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# Linking consensus to action: does frame alignment amongst sympathizers lead to protest participation?

Michiel De Vydt  and Pauline Ketelaars 

Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Belgium

## ABSTRACT

Frame alignment theory has become a dominant perspective on how people get mobilized into social movement activities. Most theoretical accounts on micromobilization take individuals' congruence with social movement organizations' frames as a starting point. However, the positive effect of frame alignment on protest participation has mostly been approached as an assumption rather than as an empirical question. Additionally, measuring frame alignment and testing its effect on participation is methodologically challenging. As a result, it has remained unclear to what extent an individual's degree of frame alignment increases the chance that he or she will participate in protest. Using panel survey data on a street demonstration organized in Belgium in 2016 (N = 2,646), we compare the frame components broadcasted by the organizers with the specific diagnostic and prognostic frame components held by both sympathizing participants and sympathizing non-participants. We test the effect of frame alignment on people's intention to join a protest and on participation as such, while accounting for multiple alternative determinants of protest participation. Our results suggest that frame alignment affects the likelihood that a sympathizer will intend to participate, which in turn affects participation.

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## Introduction

Protest events such as rallies, sit-ins or demonstrations do most of the time not occur spontaneously but need to be organized and mobilized. Protest mobilization from the perspective of social movement organizations (SMOs) is theoretically distinguished into the processes of convincing and activating, also referred to as, respectively, consensus mobilization and action mobilization (Klandermans, 1984, 2013). The aim of consensus mobilization is to convince as many people as possible of your viewpoints in order to grow a large group of movement sympathizers. SMOs try to do this by actively sharing how a social issue should be interpreted. On their websites, in press releases, and in Facebook pages, SMOs define a perceived social problem in clear terms, attribute blame, propose a solution, and identify who or what is deemed most likely to solve the problem.

Framing scholars refer to these aspects of problem definition and solution proposition as the diagnostic and prognostic tasks of framing (Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 2018).

Once the SMO has successfully generated a group of sympathizers, also called a mobilization potential, the SMO can then try to convince its sympathizers to actively participate in the upcoming protest event. Most theoretical accounts of micromobilization consider it opportune to first mobilize consensus before trying to convince people to become protesters, because activating sympathizers is difficult enough, let alone turning people into sympathizers (Klandermans et al., 2013; Ward, 2016). During the phase of action mobilization, SMOs should focus on motivational framing, which is the third core framing task (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 199). The purpose of motivational framing is to provide ‘prods to action’ by accenting the severity of the problem, the urgency of taking action, the probable efficacy of joining others in the cause, and the moral propriety of doing so (Benford, 1993). In short, whereas diagnostic and prognostic framing mostly puts the emphasis on the goal of the social movement (by defining a perceived societal problem and how it can be solved), motivational framing mostly focuses on defending the means (i.e. protest) to that goal.

The theoretical distinction between consensus (diagnostic and prognostic framing) and action mobilization (motivational framing) is of course an artificial distinction and mainly a matter of emphasis. In practice, SMOs may, and do, engage in diagnostic and prognostic framing, also during action mobilization campaigns that are mainly targeted at individuals who already sympathize with the social movement.

In this paper, we try to answer the following research question: to what extent does diagnostic and prognostic frame alignment make movement sympathizers more likely to participate in a demonstration? Our aim is thus to look at the role of frame alignment beyond the first phase of the micromobilization process.

In order to answer this question, we collected panel data in the context of a large anti-government demonstration called *The Grand Parade*, staged by the Belgian organization *Hart boven Hard* (*Heart over Hard*) in Brussels on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2016. Two weeks before the demonstration took place we surveyed people who had previously shown formal support for *Heart over Hard*, and we asked them four open-ended questions in order to measure how they framed the issue of the demonstration – plus a number of other questions. After the demonstration, we contacted them again and asked whether they had participated in the protest. This way, we tackle two design problems that plague many studies within the micromobilization and framing literature. First, we avoid selection on the dependent variable by examining both participants and non-participants. Second, we ask potential participants about their frames before the protest event took place and thus avoid using retrospective data. These data allow us to test to what extent frame alignment leads to participation while controlling for important other factors that have been found to affect protest participation.

In the section below, we first argue that thus far there are no studies that empirically examine the effect of frame alignment on protest participation in a quantitative manner. This is remarkable, given the theoretical centrality of the concept, but at the same time understandable, given the methodological challenges related to studying frame alignment. In the second section, we briefly discuss four of these methodological challenges. The aim of the third section is to show that frame alignment has typically been relegated to the first phase of the micromobilization process; where frame alignment is linked to

consensus. We introduce what we mean when we say we examine frame alignment beyond the first phase. After the literature section, we further describe our data and methods, including our operationalization of frame alignment. Our results suggest that sympathizers with higher degrees of frame alignment are more likely to intend to participate. The effect on participation is fully mediated via the intention to participate. As we will describe in our results section, the effect size is surprisingly small. In the concluding discussion, we address the question what SMOs might conclude from this study.

### Frame alignment: a ‘sine qua non’ for protest participation

Micromobilization studies ask what it is that makes some individuals decide to participate in protest, whereas others, who are seemingly equally affected by a given situation, decide not to. To answer this question, different explanatory factors have received more attention than others throughout the years in social movement research. From a strong focus on macro- and meso-structural factors during the heydays of resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), political process theory added a complementary social constructionist factor with the introduction of the concept of cognitive liberation, which refers to the process by which members of some aggrieved group ‘collectively define their situations as *unjust* and *subject to change through group action*’ (McAdam et al., 2013, 1982). Not long after, the concept of frame alignment was coined by Snow and colleagues to refer to ‘the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs [on the one hand] and SMO activities, goals, and ideology [on the other] are congruent and complementary’ (Snow et al., 1986, p. 464, clarification in brackets added).<sup>1</sup> Later scholars would later point out that both concepts tended to focus on a cognitive, ideational impetus for collective action, at the expense of attention for the emotions from which cognitive structures derive much of their causal force (see Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 2018).

Theoretical paradigms tend to complement rather than fully disqualify each other. Therefore, most contemporary scholars would readily acknowledge that micromobilization is not simply a matter of one type of explanatory factor, at one level of analysis. Instead, it involves a complex of cognitive (e.g. frame alignment, identity development), affective (e.g., emotion development) and structural mechanisms (e.g., recruitment, role of social ties) (Ward, 2016). Furthermore, recent scholarship stresses the inseparability between thinking and feeling (Jasper, 2018).

Frame alignment, however, still occupies a theoretically dominant position in micromobilization research. Both in micromobilization studies and within the framing literature, frame alignment has generally been seen as a crucial requirement, a ‘sine qua non of movement success’ (Ferree, 2003, p. 305). Just as Klandermans (1984, p. 586) stated that ‘action mobilization cannot do without consensus mobilization’, Snow et al. (1986, p. 464) posited that ‘frame alignment is a necessary condition for movement participation.’<sup>2</sup> More recent studies challenge the common assumption that congruent ideas necessarily precede action. Micromobilization scholars nowadays stress that people can attend protest events for a wide variety of reasons, some of which may have nothing to do with any kind of ideational affinity with the movement (Ketelaars et al., 2014; Munson, 2009).

Whether or not frame alignment truly is a necessary condition for participation, it remains true that the concept still enjoys much theoretical importance. In a recent review article that examines all multistage models of micromobilization, it is concluded that ‘the dominant model of movement mobilization in recent decades conceptualizes the phenomenon as one in which *movement congruent beliefs* play a critical role in jumpstarting micromobilization. Movement participation hinges on whether or not individuals initially possess an ideological affinity with a movement’ (Ward, 2016, p. 856, italics not in original). Ward categorizes these micromobilization models therefore under the label of ‘the affinity-initiated’<sup>3</sup> model. In other words, these models share the recognition that a primary impetus to collective action remains a cognitive one.

Given the theoretical starting point of frame alignment in models of micromobilization, one would expect the concept to be commonly included as a predictor for protest participation in quantitative research, especially if you consider frame alignment to be a matter of degree, i.e. a continuous variable (cf. *infra*). However, this is not the case. Frame alignment is generally treated as a self-evident assumption instead of an empirical factor that is part of the participation puzzle (Noakes & Johnston, 2005; Opp, 2009). Why is this? The main reason for this gap between theory and empirical research is a methodological one.

### Challenges of studying frame alignment

Studying people’s alignment with the frames of SMOs and testing whether this can explain participation in a movement event, generates some important methodological challenges. In particular, we see four such obstacles. Three have to do with study design, one concerns the operationalization of frame alignment.

Firstly, framing scholars often lack evidence at the individual level. Studies, for instance, show a positive correlation between the use of particular frames by social movements on the one hand and protests or movement emergence on the other (see, e.g. Hewitt & McCammon, 2004; McVeigh et al., 2004; Pedriana, 2006). Yet, whether individuals actually share the frames of SMOs remains unclear without micro-level data. A recent study of McEntire et al. (2015) is an interesting exception in this case. These authors use an experiment to test individual-level effects of the exposure to three different frames. They find that *being exposed* to SMO frames – though they do not specifically test the effect of frame *alignment* – increases both the support for the issue and the propensity to take part in a petition.

Collecting data on both participants and non-participants is a second challenge researchers are faced with. We found only one study that examines degrees of alignment amongst protesters and non-protesters. Investigating the movement activities of members of Bread for the World (BFW), Barkan et al. (1995) find that ‘participation is higher for members whose political and hunger ideologies are more congruent with those espoused by BFW’. Yet – and this brings us to the third methodological challenge – Barkan et al. use retrospective data: they study ideological congruence after participation in social movement activities had already taken place. This is problematic because it is likely that participation in a protest event affects a person’s interpretation of the demonstration issue. Consequently, we cannot be sure that the observed difference in congruence between participants and non-participants already existed before the activities took

place. The use of retrospective data is a common problem within framing research (see Benford & Snow, 2000; Ferree, 2003 for early critiques on retrospective accounts).

The fourth and arguably most difficult methodological challenge is that the concept of frame alignment is not easily operationalized, at least not if you approach it as a continuous variable. In most ‘affinity-initiated’ micromobilization models, frame alignment is approached in a dichotomous way: one either is aligned or is not. In this paper, we approach frame alignment as a matter of degree (cf. *infra*). This presents us with the challenge of operationalization. As Opp (2009, p. 254) noted 10 years ago: ‘there is so far no measure of the degree of [frame alignment]’. The hypothesis that higher degrees of frame alignment increase the chance that individuals participate in protest (in our case: a legal demonstration), was according to Opp therefore ‘not testable for the time being’ (*ibid.*). Recently, scholars started to quantitatively measure degrees of frame alignment (Ketelaars et al., 2014, 2017). These works provide a method to assess frame alignment. We follow up on these studies by taking the crucial next step and examine to what extent degrees of frame alignment can explain the difference between participation and non-participation.

### **Frame alignment in the multistage process of mobilization**

Mobilization is not a simple one-step hurdle that distinguishes between participants and non-participants. The road to participation rather is a multistage process in which the number of potential participants decreases with every step (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; Schussman & Soule, 2005). Following Ward (2016) we distinguish three basic stages. The first phase differentiates between people who support the social movement organization – also called the mobilization potential – and people who do not. These are the ones in society ‘who could be mobilized by a social movement’ (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987, p. 519). The second phase is about motivation and the intention to take part in an activity. Not everyone who generally supports the SMO is also willing to show support at social movement events. The third step, finally, differentiates between people who participate and those who do not. Not all people who are motivated to take part really show up in the end. Studies on reasoned action demonstrate that the distinction between intention and action is important (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The theory of reasoned behavior postulates that planned behavior – and we can safely say that taking part in a demonstration is planned behavior – is preceded by an evaluation. In fact, protesting is ‘deliberative’ behavior and not spontaneous action, which means that people first develop the intention to participate (or not) and only later actually take part (Friedkin, 2010).

The question then is whether and how frame alignment affects who is selected ‘in’ or ‘out’ at these three distinct steps of the mobilization process. In essentially all multi-stage models, the role of frame alignment has theoretically been limited to the first phase: the formation of the mobilization potential. There is no reason, however, to a priori restrict the effect of frame alignment to this specific step and to neglect that congruence between individual and social movement frames could be important to explain who ‘drops out’ in the second and third mobilization phases (see Ward, 2016 for a similar argument regarding the role of social ties).

In this study, we specifically test to what extent frame alignment matters *beyond* the formation of the mobilization potential. All respondents who took part in our survey

already passed the first stage of the mobilization process: they signed a declaration containing the basic ideas of Heart over Hard. We can assume that everyone in our sample supported the SMO to a certain extent and we test the effect of frame alignment on these supporters' intention to participate (step two) and on participation as such (step three). We expect that individuals with high degrees of alignment are more likely to be intending to participate, and subsequently, to be more likely to actually participate in the demonstration. Opp (2009, p. 254) calls this the quantitative hypothesis of frame alignment. Furthermore, the micromobilization literature emphasizes that participation results from a combination of different mechanisms. We therefore account for the fact that frame alignment is only one of the factors that matters in the multi-step micromobilization process and we analyze to what extent it explains participation on top of important alternative determinants.

## Data and methods

In order to test our hypothesis, we need data of participants and non-participants, both before and after a protest event took place. This is a time-intensive undertaking. The select number of studies that manage to draw on before-and-after panel data – we found only a handful – illustrates this point (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; McAdam, 1988; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Nepstad & Smith, 1999; Van Laer, 2017). We rely on data collected in the context of one specific anti-government demonstration held in Brussels – The Grand Parade – on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, to which 14,000 people attended. This event was organized by Heart over Hard (HoH), which is a grass roots movement supported by a coalition of more than 1,500 groups, including trade unions but also environmental, global justice, and anti-racist organizations.

Thanks to a collaboration with HoH, we were able to survey potential protesters. Two months before the event, we contacted the organization to ask for access to their email address database. People in this database had all previously signed the so-called *September Declaration*. This declaration was the first action set-up by HoH when it was founded after a right-wing government came into power in Belgium in 2014.

In total, we got access to 20,502 valid email addresses. Between two-and-a-half weeks before the protest until the day before the event, we sent out an email to all these addresses with the request to participate in our 'survey about social movements'. In the first wave, 5,496 people (27%) filled in the online questionnaire. From the day after the demonstration onwards we contacted the respondents of the first wave again, asking them to fill in another, shorter questionnaire. After two reminders, 3,921 people (71%) also completed the second wave survey. Our analyses below are based on the answers of 2,646 respondents. The questions that we posed to measure frame alignment are four rather time-intensive questions (see the next section). Only 2,987 of the 3,921 people who participated in both waves answered all four framing questions in wave 1. Because of nonresponse on other questions, some extra respondents had to be dropped.

There is no way for us to test the representativeness of our first wave sample. We have no information about the social or political features of the full population of HoH sympathizers. It could be the case that our respondents were more inclined to take part in the demonstration than non-respondents. But the fact that a sizeable majority of the first wave sample participated in the second wave and indicated *not* taking part in the

demonstration (see below) provides circumstantial evidence that such a sampling bias is not evident. We systematically compared wave 1 and wave 2 respondents on a number of typical as well as more demonstration specific features. This comparison yields evidence of only a few standard survey participation biases: wave 2 respondents are somewhat older and more politically interested. Yet they do not differ in terms of education nor gender. And, most importantly, panel attrition is unrelated to several central characteristics of the demonstration: wave 1 and 2 respondents were *equally* motivated, leftist and (dis)satisfied, and they believed to the same extent that the demonstration would be effective. The sole difference we found was that wave 2 respondents felt somewhat more represented by HoH. For our frame alignment variables (see the operationalization below), finally, we found no evidence of attrition biases. These analyses make us confident that panel attrition did not affect our sample beyond what is acceptable in standard survey design.

We think The Grand Parade is a good case to test the effect of frame alignment on protest participation. Specifically, because the circumstances make it *unlikely* to find an effect. First, all people in our dataset were part of the mobilization potential. It would be far more likely to find effects of frame alignment if we compared protesters with non-protesters amongst a broader group, for example, the Belgian population. Second, since HoH is a large coalition, the pamphlet of the demonstration was thematically very broad and comprehensive (see below). As a consequence, it becomes more likely for respondents to align with one or more of the demonstration messages. We can thus expect higher degrees of frame alignment and less people who are not aligned amongst our respondents than when we would analyze a protest event with a more exclusive and narrow message.

### **Coding process: measuring degrees of frame alignment**

Our method to measure frame alignment largely follows recent studies that have quantitatively operationalized this concept (Ketelaars et al., 2014, 2017). We regard people's cognitions as constructs that can usefully be captured and compared through quantitative research. Please note, however, that we cannot study frame alignment as an ongoing process: we measure frame alignment at one point in time.

We define a frame as 'a mental model which consists of cognitive elements' (Opp, 2009, p. 235). Frames are cognitive or interpretative schemata that consist of multiple parts or *frame components* (also see, e.g. Johnston, 2002; Noakes & Johnston, 2005). The frame components of an individual's frame scheme can be all kinds of cognitions: '[i]mportant for the field of social movements are goals, norms, beliefs such as perceived influence or expected sanctions, attribution of causality for a grievance and normative justifications' (Opp, 2009, p. 242). We identify both the frame components of HoH and the frame components of our respondents. By comparing them we can determine the congruence between the content of the frame scheme of individuals and the content of the frame scheme of the SMO.

In the first phase of the coding process, we analyzed the official platform text of HoH, published in print flyers and on the website of the organization.<sup>4</sup> This text might not cover all of the organizer's frames, but we think it is a meaningful source and the best available point of reference. It represents the shared interpretation of the coalition and it



is what the organizers wanted to broadcast. We converted the pamphlet into a series of frame components, such that each topic or argument was accounted for (for an early example, see Gerhards & Rucht, 1992). This was a rather straightforward undertaking because, instead of a continuous text, the platform consisted of a list of proposals and messages. The pamphlet comprised five main themes – democracy and diversity; economy and taxes; climate change; welfare state and basic human rights; migration policy – which together covered 25 subthemes. Most of these subthemes were subsequently even more specified with particular ideas or arguments. In total, we distinguished 76 frame components in the pamphlet, which is very elaborate and detailed (in comparison, Ketelaars et al., 2014 on average identified 20 frame components per demonstration text).

The second phase of the coding process consisted of identifying the frame components of each individual respondent. At the beginning of the first wave survey – after we asked respondents whether they had heard about The Grand Parade (everyone did) – we confronted them with four open-ended questions, tapping into diagnostic framing (the situation that is problematic and who or what is to blame for it) and prognostic framing (possible solutions to the problem and who or what is responsible to solve it):

- (1) Consider that you would participate in The Grand Parade, which problem or what situation would you want to address this way?
- (2) Who or what is to blame for this problem or situation according to you?
- (3) What should be done about this?
- (4) Who or what is responsible to solve this?

These questions tap into respondents' top-of-mind beliefs and invite them to present us with their diagnostic and prognostic definitions. The answers of each respondent were parsed into quasi-sentences containing one argument or statement. For every quasi-sentence, coders examined whether it was congruent or not with one of the frame components of the HoH platform text. Since it is difficult for coders to keep in mind 76 different frame components, they were instructed to first look at overlap with one of the seven broad themes, and then to determine whether a specific frame component was mentioned by the respondent. Congruence was interpreted broadly. Since framing is about sensemaking and interpretations of reality, we evaluated whether the *meaning* of the content was congruent, instead of simply assessing whether people used the same phrases or words as HoH. An example might further clarify the coding. In response to the first question, a respondent answered 'Racism, climate change, and the breaking down of our privacy'. This answer consists of three quasi-sentences: three distinct arguments or statements were put forward. The first two were coded as congruent, because the pamphlet of HoH mentioned 'Zero tolerance for discrimination and racism' and 'A climate in balance'. The third quasi-sentence was coded as incongruent, since none of the organizer's frame components was about privacy issues.

Four coders completed the coding and 10% of the sample was double coded to check inter-coder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha was .75 for the number of quasi-sentences that were identified in a respondent's answer, .72 for the number of quasi-sentences congruent with the organizers, and .64 for the number of incongruent quasi-sentences. These reliability scores might seem not so high, but they are actually quite good if we consider the fact that this is a difficult coding task that requires a lot of interpretive work

from coders. Moreover, we can assume that coding errors are random noise: we have no reason to expect that they are produced by a bias that would systematically influence our findings.

### **Independent variables**

With the information we obtained via the coding process, we created two independent variables. *Number aligned* simply measures the number of congruent quasi-sentences that a respondent wrote down on the four framing questions. Incongruent quasi-sentences are not subtracted from *number aligned*. We can expect, however, that the added value of an extra congruent quasi-sentence flattens out after a certain point. An increase of one unit means something different when number aligned is zero than when it is seven. Looking at our data, also see that only 8% of our respondents wrote down more than five congruent quasi-sentences. We therefore gave respondents a score of '5' on number aligned when they had five or more congruent quasi-sentences.<sup>5</sup> The second independent variable is *share aligned*: the relative number of congruent quasi-sentences, calculated by dividing the number of congruent quasi-sentences by the total number of quasi-sentences (congruent and incongruent) in the respondent's answers. We run our analyses with both independent variables because we think one is not necessarily better than the other. A person who writes down four congruent components *and* four incongruent ones, is arguably less aligned than someone who just writes down four aligned frame elements. On the other hand, we could argue that a person who writes down six congruent and two incongruent elements (*share aligned* = .75), is more aligned than someone who just mentions four congruent frame components (*share aligned* = 1). We therefore opt to test the effects of both variables.

On average, people in our sample wrote down 3.17 aligned frame components and the average share of congruent components was .52, which is rather high. Ketelaars et al. (2014) found a share alignment of .49 in a sample of only participants. Our sample is further characterized by a very low share of non-congruence: only 2.2% of our respondents named 0 congruent quasi-sentences.

### **Dependent variables**

The first dependent variable is *intention to participate*. In the first wave questionnaire we asked respondents: 'Are you planning to take part in The Grand Parade?' (No, Maybe, Yes). Forty-five percent of the respondents indicated they were intending to participate, 31% were maybe intending and 24% were not planning to take part. The second dependent variable, *participation*, was measured in wave 2: 'Did you participate in The Grand Parade held on March 20th in Brussels?' (Yes, No). Almost 36% of the respondents protested in the demonstration. This is high compared to other a pre- and post-participation studies. Van Laer (2017) reported a participation rate of 10% and only 4% of Klandermans and Oegema (1987) sample protested. Given that we only contacted people who belonged to the mobilization potential, the high percentage is not so surprising. Table 1 shows a crosstab of the two dependent variables.

**Table 1.** Crosstab of intention to participate and participation in % (N).

| Participation | Intention to participate |             |             | TOTAL         |
|---------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|
|               | NO                       | MAYBE       | YES         |               |
| NO            | 98.74 (628)              | 87.03 (711) | 30.43 (363) | 64.32 (1,706) |
| YES           | 1.26 (8)                 | 12.97 (106) | 69.57 (830) | 35.68 (944)   |
| TOTAL         | 100 (636)                | 100 (817)   | 100 (1,193) | 100 (2,646)   |

### Control variables

We want to test the effect of frame alignment on top of various other individual characteristics. We therefore include a large number of control variables in our models. By including control variables we can examine how much of the variance in our DV is *uniquely* explained by our IV of interest. First, we control for two political attitudes: *political interest* and *left-right placement*. Second, we include three variables that gauge the extent to which someone is integrated in social networks that might foster protest participation: *being asked* by someone to participate, *active membership* in various types of organizations, and the extent to which people around someone would approve participation in HoH (*social approval*). Third, we control for three types of perceptions of efficacy: *policy efficacy*, *collective efficacy*, and *individual efficacy*, and we also take account of feelings of *collective identity*. These control variables can be considered a proxy for the type of cognitive liberation as understood by McAdam (1982; cf. supra). Fourth, we include two variables that measure biographical availability: *fulltime employment* and having *young children* (younger than 13 years old). Finally, we add the three sociodemographic variables of *age*, *gender*, and *education*, and we control for how many days before the protest event the first wave survey was completed (*timing survey 1*). The questions to measure these variables were all asked in wave 1, except for fulltime employment and having young children. The specifics of all variables – descriptive statistics and how they were measured – are presented in the Appendix.

## Results

### Explaining the intention to participate

We expect that frame alignment has an effect on someone's intention to participate in protest, which in turn is expected to affect whether someone actually joins a demonstration. We will first test the effect of frame alignment on the intention to participate. We run multinomial logistic regressions – although the variable is ordinal – because this allows us to compare the separate categories of the variable intention to participate (no, maybe, yes) in detail. Table 2 shows two models: one with *number aligned* as independent variable (Model A) and one with *share aligned* (Model B).<sup>6</sup> The first equations (A1 and B1) compare people who answered 'yes' with people who answered 'maybe' (with 'maybe' as the base category). In the second equations (A2 and B2) 'no' is the base category.

Looking at equation A1 and A2 we see that, while controlling for 15 alternative determinants, people who were intending to participate were significantly more aligned than people who were maybe intending ( $B = .141$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and those who were not

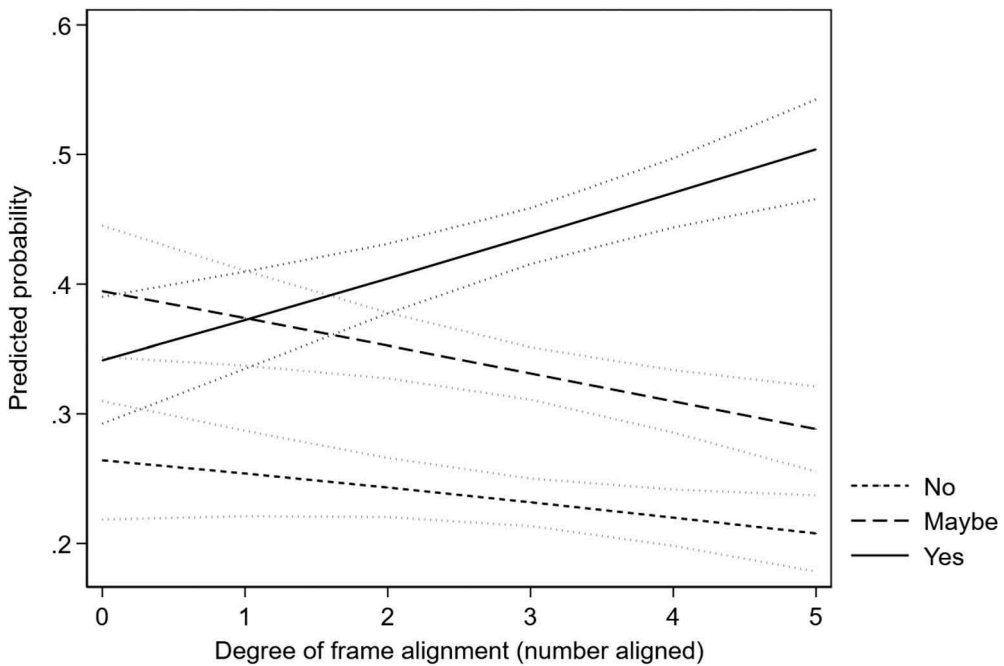
**Table 2.** Multinomial logistic regressions with intention to participate as dependent variable (N = 2,646).

|   | MODEL A                 |                        | MODEL B                 |                        |
|---|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
|   | (1)<br>YES vs.<br>MAYBE | (2)<br>YES vs.<br>NO   | (1)<br>YES vs.<br>MAYBE | (2)<br>YES vs.<br>NO   |
| Number aligned  | <b>.141 (.037)***</b>   | <b>.126 (.041)**</b>   |                         |                        |
| Share aligned   |                         |                        | <b>.431 (.214)*</b>     | .448 (.238)            |
| Age   | .003 (.004)             | .005 (.005)            | .002 (.004)             | .004 (.005)            |
| Gender (female)   | -.079 (.108)            | <b>-.337 (.121)**</b>  | -.042 (.107)            | <b>-.306 (.120)*</b>   |
| Education   | .034 (.025)             | .0004 (.028)           | .040 (.025)             | .006 (.028)            |
| Political interest  | <b>.204 (.085)*</b>     | <b>.357 (.093)***</b>  | <b>.209 (.085)*</b>     | <b>.361 (.093)***</b>  |
| Left-right placement  | <b>-.177 (.038)***</b>  | <b>-.247 (.042)***</b> | <b>-.179 (.038)***</b>  | <b>-.249 (.042)***</b> |
| Asked to participate  | <b>1.211 (.114)***</b>  | <b>1.589 (.122)***</b> | <b>1.202 (.114)***</b>  | <b>1.580 (.122)***</b> |
| Active membership   | <b>.128 (.034)***</b>   | .005 (.036)            | <b>.130 (.034)***</b>   | .006 (.036)            |
| Social approval   | <b>.243 (.078)**</b>    | <b>.438 (.082)***</b>  | <b>.247 (.078)**</b>    | <b>.441 (.082)***</b>  |
| Policy efficacy   | -.092 (.068)            | .056 (.077)            | -.091 (.068)            | .058 (.077)            |
| Collective efficacySmall chance<br>(ref. = Very small chance) Average | -.096 (.167)            | .120 (.175)            | -.092 (.166)            | .121 (.175)            |
| Large   | .235 (.171)             | <b>.736 (.186)***</b>  | .249 (.171)             | <b>.745 (.185)***</b>  |
| Very large  | <b>.894 (.244)***</b>   | <b>.992 (.263)***</b>  | <b>.900 (.244)***</b>   | <b>.994 (.263)***</b>  |
| Don't know  | <b>1.988 (.642)**</b>   | <b>2.238 (.765)**</b>  | <b>2.021 (.642)**</b>   | <b>2.268 (.765)**</b>  |
| Individual efficacy   | <b>.669 (.254)**</b>    | .494 (.255)            | <b>.690 (.254)**</b>    | <b>.511 (.255)*</b>    |
| Collective identity   | <b>.172 (.064)**</b>    | <b>.216 (.069)**</b>   | <b>.178 (.064)**</b>    | <b>.221 (.069)**</b>   |
| Fulltime employment   | .059 (.046)             | .058 (.052)            | .061 (.046)             | .060 (.052)            |
| Young children  | -.036 (.110)            | .163 (.122)            | -.042 (.110)            | .157 (.122)            |
| Timing survey   | -.045 (.127)            | -.210 (.139)           | -.045 (.127)            | -.211 (.139)           |
| Constant  | .005 (.009)             | <b>.028 (.010)**</b>   | .007 (.009)             | <b>.029 (.010)**</b>   |
| LR chi2 (40)  | 3.006 (8.764)           | 5.231 (9.808)          | 1.714 (8.767)           | 4.091 (9.798)          |
| Prob > chi2   | 622.83                  |                        | 611.27                  |                        |
| Cragg-Uhler/Nagelkerke R2   | .000                    |                        | .000                    |                        |
| AIC (empty model)   | .238                    |                        | .234                    |                        |
|   | 1944 (2132)             |                        | 1948 (2132)             |                        |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; \* p <.05. \*\* p <.01. \*\*\* p <.001

intending to go (B = .126; p = .002). Since we have more than one coefficient – because of the multinomial model – we need a Wald test to measure the overall significance of frame alignment. The Wald test returns a value of 16.64 (p < .001), which confirms our expectation: the intention to participate is dependent on frame alignment. When testing the effect of share alignment (Model B), the Wald test returns a value of 5.21 (p = .074), which is only marginally significant. We will come back to this finding in the concluding section.

We confirmed that people who are more aligned are more intending to protest, on top of numerous alternative determinants. But what about the size of this effect? Figure 1 shows a plot of the predicted probabilities for the three different categories of intention to participate on various degrees of frame alignment (while keeping the other predictors at their means), based on Model A of Table 2. It shows that the probability of intending to participate ('yes') clearly increases when someone's frame alignment is higher. Simultaneously, high degrees of frame alignment decrease the probability that someone is 'maybe' or 'not' intending to participate. People who show no sign of frame alignment (a score of 0) have a 34% chance to say 'yes', 39% chance to say 'maybe', and 27% chance to say 'no'. People who display high degrees of frame alignment (a score of 5) have a chance of 50% to say 'yes', of 29% to say 'maybe', and of 21% to say 'no'. Hence, all else being equal, a bit more than 3 out of 10 people who are not aligned intend to protest,



**Figure 1.** Analysis of the predicted probabilities of intention to participate (the grey dotted lines signify 95% confidence intervals).

while half of the people who are highly aligned plan to take action. Furthermore, [Figure 1](#) shows that the predicted probabilities for ‘maybe’ and ‘no’ do not differ a lot. Frame alignment in particular differentiates between people who are certain they want to go, on the one hand, and people who do not want to go or who are not sure yet on the other.

The results of the other variables in [Table 2](#) largely confirm previous research. We find significant positive effects on participation intention for political interest, being asked to participate, active membership, social approval, collective efficacy, individual efficacy, and being male. We do not find support for the influence of collective identity on the intention to participate (in line with [Van Laer, 2017](#)). We also find no proof for policy efficacy to increase the intention to participate.

### **Explaining protest participation**

Next, we test to what extent frame alignment is related to protest participation. [Table 3](#) shows the results of two logistic regressions with participation (0/1) as the dependent variable and with number aligned as the independent variable (share aligned does not significantly affect participation). Model A is run without the variable intention to protest: this variable is included in Model B. Model A shows, when controlling for all other variables, that the number of congruent frames significantly affects protest participation ( $B = .076$ ;  $p = .021$ ). Predicted probabilities indicate that people who share no frames with the SMO have a 28% chance to protest, while this increases to 37% for people who share at least five frames. However, if we control for intention to participate (Model

**Table 3.** Logistic regressions with participation as dependent variable (N = 2,646).

|   | MODEL A                | MODEL B                |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|
| Number aligned                          | <b>.076 (.032)*</b>    | -.010 (.041)           |
| Share aligned                           |                        |                        |
| Intention to participate                |                        | <b>2.472 (.372)***</b> |
| Maybe (ref. = No) Yes                   |                        | <b>5.130 (.367)***</b> |
| Age                                     | -.001 (.004)           | -.006 (.005)           |
| Gender (female)                         | -.049 (.096)           | .118 (.120)            |
| Education                               | <b>.101 (.023)***</b>  | <b>.140 (.028)***</b>  |
| Political interest                      | <b>.202 (.076)**</b>   | .040 (.097)            |
| Left-right placement                    | <b>-.154 (.035)***</b> | -.040 (.043)           |
| Asked to participate                    | <b>1.098 (.107)***</b> | <b>.335 (.136)*</b>    |
| Active membership                       | .053 (.029)            | .024 (.036)            |
| Social approval                         | <b>.242 (.071)**</b>   | .042 (.094)            |
| Policy efficacy                         | .025 (.061)            | .056 (.077)            |
| Collective efficacy                     |                        |                        |
| Small chance (ref. = Very small chance) | -.240 (.148)           | <b>-.404 (.195)*</b>   |
| Average                                 | -.035 (.152)           | <b>-.532 (.198)**</b>  |
| Large                                   | .210 (.199)            | <b>-.518 (.252)*</b>   |
| Very large                              | <b>1.243 (.415)**</b>  | .187 (.486)            |
| Don't know                              | .210 (.214)            | -.219 (.281)           |
| Individual efficacy                     | <b>.161 (.058)**</b>   | .080 (.074)            |
| Collective identity                     | <b>.083 (.042)*</b>    | .075 (.052)            |
| Fulltime employment                     | .078 (.098)            | .059 (.122)            |
| Young children                          | <b>-.272 (.113)*</b>   | <b>-.307 (.143)*</b>   |
| Constant                                | -7.100 (7.724)         | -17.311 (9.727)        |
| LR chi2 (df)                            | 330.88 (19)            | 1324.29 (21)           |
| Prob > chi2                             | .000                   | .000                   |
| Cragg-Uhler/Nagelkerke R2               | .161                   | .541                   |
| AIC (empty model)                       | 3157.034 (3449.919)    | 2167.626 (3449.919)    |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; \* p <.05. \*\* p <.01. \*\*\* p <.001

B), this effect disappears, demonstrating that the effect of frame alignment on participation is fully mediated by the intention to participate. Frame alignment affects whether people *intend* to take to the streets, which in turn affects participation. In fact, in line with previous research, most variables that we test do not produce significant effects at this stage, once we control for intention. Only the level of education, being asked to participate and having young children affect who drops out in the final step of the mobilization process (Model B in Table 3).

### Contribution of frame alignment

We have found that frame alignment directly matters to explain people's intention to participate in protest. But what is the contribution of frame alignment relative to other predictors? First, Pearson correlation tests show that frame alignment is not correlated with the other variables that determine participation intention – we found no correlations higher than .06. This demonstrates that our measure of frame alignment captures something that is not caught by other individual characteristics. Second, we can learn something about the contribution of frame alignment if we compare the Pseudo R2 of the full model *with* frame alignment (Table 2 Model A1) with the same model *without* frame alignment.<sup>7</sup> This shows that the difference in model fit is small: .006. In comparison, the change in Pseudo R2 when we drop collective efficacy is .026 and when we leave out 'being asked' it is .072. However, being asked is by far the strongest variable in the model. The change in model fit when excluding frame alignment is similar to the other variables

that produce significant results – political interest (.005), active membership (.006), social approval (.010), left-right placement (.013), and individual efficacy (.004).

## Concluding discussion

This study empirically engaged with the concept of frame alignment, which enjoys a dominant theoretical position within research on movement participation, but which has not received the empirical testing it merits. Using a unique dataset containing information about protesters and non-protesters both before and after an event took place, we have shown that frame alignment matters for protest participation. Higher degrees of ideational congruence with the staging organizations increase the odds that a person will join a protest. We have also shown *how* and to *what extent* frame alignment matters. First, the results indicate that the effect of an individual's degree of frame alignment on movement participation is fully mediated by the intention to participate. Sharing the organizers' interpretation affects whether people plan to take to the streets but it does not *directly* influence protest participation (when controlling for intention). Contrary to, for instance, being asked by others to participate in an activity, high degrees of frame alignment do not help people to also pass the final barrier towards participation (see Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006 for similar results regarding variables that measure biographical availability). Nevertheless, our analysis suggests that frame alignment meaningfully predicts someone's intention to participate. On top of multiple other explaining factors, people who are highly aligned with SMO frames are 16% points more likely to be willing to participate than people who are not aligned. The explaining power of frame alignment is comparable to variables such as political interest, active membership in various organizations, approval of family and friends to protest, left-right placement, and feelings of individual efficacy. Our study furthermore confirms the importance of being asked by someone to join the action as a predictor for protest participation.

Arguably, this effect size on intention is rather small, perhaps even surprisingly small, given the theoretical importance granted to frame alignment in micromobilization theories. However, the effect size must be interpreted with our study design in mind. An important limitation of this study is that we cannot draw conclusions about the very first stage of the micromobilization process. We contacted people who already passed the first step of the process towards participation – all our respondents already showed support for Heart over Hard – and we were only able to examine the effect of frame alignment during the later mobilization stages. Given our data, the aim of our study was to examine the role of frame alignment *beyond* the first step of the micromobilization process. As such, our results suggest that frame alignment still matters, even among those who already sympathize with the movement. At the same time, while frame alignment matters, it arguably matters not that much. The small effect could therefore be interpreted as an empirical corroboration, though circumstantial, of the theoretical affinity-initiated models of micromobilization, that put the emphasis on consensus during the first step in the micromobilization, and not beyond. Ideally, we would also measure frame alignment amongst individuals who do not (yet) belong to the mobilization potential. We would expect that frame alignment plays an even more important role to determine who *could* be mobilized than it does to predict who *intends* to mobilize. We want to encourage

researchers to dig into the mechanisms that lead to the formation of the mobilization potential since we still know rather little about the early phases of mobilization, not only when it comes to the role of frame alignment.

The limited number of detailed, empirical studies on frame alignment is, as we have addressed in our theoretical section, partly due to the difficulties regarding its operationalization: there is no straightforward way to measure frame alignment. We think we have shown, however, that it is both meaningful and feasible to measure individual degrees of frame alignment in order to examine its effect on participation. We gathered detailed information about frames at the individual and the organizational level and we systematically coded the overlap for each respondent with the SMO frames. We created two frame alignment variables and we found that the absolute number of aligned frames is a better predictor of participation intention than the relative number of congruent frames. Apparently, it is more important to have *a lot* in common with the protest organizers than to have *everything* in common. This means that people who disagree with an SMO on some issues are not less willing to protest if they still share many other beliefs with the organizers.

We have studied the effect of frame alignment for just one demonstration in a specific context. We cannot be sure that we will find the same results for other street demonstrations, let alone for other types of social movement activities in other countries. The extent to which frame alignment plays a role to determine protest participation (intention) can be expected to vary across these contexts. High degrees of ideational congruence with the SMO might get relatively more important compared to other predictors when, for instance, the cost of participation increases, or when the frames of the SMO become more narrow, compared to the broad and comprehensive platform text of our case. Still, we think that the mechanism we found here (the full mediation via intention) can be generalized to other types of protest events in other contexts as well.

The results of this study can be relevant to movements organizing protest events, as we have learned more precisely how frame alignment is important. Even after people have shown interest in a movement, the degree to which they are aligned with the protest organizers matters to explain their willingness to participate. The right framing, hence, is not only key in order to convert bystanders into supporters but also to motivate people who already side with the organization to take action. As such, convincing people of the rightness of the cause and the effectiveness of the movement's solutions for the problem is a continuous challenge.

## Notes

1. Although a closely related concept, McAdam et al. (2013) sees processes of cognitive liberation as occurring logically prior to the frame alignment efforts by SMOs: first comes the realization and social construction of injustice, then comes the (conflictual, contested) definition of the perceived injustice. Note that Snow et al. (1986, p. 466) acknowledge cognitive liberation as a forerunning concept.
2. The concepts of frame alignment (campaigns) and consensus (mobilization) tend to be used synonymously. For an early explicit example, see Klandermans and Oegema (1987, p. 519–520).
3. We subsume frame alignment under Ward's use of 'affinity', given that Ward has a broad kind of ideational affinity in mind. Ward also mentions *ideological* affinity: frames and



ideology are not completely the same, although the two concepts often overlap because articulated ideologies do many of the things that frames do (see Oliver & Johnston, 2000; Johnston, 2014, p. 17).

4. The platform text was produced during an open conference day in December 2015. In total, about 300 sympathizers divided into 10 thematic groups discussed policy ideas with experts. The results of these discussions were used as a basis for the platform text that was published in 2016. There is currently no way for us to test whether respondents who give more frame aligned responses in our survey also participated in the conference. Given that our sample size is 9 times as large as the conference size, the potential issue of endogeneity is not very likely.
5. People who give elaborate answers might score higher on number aligned than people who answer very brief. To make sure that we are not measuring answer length rather than frame alignment, we also calculated the total number of aligned frames by only using the first quasi-sentence a respondent wrote down on each of the four framing questions. The Pearson correlation of this variable with number aligned is very high (.719;  $p < .001$ ), which shows that our measure of frame alignment is not just a proxy for answer length.
6. Multinomial logit models rely on the assumption of independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA). To test the IIA assumption, we performed the Hausman-McFadden test, which provided insignificant results. Hence, the assumption of IIA is not rejected.
7. Note that the Cragg-Uhler/Nagelkerke  $R^2$  indicates the change in terms of log-likelihood compared to the intercept-only model. It does not convey the same information as the R-square for linear regression. Yet, a higher Cragg-Uhler/Nagelkerke  $R^2$  does mean a better fit.

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## Notes on contributor

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*Pauline Ketelaars* is a postdoctoral researcher financed by the FWO (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen). She works at the research unit Media, Movements & Politics (M2P) in the Department of Political Science at the University of Antwerp.

## ORCID

Michiel De Vydt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6259-1411>

Pauline Ketelaars  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9123-2939>

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## Appendix Question wording, coding and descriptive statistics of all variables (N = 2,646)

|                               | Question wording  | Coding   | Mean<br>(St. D.) | Min. | Max. |
|-------------------------------|---|--|------------------|------|------|
| Intention to participate (DV) | Are you planning to take part in The Grand Parade?  | No = 1, Maybe = 2, Yes = 3                           | 2.21 (.80)       | 1    | 3    |
| Participation (DV)            | Did you participate in The Grand Parade held on March 20th in Brussels?   | No = 0, Yes = 1                                      | .36 (.48)        | 0    | 1    |
| Number aligned (IV)           | 1. Consider that you would participate in The Grand Parade, which problem or what situation would you want to denounce this way?  | Total number of congruent quasi-sentences (max. = 5) | 3.03 (1.34)      | 0    | 5    |
| Share aligned (IV)            | 2. Who or what is to blame for this problem or situation according to you?<br>3. What should be done about this?<br>4. Who or what is responsible to solve this?  | Relative number of congruent quasi-sentences         | .52 (.23)        | 0    | 1    |
| Age                           | In what year are you born?  | Recoded to measure age                               | 50 (13.50)       | 19   | 88   |
| Gender                        | Are you ... ? (Male, Female)  | Male = 0, Female = 1                                 | .55 (.50)        | 0    | 1    |
| Education                     | What is the highest educational level that you have obtained? If you are studying, at what level are you studying?  | No education = 1<br>Post university = 11             | 8.12 (2.03)      | 1    | 11   |
| Political interest            | How interested are you in politics?   | Not at all = 1, Not very = 2, Quite = 3, Very = 4    | 3.34 (.64)       | 1    | 4    |
| Left-right placement          | In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?   | Extreme left = 0<br>Extreme right = 10               | 1.98 (1.40)      | 0    | 10   |
| Asked to participate          | Which of the following groups of people have asked you to take part in The Grand Parade? Please check all the categories that are applicable. (No-one, Partner, Family or relatives, Friends, Acquaintances, Colleagues or co-students, Co-members of an organization).   | Asked by no-one = 0<br>Asked by at least one = 1     | .69 (.46)        | 0    | 1    |
| Active membership             | Please indicate whether you were a passive (paying a member fee, reading the magazine, ...) or active (taking part in activities, ...) member of any of the following types of organizations in the past twelve months. (Church or religious organization, Trade union or professional association, Political party, Women's organization, Sports or cultural organization, Environmental organization, Lesbian or gay rights organization, Community or neighborhood association, Charity or welfare organization, Third world, global justice or peace organization, Anti-racist or migrant organization, Human or civil rights organization, Other). | Sum of all active types of membership                | 1.82 (1.57)      | 0    | 10   |

(Continued)

|                     | Question wording  | Coding   | Mean<br>(St. D.) | Min. | Max. |
|---------------------|---|--|------------------|------|------|
| Social approval     | How many of the following sorts of people would approve your participation in The Grand Parade? (Sorts of people: Partner, Family or relatives, Friends, Acquaintances, Colleagues or co-students, Co-members of an organization). (Answer categories: No-one, Some, Most, Everyone, Don't know/Not applicable) | No-one of all groups would approve or none is applicable = 0, At least in one group 'some' would approve = 1, At least in one group 'most' would approve = 2, At least in one group 'everyone' would approve = 3, In all applicable groups 'everyone' approves = 4 | 2.94 (.70)       | 0    | 4    |
| Policy efficacy     | The government is open to the message of the protesters of The Grand Parade.  | Totally disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neither agree nor disagree = 3, Agree = 4, Totally agree = 5   | 1.98 (.77)       | 1    | 5    |
| Collective efficacy | According to you, how large is the chance that The Grand Parade will reach its goal?  | Very small = 1, Small = 2, Average = 3, Large = 4, Very large = 5  | 2.48 (.85)       | 1    | 5    |
| Individual efficacy | I consider myself to be able to contribute to alternatives for the current economic policies.   | Totally disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neither agree nor disagree = 3, Agree = 4, Totally agree = 5   | 3.77 (.84)       | 1    | 5    |
| Collective identity | To what extent do you identify yourself with the people who do not agree with the tough economic policies?  | Not at all = 1, Not very = 2, Somewhat = 3, Quite = 4, Very much = 5   | 4.21 (1.05)      | 1    | 5    |
| Fulltime employment | What is your current working situation?   | Not working fulltime = 0, Working fulltime = 1   | .50 (.50)        | 0    | 1    |
| Young children      | Do you have children? If yes: What is the age of your youngest child?   | No children or only children older than 12 = 0, A child younger than 13 = 1  | .26 (.44)        | 0    | 1    |
| Timing survey 1     |   | Number of days before the demonstration that the survey was completed  | 11.74 (5.35)     | 1    | 17   |