

Political Action, Protest, and the Functioning of Democratic Governance

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Abstract

The current debate on the vitality of affluent democracies often cites the changing patterns of citizens' political participation as signs of this malaise. Fewer citizens are voting, and more are turning toward contentious and more direct forms of participation. What are the consequences? I describe the participation patterns in affluent democracies and then consider whether these changes in citizen participation are linked to the quality of democratic performance. Some scholars see a more assertive public as overloading the political system or destroying collective views of politics. Others see contentious politics as giving citizens an additional and more effective method of influencing policymakers. The evidence on citizen participation comes from two waves of the International Social Survey Program. Measures of the functioning of government come from the Economist Intelligence Unit and the World Bank. The analyses show that a more active public is correlated with a better functioning government. Moreover, these relationships are stronger for protest and other forms of direct action than for voting in national elections. The results suggest that an assertive and elite-challenging public is more of a boon than a curse for democratic politics.

Keywords

protest, voting, political participation, quality of governance, democracy

Many political observers see a dark cloud hanging over contemporary democracies. Political commentators and academic experts opine about the negative effects of the public's decreased trust in government. There are even alarmist claims that support for

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democracy itself is waning (Caplan, 2007; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Mounk, 2018; Przeworski, 2019). In addition, changes in the patterns of citizen participation are often linked to these trends. Some analysts decry the decline in voting turnout and the erosion of civil society activity (Patterson, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2015). At the same time, participation in other forms of direct or assertive participation appears to be increasing (Dalton, 2017; Quaranta, 2016; Vráblíková, 2014).

This essay addresses the question of whether the changing patterns of citizen participation are a boon or a curse for the function of democratic governance. The first premise is that the social and political modernization of affluent democracies over the past several decades has systematically altered the distribution of citizen skills and political norms, which has produced a shift in the patterns of political participation. Traditional electoral politics now competes with an expanding menu of possible political activities. Protest and other forms of contentious action have increased, becoming an extension of conventional politics by other means (Quaranta, 2016). Other types of direct action and online activism have also increased. The result is an expansion of political participation along with a diffusion in the forms of participation (Dalton, 2017; Vráblíková, 2014). In theoretical terms, a more involved public should be beneficial to good governance.

However, the increasing levels of protest—as documented by other articles in this issue—are sometimes cited as a sign of the erosion of the democratic process. Several critics build on the Burkean concept that assertive citizens make excessive and disruptive demands on government, which can overload the democratic system's ability to perform (Crozier et al., 1975; Putnam, 2000; Rucht, 2007; Wolfe, 2006; Zakaria, 2007). Discussions on the current divisions between populist movements, far-right groups, progressives, and centrist establishment groups highlight these concerns. At times, this argument borders on describing protestors as barbarians at the gates of politics, fueled by ideology and political discontent. The end result is to question whether the active, assertive citizens described in the other essays in this collection impede or benefit good democratic governance.

The accuracy of the negative claims about a participatory public—especially in the case of protest activity—lies at the heart of our study. While prior research has described the changing patterns of citizen participation across affluent democracies, the effects of these changes on governance are still under debate. Our goal is to go beyond the discursive approach to consider a central principle of political culture theory: congruence. *Is there a systematic link between citizen participation patterns and the quality of governance across democracies?* The style of participation is an important mechanism for the expression of citizens' voices. Do democratic governments function better if this voice is expressed through voting and other forms of institutionalized political participation or through more assertive and elite-challenging forms of action? Instead of disrupting effective governance, protest might—in the long term—encourage democratic governments to be more effective and representative. This is an important question in a volume focusing on the rise of protest and methods of studying protest.

The evidence on citizen participation primarily comes from two waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Measures of the functioning of

government come from the World Bank (WB) and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). The analyses show that a more active public is correlated with a better-functioning government across affluent democracies. Moreover, these relationships are stronger for protest and other forms of direct action than for voting in national elections. The results suggest that well-functioning democracies enable citizens to participate, even in ways that challenge political authorities. The rule of law, press freedom, and freedom of association expand with democratization, and thus, an assertive public may be another indicator of democratic development.

Changing Patterns of Political Participation

There is a long theoretical literature and more recent empirical literature on the link between citizen participation and aggregate measures of government performance. The connection between a participatory culture and government performance was central in Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's (1963) description of the civic culture and its consequences for effective democracy in Britain and the United States. Robert Putnam's (1993) landmark study of democratic governance across Italian regions provided strong empirical evidence that the level of citizen participation was related to good governance. More recently, Putnam (2000) and Stephen Knack (2002) found that a "social capital" index including political activity was correlated with better governance across the U.S. states as well.

Explicit in this research is the assumption that networks of civic engagement are "an essential component of social capital" that benefits the functioning of democratic governments (Putnam, 1993, p. 173). This builds on Alexis de Tocqueville's (1966) classic observation on the value of civil society in developing strong democratic governance. Citizen participation was seen as essential for a democratic system, although this was often equated with participation in institutionalized forms of action, such as voting and campaign activity.

Missing from much of this literature, however, is an examination of how participation in various modes of action might affect the governing process. Putnam and others place a premium on conventional methods of participation, such as voting, contacting a public official, or participating in voluntary groups. Participation in a protests, boycotts, or other forms of contentious action seems to run counter to the social capital logic. For example, Carles Boix and Daniel Posner (1998) discussed the potential causal mechanisms for social capital to increase good governance, and contentious participation seems at odds with all five of their potential explanations. Putnam (2000) was somewhat skeptical of protest and contentious politics; he claimed that these activities were decreasing and had limited social capital benefits.

Protest activities are also different from conventional methods by their form and their relationship to government. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2006) described such actions as "contentious" because they challenged governments in their methods and often their goals. Inglehart (1990) highlighted the "elite-challenging" nature of protest activities. These contentious elements are what generate questions about the impact of protest on the good functioning of democracies. We use the term

“contentious” or simply “protest” to identify these actions that present specific claims, often reject existing social and political arrangements, and use direct-action methods (Van Deth, 2016).

Consequently, a consistent strand in the literature viewed noninstitutional, elite-challenging, and contentious forms of action as a detriment to good governance (Crozier et al., 1975). Protest activity might not develop the broader feelings of societal trust and reciprocity that are central to the social capital concept. In addition, protest typically intends to challenge the current status quo and circumvent the institutionalized methods of political participation and deliberations, which can further disrupt the governing process. The potential violence of some protests is another antisystem challenge. Thus, some scholars have reservations about interpreting citizen protest in the same positive way as the civic benefits of activity in voluntary associations or conventional political activity (Deutsch et al., 2005; Rucht, 2007).

In contrast, the social movements literature stresses the potential positive consequences of protest activity (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Political protest can be an effective vehicle to hold elected officials accountable, and not just at the time of elections. Protest can directly advocate specific issue positions without the intermediation of other actors. This is especially relevant for interests that are not institutionalized. And by the nature of its methods, protest can be a high-pressure activity in prompting government action. Thus, several scholars argue that an assertive public and protest make a democratic system more accountable and representative of the citizenry (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Morales, 2009; Welzel & Dalton, 2014).

A strength of democracies is the accountability mechanism by which citizen inputs can affect government actions. Otherwise, the problems of principal-agent failures, rent seeking, outright corruption, and so on, doom effective governance in addressing the needs of all. Thus, citizens cannot be passive in such circumstances, and an increased level of citizen participation in elite-challenging activities may improve the functioning of government. More voters is a good thing. More letter writers, petition signers, political contributors, and even contentious protestors may be a good thing for contemporary democracies.

Is Contentious Activity Increasing?

One preliminary question is whether contentious activity is increasing in affluent democracies. The best cross-national evidence on the public’s increasing use of contentious politics comes from a time series begun in 1974 (Barnes & Kaase, 1979). Survey respondents were asked about participation in several forms of contentious action; the World Values Survey (WVS) repeated these questions across multiple waves.¹ These surveys allow us to track the growth in contentious action across eight affluent democracies from 1974-1975 to approximately 2015.²

Figure 1 shows a significant increase in boycotts, lawful demonstrations, and petition signing over this time span averaged across the eight nations combined. In each trend, activity levels roughly double overtime. For example, the share of the public who say they participated in a lawful demonstration rose from 9% in the 1970s to 22%

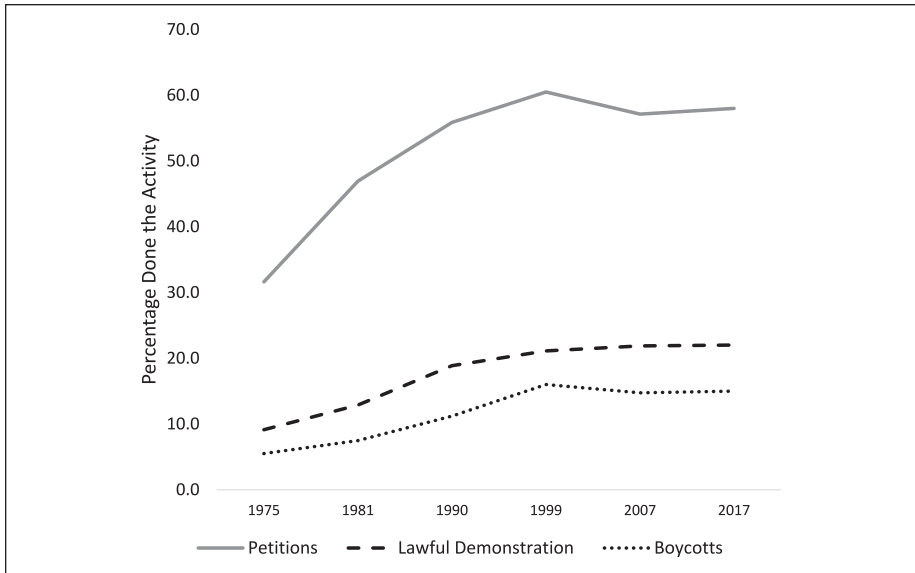


Figure 1. The growth of contentious political action over time.

Note. Entries are the average percentages for the eight nations in the Political Action Survey: Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the United States.

Source. Data sources are the 1974-1975 Political Action Survey; 1981-1983, 1990-1993, 1999-2002 World Values Surveys; 1999-2002 European Values Survey; 2006-2008 World Values Survey for the United States and 2008 European Values Survey for other nations; and 2017-2020 World Values Survey for the United States and European Values Survey for Germany.

in the most recent WVS. The percentage signing a petition rose from 32% to 58%. In each nation, all three examples of contentious participation are higher at the end of the series than at the start (also see Quaranta, 2016). We presume that protest levels would have been even lower if data were available for the 1950s and 1960s, and thus, the increase over time would be greater.³

Given this special issue’s focus on the measurement and correlates of contentious politics, examining the link between protest (and other forms of participation) and the quality of democratic governance highlights a potentially major implication of rising contentious participation. I examine this link only in established democracies where the foundations for democratic discourse are more solid. Contentious politics in these nations aims at reforming the system or shifting policy priorities, rather than regime change. By assembling cross-national data linking citizen participation and governance, we can marshal new evidence on this topic.

The Empirical Resources

Studying the link between citizen participation and good governance requires data at two levels. Microlevel data document the individual-level participation patterns across

nations. Then macrolevel data allow us to connect the participation patterns with the performance of government. This section describes these two resources separately.

Microlevel Data

The first step is to measure the patterns of citizen participation cross-nationally. The ISSP is a cooperative project between independent academic survey projects around the globe. The nations participating in each thematic module are asked a set of questions, which are then compiled into a common data set.⁴ The 2004 and 2014 modules included a battery of political participation questions (see the appendix in the online version of this journal). Besides inquiring about voting in the previous election, the survey was short on campaign activity questions; the closest item is probably formal party membership. Another question asks about contributing to a social or political group, and many contributions may involve parties and elections. There are several questions on contentious action, as well as two questions on contacting a politician or public official. One item asked about joining an internet political forum. The mix of items is not ideal—researchers always like to have more questions—but these items represent all except communal activity (i.e., group activities) from the standard list of participation modes (Verba et al., 1995).

I used principal components analysis with varimax rotation to determine the clustering of items into general modes of participation. After some exploratory analyses, a robust three-dimensional framework emerged in both years (Table 1).⁵ The first dimension taps examples of protest politics—petition signing, boycotting, and demonstrating—as well as the item on donating money for a social or political cause.

The second dimension includes the two examples of contacting a politician/civil servant or the media. In addition, attending a political meeting or rally—distinct from a protest demonstration—is related to this dimension. It is informative that political party membership is the highest loading item on this dimension. Contacting a politician normally involves contacting a partisan figure, and political meetings or rallies are often part of partisan politics. So there is a significant partisan component to contacting.

The third dimension juxtaposes two forms of political action. This dimension is primarily defined by the very high coefficient for voting in the last national election (.90 in 2014 and .82 in 2004). Voting also contrasts with joining an internet political forum, which has a negative coefficient on the same dimension.

These results led to the construction of six indices of political participation:

1. *Voting* is the report of voting in the last national election.
2. *Contributing money* can overlap with campaign activity and is especially relevant to class differences in participation.
3. *Contacting* combines contacts with either politicians or the media.
4. *Protest* includes the contentious actions of petition signing, boycotting, and demonstrating.
5. *Online activity* is participating in an online forum.
6. *The overall participation index* adds all five modes of action into a single measure.

Table 1. Dimensions of Political Activity.

Activity	2004			2014		
	Protest	Contacted politicians	Voting vs. internet forum	Protest	Contact politicians	Voting vs. internet forum
Signed a petition	.72	.07	.19	.74	.08	.13
Boycotted products	.77	.07	.01	.77	.09	.04
Participated in a demonstration	.59	.26	-.12	.63	.30	-.04
Donated/raised money	.52	.28	.01	.56	.30	.08
Attended a political meeting	.37	.66	.04	.40	.66	.05
Member of a political party	-.15	.77	.23	-.18	.76	.23
Contacted politicians	.38	.63	.02	.35	.66	.05
Contacted media	.42	.54	-.24	.38	.61	-.18
Voted in election	.17	.16	.82	.17	.10	.90
Joined internet forum	.34	.47	-.43	.40	.50	-.28
Eigenvalue	2.39	2.25	1.04	2.50	2.28	1.01
Variance explained (%)	23.9	21.5	10.4	25.0	22.8	10.1

Note. Entries are coefficients from principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Pairwise exclusion of missing data. Shaded cells are highest loading items.

Source. Data are from the 2004 and 2014 International Social Survey Program surveys for established democracies.

I constructed six 0.0-1.0 participation indices for the 2004 ISSP established democracies ($N = 18$) and the 2014 ISSP nations ($N = 14$).⁶ These indices provide the participation measures for the first part of the participation-governance linkage.

Table 2 presents the patterns of participation across the affluent democracies surveyed in the 2014 ISSP. In broad terms, these results are consistent with other recent studies of cross-national participation levels.⁷ For example, voting in the last election is the most common form of political action. Self-reports of voting range from 96% in Australia and Belgium, with their compulsory voting laws, to only 69% in the United States and 76% in Switzerland.

Contributing to a social or political cause is also quite common across democratic publics (an average of .46). The level of protest activity is also relatively high across nations, with the French and several Scandinavian nations being the most active; and the Japanese are the least likely to use contentious forms of action (Quaranta, 2016). The

Table 2. Cross-National Participation Patterns, 2014.

	Voting	Contributing money	Contact with politicians	Protest	Internet forum	All five
Australia	.96	.39	.30	.53	.27	.50
Austria	.85	.57	.27	.45	.21	.48
Belgium	.96	.44	.27	.50	.19	.48
Denmark	.95	.56	.29	.53	.26	.52
Finland	.84	.38	.32	.45	.23	.45
France	.90	.43	.20	.55	.16	.45
Germany	.85	.63	.31	.50	.19	.51
Iceland	.92	.45	.29	.57	.29	.51
Japan	.73	.27	.09	.25	.06	.29
Netherlands	.83	.41	.28	.43	.19	.44
Norway	.92	.53	.29	.49	.25	.51
Spain	.85	.39	.24	.47	.20	.43
Sweden	.95	.53	.30	.57	.23	.52
Switzerland	.73	.58	.25	.45	.14	.44
United Kingdom	—	.37	.30	.47	.22	—
United States	.69	.46	.31	.45	.27	.45
All established democracies	.86	.46	.27	.47	.21	.46
ISSP developing democracies	.76	.24	.17	.25	.16	.32

Note. Entries are the mean scores on participation in each area: from “0,” lowest score on activity to “1,” highest score on activity. ISSP = International Social Survey Program.

Source. Data are from the 2014 ISSP for established democracies. The averages at the bottom compare the established democracies listed in the table with the other, developing democracies in the survey.

level of political contacting is more modest, with a substantial cross-national range in this activity. Participating in an online political forum had the lowest level of activity, but this has been rising since the 2004 survey and likely has continued to increase (Dalton, 2017).⁸

There is significant cross-national variation in each of these political activities, which provides the variance for our study of participation effects. The small number of cases limits the statistical analysis options, but this set of nations covers a large share of the established, affluent democracies of Europe, North America, and the Asia/Pacific region.⁹

Macrolevel Data

Several researchers have linked overall participation or social capital measures to the performance of regional governments within a nation, and this research extends this approach to cross-national comparisons using multiple modes of political action. We focus on established democracies so that the basic principles of governance are the same and the potential for citizens to participate is relatively comparable. In contrast, protest activity in less democratic systems may be actively discouraged by the state,

and the protests may often challenge regime values—so we do not imply that our results extend beyond established democracies.¹⁰

The theoretical and empirical measurement of good governance is complex. There is a very large theoretical literature on the possible elements of democracy (Held, 2006). Another large and still growing literature focuses on public satisfaction with the working of the democratic process as a consequence or measure of the function of government (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016; Norris, 1999, 2011; van Ham et al., 2017). Citizens also can differ in their definition of democracy, and implicitly in how democracies should function (Teorell et al., 2007). These subjective measures are important to track, but they are different from our interest in the formal processes of governance.

Our interest in the functioning of government relies on cross-national studies that empirically assess broad governing traits such as *democratic accountability, representation, and administration*. There is no ideal definition and measure on which researchers agree. We utilize two of the most widely cited and used cross-national measures of government performance: the EIU and WB measures of democratic governance. These measures are used extensively in the planning of the WB and other international institutions, as well as by social science researchers.

The EIU (2014) calculates an index of the positive functioning of government.¹¹ The EIU index assesses whether democratically based decisions cannot or are not implemented by the government. The index is based on 14 items that include traits such as legislative rights, checks and balances, freedom from the military or any other entity separate from the democratic government, corruption, public confidence in government institutions, the quality of administration, and the rule of law. Elff and Ziaja (2018) describe this as the horizontal accountability of government. Citizen participation is part of a separate EIU index so that it is differentiated from the functioning of government measure. Our theoretical hypothesis is that if citizen participation does overload democratic governments in a dysfunctional way, then it would have a negative effect on the EIU governance index. The highest scores on the EIU index are for Finland and Sweden; the lowest are for Spain and the United Kingdom.

Because government performance has potentially varied meanings across nations, I cross-validated the EIU measure by comparing it with the WB index of government effectiveness.¹² The WB says that its government effectiveness index captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies. The index combines several dozen variables (ranging from the quality of the bureaucracy to the distribution infrastructure of goods and services) from diverse international sources (Guisan, 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2008). We selected the government effectiveness index because it taps whether government “works,” which is the concern of those who argue that contentious participation overloads the administration of government. As one example of its application, Magalhães (2014) used this measure as a predictor of satisfaction with democracy. The highest effectiveness scores are for Denmark, Finland, and Switzerland; the lowest scores are for Portugal and Spain.

Table 3. Participation Modes and Government Performance.

Political participation	Economist Intelligence Unit Functioning of government	World Bank government effectiveness
Voting	.19	.16
Contributing	.30*	.16
Contacting politician/public servant	.33*	.28
Protest	.24	.25
Internet forum	.09	.03
Four nonvoting modes	.35*	.26
All five modes	.36*	.27

Note. Entries are Pearson's r correlations ($N = 34$).

Source. Data source is the aggregate file from the 2004 and 2014 International Social Survey Program; government performance indicators are from the European Intelligence Unit and World Bank.

* $p < .10$.

There is a very strong correlation between the two government performance indices ($r = .77$). To address causality questions, both performance measures were lagged by 1 or 2 years after the ISSP surveys.

Do Active Citizens Equal Good Government?

Are the levels and forms of citizens' participation related to the performance of their government? Government institutions only exist at the aggregate level, and therefore individual orientations primarily affect institutions by their aggregate configuration. Likewise, "culture" is not an individual attribute but a collective property that represents the *aggregate* of all individuals in a nation. Thus, I calculated each nation's average level of political activity for each of the five modes in Table 2. The key question is whether the aggregate patterns of political activity in a nation are related to governance performance. Prior research suggests a positive relationship for conventional forms of political action (Knack, 2002; Putnam, 1993, 2000), while the impact of contentious action was debated.

Table 3 shows the relationship between each of the participation modes and the two indices of government performance. *Each form of political action is positively related to both government performance indices—all participation positively covaries with good governance.* For example, nations that score near the top of the EIU index—such as Norway, New Zealand, Canada, and Denmark—also have fairly high levels of overall citizen participation (all five modes combined). Conversely, the four lowest levels of participation occur in nations that are below average in the functioning of government. With weaker relationships, the WB index of government effectiveness follows the same pattern.

The strength of these relationships varies across modes, however. Voting turnout displays one of the weakest correlations. This is presumably because elections are infrequent, the range in turnout is limited, and cross-national variations in turnout are

generated by the electoral system and other contextual factors. Central to our interest, the strongest correlations are for citizen-initiative activities that are more policy focused and occur when and how citizens choose. Contacting politicians or public officials and contributing money fit the Tocqueville-Putnam model of direct citizen action through conventional channels. Also, protest activity—signing petitions, taking part in demonstrations, and boycotting—displays almost the same positive relationship. An assertive public—in both conventional and contentious politics—is a part of making democracy work.¹³

Figure 2 illustrates these patterns. The top panel displays the relationship between voting turnout and the EIU governance index across all data points. There is a modest positive, albeit insignificant, correlation between voting turnout rates and the good governance index. The slope shows that each .10 increase in voting turnout increases the governance score by .15 ($b = 1.53$). By comparison, the relationship for the protest index in the second panel is considerably stronger, nearly double the slope for turnout ($b = 2.71$).

Even more striking are the results if we combine all four nonvoting modes of political participation. The third panel of the table shows that overall levels of citizens' nonelectoral participation are a markedly stronger correlate of good governance ($b = 5.27$). It is not just contacting politicians or civil servants, or being active online, or protesting that makes for good governance. The highest levels of good governance are in nations where citizens are active in all of these ways.

Because voting turnout statistics are so accessible for analysis and commentary, and voting is the central participatory act in a democracy, political observers often focus on turnout as a measure of the vibrancy of a democracy (Diamond, 2019; Franklin, 2004). The results of this study suggest that this focus is misplaced. I used a simple, three-variable multivariate model—voting turnout, an index of all four nonvoting items, and the year of the ISSP survey—to predict the EIU governance index.¹⁴ This analysis shows a drop in government performance between 2004 and 2014, probably because of the negative economic and political effects of the Great Recession ($\beta = -.20$). The strongest correlate of government performance is nonelectoral participation ($\beta = .31$), while voting turnout trails far behind ($\beta = .13$).

This is painting on a large canvas with broad, brush strokes. And any empirical measure is imprecise. Measuring general participation patterns from an opinion survey is problematic since a specific event during fieldwork may affect the survey results. The measurement of turnout from opinion surveys also is imprecise because people tend to overestimate their own voting levels. The multi-indicator measure of the functioning of government is also imperfect, which is why I used two alternative measures for comparison. Still the evidence across these two time points and different measures of government performance is consistent.

It would be ideal to extend the research to multiyear, cross-national measures of participation. For example, events-based measures of protest might expand the analyses.¹⁵ A promising approach is the compilation and standardization of participation measures across different survey projects (Jenkins & Kwak, this issue; Slomczynski et al., 2016). Combining separate surveys measuring protest activity may develop a

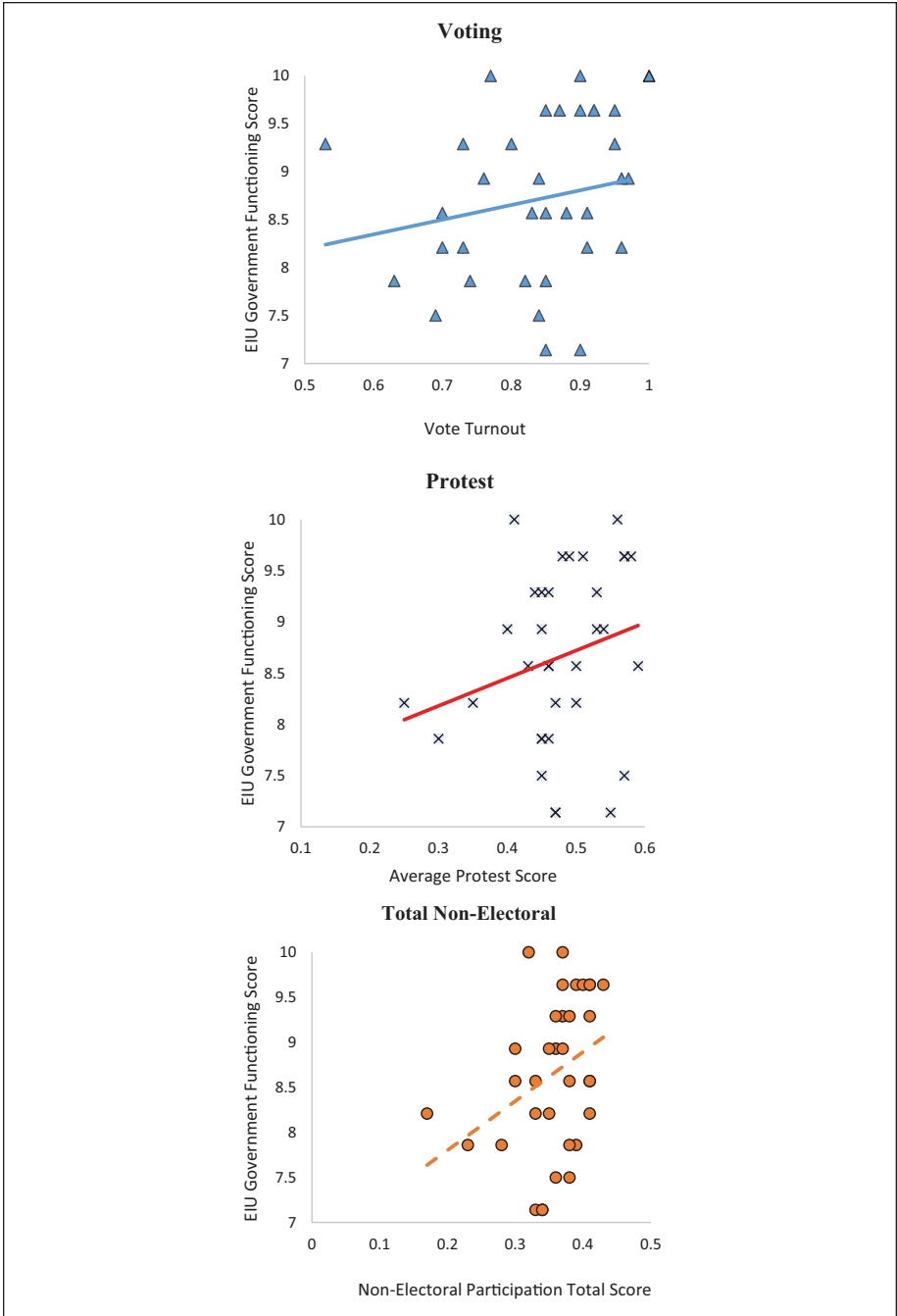


Figure 2. Citizen participation levels and the functioning of government.

time series that could more directly test the causal relationship between contentious politics and the functioning of democratic governments.

In addition, more sophisticated modeling is needed to assert causality. Do good citizens make good governments, or does good government make good citizens? To some extent, *it is likely that both are true*. One presumes that a well-functioning democracy enables a more active public and provides additional opportunities for citizen involvement. This is especially true for contentious actions such as demonstrations. Long, regular time series are needed to address this topic. The data used here are not sufficient to explore this topic, even though the analyses used time-lagged governance measures to lessen the simultaneity problem. So we should treat these results as suggestive, meriting further research.

Still, these analyses reaffirm the argument from Jefferson to Tocqueville to Verba, Scholzman, and Brady. Expanding the public's voice beyond voting is essential to have a fully democratic polity and broadly improves the quality of governance. And despite the repeated concerns about the potentially disruptive and contentious nature of protest activity, high levels of protest in established democracies are a strong correlate of the quality of democratic governance. Far from creating a crisis of democracy, public participation in a wide range of political activities seems to contribute to an effective, functioning democracy.

Good Citizens and Good Government

A long-standing view in political science held that the good democratic citizen was an allegiant supporter of the political system, with only limited involvement in politics, primarily through voting and other conventional activities (Almond & Verba, 1963). As social conditions began to change in the latter 20th century, citizen values followed (Inglehart, 1990, 2018; Welzel, 2015). Public attention to new cultural issues strained existing political alliances, deference to authority decreased, and people sought more control over the decisions affecting their lives (Welzel & Dalton, 2014). The result has been an expansion of political engagement in most established democracies and greater use of direct and contentious forms of action.

Our question was whether these more assertive forms of action weaken democratic governance because of system overload or simply the disruption caused by contentious action. There is no shortage of skeptics who warn against the perils produced by a more active public or even agonize over the limits of the public when it comes to voting (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Brennan, 2016).

This study examined the relationship between the patterns of citizen participation and the functioning of government. An effective and responsive government should be a foundation of the democratic process. The empirical evidence suggests that nations with higher levels of voting turnout have *better-functioning governments*. However, political activities beyond voting are *even more strongly related to better governance*. Democracy does not stop on Election Day, and neither should a democratic public. Thus, a citizenry that is more active in politics is a boon for democratic performance—and contentious political activities follow the same pattern.

Consequently, the Burkean premise of “undisturbed leadership” as a model of representative democracy overlooks the basic challenge of the principal–agent relationship in political representation. To a degree, governance is a customer service function: If the customers (citizens) do not raise their voices to make their demands heard, the service providers will not hear them and thus are not doing their best for the public interest even if well-intentioned. A passive electorate leaves interests unexpressed and unrepresented, and political agents possess too much discretion in their actions. Thus, the empirical evidence suggests that democracies do better when the clientele is assertive.

While this research focused on good governance, we should also recognize that a prime goal of contentious participation is to expand the boundaries of political debate, bringing new issues into public discourse that might not arise in elite-dominated conventional political activity. This is a potential benefit of a contentious public that challenges the status quo and might be considered the *raison d’être* for contentious political action. The goal of an assertive public is not to influence the functioning of government but the *content* of governance.

One caveat is that this study restricted the analyses to established democracies where strong institutions, an active civil society, and embedded democratic norms are in place. Indeed, these are the very contexts where protests can easily expand as a tool of citizen influence (which again raises the question of the causal direction of the observed relationships). Thus, there is an ironic pattern that citizen participation in protest activities is more common in affluent democracies than in developing democracies. Protests in affluent democracies also seek to advance policy goals and represent an extension of conventional forms of participation with new tools. In developing democracies, authorities may seek to repress protests as a threat to the new regime, or representatives of the predemocratic regime may use protest activities to attack the new political order (Sadovskava et al., 2019; Shigetomi & Makino, 2009). Thus, some protests may have an antisystem objective. The existence of such regime differences deserves further attention.

In summary, rising assertive cultures present new challenges for established and developing democracies. A more assertive and contentious public places new political demands on the political process. A more assertive public also generates political tensions and conflict. And citizens may question existing democratic institutions and require reforms to update them to meet contemporary needs.¹⁶ This is often how democracies have expanded the rights of citizens in the past. Eventually, however, a participatory citizenry can move societies closer to realizing democracy’s key inspirational promise: empowering people to make their own decisions and to make their preferences heard and counted in politics.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. More information on the WVS project and access to these surveys can be found on the project website: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>.
2. The eight nations are Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the United States. Figure 1 averages the percentage of those who *have ever done each activity* across the eight nations. Among the 144 data points, in 9 instances, a nation was missing from a WVS survey. In these cases, I interpolated the average between the adjacent time points.
3. One complication of the participation measures is the different wording of possible activity levels. The WVS asked whether the respondent had done the activity in the past, without a time limit. Other surveys ask about participation during 1-, 2-, or 5-year time spans. This might affect the baseline survey, but the common wording probably has only modest effects on the time trend because of counterbalancing effects.
4. More information on the ISSP can be found on its website: www.issp.org. The GESIS archive in Germany provided the survey data (www.gesis.org). I want to thank the participants in the ISSP for collecting these data and sharing them with the international research community.
5. In 2014, the third dimension had an eigenvalue of .998, so I constrained the analysis to extract a third dimension.
6. Each item was coded so that the full variance of the responses was used. The responses ranged from .0 = *Have not done and would never do*, to .33 = *Have not done but might do*, to .66 = *Have done in the distant past*, to 1.0 = *Have done in the past year*. When the items were combined in an additive index, the total was divided by the number of questions, so all the indices also range from 0 to 1. (See the online appendix for the question wordings.)
7. Kateřina Vrábliková (2014) studied nonelectoral participation cross-nationally and the factors that affect national participation levels; Mario Quaranta (2016) and Dalton (2017) used the WVS to describe and predict cross-national levels of protest activity.
8. This essay focuses on the set of affluent, established democracies in the 2004 and 2014 ISSP surveys. It is worth noting that the overall levels of political activity in the developing democracies in the ISSP are substantially lower. The last rows of the table show that aside from voting turnout, most other forms of political activity are about twice as common in the established democracies as in the developing democracies.
9. The 2004 ISSP included data from Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
10. Prior research does suggest that broad indicators of democratization are positively related to protest activity levels (Quaranta, 2016; Dalton et al. 2010).
11. EIU (www.eiu.com). The index theoretically ranges from 0.0 to 10.0.
12. WB, world governance indicators (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi>). The index theoretically ranges from 0 to 100. Compared with the EIU index, the WB index shows less variation across the established democracies.
13. I attempted to replicate these analyses using the events data from the World Handbook IV project, with annual average and total protest activity figures between 2000 and 2004 (the Protest summary). There is essentially no relationship between the protest estimates from

the ISSP and the World Handbook ($r = .003$) for the 18 nations in the 2004 ISSP. I think this is because a simple counting of events is an imperfect indicator of the participation levels of the general public when the results are constrained to established democracies. (Also see Kriesi et al., this issue.).

14. The results are as follows:

	b	β
Voting turnout	1.06	.13
Nonelectoral participation	4.65	.31
2004-2014	-.33	-.20
Constant	6.32	
Multiple $R = .40$		

15. However, there are questions of the breadth of participation versus repeated activity by small intense minorities. My exploratory analyses found that national-level survey-based and events-based protest measures are not strongly correlated, so I did not explore the events-based measures (Also, see Kriesi et al., this issue).
16. See the discussion of institutional changes that have already occurred in Smith (2009).

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