Collective Mobilization and Dynamic Representation

From Citizens to Policy and Back Again

by

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Abstract

The question of whether collective mobilization makes a difference in policy is a puzzling one for social scientists, but also for citizens and activists. This dissertation focuses on the dynamics between collective mobilization and its consequences. On the one hand, it investigates whether mobilization influences policy outputs and agendas, and what role contextual factors such as public opinion and elite support play in this relationship. On the other hand, it inquires into reverse causality asking whether policy change affects mobilization in turn. The theoretical and empirical chapters in this dissertation approach this dynamic phenomenon from different angles.

Chapter 2 develops the conceptualization and measurement of collective mobilization as public claim making, and introduces the machine-coded protest event data (GDELT) used in the subsequent empirical analyses. Chapter 3 introduces a comprehensive typology of the consequences of mobilization, trying to put distinctions into a common framework. This typology is used for specifying the scope of the empirical analyses which are focused on analysing two specific types of consequences of mobilization: policy outputs and policy agendas. Next to that, this chapter also proposes a new dynamic model of representation, bringing together the impact of public claim making, public opinion, and elite support on policy outputs and agendas.

Within two issue areas, the environment and education, the dynamic model of representation was empirically tested using a large scale sample of 26 EU countries across a large time span (2002-2013). Chapter 4 looks into the effects of public claim making and its interactions with contextual factors on policy outputs in the form of public expenditure, while Chapter 5 focuses on consequences on policy agendas measured in two ways: governmental events in the media, and legislative activities. The results of both chapters suggest that mobilization does matter for policy. Large-scale increases in mobilization for issues generally correspond to large-scale shifts in policy outputs and agendas addressing those
issues. Nevertheless, this is not a simple process. Collective mobilization interacts with both public opinion and elite support for issues in opposite ways. While public opinion support appears to be a catalyser of this impact, elite support seems to reduce collective mobilization’s effects.

Extending the empirical findings, Chapter 6 illuminates the differences in protest events and the wider array of public claim making events. It shows that while the difference between using a wider range of public claims compared to just protest events is not always critical, for issue areas where protest events are few, using only such events can underestimate the influence of mobilization on policy outputs.

Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on reverse causality in the relationship between mobilization and policy outputs. The effects of policy change and public opinion on intentions to engage in protest participation are analysed using experimental survey data. The results indicate that an unsupportive public opinion decreases mobilization, while policy change has a thermostatic effect as increased benefits lead to decreased mobilization intentions.
# Table of Contents

Copyright ii

Acknowledgments iii

Abstract v

List of Tables x

List of Figures xii

1 Introduction - An Agenda for Studying Collective Mobilization Consequences

1.1 From Mobilization to Policy and Back Again 1
1.2 Research Agenda 6
1.3 Scope Conditions and Case Selection 8
1.4 Plan of the Dissertation 10

2 Collective Mobilization as Public Claim Making

2.1 Introduction 12
2.2 Using Protest Event Analysis for Measuring Collective Mobilization 13
2.3 The Unit of Analysis: Collective Mobilization as Public Claim Making 17
2.4 Using the GDELT for Measuring Public Claim Making 21

3 Consequences and Context

3.1 Introduction 30
3.2 Conceptualizing Consequences 31
3.3 Placing Movements Consequences into the Larger Context 36
  3.3.1 Collective Mobilization and Context 36
  3.3.2 The Resource Mobilization Approach and the Information Model 38
6.3 Do Protest Events Matter for Policy Outputs? 106
6.4 Discussion 109

7 The Participation Consequences of Policy Change - A Vignette Experiment 111
7.1 Introduction and State of the Art 111
7.2 Hypotheses 115
7.3 Experimental Design 118
  7.3.1 Vignette Studies 118
  7.3.2 Experimental Design 118
7.4 Data and Methods 120
  7.4.1 The Data 120
  7.4.2 Methodology 124
7.5 Results 128
  7.5.1 Manipulation Checks 128
  7.5.2 Overall MANOVA Results 128
  7.5.3 The Effect of Issue Area 130
  7.5.4 The Effect of Policy Change 132
  7.5.5 The Effect of Public Opinion 137
7.6 Discussion 137

8 Conclusions - Wrapping-up a Dynamic Phenomenon 141
8.1 Contributions to the Research Agenda 141
8.2 Summary of Findings 144
8.3 Limitations and Future Studies 149
8.4 Final remarks 151

A Appendix Chapter 4 154
B Appendix Chapter 5 166
C Appendix Chapter 6 171
D Appendix Chapter 7 184
Bibliography 185
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Types of Challenges (adapted from Snow and Soule 2010)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Event Categories Included in the GDELT</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Public Claim Making - Conceptualization, Characteristics, Measurement</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Indicators and Data Sources</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics - Environmental Issue Area</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Effects on Public Expenditure for the Environment</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics - Education Issue Area</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Effects on Public Expenditure for Education</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics - Governmental Events</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Effects on Governmental Events</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>CAP Countries and Legislative Activities</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>General Descriptive Statistics of Legislative Activities</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Effects on Monthly Legislative Activities in the Environmental Issue Area</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Effects on Monthly Legislative Activities in the Education Issue Area</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Protest Events - Environment</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics of Protest Events - Education</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Effects of Protest on Public Expenditure</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Vignette Manipulations</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Country Distribution of Subjects</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Characteristics of Subjects I</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Characteristics of Subjects II</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Manipulation Assignment</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Manipulation Checks</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>MANOVA results</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>The Effects of Issue Area</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.9 The Effects of Policy Change .............................................. 134
7.10 The Effects of Demonstrating Before ................................. 134
7.11 The Effects of Public Opinion .......................................... 134

8.1 Summary of Effects over Outputs and Agendas ....................... 145

A.1 Fixed Effects on Environmental Expenditure - 1 ..................... 158
A.2 Fixed Effects on Environmental Expenditure - 2 ..................... 159
A.3 Fixed Effects on Education Expenditure - 1 .......................... 160
A.4 Fixed Effects on Education Expenditure - 2 .......................... 161
A.5 PCM and Elite Support .................................................... 165
A.6 Popularity of Environment and Education in Smaller Parties (<25% of seats)165

B.1 Fixed Effects on Governmental Events - 1 .......................... 167
B.2 Fixed Effects on Governmental Events - 2 .......................... 168
B.3 Fixed Effects on Monthly Legislative Activities in the Environmental Issue Area ....................................................... 169
B.4 Fixed Effects on Monthly Legislative Activities in the Education Issue Area ............................ 170

C.1 Fixed Effects on Public Expenditure - Protest - 1 .................... 178
C.2 Fixed Effects on Public Expenditure - Protest - 2 .................... 179
C.3 Fixed Effects on Public Expenditure - Protest - 3 .................... 180
C.4 Fixed Effects on Governmental Events - Protest - 1 ............... 181
C.5 Fixed Effects on Governmental Events - Protest - 2 ............... 182
C.6 Fixed Effects on Governmental Events - Protest - 3 ............... 183

D.1 MANOVA Results Including Speed .................................... 184
List of Figures

2.1 Social Movements, Street Demonstrations, and Public Claim Making Events 18
3.1 Typological Tree of Movements Consequences . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 33
3.2 A New Model of Dynamic Representation . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 51
4.1 Trends in the Environmental Issue Area in Spain, Slovakia, and Belgium 65
4.2 Trends in the Education Issue Area in Finland, Slovakia, and Hungary 72
6.1 Protests vs. Public Claim Making - Environment . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 100
6.2 Correlations between Protests and Public Claim Making - Environment 102
6.3 Protests vs. Public Claim Making - Education . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 104
6.4 Correlations between Protests and Public Claim Making - Education 105
7.1 Histograms of the Dependent Variables . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 127
7.2 The Effects of Issue Area . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 131
7.3 The Effects of Policy Change . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 135
7.4 The Effects of Demonstrating Before . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 136
7.5 The Effects of Public Opinion . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 138
A.1 Trends in Public Claim Making and Environmental Expenditure - 1 155
A.2 Trends in Public Claim Making and Environmental Expenditure - 2 156
A.3 Trends in Public Claim Making and Environmental Expenditure - 3 157
A.4 Trends in Public Claim Making and Education Expenditure - 1 162
A.5 Trends in Public Claim Making and Education Expenditure - 2 163
A.6 Trends in Public Claim Making and Education Expenditure - 3 164
C.1 Trends in Protest Events and Environmental Expenditure - 1 172
C.2 Trends in Protest Events and Environmental Expenditure - 2 173
C.3 Trends in Protest Events and Environmental Expenditure - 3 174
C.4 Trends in Protest Events and Education Expenditure - 1 175