

Conclusion: Studying Protest in Context

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On February 15, 2003, an unprecedented mass of people publicly expressed their indignation in hundreds of cities around the globe. About one month later, the United States and its allies did what the demonstrators had sought to prevent: they invaded Iraq because of its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. At least to the invaders, it seemed that this war would soon come to an end. On May 1, 2003, aboard the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*, President Bush declared “one victory.” Behind him hung a banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” However, as we write these lines in April 2008, the war in Iraq is still not over. The large contingent of troops mainly from the United States and United Kingdom seems incapable of controlling the situation even after the Bush administration increased the contingent of in Iraq. In hindsight, it appears that the fears of the February 15 demonstrators were largely warranted—no wonder the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the war provoked another wave of protest in many countries.

This volume, however, does not discuss whether the reasons for war were legitimate, which course the war took or which consequences it had. Rather, we have engaged in analyzing who those demonstrators against imminent war were, why they took to the streets, and how they were mobilized. We drew on exceptional empirical evidence based on thousands of answers to a questionnaire that was distributed in eleven cities in eight Western countries. Our main aim was to compare the demonstrators in the eight nations to make headway in understanding how the protest events on February 15 were set up with relation to a specific environment, and how they were determined by their specific context. The apparently homologous nature of the protest

events under study—timing, slogans, action type, platform, and so forth were almost identical—gave us the unique opportunity to investigate the similarities and differences of these protests and the reasons that may account for them.

Our Ambition, Theoretical Framework, and Assumptions

The central idea for our endeavor was that the protests on February 15 must be studied in their political, social, and cultural context. We set ourselves apart from the classic political participation studies, as they entirely decontextualize protest participation and do not allow the examination of how protest motivation and eventual actual participation are molded by the structural and situational environment. We also argue that most social movement studies, even when taking a comparative perspective, have difficulties in identifying and weighing causal factors because too many variables come into play (see Kolb 2007). In our cross-national research setting, however, the issue, time frame, and form of protest is held constant. In this regard, we had an ideal research setting—a kind of “natural experiment” that allows us to study the impact of contextual factors.

The available macro- and meso-level theoretical perspectives do not offer clear clues as what to expect of individual protesters, their sociostructural features, attitudes, and behaviors. The political opportunity structure approach, for example, which seems to be well-suited for comparative analysis, does not make inferences about individual protesters. Rather, it was designed to explain meso-level variables (social movements, social movement organizations, and campaigns and their successes) or even macro-level variables (the amount and cycles of protest in a given society). Therefore, in the introductory chapter, we suggested five different context layers that may determine or predetermine what individual participants may look like.

First and very generally, we assumed that the sociodemographic composition of the population at large has an impact on the composition of the protester populations. If people in a country are generally highly skilled, we expect a large proportion of protesters in that country to be highly skilled as well, at least in a protest that does not recruit a particular social group such as farmers or workers. Second, stable structural features of the political system may also play a role, as they may determine the strength of the general movement sector on which specific protest events can build. We hypothesized that certain political structures foster a strong progressive movement sector, which, in turn, is likely to produce a high turnout in peace protest. Third, we introduced the concept of the issue-specific context, referring to the particular political and social environment in which a certain protest event

is staged. How do government and opposition position themselves on the issue? Is there support on part of the mass media? What does the public at large think about the issue? Probably more so than general political opportunities, the issue-specific context matters in terms of the size and kind of protest and the characteristics of the protesters. Fourth, we assumed that, additionally, social movements and their structures, goals, and strategies affect the profiles of the protesters. In countries with a strong peace movement, for example, we expected the February 15 protests to be populated to a greater extent by peace movement activists than in other countries. Finally, we also expected demonstrators' characteristics to be influenced by the specific mobilization strategies and processes that the organizers used to incite people to take to the streets.

Main Descriptive and Explanatory Findings

In this volume, we were not able to systematically test the preliminary model, which, at any rate, should be considered more of a toolbox or heuristic device than the result of an integrated theory. In particular, we could not assess the relative weight of these five contextual layers. Yet, looking at the empirical evidence presented in this volume, we believe we can safely state that at least parts of the model seemed to have worked quite well and therefore offer valuable insights for better understanding the factors and mechanisms of protest participation.

One of our key findings is that quite substantial differences exist among the February 15 protesters in the eight countries studied. This holds in spite of that we chose to investigate protesters from similar countries (regarding the logic of a most-similar-systems design, see Przeworski and Teune 1970) focusing on the same issue, responding to same call issued in a prior social movement meeting, and, finally, protesting on the same day. Yet it was only at a first glance that the protesters may have appeared very similar—with the same slogans, appearance, et cetera. As a matter of fact, contrary to our initial expectations, the protesters in the eight countries exhibited considerable cross-national differences in their sociodemographic profile, their attitudes, and their behaviors.

Regarding the sociodemographic profiles, of course, the average demonstrator, in the aggregate of all countries, resembled the typical new social movements' activists with high levels of education, a relatively large proportion of whom were women, belonged to the younger age cohorts, and predominantly worked in the human service sector. But beneath this aggregate profile we found notable differences. Just two examples: demonstrators were much younger in Switzerland, and in Belgium, an extremely large percentage

of demonstrators had high educational levels and a disproportionately large number of them were male (see chapter 5).

In a cross-national perspective, attitudes varied as well. To be sure, all who protested on February 15 were strongly opposed to the war. Nearly all participants thought that it was fought for political control and/or control over oil and that war without UN approval was unjustified. But apart from this general rejection of war on Iraq, we came across significant differences among countries in the degree of unconditional pacifism, the embeddedness of antiwar positions in broader opposition to the government, or general feelings of political dissatisfaction (see chapter 6). The protesters, when asked in an open-ended question about their reasons and motives to participate, offered a broad range of arguments, again showing significant differences across countries (see chapter 12). Neither in their answers nor in written pamphlets and speeches held during the demonstrations did we find evidence of an overarching ideological master frame as a driving force to protest, apart from general statements, as expressed in the joint call for action, to “fight . . . for social rights and social justice, for democracy and against all forms of oppression.” Interestingly, anti-Americanism, an important reason underlying the protest according to some commentators, was almost completely absent in these many answers.

We also found significant variation in the extent of membership in political groups and previous protest activity. In general, many respondents to our questionnaire had considerable protest experience, and many were active in voluntary associations and social movements. But in some countries—the Netherlands, for example—the clear majority of the demonstrators had taken to the streets before. And in other countries, the United Kingdom for instance, protesters were much less engaged in civil society groups (see chapters 7 and 10). Participation in the antiwar protest is strongly correlated with a leftist orientation and identification with the global justice movements and similar groups focusing, for example, on labor and social issues, or third-world solidarity (chapter 7). However, many of the organizations running the protest were not primarily oriented toward peace issues (chapter 10). In other words, the protesters, characterized by “complex political identifications,” according to the analysis in chapter 11, were recruited from a broad spectrum of political and social groups. Again, the range of these groups varies across countries, with broader alliances, for instance, in Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, where governments were supporting the war from a more cautious and less committal position, and smaller alliances in the war-leading United States and United Kingdom (chapter 10). In line with earlier research findings (e.g., Dalton 2002), the demonstrators, when asked

about their previous political activities, tended to mention both unconventional and conventional forms of action. As chapter 8 shows, they were not turned away completely from the electoral process and party politics. Yet, this chapter also provides evidence that the protest had little effect on subsequent voting behavior.

Most of the chapters tried to explain the many cross-national differences among the protesters found in our data, by drawing on one or more of the five context layers presented above. Given certain problems of measurements on the side of independent variables as well as the complexity of the task, some authors could not fully explain the cross-national differences they found.

The most valuable tool by far to account for cross-national differences in sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes, and behavior was what we have called the issue-specific context of the protests—which Kriesi (2004, 70) has labeled the interaction context. Regarding this context, several more specific dimensions come into play. First, the position of established political actors is of crucial importance. Whether the national government participated in, supported, or opposed war, and how the oppositional parties reacted to that official stance, made a sizeable difference regarding the profile of the (potential) protesters. The classification of countries presented in chapter 3 by rank-ordering countries on a simple pro-war to antiwar scale proved to be the best overall predictor of demonstrators' cross-national differences. Although an analysis based on only eight countries limits the reach of our conclusions, in many cases the simple fact that demonstrators lived in a country participating or not participating in war had a considerable impact on their profiles when it comes to their sociodemographic characteristics, range of motives to participate in the demonstration, and embeddedness in civil society groups.

More or less the same applies to the second dimension of the issue-specific context: public opinion on the issue of war. Whether the public in a country rejected or approved of war—to be precise, the extent to which it rejected war—affected the protests and the protesters. Though there is strong evidence that both factors of the “issue-specific context”—the stance of government or opposition and the population's stance on war—do matter, we can assess neither the differential effect of these factors on the protesters nor how the factors are related. On theoretical grounds, we believe that the political positions of governments or oppositional parties affect public opinion rather than vice versa. Accordingly, public opinion can be seen as an intermediary variable (strongly influenced by the stance of the government, yet not necessarily in accordance with this stance) that affected the composition of the protesters.

The media, the third dimension, act as intermediaries connecting established political actors and opinions of the populace. After all, almost all the information people receive about the war is presented via mass media. Moreover, we can assume that both the kind and distribution of speaker mentioned in the media and the media's own positions regarding war, as expressed, for example, in commentaries, also influence people's views and attitudes.

At a closer look, it appears that the main factor affecting the sociostructural characteristics, attitudes and behavior of the demonstrators was not merely governmental (or oppositional) stances on a continuum from participation in war (United States and United Kingdom) to support (Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands) to opposition (Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany). Rather, it was whether or not the country was or would be militarily engaged in fighting the war. Indeed, the United States and United Kingdom demonstrators stood out in most analyses and differed most from those in all the other countries. We found that, in some respects, the Spanish, Italian, and Dutch demonstrators—their governments supporting the war only with words—differed from the rest as well. Yet, the actual participation in war clearly was most consequential for the composition of the protesters. It appears that “rally around the flag” mechanisms and “support our boys” discourses substantially affected which kinds of movements, organizations, and people publicly mobilized against war. Moreover, in both countries with war-promoting administrations, even the main opposition parties were not able to raise a strong and consistent argument against war; instead, they were marginalized in a spiral of pro-war discourse. Consequently, in these two countries, the media and public opinion were also by far the least opposed to the idea of ridding the world from Saddam Hussein and his supposed “weapons of mass destruction” by engaging in warfare. In the United States in particular, the newspapers, and perhaps the media in general, tended to downplay the extent of opposition to war in other countries and in international institutions such as the United Nations (see chapter 12). The situation was entirely different in the merely war-supporting—but not war-leading—countries (Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands) where the left-wing opposition noisily and forcefully argued against war, and the entire left-wing social movement sector unambiguously mobilized against war. In these countries, demonstrators, for the most part, did not differ that much from the protesters present in the war-opposing countries (Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany). Also, the media in these countries tended to provide a more complete and fair account of the opposition to war than the United States did.

However, our argument that especially active engagement in warfare made a difference to people who ended up demonstrating may be challenged

by the observation that both belligerent countries also differed in other respects: they are Anglo-Saxon nations not belonging to continental Europe, unlike the rest of the nations in our sample. How can we be sure that the systematic differences we found are a result of their governments engaging in war and not an expression of Anglo-Saxon political culture? Again, in operational terms, we cannot separate the impact of these factors. But we believe it is difficult to conceive that public opinion and media in these two countries also dislike war less than they do in the six other countries. Unfortunately, we do not have at our disposal systematic evidence regarding general war-and-peace attitudes of the population in our sample of countries.

Let us briefly summarize when and how the position of governments and political opposition (and likely linked media coverage and public opinion) made a difference, as shown in various chapters of this book. Considering the sociodemographic traits of the demonstrators, chapter 5 showed that their “normalization”—the extent to which they were heterogeneous and resembling the population at large in a given country—was by far the least obvious in the United States and the United Kingdom. In these two countries, protesters formed a more homogenous crowd, while the in Switzerland and the Netherlands, they were the most diverse. Chapter 6 studied the attitudes of the demonstrators and, not surprisingly, established that those in the bellicose countries were more opposed to their governments. More significant, perhaps, this chapter showed that these protesters also were more skeptical about the general functioning of democracy in their countries and that they were more politically dissatisfied. In short, in countries engaging in or rhetorically supporting the war, resistance against war was embedded in broader oppositional sentiments, bringing different kinds of people to the streets. Chapter 8, focusing on political parties, revealed that although the protesters were mainly left-wing party supporters, there were interesting cross-country differences in their partisan makeup depending on the stances of the countries’ government and opposition. Regarding mobilization patterns, chapter 9 demonstrated that the official governmental position, translated into public opinion vis-à-vis the war, affected the dominant type of mobilization in the different countries. The more the public endorsed the antiwar cause, the more the mobilization relied on open channels. Chapter 10 presented evidence of the significance of issue-specific political context. Different kinds of organizations promoted the marches or rallies in the eight sampled countries, and, consequently, participants had quite different organizational relationships with the protest organizers. In the United States and the United Kingdom in particular, the ties of participants with organizing groups were weaker than in the other countries.

Dramatically different issue-specific national political contexts—the government's position on the war—almost consistently affected most dependent variables. This finding raises questions about the prevalence and importance of national versus international political contexts for protest participation. Since for the majority of the eight countries, the war on Iraq was a “foreign” issue, and they were not actively engaged in waging it, one might assume that their national contexts are of little relevance. In fact, however, the specific national context seemed to have molded the protests most. We conclude that international political opportunity structures do not directly affect protests and protest participants, but, rather, the latter are mediated by national opportunity structures, power structures, conflict constellations, media coverage, and public opinion. If the international context had been primary, we would not have found as many substantial cross-national differences among the protesters as we did.

Various chapters showed that the issue-specific context explains quite a few differences among demonstrators. Thus it is a useful analytical tool. What about the other explananda or “layers” in our heuristic model? Chapter 5 documented that the composition of the demonstrators in terms of age and education is associated with a country's general sociodemographic pattern, the most general factor in our model. None of the chapters found a clear link between the protesters' features and the general properties of the national political context—the stable institutional arrangements and the subsequent strength of the progressive social movement sector. While this is not surprising, because the political opportunity structure approach was never meant to explain the characteristics of individual participants in specific protest events, chapter 2 did not locate a consistent link between structural access for all kinds of challengers and the strength of the progressive movement sector. Thus, based on general properties of political systems, it was impossible to generate clear and unambiguous hypotheses about the number and kind of demonstrators in the different countries.

Also the massiveness of previous antiwar demonstrations and the power of the peace movement in the past, as explored in chapter 4, did not prove to be a good predictor of the composition of the February 15 protesters. Comparing the protest against the deployment of nuclear missiles in the 1980s with the resistance against the Gulf War in the early 1990s, we found major discrepancies, with some countries mobilizing strongly in the 1980s and much less so in the 1990s, and vice versa. This, also, made us uncertain as to the turnout we might expect on February 15. However, as documented in chapter 10, general levels of political participation, protest patterns, and features of the social movement sector seem to have affected the organizational basis

of the demonstrations. In countries that had strong global justice mobilizations prior to February 15, 2003, like Italy and Belgium, antiwar protesters appeared to exhibit the traces of this past. In countries with strong and active unions, the protesters more frequently were a trade union member. And in countries with strong mass political parties, the protest participants were more active in parties than in countries with fewer party members.

The final layer in our heuristic model comprised the specific patterns and channels of mobilization adopted by the organizations staging the protest. Did mobilization affect the differential organizational composition in the eight countries? This clearly was the case. The open or closed character of the mobilization had significant consequences on recruitment, as chapter 9 demonstrated. Sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes, and political behavior all were affected by the mobilization pattern. When laying out our heuristic model in the introduction to this volume, we considered mobilization pattern an intermediary variable. Indeed, while directly affecting the dependent variables, that is, the characteristics of the protesters, the typical mobilization pattern in the eight countries was, in turn, affected by two independent variables of the model. The issue-specific context—in terms of the public opinion regarding war and the strength of the social movements in a country—membership in organizations and patterns of protest were directly associated with the openness or closedness of the mobilization process in the eight nations. Mobilization seemed to work as an intermediary factor, translating more structural dimensions of the political context into the specific composition of the protesters.

Concluding the evaluation, we think our heuristic model proved to be a theoretically reasonable and empirically plausible tool. Admittedly, we are unsure about precise interaction of the independent and intermediary factors. And we cannot, at this stage, examine the net effect of the various factors. Yet we have evidence that four of the five proposed factors that hypothetically influence the specific composition of the protests and the protesters did play roles and determined or codetermined the sociodemographic profile, attitudes, and behaviors of the participants. Above all, the issue-specific context, in particular the stance of government and opposition on the issue of war, seems to make a great difference regarding the kind of protesters that took the streets. The sociodemographic composition of the population appears less influential. Also, the strength of the social movement sector seems to affect the makeup of the demonstrations. Mobilization processes do have the expected effect: they turn structural context factors into a specific composition of protesters. Only the political system variables did not yield substantial findings; we could not even use them to make concrete predictions

about the strength and shape of progressive movement sectors. Though we cannot rule out that the most general and stable characteristics of a given political system might ultimately have some effects on the individual-level composition of protest events, we assume that such effects are very indirect and probably mediated by many additional variables. Political opportunity structure approaches are simply too abstract and too general to account for specific protest events and even more so for profiles of protesters. Therefore, we advocate for the elaboration of middle-range theories that link macro structures to micro behavior. In the social sciences in general, macro-micro bridges (see Dogan and Rokkan 1969) are one of the weakest and most underdeveloped areas. This is also reflected in studies on social movements and, more generally, political participation. We hope we highlighted some factors and variables that might be helpful in building such a bridging theory, though we are fully aware that this is no more than a first step.

Lessons for Further Research

In this volume we had not only theoretical aspirations; we also sought to test whether large-scale surveying of protest participants is feasible and, more importantly, whether it is useful. Surveys of protesters on the spot are not very common, and they have never been used on such a large scale as in our comparative endeavor. Conducting simultaneous surveys in eight countries and eleven protest venues is not an easy task. Yet it is possible, as our collective effort shows. It is, of course, up to the reader to judge whether protest surveys are useful to better understand the dynamics of protest events and protest participation. We hope to have shown that surveying protesters by questionnaire offers valuable and hard data that can put existing theories to the test and contribute to developing new theoretical insights.

Surveys of protesters necessarily imply a shift from the thus far prevailing focus on the meso- and macrolevel aspects of social movements and political protest to the micro level. The individual and his or her individual participation are put on center stage. For social movement research, this is quite a change, asking for better linking of meso- and macrolevel contexts on the one hand with individual characteristics and behaviors on the other. In fact, this entire volume has been a constant struggle to adjust existing theories and insights to the individual level of analysis. Methodological innovation, thus, has theoretical consequences. The main limitation of surveys of protesters is that they cover only people who were successfully mobilized. Accordingly, we cannot directly compare participants with nonparticipants. In a sense, such surveys sample on the dependent variable. One way of dealing

with this inherent problem of the research design is to resort, as we did, to comparison of the participants in a given event and in different nations.

Our focus was to explore the links among three groups of variables: first, the relatively inert political structures; second, the—thus far largely neglected—issue-specific context, including issue-specific stances of political actors and the populace, but also channels of mobilization; and, third, the characteristics of those participating in a specific act of protest. We were lucky to rely on a quasi-experimental comparative research design: held constant was not only the very specific issue but also the day of the protest. Moreover, we studied one of the largest coordinated single protest actions in history by using the same questionnaire distributed on the spot, which produced a large data set that we analyzed according to analytical questions rather than offering country-by-country chapters. Taken together, this resulted in a unique enterprise that involved dozens of researchers and their assistants. Nevertheless, when we look at the wider field of research of social movements and collective protest, it is obvious that we covered only limited ground. Only two of the many limitations: We did not study in much detail the planning of the protest, its logistics, or the concrete mobilization process as it occurred in the eight countries and eleven cities where we distributed our questionnaire. Nor did we study the impact of these protests on public opinion, public debates, and policy makers.

Though we consider cross-national comparison, as applied extensively in this volume, to be a fruitful research strategy, we also think that surveys of protesters yield even more insights when different protest issues are compared within a country or across countries. On such a basis, we also expect to find further evidence for the crucial relevance of issue-specific political opportunities, mobilization structures, and collective action frames.

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