EDITORIAL

POLITICAL ACTIVISM RESEARCH: STUDYING THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOR[*]

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ABSTRACT: The study of political activism has grown significantly within the last fifty years. Political partic-
ipation was always the cornerstone of research in political science, but the advent of comparative political
behavior studies and quantitative analysis has paved the way for data-driven investigations of who votes,
why people participate and what types of political activities citizens prefer. This article is an introduction to
the main scholarship in political participation studies, its evolution since the beginning, the shift in focus
from conventional activism to unconventional engagement, up to the most recent innovation of digital
participation. The political behavior field has showed how citizens are not necessarily prepared to be polit-
ical animals, how political interest and opportunities play a role in the levels of participation recorded and
how individuals may choose newer, confrontational modes of political expression that better fit their
needs. In the end, the entire development of this field of research highlights once more the relevance of
political action, especially with regards to how participation has changed in Europe, over time and across
borders.

KEYWORDS: electoral turnout, political behavior, political participation, protest, voting

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1. Introduction to Political Activism

Scholars of democracy started to study the concept of political activism in the 1960s (Campbell 1960; Almond and Verba 1963). The first comparative studies pointed out the nexus between citizens and the political system, while highlighting its main patterns. In 1963, Almond and Verba, comparing and contrasting the patterns of political attitudes in five countries, determined that political culture and political participation were at the base of a healthy democracy. The work mapped orientations towards the political system and the policy process, and how individuals conceived of themselves as political actors. Among the different types of political culture, only the participant version (civic culture) was compatible with democracy, because it supported the principles and rights at the base of any democracy (Lipset 1994). Since then, the idea that societies differed in their political culture has expanded, as confirmed by different comparative studies in the following decades (see Verba and Nie 1972; Marsh 1977; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Jennings and van Deth 1989). Across the literature from those years, "political engagement" and/or "public involvement in decision making" represent the cornerstones on which democracy takes root and structures its consolidation. Although some scholars question whether it is time to update the definition of political participation (Fox 2014; van Deth 2014), because there is a continuous expansion of the modes of action, engagement and involvement continue to be key components in the definition of political activism.

Then, what is political participation? Adopting an etymological point of view, the term participation refers to the act of taking part in person in the decision-making (Sartori 1987, 113). Thus, political participation can be seen as the bridge to connect citizens to the political class. In fact, "Political participation affords citizens in a democracy an opportunity to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 37). In this view, political participation represents a basic condition of democracy, where citizens, through their political activities, try to have an impact on the decisions made by political leaders (Dahl 1971) and at various levels of the political system (Marsh and Kaase 1979). Although participation in democratic decision making provides personal benefits to those who engage in this activity, and citizens have the right to express their views about happening in the public sphere, not all individuals choose to participate. Moreover, not all forms of participation are relevant to improve the relationship between citizens and rulers in terms of responsiveness (see Zittel and Fuchs 2007).

Even in situations of political apathy, when citizens decide to act in the political arena, they become involved in politics in different ways. For instance, the parsimonious view offered by Downs (1957) in 'An Economic Theory of Democracy' reveals that the choice of individuals to become politically engaged is linked to rationality. People become politically active after a thorough cost-benefit analysis to achieve a stated goal. Only when the marginal benefits of an action exceed the marginal costs, they will act. However, this theory "…provides an incomplete explanation of political action" (Whiteley 1995, 227), because rationality is insufficient to encourage citizens to engage with politics (Jones, Hoffman, and Young 2013). On the other side, other scholars show that "the results attest unequivocally to the importance of personal influence and the other variables in the collective interest model in motivating individual participation" (Finkell and Muller 1998, 46) confirming that "There is nothing irrational about voting" (Abrams et al 2010). Following Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) instead, another theoretical perspective is based on the assumption that a central determinant of behavior is the individual's intention. Since intentions indicate decisions or plans of action, when citizens formulate their intentions, in practice they are taking into account three types of consideration (attitude toward the behavior, subjective normative, and perceived behavioral control). Differentiating between endogenous and exogenous determinants of political choice, this theory represents a parsimonious explanatory model of political action (see Eckstein et al. 2013).

Among more middle-range theories, socio economic resources, as income, education and age (see Verba, Nie and Kim 1978) or time, money and skills, allow citizens to get engaged in politics, since it is easier for them to afford it (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). Other theoretical perspectives discuss motivation that leads people to political participation (Armingeon 2007), mobilizing networks (Verba et al. 1995), in terms of social capital (Putnam 2000) or mobilization agencies, as parties, civic associations or churches, which recruit people to participate (Teorell 2003).

In recent years, several researchers have shown that the democratic deficit recorded at the end of the last millennium (Norris 1999) continues to characterize the more established democracies (Bellucci and Memoli 2012): political institutions have not helped citizens to participate in the decision making process. As confirmed by the low support received from the public opinion, the political class as well as government institutions have slowed down citizens' political participation. In fact, "citizens who remain dissatisfied are more likely to abstain from the political process at least in terms of conventional participation, even if the negative effects of dissatisfaction for the

average citizen are not as strong as those of democratic skepticism" (Karp and Milazzo 2015, 108).

In general, it is claimed that democracy requires an active citizenry, because only through different forms of political engagement (discussion, interest, involvement, and so on) citizens' goals can be defined and carried out in a democracy. In this context, electoral participation has become the first example of political activism, since the first relevant work in 1960 (Campbell 1960).

2. Voting as form of participation

Political participation can be conceived in a variety of ways, often based upon a distinction between conventional and unconventional behaviors (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002). Although some researchers find the distinction vague and simplistic (Kühberger and Windischbauer 2010), it continues to be a useful way to separate and understand the diverse and competing modes to participate in the political arena. Among conventional behaviors (institutionalized modes), namely all activities by which citizens can make their voice heard in a legal manner and using conventional means, voting is the cornerstone of the democratic political process, as it represents the most widespread form of conventional political participation as well as a central component of behavior research. According to Verba and Nie (1972), it requires little individual initiative, exists in all democracies and includes conflict. For instance, campaign activity is a significant mode of action: citizens can further impact the pre-election time and its outcomes. Unlike voting, campaign activity requires more time investment as well as articulated policy actions. These two forms of participation are followed by other, but less, conventional forms of political activism. Considering the conventional participatory repertoire of actions, the list could include 'joining a political party', which identifies a basic political/ideological orientation, 'doing political work', which offers more possibility to express personal views or demands, as well as 'contacting officials'. Other modes to participate in politics are represented by collecting signatures for a petition or money for social causes, as well as writing letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schulz 2001).

Although electoral participation (voting) represents the main way in which citizens can 'easily' participate in the political life of their country, the literature on this topic reveals a citizen increasingly disenchanted and unwilling to take action. An analysis of electoral action reveals a bleak view on the state of electoral democracy (Dalton 2009). While studying young adults in the UK from 1964 to 2010, Smets (2015, 18) shows that

"turnout has declined in almost all advanced industrial democracies and diversified life trajectories and delayed transitions to adulthood are observed in these countries as well". A similar trend is found by Putnam (2000), who investigated American public opinion and pointed out that between 1974 and 1994 the percentage of citizens attending a political rally declined by 32%, whereas individuals working for a political party recorded a similar slump (down 42%). Considering the European elections as an election in Europe, the scenery does not change. From 1979 to 2009 the share of citizens who have expressed their vote fell from 62% to 43%, while the May 2014 EU election saw the lowest voter turnout on record (42.5%). Even if voter turnout is higher in more competitive elections (Pacheco 2008), a similar trend characterizes all European countries, where "there has been a trend since the 1960s for voter turnout at elections to decline as have memberships of the main political parties"(Roberts 2015, 951). Overall, different factors are responsible for lower voting turnouts: skepticism towards democracy (Karp and Milazzo 2015) or dissatisfaction with democracy (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2014), disagreement from political experience in social networks (Nir 2011), or simply economic and ideological factors (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2014).

If party identification has been decreasing over time (Dalton 2013), partisan conflict has intensified. Parties are more salient to citizens, and where party polarization is strong, citizens tend to become more partisan (Lupu 2015). This trend does not characterize all cohorts: younger citizens might believe less in parties, thus renouncing to affiliate and to vote. Yet, new repertories of participation could make the youth more likely to attend demonstrations or sign petitions (Dalton 2009). The media would undoubtedly contribute to that, especially the new type of media. As some scholars have written, the Internet is indispensable for campaigns and the electoral process (Bimber and Davis 2003), because it represents a new way of participating in elections and public affairs (Chadwick and Howard 2008). Thus, more internet access among younger generations can turn into more political interest and engagement in the future (Mossberger 2009). Among similar conventional modes of activism, citizens may write to politicians trying to influence the political agenda or political outcomes, but this mode to participate requires more skills. Still, citizens tend to contact politicians in proximity to an election, with the goal of expressing their political voices, even where democracy is not consolidated (Michelitch 2012) or where freedom of speech is still limited (see Shyu, 2010).

Although conventional participation appears to have decreased over time and across activities, citizens do not shy away from politics. Probably, they are only looking for a new way to access the public sphere (Dalton 2009), and the advent and growth of

unconventional activism has played a big part in the on-going understanding of how citizens participate politically.

3. The Shift Towards Protest

The development of political behavior research took a turn in the 1970s. Reflecting the time, political behavior scholars began focusing on the possible variety of political actions that could indeed be measured and studied. In the aftermath of Verba and Almond's contribution (1963), researchers in comparative political behavior expanded the type of political actions included in the sphere of political engagement. Citizens were already confirmed voters, volunteers in political campaigns and party members above anything else, but this vision of activism was clearly limited as many societies in the 1970s experienced protest activity and social rebellion as a reaction to a social political model that was not up to date. In this context, Samuel Barnes and Max Kaase's work (1979) changed the game of political behavior studies. While recognizing the innovative approach of Verba and Almond with the survey based assessment of political engagement, the volume underlined the need to add newer forms of political activities to the typical repertoire of possible actions among citizens. Protest and unconventionality became an equally important focus of research. If protest based activism was previously considered an anti-systemic expression of political behavior, not deemed worthy of analysis, over the last four decades it has certainly become an important topic of study across disciplines and countries. A follow up volume to Barnes and Kaase's contribution (Jennings and van Deth 1990) confirmed the new path in the study of comparative political behavior and quantitative analysis in the research on political activism.

Many publications have highlighted the increase in protest activity once scholars started to measure it. A growth in unconventionality over time and across countries has reaffirmed the relevance of such activity in political behavior (Norris 1999, 2002, 2006; Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002; Rucht 2007; Dalton 2014). If political scientists had mostly focused on individual level analysis of unconventional activism, sociologists opted to incorporate collective action and group organization into the development of social movements analysis. Individual citizens as well as groups of people were involved in confrontational actions (Dalton and Kuechler 1990; Kriesi et al. 1995, as examples on Europe in particular), outside of the realm of voting and parties.

The empirical measure of protest has equally changed as scholars refined their research designs. Some of the initial disagreements in the field centered on the differ-

ence between protest activity and protest potential. Citizens certainly revealed higher levels of potential to engage in protest (Jenkins, Wallace, and Fullerton 2008), but consistently lower levels of unconventional action (Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Jennings and van Deth 1990). As surveys could only measure self-reported protest activism, methodological debates on actual measures of protest led to new choices on how to quantify people's challenging or disrupting political activities. Many international surveys studying political behavior included variables to measure protest. There are indeed different types of measures, and they have evolved over time, based upon methodological, theoretical and practical questions. For instance, the World Values Survey introduced five separate questions to assess unconventionality: signing a petition, participating in lawful demonstrations, joining in a boycott, participating in unofficial strikes, occupying a building, damaging property, and engaging in personal violence. The last two items often are not measured any longer as they tend to have a very low response rate, but all the others are frequently present in international surveys such the European Social Survey or the Eurobarometer. Other well-known surveys include some of the same measures, showing the shift in focus, from hard (disruptive) protest towards soft (non confrontational) protest, in light of doubts about the actual validity of the self reported data on illegal activities such as political violence. More recently, newer forms of unconventionality have also been added to the list of protest actions considered. Political consumerism (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005) is an example of the evolution of challenging activities in advanced democracies, with individuals expressing their political views by boycotting certain products, outside of the typical realm of institutionalized political activism, such as voting or fundraising for a candidate. In the end, the empirical assessment of protest has evolved, first from a violent action to a peaceful activity of disruption, and later to an innovative addition to political unconventionality as newer forms of political expression developed.

In this context, the updated understanding of protest behavior has allowed scholars to focus on quantity and quality of unconventionality. By all means, the typical protester has normalized (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001), encouraging more diverse individuals to embrace protest in different forms and bringing unconventionality closer to routine political behavior. More diverse participants in protests have also been credited with a possible elimination of inequalities in activism, especially in comparison to conventional forms of political engagement (Marien, Hooghe, and Quintelier 2010). Participation in a street demonstration is certainly not viewed as a particularly challenging action any longer, but as an example of a well-planned effort to intensify the impact of people's dissatisfaction, without waiting for elections. The quality of unconventional

activism has improved overall participation in politics, rewarding new types of issues and citizens with new needs.

In response to a justified multiplication of new protest measures, scholars studying unconventionality introduced the use of scales. As a better way to assess the relevance of multiple protest activities, studies employed the inclusion of more individual measures into a coherent index, where different preferences for diverse protest activities could be assessed and incorporated (Jenkins et al. 2008; Vassallo 2010; Quaranta 2013b; Dalton 2014). In addition to individual protest levels in specific type of actions (for instance, boycotts, demonstrations, strikes, etc…), countries and citizens could be identified by their overall level of unconventionality, a score that incorporated the individual unconventional actions into a meaningful scale. Countries with different preferences for certain types of actions could be better compared, because the equivalence of separate protest measures (for instance, a boycott vs. a street demonstration) cannot be assessed convincingly.

In addition to discussions on potential and action in unconventionality, explaining protest also became a main focus for the research. Barnes and Kaase (1979) had primarily focused on a few demographic variables to predict unconventionality, later scholars continued to assess the relevance of the same individual predictors while testing for continuity. Men were and remained more likely to engage in a protest activity than women (Jennings and van Deth 1990), but the normalization of protest has contributed to close this gap (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001; Marien et al. 2010). Age confirmed to be a consistent predictor of unconventionality for younger citizens across generations (Melo and Stockemer 2014; Caren, Ghoshal and Ribas 2011). Leftist ideology equally retained its relevance in explaining why certain individuals are more prone to embrace a challenging political action over voting (Torcal, Rodon, and Hierro 2016). With the progression in the research on protest, more scholars investigated new potential predictors or motives to explain the selection of street marches or building occupations for certain individuals. Some examples for this type of research focus are Gurr's volume on relative deprivation theory (1970) and the impact of citizens' grievances when they feel deprived, a trend in the research that has reappeared in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession (Kern, Marien, and Hooghe 2015). Other contributions identified institutional elements at the country level as possible variables in the choice of protest: Nam (2007) explained the relevance of a strong legislature and Quaranta (2013a) focused on the level of decentralization of a country. Tilly and Tarrow's investigation of contentious politics (2007), Meyer's book on the politics of protest (2007), Tarrow's work on social movements and contentious politics (2011), as recently as Dalton and Welzel's publication on the new *normal* assertive citizens (2014)

are all examples of the significant expansion of the acknowledged relevance of unconventionality in the realm of political behavior studies.

The new conventionality of protest is now a new boundary to be tested with more disruptive actions in a new context, such as the digital realm.

4. A New Approach to Engagement: Digital Activism

With the change of times and behaviors, new technology became the latest innovation to affect the way citizens become politically active. The significance of the technological evolution has quickly supported the creation of a new subfield in political behavior research: internet and politics. As voters, candidates, movements, campaigns and citizens embraced the possibilities of online political communication and action, scholars debated whether digital activism was *real* activism and whether the technology was more of an obstacle than an incentive for participation.

Political Facebook pages, Twitter posts, or Instagram photos were easy evidence of political debates, but less accepted activities in political activism. Regardless of whether the focus was on conventional or unconventional participation, quick posts on a political issue, retweets of a political announcement or a like on a candidate's YouTube video did not fit in the frame of political activism. Scholars such as Gladwell (2010) hinted at the lack of meaning in the many online political contributions. In particular, the so called issue of "slacktivism" emphasized the lack of real effort on the part of political participants in comparison to previous political activists. The advent of smartphones reinforced the discussion on new forms of political expression when mathematical algorithms are already selecting the types of website access a user is interested in. The major complaint against digital activism is not quantity, but actually quality. Quantity in online activities is viewed as a measure of poor quality, with individuals clicking on many possible political posts, without necessarily assessing the actual contribution of a new post or a specific tweet. Online participation has the potential of being empty and in the end disempowering, as citizens contribute hastily to many political debates without the proper knowledge or understanding of the issue. In brief, easy participation does not mean better political activism.

On the other side of the debate, some scholars have promptly pointed out the many benefits of recent online activism, even across countries (Shirky 2011). Digital activism has reinvigorated participation among younger generations in particular and has equally expanded the profile of the political participants. Beyer (2014) has presented evidence on how even online communities not dedicated to politics can become politically

engaged. Gamers can be politically mobilized for the right reason, as they generally already share common beliefs and have similar values, factors that attract them to the same online group. If the actual online participation may be superficial, it remains in the end a version of political engagement that can easily convince new people to embrace political debates, when political apathy was present.

A second dilemma with online activism concerns instead the access to the technology required today for political communication. The internet, computers or smartphones are indispensable tools to become politically engaged, even when a person is already a member in a political group. In the past, the ballot box was the only tool needed to participate politically. Today, internet security issues have added new concerns on censorship. In countries where governments are allowed to oversee online communication, the fear of a political censorship that could stop a citizen movement by deleting its Facebook profile, blocking its Twitter account or taking down its YouTube page, is expanding (Joseph 2012). As many citizens have become more active politically, in part due to online communication, the removal of accessibility can easily decrease participation. New technology may not have eliminated older problems of free and democratic access to forms of political expression.

Overall, the role of social media in conventional and unconventional activism is becoming more dominant, mostly because it is very effective. On a global scale, social media-led activism has been credited with sparking the so-called Twitter revolutions during the Arab Spring or the Occupy Wall Street protests in advanced economies (Joseph 2012). The impact of Anonymous across countries has also pointed out the power of digital activism in connecting newer participants across a variety of diverse causes. In specific cases, online activism has also linked traditional groups to newer, more confrontational actions to expand the number of participants and the visibility of the movement. In brief, the recent accomplishments from digital activism have created a better bridge between conventional and unconventional involvement, allowing more potential participants in the realm of political engagement.

5. Overview of the Special Issue

The articles in this special issue incorporate most of the political behavior literature presented above so to explain how political activism has been flourishing in Europe. The primary focus is on political action since the global financial crisis, as scholars expected changes to the volume of political engagement recorded since European societies experienced the financial recession. All contributions in this issue address in differ-

ent ways questions of levels of political participation, as well as quality of political involvement, in light of the innovative political activities created by diverse groups of citizens. All the articles also include empirical data from a variety of international datasets, including some original data collected for the specific research. The key analysis in the special issue is also on the time variable, in order to assess whether patterns of action, conventional or unconventional, can be identified. The articles can be grouped in three clusters, based upon the type of political activity considered.

The first and largest group of articles in this issue deals essentially with contentious politics in Europe, through a variety of forms of confrontational political activism. Christensen's article analyzes the role of political dissatisfaction as a source of protest in Europe, identifying the different shades of expected citizen involvement according, for example, to levels of political trust or interest. The typology introduced in his article underscores the differences with regards to the likelihood of unconventional activity at the beginning of the great recession.

Memoli's article investigates instead the relationship between political ideology, voter status and protest activism. The combination of a leftist ideology and a loser status as a voter increases the probability of confrontational engagement in politics, especially when combined with a government ideology the voter did not support. In a similar way, Vassallo and Ding study the role of objective and subjective economic indicators to predict protest in Europe before and after the economic collapse of 2008. Both types of economic variables matter in the explanation of protest activism, but the impact of personal economic evaluations provides a renewed focus on how relative deprivation theory can be used to predict contentious politics across countries in economic distress. With a longer term perspective, Quaranta presents research on the possibility of a European social movement society, looking at the evidence for more protest, more institutionalization and more participants in confrontational activism over a period of about thirty years. In this sense, at the beginning of the financial crisis, Europe showed a lack of a complete normalization of the protester figure, affecting the claim of a consolidated movement society. Unlike the previous works, Portos' article is a country study focused on Spain and the cycles of protest connected to the country's austerity. His investigation of the protest peak highlights a delay in institutionalization, coupled with the relevance of strategic alliances in the overall anti-austerity movement across the country.

The second group of articles concentrates on conventional activism, with a particular focus on European elections and political party organizations. Di Mauro's article presents evidence on the limited impact of the economic crisis on electoral behavior in Europe, citing the role of other political factors as essential components of the explana-

tion of voting at the European level. Iancu and Soare tackled the question of citizen participation with regards to political party structure. In the post-communist era, political parties had to adapt to function in the newly created democracies, which required them to generate supporters and participants. As mobilizing agencies, parties dealt with opportunities and negative side effects from their attempt to create voters and party supporters to thrive in a democracy.

The last group of articles includes research that studies both conventional and unconventional activism in Europe. Splendore's contribution presents an analysis of participation linked to media and digitization at the national level. As digital activism has developed considerably, internet access and accessibility to new information platforms do make a difference for political participation, although not for all its modes equally. Filetti's investigation tackles the relationship between income inequality and forms of political action. His article reaffirms the relationship between higher income inequality and lower political participation, especially with regards to unconventional activism – a finding that is more relevant in the aftermath of the great recession.

In the end, the articles included in this special issue provide a snapshot of the overall state of political participation in Europe, from different theoretical perspectives, and with the use of a variety of data. As an updated investigation on comparative political behavior, they reaffirm the salience of previous political behavior research as much as they cover new grounds for future investigations.

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