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Preparing for action: police deployment decisions for demonstrations

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ABSTRACT
The objective of this paper is to analyse police decision-making about protest policing. While previous quantitative studies of protest policing rely mainly on newspaper data, this study presents an alternative design to tease out how the police decide irrespective of what protesters do during demonstrations and to study 'net' protest policing. We propose to focus on the decisions police officers take *before* the actual protest event takes place. Drawing on the existing literature of protest policing we test hypotheses about police preparation for protest drawing on two concepts: police knowledge and protest threat. To test our hypotheses, we use a unique dataset of police records of demonstrations in Brussels, Belgium, between 2001 and 2010. The dataset contains full data about the official demonstration permit requests submitted by protest organisers. Our results confirm our expectations and show that police previous experience with protesters and the level of threat are important factors in explaining decision-making prior to protest events.

Introduction

Social movements and the protests they stage are strongly affected by how the state reacts to contention. In addition to how the state reacts substantially on demonstrations – by answering protesters' claims, ignoring them, starting negotiations, etc. – the way the state deals on the spot with specific protest events as such has been the object of extensive scholarly research. Under the header of 'state repression' a good deal of work has investigated, for example, how the general level of repression by the state affects the levels, repertoires, and outcomes of social movements (Tilly 1978, Kriesi *et al.* 1995, Davenport *et al.* 2005). Within this broad body of work there is a distinct line of research focusing specifically on protest policing. While political authorities define the general and broad strategies about handling street demonstrations, the police have a large autonomy on day-to-day handling of street protest (Earl and Soule 2006). Police departments decide on whether to attend a protest and what strategy to adopt. Characteristics of social movements and demonstrations are said to shape protest policing strategies (Davenport 2000, Earl *et al.* 2003) and the conditions under which protest events face more or less aggressive responses by the police have been investigated extensively (Earl *et al.* 2003, Della Porta and Reiter 1998, Della Porta *et al.* 2006 , Ayoub 2010). One of the most important findings of the literature on protest policing has been that, over time, protest policing in the US shifted from a police strategy of escalated force in the 1960s to negotiated management in the 1990s (McPhail *et al.* 1998). Similar shifts in police strategies are witnessed in Europe where open repression of street demonstrations has become rare (Ayoub 2010). Yet, despite the general trend towards less overt repressive protest policing, some protest events by

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some movements are still facing higher repression than others. This observation is the starting point of our contribution.

Protest policing, that is, what police officers actually do when attending and monitoring a protest event, is affected by two aspects: police decision-making and protesters' actual behaviour. Quantitative studies of protest policing found that it follows a two-step logic: first the police decide *whether* or not to attend a protest event and with what capacity, the actual decision on *how* to react to the event is often only taken after arriving at the spot (Earl *et al.* 2003). When protesters do not follow the agreed-upon route, when they try to enter the 'safe zone' around government buildings, or when they start vandalising public or private property, the police hardly have a choice but to intervene and to resort to repressive means to restore order. Actual protest policing thus is a consequence of the *interaction* between protesters and the police. This makes it tricky to directly observe the police's role in taking repressive action as it is almost always the consequence of the interplay of protesters' and police behaviour. In other words, when examining protest policing via real protest events – like the large majority of protest policing studies thus far – it is very hard or even impossible to observe 'pure' police decision-making as it is inevitably 'contaminated' by what the protesters do. The problem of police observation is especially cumbersome when relying on newspaper data, the dominant strategy in the protest policing field. Not only are newspaper accounts not very precise or concrete in their description of particular police decisions, they also suffer from a strong over-reporting of violent protests (Soule and Davenport 2009) which may lead to biased conclusions about how the police decide on protest policing more generally.

This study presents an alternative design to tease out how the police decide irrespective of what protesters do and to study 'net' protest policing. We propose to focus on the decisions police officers take *before* the actual protest event takes place. This allows to better examine the underlying logic and to reconstruct police thinking about protest. Of course, once in the field and confronted with a concrete event the actual policing may unfold differently than initially planned. Protesters may behave unexpectedly or the field commander may take other decisions than the police officers that took the preparatory decisions from behind their desks. But even these field decisions can only diverge to a limited extend from the preparatory ones as the field commander is heavily constrained by the people and material he/she has got at his/her disposal. And, as we will show, the field decisions at previous protests are factored in in the preparatory decisions for future protest events. So, the study builds on the idea that we can learn about process policing by looking at what police officers do to prepare for protest events.

Drawing on the existing literature we present a theoretical account of police preparation for protest drawing on two concepts: police knowledge and protest threat. On the one hand, the police learn from their earlier experience with specific protest organisers. They take the resulting knowledge into account when deciding on how to prepare for an event staged by the same organisers. On the other hand, on top of their knowledge based on past experience, they factor in specific features of the protest event that they are preparing and assess its threat. The threat is related to the targets of the protest and to the physical features of the expected event.

To test this account, we present a unique dataset of police records of demonstrations in Brussels, Belgium between 2001 and 2010. The dataset contains full data about the official demonstration permit requests submitted by protest organisers. It not only covers the requests including the name of the organisers, the expected turnout, etc. but – more importantly – also the deployment decisions the police took regarding the requested events. Concretely, the evidence consists of the *number* of police officers to be deployed at the event and the *gear* that they will be equipped with. These two variables allow us to grasp the actual protest policing decisions. With these data we tackle the following operational question: *What characteristics of the organisers, the targets, and the protest itself determine the police's decision with regard to the number of police officers to deploy and how to gear up for potential confrontation?*

Brussels is a capital with very high levels of demonstration activity as it hosts most of the important Belgian demonstrations while at the same time it is the prime venue for European demonstrations

targeting the European Union (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001). Having to deal with hundreds of street demonstrations every year, we consider the Brussels police department as an experienced 'protest policer'. Decisions about demonstration permits are taken routinely (several a day) and so are the decisions to deploy a number of police officers and to equip them with specific gear. The Brussels police dataset allows to observe routine protest preparation decisions by an experienced police force. The quantity of the data – containing more than four thousand requests and subsequent police decisions covering a period of 10 years – can help us to lay bare patterns in police thinking about protest. Therefore, our design allows a combination of both, testing hypotheses developed in the protest policing literature based on newspaper data, and at the same time, whether these hypotheses hold over time for a large number of demonstrations for decision-making prior to the demonstration.

We find that the police learn from the past. When organisers have a history of violence, the police show up with more people and geared up for confrontation. When demonstrations imply a threat because the target is politically sensitive, more police officers are deployed. When an imminent demonstration entails a physical threat, for example when demonstrations are particularly large or when they are moving, not only more police are deployed but they also appear on the scene in riot gear. All in all, we find that protest policing behaviour is not that much affected by specific events or by incidental and particular behaviour of protesters at the spot as most previous studies concluded (and investigated). Instead, we find protest policing to be very predictable and routinised, following strong patterns.

What determines the police's protest planning decisions

Research has emphasised the role of different factors in explaining protest policing styles. While scholars seem to have reached a consensus on the general shift from escalated force to negotiated management, that is, a shift towards a strategy based on negotiations and dialogue with demonstrators prior to the event and characterised by less frequent use of force (McPhail et al. 1998), empirical studies show that protest policing is selective and that some protest events are more often met with repressive tactics than others, even in times of negotiated management.

The main objective of the police when policing protest is the maintenance of public order (Waddington 1994, 1998, Earl and Soule 2006). But demonstrations always entail some form of uncertainty. When people gather, and especially with increasing sizes of the mass, unexpected events may happen that might disturb public order. Police planners have to face a difficult trade-off between, on the one hand, making sure that public order is maintained by deploying enough police with the right equipment on the venue, and, on the other hand, the wish not to waste public money and police resources on protest that does not pose a threat to public order. To deal with this predicament and to reduce uncertainty the police typically gather information about the protest, its participants, and organisers. Before granting permission to demonstrate and planning their efforts, the police rely on intelligence reports, on information provided by organisers in their formal protest requests and on their previous experience with these organisers. These sources of information or heuristics lead to patterned and systematic decision-making about protest preparation.

Previous literature on protest policing highlights various factors that affect police decision-making about demonstrations. One important aspect highlighted in the previous ethnographic studies is that the police try to avoid 'trouble' as much as possible when dealing with demonstrations to maintain public order and to guarantee freedom of demonstration. Waddington (1994, 1998) distinguishes two potential sources of trouble: 'on the job' and 'in the job'. 'On the job' trouble 'arises from the potential for disorder and violence that might result in damage to property and injury to participants, including the police' (Waddington 1998, p. 119). 'In the job trouble', on the other hand, 'takes the form of official inquiries that inevitably follow any outbreak of disorder' (Waddington 1998, p. 120).

Other ethnographic studies propose a model for the analysis of the process going from the preparation of the event to the actual policing and the interaction with protesters: the Flash-Point Model

of Public Disorder (Waddington 2013). In his account of the Sheffield anti-'Lib Dem' demonstration in 2011 Waddington shows how taking into account several levels of analysis (structural, political, institutional, cultural, contextual, situational, and interactional) and their interaction allows to explain a 'flashpoint'-style of protest policing, leading to more or less violent behaviour of protesters and the police. However, since this model is aimed at explaining 'flashpoints', it does not offer a more general theory of how police make decisions about a broad range of protest events, ranging from low to high profile demonstrations (Earl *et al*. 2003).

Quantitative studies of protest policing identified several factors that affect protest policing and that are useful to explain decision-making prior to the event. These studies distinguish between internal and external factors explaining protest policing, that can to some extent be traced back to 'on the job' and 'in the job' sources of trouble. *Internal* factors are related to police culture, including previous experience with specific groups. *External* factors relate to aspects of the protest events themselves (Earl *et al*. 2003). We draw on this distinction and propose one internal factor, police knowledge, and two external factors, political and physical threat, to account for pre-protest police decision-making.

Police knowledge on protest – the internal factor we consider – is defined as the perception of the police of 'external reality, which shapes the concrete policing of protest on the ground' (Della Porta and Reiter 1998, p. 20). It is acquired through previous experiences with protest. The police learn from dealing with protests: 'The police, in fact, seem to be equipped with an elephant's memory: the history of previous interactions with protesters is an important element shaping today's protest policing' (Della Porta and Reiter 1998, p. 20). The police perceive social movements and diagnose protesters, their goals, and their tactics (Noakes and Gillham 2006). They define demonstrators as 'good' or 'bad' and this is key for their own policing behaviour at subsequent protest events (Della Porta and Reiter 1998, Waddington 1998, Wahlström 2007). If demonstrations on a particular issue, attended by specific social groups or organised by certain organisations, regularly result in damage or in violent confrontations between protesters and the police, future demonstrations on these issues, by these groups and by these organisations, are more likely to face higher levels of police presence. We believe that, rather than classifying protest according to the issue or attendants, the police mostly gauge the protest organisers when planning police presence. Organisations play a central role in recruiting protesters. They can or cannot control the behaviour of 'their' protesters, and the police negotiate and make agreements about the routes and the dos and don'ts of the protest with organisations. In fact, we know that the Brussels police department gathers and relies on intelligence information on protest organisers. Therefore, we expect police deployment decisions to be based on previous experiences with organisers and more in particular, on whether previous events by these organisers led to public disorder. This leads to our first hypothesis: *Protest organisers with a track record of disruptive events face a more numerous and more forcefully equipped police presence*.

One of the most widely used and empirically validated theories of protest policing is the so-called threat model (Davenport 2000). The more threatening a protest the more likely it will encounter more and more forceful police presence. According to this approach two types of threats affect protest policing: political threats and physical (or situational) threats (Davenport 2000, Earl *et al*. 2003). Public protest may pose a threat to political elites. Many protest organisers make claims against the government, a minister, an international organisation, or a party in power, and they want that political target to change its course. The political decision-makers that are targeted by the protest are often those who ultimately make decisions about the police – they appoint, for example, the police chief – and the police's primary goal is to defend the political institutions of a country. It is therefore likely that protest with political targets faces another type of police presence than non-political protest. Pressure to keep protest under control might not only come from national authorities but also from foreign or supranational authorities. This particularly holds true in Brussels, the European capital hosting many international and supranational institutions. Similarly, Ericson and Doyle (1999) argue that the policing of international events may be affected by powerful extra-national

influences leading to a strong police response to international protesters. Hence, our second hypothesis: *Protest events targeting political elites or an international/supranational institution face a more numerous and more forcefully equipped police presence.*

Another version of the threat model states that police officers themselves face threats while carrying out their task. In this perspective, 'situational' or 'physical' threats would do a better job in accounting for protest policing (Earl *et al.* 2006, Rafail *et al.* 2012). Earl *et al.* (2006) argue that, since the primary aim of the police is to maintain public order, the major perceived threat by police officers is loss of control. Consequently, in terms of decision-making about numerical presence and equipment, the physical features of the expected protest event then mainly determine to what extent and how the police are present on site. A whole range of concrete protest features may entail the threat for the police to lose control. To start with, the type of organisers staging the event may affect the police's risk perception. In a situation of negotiated management, the police try to interact with organisers to prepare the event but also during the demonstration to prevent disruption and violence. But not all organisations are equal. More formally organised groups – representing established groups and with previous demonstration experience, like trade unions – may seem more reliable and predictable to the police than informal, minority groups with less experience (Fillieule 1997). The former may have their own security service and the knowledge of how to handle risky situations, while the latter are less likely to be able to control their constituency and to prevent tense situations from running out of hand. Apart from the status of the organisers, other more tangible features of the planned protest event may increase the risk of losing control. The sheer (expected) size of a demonstration should matter as it is harder to control a large compared to a small crowd. A moving protest going from A to B – typical examples are demonstrations or marches – is harder to keep under control than a static event starting and ending in the same venue. The precise action repertoire used by the protesters may also be a source of potential loss of control. Confrontational tactics, such as blockades and sit-ins, compared to ordinary demonstrations or informational tactics, most likely increase the perceived situational threat (Earl *et al.* 2003, Rafail 2010). Also, the announced occurrence of a counterdemonstration obviously increases the likelihood of conflict and disruption and, as a consequence, the potential loss of control by the police forces. Finally, during some protest events a delegation of the protesters is received by the protest targets in a face-to-face meeting typically in the target's offices. Such situations are obviously risky and laden with threat for physical confrontation and should lead to more and different police presence. In summary, our third hypothesis goes as follows: *Protest events with a higher situational/physical threat face a more numerous and more forcefully equipped police presence.*

Methods and data

To test our hypotheses we use a unique dataset with police records of protest events in Brussels from 2001 to 2010. Data were directly and manually collected and coded from the paper police archive by one of the authors and a number of trained master students. The archive contains protest permit applications submitted by organisers who want to stage an event in the police district of Brussels-Capital-Elsene, covering the city centre of Brussels. The Brussels police keep a separate file for each protest permission request basically containing three elements: (1) the actual request (mostly a letter by the organisers), (2) the decision by the police to grant permission or not, including the department's plan of action to police the event, and (3) a report of the actual protest describing what happened and to what extent the police had to intervene (see Wouters 2013 for a description of the data collection process). For this study, we use the two first sources of information. Our units of analysis are permitted protest events as recorded by the police (*manifestations revendicatives*) including demonstrations, marches, information booths, strikes, sit-ins, and blockades. For the period under study we have information about 4695 protest requests by organisers and planning decisions by the police on a total of 5328 protest events that the Brussels police recorded on its territory in the period

of investigation. The events for which we lack a permission request and the police planning information – most of the time minor and less important events – are left out of the analysis. Due to missing data (for instance, no estimation of demonstration size in the police planning) our analyses below draw on 4172 events for which we have full information. [1]

We employ two indicators of protest policing decisions, these are the dependent variables in the models below. Both are decisions taken before the event and are thus disconnected from how protesters behave during the events; they are net measures of protest policing. Our first dependent variable is the planned *Number of Police Officers* to be deployed at the event. Our second dependent variable measures *Police Equipment* and grasps to what extent the police prepared for potential disruption by assuring the presence of equipment to control or repress it. The specific riot equipment the Brussels police use to prevent potential loss of control are the following seven: arrest squad in plain clothes, medical team, special squad recording damages, water cannon, horse patrol, patrol wagons, helicopters, and protective clothing with shields and safety helmets. We coded each of these seven equipment as a dummy leading to a Police Equipment variable with seven values (1–7). Both dependent variables are count variables with over dispersion and dominated by lower counts and therefore we use negative binomial regressions.

To tap police knowledge we construct a variable *Organiser Disruption* grasping the degree to which events staged by a certain organiser were disruptive or not in the period under study. Therefore we use the police reports drafted *after* the protest. The variable records for each organiser whether, during the protests it staged, violence was used against objects, whether people were wounded, whether traffic was blocked, or whether anyone was arrested. Each unique protest organiser applying for a permit is given a score, being the mean of protests being disruptive in which they were involved. Based on this indicator, we then assign an Organiser Disruption score to each protest event. If more than one organiser was staging a planned event, we take the organiser with the highest disruption score to be the score of the event. In fact, one could consider our disruption score as a proxy of the information the Brussels police uses to judge protest organisers and organisations.

Political threat is measured by two variables. We simply code whether the target of the protest was political or not (*Political Target*), that is whether the claims of the demonstration is addressed to a domestic political institution (parliament, government, headquarters of a political party), a foreign political institution (embassy or consulate) or an international political institution (European Union institutions, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)). The target is defined based on the description of the demonstration and the issue as given by the organisers in the authorisation request. Second, to account for potential pressure of foreign or international political elites we look at the location of the demonstration (*International Location*). In fact, by far most protests in Brussels that target an international or transnational organisation are held at a location as near as possible to the targeted institution. Demonstrations typically take place right in front of an embassy or consulate or close to the seat of an international institution, in Brussels mainly the European Union institutions.

Situational or physical threats are assessed using six indicators. *Minority Group* is a dummy variable tapping whether there are minority groups among the organisers. Minority groups are defined as organisations of foreign nationals and asylum seekers. *Event Size* is the natural log of the number of expected participants according to the police. *Moving* indicates whether an event will be moving or static. *Counterdemonstration* is a dummy recording whether a rivalling group is expected to protest against the initial protest. *Delegation* is a dummy variable as well tapping whether the protesters will be received by their targets or not. Finally, *Protest Repertoire* indicates whether the protesters announced to make use of confrontational action forms (strike pickets, sit-ins, blockades), of demonstrative action forms (demonstration), or of informative action forms (information booth).

Finally, we include *Year* to control for any changes in police presence and equipment that may have occurred over time. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analyses.

Table 1. Descriptives of all variables used in the analysis.

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Dependent variables					
Number of Police Officers	4172	16.797	34.366	0	690
Police Equipment	4172	0.292	0.636	0	6
Police Learning					
Organiser Disruption	4172	0.077	0.121	0	1
Political Threat					
Political Target	4172	0.685	0.465	0	1
International Location	4172	0.379	0.485	0	1
Situational/Physical Threat					
Minority Group	4172	0.478	0.500	0	1
Event Size (natural log)	4172	4.335	1.579	0	11.40757
Moving	4172	0.169	0.375	0	1
Counterdemonstration	4172	0.011	0.104	0	1
Delegation	4172	0.214	0.410	0	1
Protest Repertoire	4172	0.136	0.400	0	2
Control					
Year	4172	2006.08	2.677	2001	2010

Findings

We run two separate negative binomial regression models on our two dependent count variables: Number of Police Officers (Model 1) and Police Equipment (Model 2). Table 2 shows the change in the predicted number of police officers and police equipment for each step in the independent variables while keeping all other variables at their mean. The full regression table with coefficients is shown in Appendix.

Our first hypothesis regarding police knowledge gets straightforward empirical support from the evidence. Brussels police indeed factor in previous experience. When a protest event is organised by organisations that are generally involved in disruptive events, the police department anticipates and sends more police officers to the event. A one-unit increase on the Organisation Disruption score significantly increases the number of police officers present at the event by twelve. Moreover, the officers go to the events more prepared, as they are equipped with more kinds of riot gear (marginal effect = .174).

Our second hypothesis, related to the political threat posed by protest, finds partial support. Events characterised by having a Political Target are on average attended by four more police officers,

Table 2. Results of negative binomial regressions.

	Model 1 Number of Police Officers	Model 2 Police Equipment
Police Knowledge		
Organiser Disruption	12.60*** (1.591)	0.174*** (0.0288)
Political Threat		
Political Target	3.901*** (0.447)	−0.00273 (0.0133)
International Location	0.848* (0.410)	0.0127 (0.0129)
Situational/Physical Threat		
Minority Group	0.903* (0.353)	0.0505*** (0.0113)
Event Size	5.021*** (0.151)	0.0678*** (0.00348)
Moving	3.246*** (0.526)	0.0615*** (0.0133)
Counterdemonstration	−2.675 (1.626)	−0.0663 (0.0411)
Delegation	1.250** (0.432)	0.0142 (0.0127)
Protest Repertoire (ref. Demo.)		
Information booth	−2.521*** (0.509)	−0.0373 (0.0194)
Confrontational	2.163 (1.439)	−0.00207 (0.0480)
Control		
Year	0.397*** (0.0647)	−0.0368*** (0.00197)
N	4172	4172

Notes: Marginal effect at mean (increase of number of police/police equipment for one-unit increase of iv) change in the expected number of events when regressor changes. Marginal effects; Standard errors are given in parentheses.

*p < .05.
**p < .01.
***p < .001.

and events set on an International Location get assigned almost one additional officer (Model 1). Yet in Model 2, testing the effect of political threat on police equipment, we fail to see similar effects. That the target of a protest is political or international does not affect how geared up the police appear at the event. Apparently, the police see reasons to deploy more officers when domestic or international elites are targeted, but do not find it necessary to bring riot equipment, helicopters or paddy wagons in these situations.

The next block of six variables in Table 2 measure whether threats to the police itself – situational or physical threats – affect police preparatory decisions. Overall, the evidence supports hypothesis 3, that is, the notion that a threat to the police leads to more officers on duty and to a more prepared police force. Consistent with previous literature situations that increase the risk of loss of control are an important predictor of police presence. We find that situational/physical threats are important factors to explain police decision-making about deployment. A good deal of the coefficients in Models 1 and 2 reach statistical significance. We find an effect of protest held by minority groups. The effect is very small for the number of police officers – it leads to about one extra police officer on site – but it has a strong and important effect of how well equipped the police show up. This result makes sense as the turnout of minority protests often is rather low. As hypothesised, protest that is expected to mobilise more activists is welcomed by more police agents with more riot equipment. Both Protest Size effects are substantial and strongly significant. Moving protest also substantially increases the number of police officers present – it adds about three more officers to the contingent – and also the equipment used. This confirms that protests, mostly demonstrations, that move from point A to B are more complex and less easy to control so that the police have to take more precautionary measures. Unexpectedly, whether a counterdemonstration was planned has no influence on either dependent variable. This finding goes against previous studies on protest policing where counterdemonstrations have been found to be a strong predictor of police presence at demonstrations (Earl and Soule 2006). It seems that it does not affect the decision-making prior to the demonstration. The Delegation variable indicating whether a delegation of the protest group is received by the protest target leads to additional police deployment in number but does not affect the equipment. As delegations are mostly received inside buildings it probably does not make a lot of sense to bring water cannons or horses. The action repertoire employed (requested) by the protesters matters as well for the number of police officers present. Demonstrations (reference category) and confrontational tactics are met by more police presence than information booths who get on average around 2.5 less police officers attributed. It is remarkable that confrontational actions like strike pickets, blockades, and sit-ins do not lead to higher deployment levels than demonstrations. The police do not seem to consider these confrontational tactics as more threatening than demonstrations – that is, of course, when controlling for a whole range of other protest features. Also, Protest Repertoire does not affect the equipment used by the police.

Finally, we also find a strongly significant impact of the year the protest takes place, both on numbers and on equipment. The tendency towards negotiated management that was already documented in other places is clearly present in Brussels as well. Each year the police diminish its riot equipment presence and thus attend the protest in a less intimidating way (−.0368). Yet, at the same time, events are attended each year by on average about a half police officer more than the year before (.397). Over the 10 years of inquiry, this finding documents a substantial shift from protest policing by force to protest policing by presence.

To summarise, our results suggest that our theoretical expectations hold the track. When the police decide about how to plan for protest they factor in their experience with the protest organiser at stake, and more specifically, whether this organiser has a reputation of violence or escalation or not. Besides past experiences, police officers take the political threat that an event represents into account. They integrate all kinds of features of the protest event itself that might lead to threats or to losing control in their decision to deploy a contingent of police officers and how to equip them. It is hard to draw comparative conclusions about the relative impact of the three theoretical components since they are measured by different numbers of more or less adequate indicators.
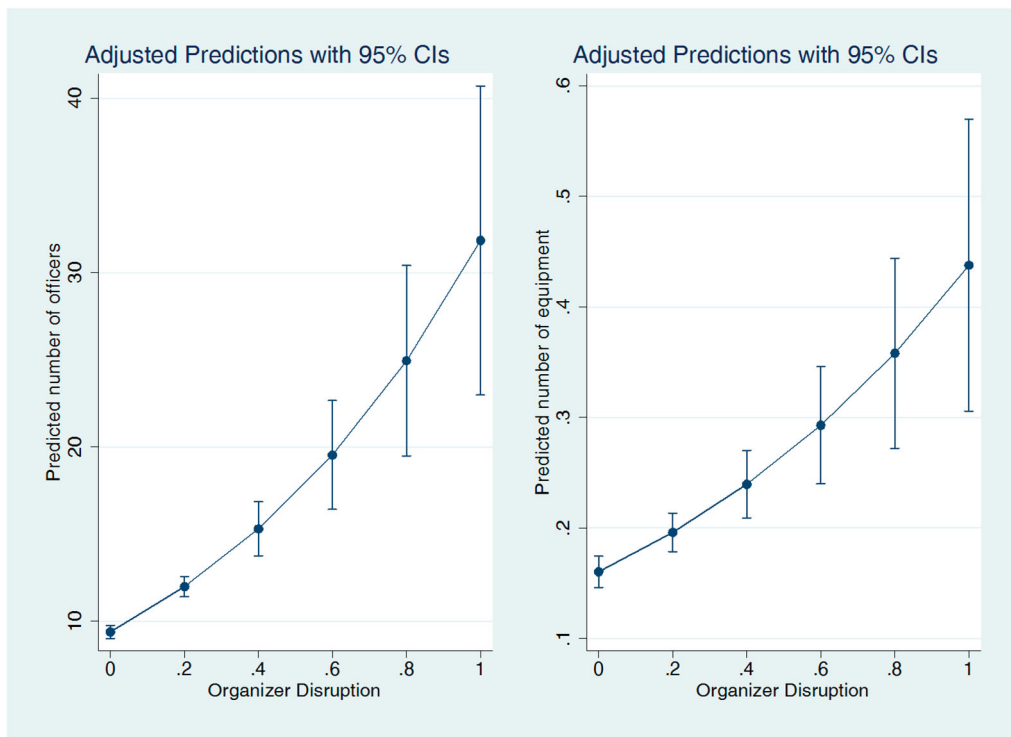
Figure 1. Predicted number of police officers and police equipment for different levels of Organiser Disruption (all other variables kept at their mean).

Still, looking at the blocks of variables in Table 2 suggests that police knowledge is the strongest factor followed by situational and then by political threat. Especially the relatively weak impact of the political threat variables is remarkable – they only exert influence on the number of police officers present and not on the equipment they bring with them. This is however consistent with previous literature showing that situational threats are more relevant for protest policing than political threats, that are more diffuse (Earl *et al.* 2006, Rafail *et al.* 2012).

Taking a closer look at the relation between the level of disruptive events – the most important explanatory variable – and both dependent variables, Figure 1 shows the predicted Number of Police Officer and Police Equipment for different values of Organiser Disruption. The graphs show a strong (steep) effect, with confidence intervals only overlapping in the higher ends of the Organiser Disruption scale. Every step on the Organiser Disruption scale leads to more police present on the spot and to a police force geared up with more material.

Conclusion

Protest policing is a relevant factor influencing social movement activism. Examining pure policing is hard, though. How the police deal with protest is not only determined by what the police department does and wants, but also by the behaviour of the protesting crowd. If the crowd behaves rowdy, the police cannot but intervene. Previous quantitative work studying protest policing mainly used newspaper accounts of protest events. Apart from the fact that such accounts are not very detailed about the police's role or actions and that news reports are skewed towards the more disruptive protest events, such reports inevitably are the result of the interaction between police and protesters. This study suggested an alternative approach. It proposed to look at the police's *preparatory* decisions

that are not affected by real protest behaviour and that allow to better gauge the police's intentions and strategy rather than their actual field decisions (that may be taken by different people as well).

Our unique evidence on the Brussels police force – a police department with ample experience in protest surveillance – shows that the decisions that the police make are predictable and patterned. It appears that a very practised police department takes foremost routinised decisions on how to deal with protest. Three factors are taken into account: knowledge about the protest organisations, the political threat exerted by the protesters, and the situational threat exerted by the specific protest event. Taken together, these three factors explain a good deal of the protest policing decisions that police departments make on a daily basis. When only police decisions matter, both the knowledge model and the threat model of protest policing receive strong support from the data.

A final note relates to the case we studied here, the Brussels police department. Can we generalise the findings from a single city case, even when based on many observations? We are not sure we can. As mentioned several times, the Brussels police are extremely learned and skilled in dealing with protest. The fact that we find such strong patterns points towards a routinised and standard decision-making process typical for specialised and expert decision-making. If we had data about protest policing decisions made by less experienced police departments, the patterns would probably have been weaker with more idiosyncratic and individualised decisions. On the other hand, the case of Brussels is not that exceptional. In many countries protest incidence is concentrated in the capital, especially in smaller countries, and in most of those countries the capital's police force probably is experienced taking routinised protest policing decisions. So, from the point of view of social movements and protest organisers, the bulk of the protest policing decisions affecting them may be taken by knowledgeable police planners.

Our study calls for further research. Besides incorporating cases of less experienced police departments, more cases and variation is needed to tease out how the context in which protest occurs affects police decision-making (last-minute threats, differences across political systems, differences in public legitimacy of protest, etc.). Such a more comparative approach could contribute to how the different elements of knowledge and threat combine in explaining police deployment decision-making. An alternative approach turns to the demonstrators and how they perceive protest and how their perception of police deployment might affect demonstrator–police interaction (Van Leeuwen *et al.* 2015). We expect that in all these cases, the role of knowledge and threat factors will contribute to a better understanding of protest policing, both prior an event and in the act.

Note

1. Our data do not include last minute changes in police deployment. However, 40% of authorisations are requested in the week prior to the event and are thus filled in very close to the event. We are thus confident that last minute changes are very rare and in case they take place do not affect dramatically decisions about deployment.

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Appendix

Table A1. Negative binominal regression coefficients predicting protest policing.

	Model 1	Model 2
	Number of Police Officers	Police Equipment
Police Knowledge		
Past Disruption	1.221*** (0.153)	1.004*** (0.164)
Political Threat		
Political Target	0.378*** (0.0429)	−0.0158 (0.0770)
International Location	0.0822** (0.0398)	0.0733 (0.0745)
Situational/Physical Threat		
Minority Group	0.0875** (0.0342)	0.292*** (0.0658)
Event Size	0.487*** (0.0128)	0.391*** (0.0199)
Moving	0.315*** (0.0507)	0.355*** (0.0762)
Counterdemonstration	−0.259* (0.158)	−0.383 (0.237)
Delegation	0.121*** (0.0418)	0.0818 (0.0736)
Protest Repertoire (ref. Demo.)		
Information booth	−0.273*** (0.0615)	−0.236* (0.136)
Confrontational	0.187 (0.114)	−0.0117 (0.274)
Control		
Year	0.0385*** (0.00625)	−0.212*** (0.0121)
Constant	−77.49*** (12.53)	422.2*** (24.26)
Lnalpha	−0.0163 (0.0246)	−2.348 (0.478)
Log likelihood null	−15,550.54	−2881.593
Log likelihood	−14,181.83	−2273.403
AIC	28,389.65	4572.807
BIC	28,472.02	4655.176
Observations	4175	4172

Note: Standard errors are given in parentheses. AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion.

*$p < .1$.

**$p < .05$.

***$p < .01$.