



# What drives unconventional political participation? A two level study

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## ABSTRACT

There is little evidence on the factors that drive peaceful unconventional political participation. This study evaluates the impact of seven individual level constituents – age, income, education, gender, satisfaction with the government, engagement in civil society organizations and voting – as well as five macro-level factors – economic development, democratic experience, income inequalities, a country's regime type and federalism – on citizens' participation in boycotts, demonstrations and petition signing activities. Participation in all three protest activities hinges on education, voting, participation in civil society organizations, and lack of satisfaction with the government. Moreover, the influence of some macro-factors, such as democratic experience and economic development, and micro-level factors, such as gender differs between the three forms of political engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

Civil society provides an especially strong foundation for a [political system] when it generates opportunities for participation and influence at all levels of governance. (Diamond, 1994, p. 9)

A participatory public is a defining feature of a functioning political system (Tocqueville, 2000). Political participation provides the link between the citizenry and the governing process; it allows citizens to directly and indirectly communicate their interests, concerns and complaints to the government (Tam & Rudolph, 2008). Aware of the repercussions of citizens' involvement in politics for the well-being of a political system, numerous case, comparative case, and large-*N* quantitative studies have investigated several aspects of political participation (Van der Meer & van Ingen, 2009). Most analyses focus on voting, the most conventional form of political engagement. These studies have identified a plethora of macro-level

characteristics, such as compulsory voting, proportional representation and the decisiveness of the election at the heart of differences in turnout between countries (Dettrey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Franklin, 2004). The literature has also identified an abundance of micro- or individual-level attributes that impact citizens' propensity to become and remain both conventionally and unconventionally engaged. Income, education, and participation in voluntary organizations are commonly associated with higher levels of political engagement (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2002; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

However, while recent research has disentangled macro-level characteristics of turnout and micro-level indicators for political participation more generally, few studies examine the interplay between micro- and macro-level factors on an individual's likelihood to participate in peaceful forms of political protest. How does context influence citizens' propensity to engage in peaceful unconventional political activities? Which individual and contextual factors explain why some people sign petitions, participate in boycotts, and demonstrate while others do not? It is the goal of this article to answer these puzzles. More precisely, this study analyzes the impact of seven theoretically informed micro-level covariates:

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age, income, education, gender, satisfaction with the government, engagement in civil society organizations, and voting – as well as five macro-level factors: economic development, democratic experience, income inequalities, federalism, and macro-level turnout – on the three forms of peaceful unconventional political actions: partaking in boycotts, participating in demonstrations, and signing petitions. The results are derived from a large sample of more than 41,000 individuals across 39 countries. By differentiating between the three most common forms of peaceful political protest, this study also determines whether partaking in a boycott, participating in a demonstration, or signing a petition can be explained by the same independent variables or not.

The results of this study are quite nuanced. First, an individual's propensity to engage in peaceful protest activities is mainly driven by individual factors. Second, there are some commonalities and differences with regard to the constituents of the three peaceful protest activities. On the one hand, the four micro-level indicators of education, engagement in civic organizations, conventional political participation, and dissatisfaction with the government are individual drivers for high levels of all three forms of unconventional political engagement. On the other hand, there are some differences in the effect of other micro-level factors, such as gender and income, as well as macro-level indicators, such as economic development and democratic government on the three forms of peaceful protest activities.

## 2. Defining unconventional political participation

Political participation, largely defined, comprises “all voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to directly or indirectly influence political choices at various levels of the political system” (Kaase & Marsh, 1979, p. 42). One of the most common differentiations between different kinds of political participation is conventional versus unconventional. Conventional political activities including voting, party membership and participation in a political rally are actions that intend to influence the political process through the electoral arena (Verba & Nie, 1972). Unconventional political participation aims to influence politics through non-institutionalized means. For example, holding a demonstration, participating in a boycott and signing a petition are all forms of unconventional political activities (Van der Meer & van Ingen, 2009).

Historically, unconventional political activities were equated with all kinds of protests and comprised both peaceful and violent forms of actions. In fact, prior to the mid 20th century, revolutions, rebellions and revolts such as the French and American Revolutions constituted a high amount of contentious actions (Stockemer & Carbonetti, 2010). In the 20th and 21st centuries, deliberately resorting to violent forms of protest, such as wounding or killing opponents or using weapons by protesters has become less common, especially in Western countries (Roller & Wessels, 1996). Rather, these types of protest have been replaced by peaceful forms of political contention such as participation in demonstrations, boycotts of products, deliberate purchase of specific goods, and signing petitions.

Generally, these non-violent political acts are considered legitimate and within the bounds of accepted norms (Meyer, 2004).

This study adopts the distinction between violent and non-violent forms of political participation. Unconventional political activities are defined as all sorts of protest behaviors that do not deliberately involve physical force and operationalized by data from the World Value Survey. Consistent with the definition above, the concept includes three measures of peaceful political protest: signing petitions, attending lawful demonstrations, and joining boycotts. However, while these three forms are the most common forms of peaceful protest activities, they differ in at least three fundamental ways. First, individuals from the sample of countries included in this analysis have varying probabilities to partake in any of the three forms of political action. For example, 31% of the sample respondents have signed a petition; 18% have demonstrated; and 10% have boycotted.

Second and relatedly, the three proxy variables of protest activity involve different forms of protest. For example, signing a petition is a very low risk form of unconventional political activity; signing a petition takes minutes, if not seconds, and the act remains largely invisible. In contrast, participation in a demonstration is a more open act of political engagement that involves a relatively high amount of time commitment. Third, the three forms of political engagement might be used for different purposes. For instance, boycotts might be conducted for ethical reasons, while demonstrations could be more overtly political. Because these three forms of contentious actions cover different forms of unconventional political engagement, each of these three forms of peaceful contentious actions is treated individually in the analysis. Political crimes, such as terrorism, sabotage, guerrilla warfare, hijacking, assassinations, bombings, kidnappings, and armed attacks are deliberately excluded from the definition of political engagement.

Contrary to conventional political engagement, peaceful unconventional political involvement has been on the rise over the past decades (Inglehart, 1999, p. 7). Table 1 presents the increase or decrease in all three forms of unconventional participation in all 15 countries that participated in the 1981 or 1990 wave and the 2005 wave of the World Value Survey. The first number in each field presents the change in any of the three forms of political engagement between 1981 or 1990 and 2005. The numbers in parentheses represent the percentage of citizens in each country who self-identify as having ever participated in any of these three forms of political engagement in 1981, 1990, and 2005 respectively. While all forms of unconventional political engagement have generally increased, there is also some wide-ranging between-country variation. For example, in Japan, all forms of protest behavior have more than doubled between 1981 and 2005. However, in other countries such as Turkey, unconventional engagement has been stable over the past three decades. Finally, there are even a few countries, including Chile, where protest actions have actually declined.

For the remaining 60 countries that are included in any of the five waves of the World Value Survey, it is harder

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