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Elitism, trust, opinion leadership and politics in social protests in Germany

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ABSTRACT

Energy infrastructure projects often bring along protests. Protests as a form of political participation reveal perceptions of locals regarding a specific project. However, it is still unclear who protesters are and what drives them. Specifically, the attitude towards protest has not been extensively studied. We conducted an online survey study with 464 participants and used partially-least squares structural equation modeling to identify antecedents to protest attitudes. We included opinion leadership, trust in institutions, political efficacy and demographic factors in our model to determine possible causal relationships between these factors. We found that protest attitude is predominantly influenced by income, protest experience and political efficacy. No direct association was found for trust in institutions and opinion leadership.

1. Introduction

When novel forms of energy generation (e.g., wind turbines, geothermal energy, biogas utilization) are realized, somebody will complain; somebody will protest. Especially, the associated infrastructure planning as well as the rollout of energy technologies within urban environments attracts public attention and often public criticism and resistance. The protests are not limited to specific energy forms and infrastructure planning projects. They can be observed in geothermal energy [17,37,74], but also in wind power plants [15,69], bio gas [18,66], hydrogen technology [77], and transmission lines [2,16,58]. In recent years, social science research has concentrated on examining social, personal, economic, and organizational factors that are related to the public acceptance of sustainable energy technologies and that might be responsible for a successful technology diffusion and efficient adoption within communities. In the meanwhile, a considerable body of knowledge is prevailing about the role on public perception of user diversity [28], siting preferences and place attachments [41,75], information and communication duties [59], and policy interventions [70].

Protests against energy infrastructure often occur because stakeholders, whose acceptance is critical, are not involved in the planning process on time [51]. Often policy makers aim at "resolving" possible conflicts and reducing public resistance. In an open and free democracy, protest in general is a form of political participation. It is an essential part of the modern democratic values. Protests and their varying forms evolve along with changes and transformation processes in society (see also: [24] in this special issue). This includes technical progress and the resulting social development, and changes. As such it has the potential to positively change social conflicts [45]. In the case of renewable energy projects, protest as a form of participating in the development of such projects can be integrated through participation and communication [11]. One must note that acceptance and protest are not necessarily on the opposite ends of the same spectrum when it comes to energy infrastructure. People often accept the technology globally but resist local implementation for multiple localized reasons [73]. In this case, participation and a transparent two-way communication play a large role [31], just like consistently integrating different approaches to participation across levels [23]. Acceptance has been investigated with regard to its different facets [14,72]. Acceptance of energy projects has been investigated in general [76] and regarding contrasting contexts [75]. However, research on protest and its individual motivations and attitudes mostly focused on one specific protest context or topic (e.g., [13,29]). Protest relating to renewable energy projects is on the one hand known for occurring in the social divide between individual beliefs and concerns, and on the other hand for societal and global challenges, such as climate change. Citizens living close to large scale energy projects may feel concerned because of possible negative effects such as e.g. noise pollution during the construction phase, or the loss of value of property. However, on a global perspective the benefits are large, while the overall costs are relatively low. On the individual level the perceived benefits are small, while the costs are very high. This makes it more difficult to bear those perceived costs [1]. Understanding when protest arises, who the key stakeholders are and how to address them becomes crucial when planning novel forms of energy generation.

1.1. Applicability of our results

In this article we aim to understand the antecedents of protests and their connections with opinion leadership, distrust in elites, and political efficacy as well as their interplay with the thematic field in which they are embedded. We use a German sample to limit the effect of cross-cultural differences towards protest. However, the method is extensible to other cultural contexts as well.

Protest itself is a phenomenon that often occurs in the context of energy projects. In this context—and following earlier work like Cuppen [11]—we see protest as a form of social participation and thus as a strong resource in the development of energy projects. As such it is necessary to understand the nature of protest and its influencing factors. We suggest that a comparison of protest attitudes and the willingness to protest in different contextual areas could be helpful to find out more about the nature of protest. This will in turn help to understand protest as a social phenomenon in the energy context: do people who protest against large scale projects differ from people who protest against climate change?

2. Theoretical background

Protest is a social phenomenon. It is a social process aiming at societal change, charging grievances and customizing relevant changes in society. As such, it is a form of political participation. Furthermore, it is a form of communication: every protest has a message directed at a recipient and has an appellative character [40]. Just like the definition of protest is not clearly set and covers it own field of research, the influencing components of protest are inconclusive. While some theoretical approaches focus on the structural aspects of protest [34,43] others see the involved and available resources (such as money, time and human capital) as the primary explanatory factor [35,42]. In addition, other approaches focus on the emotional and motivational components of protest behavior [62].

In this paper, we focus on the individual self-concept and demographic properties of individuals and their effects on protest behavior. Also, the general attitude towards protest regarding different thematic areas and their influence on protest behavior is covered. Moreover, we will focus on the distrust in elites, political efficacy, opinion leadership and demographic data and refer to their role in the context of protest.

2.1. Distrust in elites

The political system is not always the recipient of protest (communication), nor are politicians. In times of globalization and a complex world the counterpart of protest is often not easy to define for those who oppose something. In times of blurring boundaries between nations, political decisions and decision makers, decisions are not only made based on national democratic processes. Interest groups, global players and elites are gaining influence and political processes are getting more obscure. This is called post-democracy [10]. This term describes that stakeholders, who have not been democratically elected, influence political decisions. Consequently, distrust in elites arises in the general public. Distrust is not a new concept in this context. There has been a broad range of discussions about distrust and politics and the accountability of decision makers (e.g., [50]). The concept of post-democratic distrust in elites integrates specific characteristics of today's societal challenges such as changes in democratic processes and political legitimization of decisions and decision makers [10].

For that reason, as distrust leads to a critical perception of decision makers, the probability of protest increases in society. Thus, distrust in elites is one possible motivation to engage in protests and should consequently be integrated when examining protest. One major question in research on protest is why some people engage in protest and others do not. Obviously post democratic conditions concern the general public, but not everybody protests. Hence, next to distrust there have to be more factors influencing protest.

2.2. Political efficacy

One concept that is often discussed in protest research is political efficacy. This concept ranks as a major contributor to engaging in political participation and thus political protest. Political efficacy describes a person's belief, that his or her acting within a political system could lead to change and that the political system offers enough leeway for change. Thus, a person with high internal political efficacy believes in their own ability to act within a political system, understands political processes and achieves change by their behavior [7,56,64]. Internal political efficacy is an indicator for a well-functioning democracy, because it is a basic premise for active political participation and thus protest [71]. Political efficacy also has an external component. External political efficacy is the feeling that the responsible parties within a political system act responsibly and work for the common good. While the internal political efficacy might be stable over a person's lifespan, external efficacy varies regarding external factors such as government, political system, and political climate [3]. Political efficacy also has a cynical dimension. Cynical people do not believe that they can make a difference. They also do not believe that the people in charge act for the common good. This includes feelings of resignation and frustration with politics [56]. Several studies provide empirical evidence that there is a relation between political efficacy and participation in political action [46]. Thus, efficacy is a factor to consider when it comes to the examination of protest. Also, there is empirical evidence that political efficacy is related to demographic factors, such as the level of education of a person [46].

2.3. Demographic data

Studies in Germany examining protest participants and their characteristics found that protesters are often well educated and middle-aged [48,61,67]. This is primarily the case in the context of protest forms like demonstrations and local action groups [67]. These demographic characteristics of typical protesters can be explained by structural conditions of protest. To engage in protest, education and knowledge to understand the often complex protest issues, are advantageous. To deal with terminologies, official agencies and administrative issues could discourage people with a lower educational level, as has been suggested by some authors [61,67]. Therefore, well educated people are structurally in a better position to place their topics. Those observations about the structure of typical protesters suggest that there is a structural unfairness in political protest to the detriment of less educated people [4,61,67].

Internet and especially Social Media changed communication and information structures [55]. As protest is a phenomenon related to the current developments of social and societal structures, protest conditions are also changing with the evolution of communication and information structures. Thus, some authors suggest that the influence of education will be less important when catching up about any topic is as easy as modern media suggest. Modern media provide information compiled by algorithms filtering data based on personal profiles. As a consequence, people only perceive information based on their past information behavior and thus, so called filter bubbles may emerge. This means that people only get access to a small part of information, framed by past information searches. Thus, filter bubbles may be the base for opinion building and lastly protest. Therefore, it is important to understand the interplay of opinions, believes, attitudes and protest. As a background for this, the role and influence of the thematic area and its influence and relation to protest is an important research topic. Next to that, the role of information in protest and how information about protest topics are distributed is another relevant research question.

2.4. Opinion leadership

Therefore, another important factor to include in the examination of protest is how information is received and imparted in the context of a protest. Based on the increasing distrust in elites, personal information may gain importance in a trustful and reliable information and opinion building