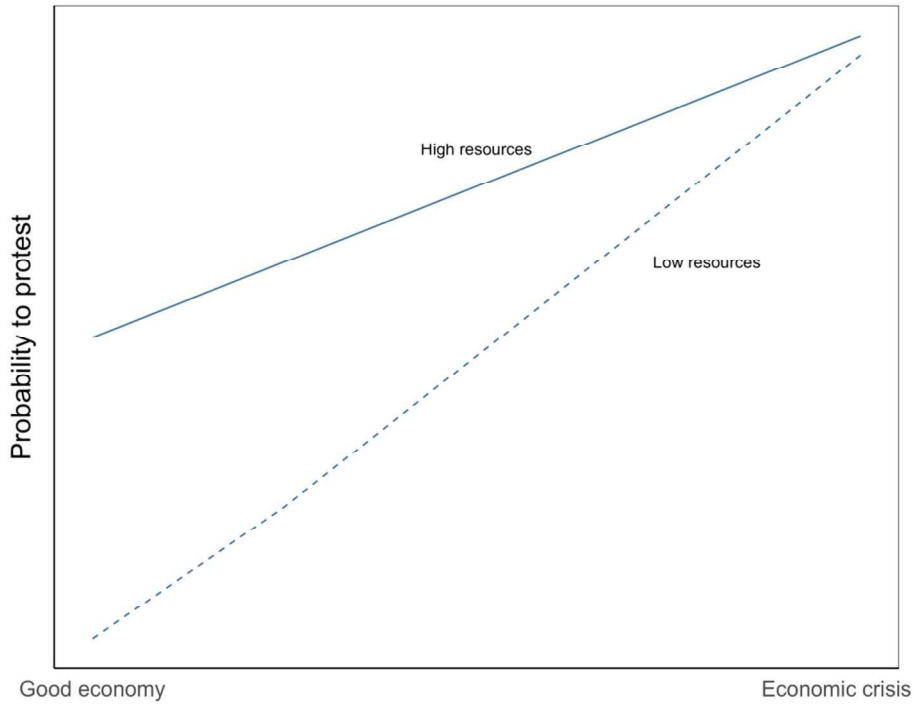
There are several alternative and conflicting hypotheses on how a shock on resources caused by an economic crisis may affect protest behaviour. First, it could simply be hypothesised that the Great Recession increased everyone's likelihood to protest, bringing more citizens to the streets but keeping the protest gap constant. Second, the classical resources-driven theory has speculated that economic downturns may trigger differential mobilization patterns across social groups, increasing the likelihood to protest among resourceful individuals and depressing it (or keeping it constant) among the disadvantaged. If this was the case, the protest gap could have increased during bad economic times (Dalton 2008; Grasso and Giugni 2016). Finally, another group of scholars sustain that individual or collective deprivation is, in fact, linked to high protesting patterns. At the core of this approach lies the idea that people who experience a bad economic situation have the least to lose and the most to gain by attempting to change the existing economic or political situation (Wilkes 2004). According to this view, disadvantaged individuals would be more likely to gain from a (radical) change in the system (Gurr 1968; Klandermans 2015), as they would obtain higher marginal returns.

If the last hypothesis is correct, the recent economic shock might have had heterogeneous effects and individuals with more resources might have ceased to be 'the only man in the street' (van Aelst and Walgrave 2001). By engaging in more protest events, low-resource individuals might have closed the protest gap, possibly even reaching the same likelihood to become engaged in protests than advantaged individuals. On this regard, 'feelings of dissatisfaction with important aspects of life' (Klandermans 2015) triggered by the Great

Recession might have consolidated the progressive change in the attitudinal and social profile of protesters that was already occurring even before the recession hit the countries of Europe (Dalton 2008; Marien, Hooghe, and Quintelier 2010). Furthermore, the 2008 economic crisis ran in parallel with the emergence of a new integration-demarcation division or the universalization of the internet, which, according to some authors, was already changing the social profile of protesters (Grande and Kriesi 2012).

To clarify this expectation, Figure 1 summarises the effect of the economic crisis in closing the protest gap. As displayed, people with high resources are more likely to protest than low-resources individuals, especially when the country is not in economic turmoil (left of the graph). As the economy worsens (right of the graph), the likelihood of both groups to engage in protesting events goes up, especially among low-resources individuals, whose probability to protest substantially increases. Eventually, differences with high-resources individuals become negligible, closing the protest gap between both groups.

Figure 1. Likelihood of engaging in political participation as a function of the economic situation among individuals with high and low resources



If this expectation is accurate, protesting will vary as a function of an aggregate-level indicator such as the economic crisis. In this sense, the need to consider the conditional effect of aggregate trends in our understanding of protesting has recently offered some interesting insights. For instance, Kern et al. (2015) showed that non-institutionalised political participation increases in bad economic times, during which individual factors, such as satisfaction with the economy, become more relevant. Solt (2015) found that economic inequality triggers heterogeneous effects: only those with incomes below the top quintile experience a drop in protest participation. On a similar vein, Grasso et al. (2016) showed that individual-level perceived relative deprivation has a direct effect on the propensity to have protested in the last year and that this effect is greater under certain macroeconomic and political conditions. Finally, Torcal et al. (2016) provided evidence that left-wing individuals are still more likely to protest, even when the cabinet is held by a leftist party or a leftist coalition.

In sum, our departing hypothesis is that the effect of socioeconomic factors (gender, age, income, education and ideology) will interact with an aggregate-level variable such as the state of the country's economy in a manner that the effect of these typically constraining participating factors will be reduced or eliminated.

H1. The economic crisis diminished or eliminated the protest gap shaped by traditional socioeconomic and ideological positions

3. Data and methods

We rely on data from the European Social Survey (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014), a biannual survey conducted in several European countries. Data covers the period of the Great Recession, but also a few years before and after. We include 25 different countries and more than 128,000 individuals. Following Grasso and Giugni (Grasso and Giugni 2016), we complement individual-level data with the percentage of unemployment at the country-level, as reported by Eurostat.[2] Although unemployment may reflect differences in European labour markets, it is an appropriate indicator to tackle general economic circumstances (Lewis-Beck and Mitchell 1990). Furthermore, during the Great Recession, unemployment greatly affected the lower strata of European societies

[2] Data available at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database?node_code=med_ps421 [last accessed 22nd November, 2016].

(Grusky, Western, and Wimer 2011), providing us with a convenient test of whether low-resources individuals increase their probability to protest. Since the data structure is hierarchical (individuals are nested within countries), we perform a multilevel linear probability model (Caudill 1988). Table A1 in the appendix shows the number of observations by country and year used in the baseline model (with 'participation in a demonstration' being the dependent variable).

The ESS contains several items of political participation. We distinguish between protest activities in which individuals assume a low-cost from those that entail a high (relative) cost. We consider that participating in a demonstration is a much costlier activity than signing a petition or engaging in boycotting. Demonstrating entails some investment in terms of time, information, public exposure and opportunity costs, while signing petitions or boycotting are more likely to be undertaken in the individual's private sphere, with relatively lower associated costs. A principal component analysis shows that taking part in demonstrations represents a different dimension than signing petitions or boycotting, two activities that are strongly associated within the same dimension.[3] Thus, our initial interest is in whether the respondent took part in a lawful demonstration during the last 12 months (1) or whether he/she did not (0). Secondly, we use whether the respondent participated in a boycott for political reasons or signed a petition (1) or whether he/she did not do any of these activities (0).

The empirical analysis includes several socio-structural indicators. To ease the interpretation, the reference category in all the cases will be the socioeconomic or ideological group expected to participate less: Firstly, we include political ideology, a categorical measure ranging from 1 to 5 (from extreme-left to extreme-right –the

[3] These three types of political participation are complemented in the ESS with two additional indicators tapping into whether the individual has worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker, and whether the individual has engaged in online participation. We did not consider the latter given the very unequal levels of access to the internet in the different countries considered and the very unequal distribution by age. As for wearing a campaign badge, we have not taken it into account either, as this is an unusual form of political participation in most European countries. Principal component analysis shows that participation in a demonstration belongs in a first dimension, while having participated in a boycott for political reasons or having signed a petition belong to a second dimension. As for the two remaining forms of participation, they neither belong to the two previous groups nor do they form a new single group belonging in one specific component.

reference category). Secondly, gender (0 Women, reference, and 1 Men). Thirdly, age, recoded in 4 categories: from 15 to 29 years old; from 30 to 44; from 45 to 64; and 65 and more –the reference. Fourthly, we include an individual household's total income (after tax and compulsory deductions), which we divide into three categories, going from low income (reference) to high income. The last individual-level covariate is the level of education, a dichotomous variable with 0 corresponding to lower education (up to completion of secondary education, the reference category) and 1 medium and high education.

Finally, we include the individual-level controls of political interest (which range from 1, no interest at all, to 4, very interested) and whether the individual feels close to a political party (1) or not (0).

Our models are based on a series of multilevel linear probability models with random effects at the country level.[4] We first run a baseline model with no interaction terms to assess the likelihood of different individuals to engage in protesting activities, as specified by the Model's 1 equation shown below. It is important to note that all models include year-fixed effects to account for the country's initial value in unemployment and to control for plausible time-trends.

$$\text{Model 1: } Y_{pol.participation} = \alpha + \beta_1 Ideology + \beta_2 Gender + \beta_3 Age + \beta_4 Income + \beta_5 Education + \beta_6 Political\ interest + \beta_7 Party\ closeness + \beta_8 Unemployment + \beta_9 Year + \varepsilon$$

In a second step, the impact of the level of unemployment on the likelihood of engaging in protesting is tested through a cross-level interaction between the aggregate-level measure of unemployment and our main independent variables.

$$\text{Model 2 to 6: } Y_{pol.participation} = \alpha + \beta_1 Ideology + \beta_2 Gender + \beta_3 Age + \beta_4 Income + \beta_5 Education + \beta_6 Political\ interest + \beta_7 Party\ closeness + \beta_8 Unemployment + \beta_9 Year + \beta_{10} Ideology/Gender/Age/Income/Education * Unemployment + \varepsilon$$

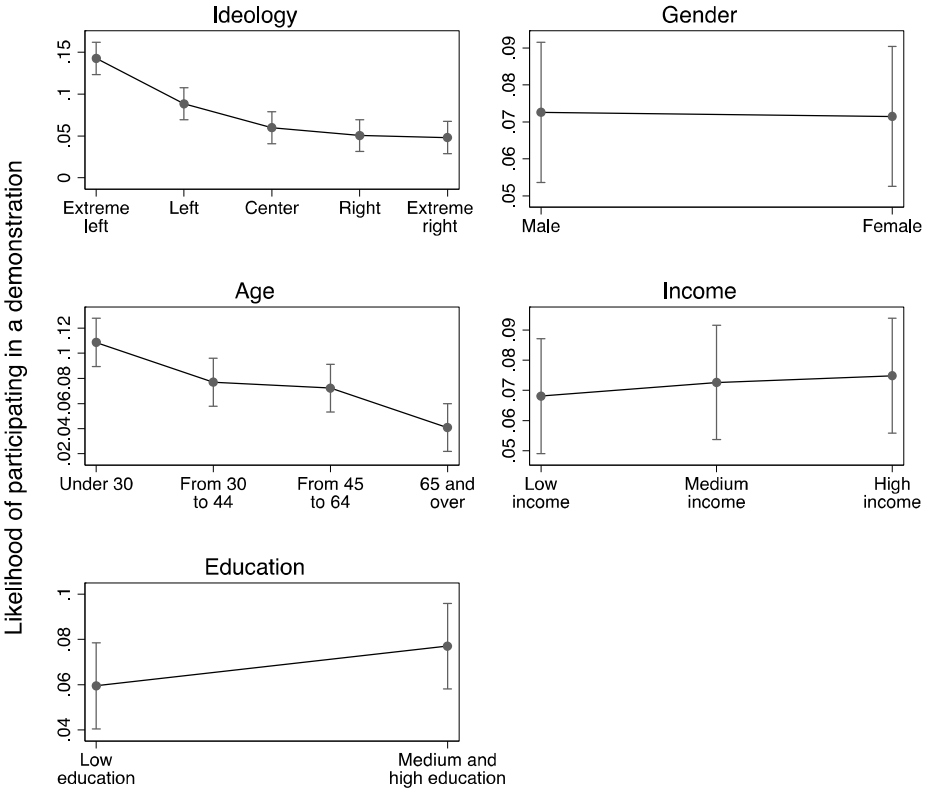
[4] The precise estimates of all models are included in the Appendix. As a robustness check, we have replicated our results using a 'Similarly Unrelated Regression' (SUR) model. These models control for the contemporaneous cross-equation error correlation between the low-cost and high-cost protest equations. As a drawback, these models do not consider the multi-level structure of our data. Results using a SUR specification are virtually identical.

4. Results

Our baseline models first analyse the impact of socio-structural factors on the probability of participating in a demonstration (high-cost protest) and engaging in boycotts or signing petitions (low-cost protests).

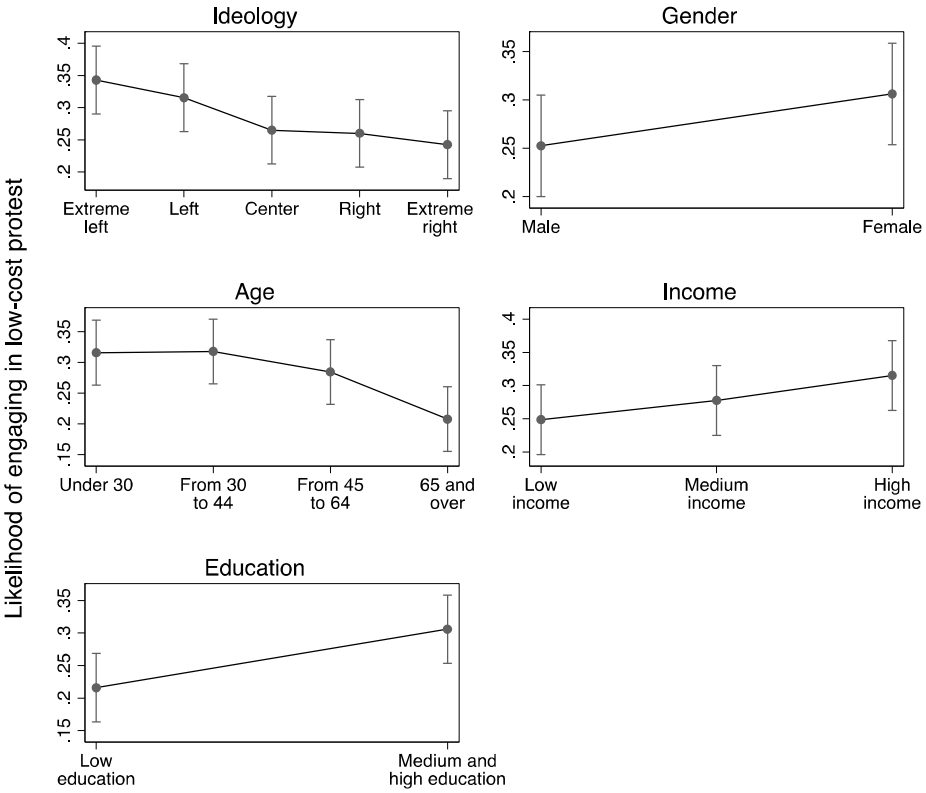
Figure 2 plots the likelihood of demonstrating across the different socio-structural indicators. The top-left graph shows that demonstrating is much more likely among extreme-left and left-wing individuals than the rest. As one moves towards the right of the ideological spectrum, the relationship between demonstrating and ideological self-placement flattens out. Interestingly, the variables 'gender' and 'income' do not report statistically significant differences across the different values. This effectively means that men are equally as likely to attend a demonstration as women and that low-income individuals are equally as likely to demonstrate as middle- and high-income respondents. Conversely, results show that young people are 2.6 times more likely to attend a demonstration than older individuals. Finally, individuals with medium and high education are 1.7 percentage points more likely to attend a demonstration. All in all, these baseline models show that socio-structural factors generate a protest gap, although the effect is not constant (or even significant) across variables, as the cases of gender and income illustrate.

Figure 2. Likelihood of participating in a demonstration in 26 countries, 2006-2014



Conversely, when considering low-cost protesting –boycotting and signing a petition–, the protest gap exists across all categories (as displayed in Figure 3). The relationship between ideology and protesting, as well as age and protesting, reports a similar trend than before: extreme left-wing individuals and younger individuals are more likely to protest than extreme-right or older citizens. The only subtle difference arises in what concerns low-cost protesting and middle-aged individuals. As opposed to high-cost protesting, the middle-age group is equally as likely to protest as young people. Besides, higher and medium educated individuals engage to a higher extent in low-cost protesting than low-educated ones. Again, these baseline models reveal a consistent and significant protest gap. Moreover, as compared to taking part in demonstrations, income and gender are significant. High-income individuals are more likely to participate than medium and low-income individuals in low-cost protesting. Moreover, women are significantly more likely to participate in low-cost activities than men.

Figure 3. *Likelihood of engaging in low-cost participation in 26 countries, 2006-2014*



Next, we assess whether the protest gap across socio-structural groups closes, widens or remains stable as a function of the state of the economy. To do so, we ran several models in which we include an interaction between each socio-structural indicator and the country's level of unemployment.

Figure 4 summarises the change in the likelihood of engaging in each form of participation across the different variables when moving from a country with minimum to maximum level of unemployment. Positive values indicate that changing the level of a country's unemployment from the minimum to the maximum value has a positive effect on the likelihood of protesting. Negative values indicate otherwise. Just 'eyeballing' the graph we can see a story consistent with previous works: almost all coefficients are positive, meaning that during bad economic times, the likelihood to protest increases. If the hypothesis on the reduction of the protest gap is correct (H_1), we should observe, for each of the variables, that the coefficient in the reference category (the group of individuals that participate less, indicated with an asterisk) is higher than the coefficients

of the other categories—that is, the protest gap diminishes if the increase in the reference category group is greater than the increase in the remaining groups.

Let us first focus on high-cost protesting. Recall that the baseline models showed that, when it comes to high-cost protesting, a protest gap existed on ideology, age and education, with no significant differences across the categories on income and gender.

In a bad economic situation, coefficients in Figure 4(a) reveal that the ideology, age, income and education gaps increase (note that the coefficients for the reference category are lower than the rest). The likelihood of participating in demonstrations becomes higher for all ideological groups during bad economic circumstances, although extreme-left and left-wing individuals are the ones that experience a larger increase in the likelihood to protest. In what concerns age, a similar pattern arises: when the economy is bad, all age groups are more likely to attend high-cost protesting events, except individuals who are 65 or more. Likewise, during bad economic times low-income individuals only experience a small increase in the probability to attend demonstrations, while medium- and particularly high-income groups are more likely to go on to the street. Finally, under bad economic circumstances, individuals with medium and high education are significantly more likely to attend demonstrations, while the likelihood to protest among low education individuals slightly diminishes. In sum, when the economy falters, the analysis shows that the protest gap increases (with the exception of gender).

Interestingly, results for low-cost protesting portray some differences (Figure 4 (b)). The baseline models showed in Figure 3 indicated that the protest gap was present in all socioeconomic factors. Yet, when the level of unemployment increases, a different pattern emerges. Firstly, when unemployment is high, and as compared to other ideological positions, extreme right-wing individuals' likelihood to engage in low-cost protest events jumps up considerably, eliminating the existent former gap found in good economic times (see also Figure A6 in the Appendix). Secondly, when the economy is doing poorly, men's increase in the likelihood of engaging in low-cost protesting is higher than the women's increase, eliminating the initial protest gap reported in favour of women during good economic times (Figure A7). Finally, the income categories show that the increase in the likelihood of low-cost participation is higher among low-income individuals, also closing the protest gap found during good economic times.

Conversely, the protest gap persists when we look at age or education. Estimates show that bad economic circumstances increase all age and education categories' likelihood of engaging in low-cost protesting.

Figure 4. Change in the likelihood of engaging in high and low-cost protesting when moving from a country with minimum to maximum level of unemployment

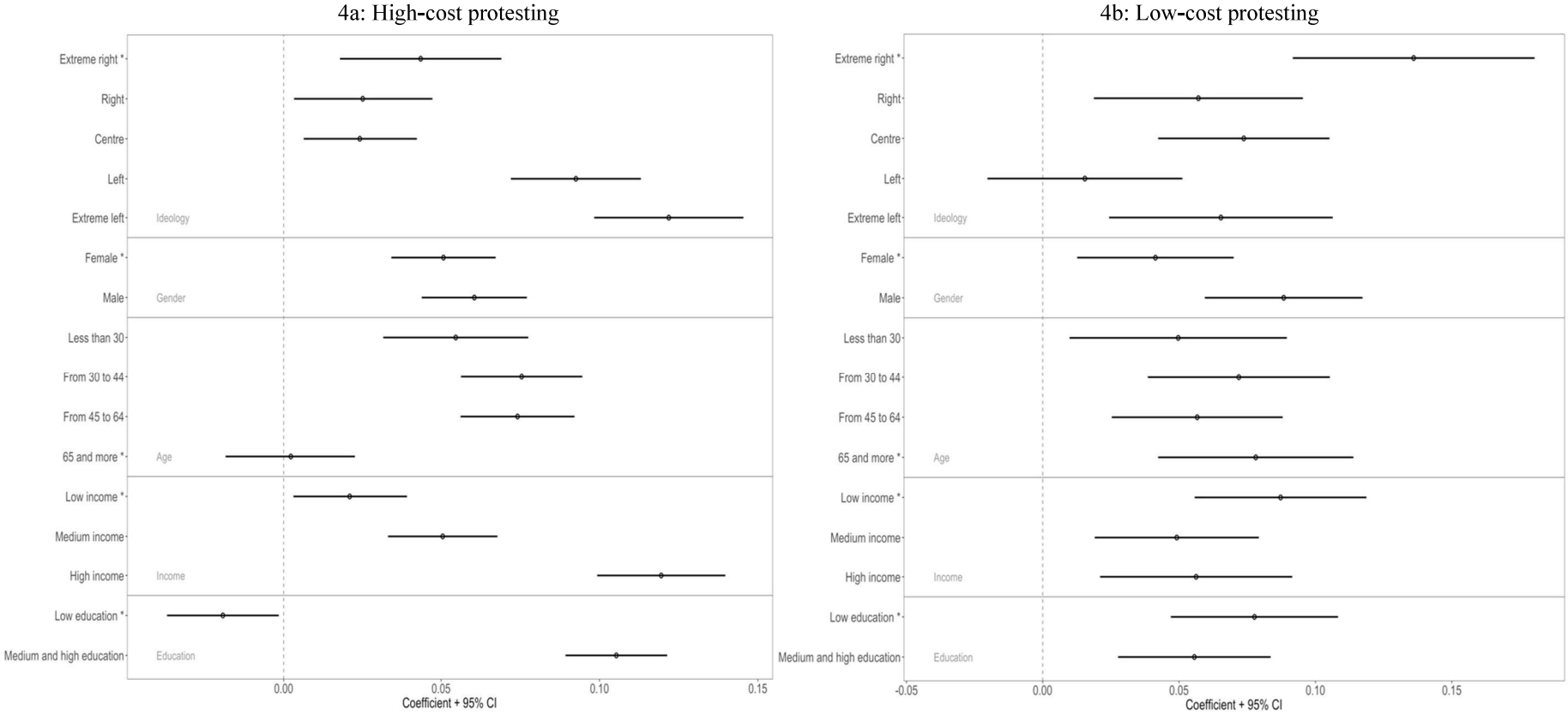


Table 1 summarises whether the protest gap closed as a consequence of the Great Recession. When we consider the state of the economy, measured by the level of unemployment, we see that, in general, a poor economic context increased the likelihood of individuals engaging in both high and low-cost political participation (column 'Trend'). The different interactions (summarised in the column 'Protest Gap') showed that, at high levels of unemployment, the protest gap increased for high-cost protesting. In contrast, the protest gap remained stable or diminished in what concerns low-cost protesting. While the probability to protest among extreme-right individuals, low-income and men during good economic times was much lower than their counterparts, this probability converges when the economy performs inadequately. The protest gap, however, remains stable when we look at the variables age and education: the economic crisis simply increased everyone's probability to protest, keeping the gap constant.[5]

Table 1: The effect of socio-structural factors and ideology at high levels of unemployment. Summary of the empirical findings.

	Demonstration attendance		*Low-cost protesting*	
	Trend	*Protest Gap*	*Trend*	*Protest Gap*
Ideology	+	↑	+	↓
Gender	+	=	+	↓
Age	+	↑	+	=
Income	+	↑	+	↓
Education	+/–	↑	+	=

Notes: Table summarizes the effect of socio-structural factors when the level of unemployment is high. The positive (negative) sign indicates that groups are more (less) likely to protest when the economy reports bad figures.
Arrows and equal sign show whether the protest gap (the difference in the likelihood of protesting across social groups) increases, decreases or remains stable.

[5] Table A4 (for high-cost) and A5 (for low-cost protest) in the Appendix provide more information on which categories protest more both during bad and good economic conditions.

5. Discussion

In this article, we have analysed whether bad economic circumstances can close the protest gap. Some socio-structural factors such as income, ideology and gender have been associated with a lower probability of participating in demonstrations or engaging in other protest activities. Our baseline models first showed that extreme-left and left-wing individuals, young people and people with medium and high education are more likely to take part in demonstrations than the rest, although no differences arise across gender and income groups. A different pattern emerged when analysing participation in low-cost protesting activities. Left-wing and young individuals are more likely to engage in boycotting or in petition signing, as well as women, high-income and better-educated individuals. This divergent pattern confirmed the appropriateness of distinguishing between low-cost and high-cost modes of protesting.

We next assessed whether the socio-structural gap in protest behaviour changed as a function of economic circumstances. In what concerns high-cost protesting, our findings show that, during bad economic times, extreme-left and left-wing citizens are still more likely to attend demonstrations than the rest of the population. The gap is, therefore, wider. This gap also increases when considering other factors: when the economy performs poorly, individuals with higher income or higher education levels protest more, as well as young and middle-aged individuals.

In contrast to demonstration attendance, the effect of unemployment on the probability of engaging in low-cost protesting is fairly heterogeneous. When unemployment is high, all groups are more likely to protest, but the gap diminishes in three of the five socio-structural indicators employed in the analysis. First, the change in the likelihood to protest is higher among men than women (who were initially more likely to protest). Second, leftist individuals do not change the likelihood of engaging in low-cost participation during bad economic times, but extreme right-wing individuals do. Finally, low-income individuals increase their likelihood of participating, when compared to medium- and high-income groups.

To sum up, our empirical analysis shows that, when considering costly activities such as demonstration attendance, the protest gap defined by socio-structural factors increases. In contrast, the protest gap in low-cost protesting either remains stable or closes. The first part of our findings square with Grasso et al.'s (2016) recent article: as in our analysis,

they report that unemployment increases the effect of subjective relative deprivation. By employing several socio-structural indicators, less affected by endogeneity concerns, we confirmed these findings, but we also showed that taking into account the type of protest is important. During bad economic times, the protest gap in low-cost protest activities is, in fact, lower or even negligible. In other words, when the economy is bad, socio-structural factors still matter in making certain individuals less likely to voice their discontent, but this effect crucially depends on the type of protest.

Moving forward, our findings invite further research towards understanding the compositional change in protesters as a result of economic circumstances. Similarly, there is still the need to understand how macroeconomic magnitudes may influence the likelihood of certain individuals engaging with new forms of participation such as social media activism or protest fundraising events. More in general, the protest gap invites to think about how the preferences of those less likely to protest are communicated to the governing institutions.

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