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Marching and voting: The electoral protest cycle

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ABSTRACT

Social movements studies have analyzed how the protest affects the electoral agenda and the outcome of elections. Here, we reverse this approach and analyze whether the electoral cycle affects the protest. With the aid of a new dataset that contains all the demonstrations and marches in Spain from 2000 to 2020 ($N = 2{,}255$), we test whether the size of the protest is influenced by the proximity of general elections. As elections offer social movements a political opportunity to air their grievances and make their demands visible to political contenders and the public, we test an electoral protest cycle hypothesis whereby the number of participants in protest events will increase as election day draws nearer. Our results confirm the existence of an electoral protest cycle, even after controlling for potential confounders such as the type of organizers, the claims of the protest, the ideology of the government, and city size.

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1. Introduction

Research on the factors affecting the size of demonstrations is almost non-existent (Somma & Medel, 2019) and no systematic attempt has been made to explain why some protests are more numerous than others (Biggs, 2018). Thus, the determinants of protest size (the number of protesters) have been rarely analyzed, with notable exceptions such as Eisinger (1973), who explained the rate of participation in black riots through the openness of the political structure of the cities where they occurred, and Zhang (2016) and Kurrild-Klitgaard (2013), who attributed increases in protest turnout to good weather. Protest frequency (the number of protest events) has been more often studied but elusively related to the existence of political opportunities, resourceful organizations, and non-confrontational tactics (Disi, 2020; Price, 2019). All in all, empirical studies are largely absent on this topic.

Protest frequency is certainly relevant: It has mattered in countries such as the U.S., where it impacted Senate votes, Congress passed bills, state-level legislation, and hearings (McAdam & Tarrow, 2012), and Belgium, whose effects on agenda-setting have been documented (Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2012). However, protest size may matter even more as large numbers have an impact on decision-makers and protest frequency does not capture this effect (Biggs, 2018). Political representatives are responsive to turnout in protest events as they reveal private information about people's preferences and provide cues about public opinion (Lohmann, 1993; Burstein & Linton, 2002). The number and unity of protesters seem to be the most persuasive cues affecting elected officials' beliefs (Wouters & Walgrave, 2017). Marches with a high attendance that contain heterogeneous constituencies might endanger the re-election chances of incumbents (Walgrave & Verhulst, 2009). Large civil rights demonstrations in the U.S. in the 60s were followed by some change in racial policies (Terchek, 1974), and, in Chile, larger demonstrations displayed universalistic demands that targeted the national

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government and mobilized cohesive groups with broad public support (Somma & Medel, 2019). In those polities where a coup is a possibility, elites are influenced by protest turnout and overreact to it (Casper & Tyson, 2014). Further, protests have become so common in democracy that should social movement organizations (SMOs) want to have some sort of political impact, "they need to go for big numbers, not for a proliferation of many small events" (Walgrave & Vliegenthart, 2012, p. 151) that will pass unnoticed. Large protests inevitably receive media coverage (Oliver & Maney, 2000) and have an enduring impact on media agendas (Jennings & Saunders, 2019). Finally, size and frequency are not necessarily connected: In the U.S., the correlation between the number of participants and the number of protests is low, the bulk of participation comes from a few large events (Biggs, 2018), and the size of protest events has grown at the expense of the number of them (Soule & Earl, 2005).

To contribute to fill the gap about why some protests are more numerous than others, we offer new insights into one of the factors that may affect protest size: elections. We put forward an electoral protest cycle hypothesis: Social movements increase their mobilization before elections because they seize on the political opportunity opened by the competition for votes to make their claims visible to political contenders and the public. Thus, the closer the election day, the larger the number of protesters should be. This is consistent with both the "efficiency principle," whereby social movements intensify their mobilizing efforts to further their interests when they believe they can have the largest influence (Meyer, 1993), and the fact that elections attract domestic and international media attention (Trejo, 2014).

Both sociology and political science have failed to link electoral politics with the protest, and empirical analyzes that connect elections with movements' mobilization have been rare (Madestam et al., 2013; McAdam & Tarrow, 2010). This dearth is more noticeable when the focus is on the pre-election phase (Blee & Currier, 2006) and the intensity of mobilization. How the protest influences elections has been the topic of mostly U.S.-based studies, but their results have been so far inconclusive. To our knowledge, no study has however measured whether the proximity of elections augments the intensity of the protest.

To establish whether there is an empirical rapport between elections and the protest, we employ a comprehensive dataset that covers 20 years of social mobilization in Spain and 2,255 protest events in which demonstrations or marches were used. We focus on these repertoires because they allow social movements to show their strength through the display of high numbers in the public space, unlike other tactics such as vigils or sit-ins. Spain is a parliamentary democracy in which the protest is normalized and frequent (Jiménez, 2011) and electoral results have never been disputed. Our focus is on national elections, or concurrent elections to the lower and upper houses (Congress and Senate), that are held on a regular basis (every four years unless they are called earlier).[1]

This article is organized as follows. First, we review the little studied topic of the relationship between electoral politics and the social protest. After that, we introduce our key hypothesis and discuss potential confounders that ought to be controlled for. Then, we present the dataset and test our hypotheses. Finally, the results are shown, and we close with a discussion and some concluding remarks.

2. The neglect of electoral dynamics in social movements studies

Social movements studies have failed to analyze elections as an important catalyst of movement activity (Tarrow, 2012). This can be explained by two reasons: Elections were at first too narrowly conceived as an instrument to increase the access of previously excluded groups to the political system (Tarrow, 1994), and later taken for granted in democratic politics.

[1]Four cycles of mobilization over 2000–17 have been unveiled: massive rallies against the Iraq war and ETA terrorism, and the decline of anti-globalization protests during 2000–4; an intermediate period until 2008 in which labour unrest grew and students' and conservative groups mobilization stood out; anti-austerity demonstrations and the 15-M movement until 2015, and a new cycle from 2016 in which pro-Catalan independence and feminist groups prevailed (Romanos & Sádaba, 2022).

Even though social movements swing between institutional and non-institutional politics, scholars have not properly addressed electoral processes. Kitschelt (1986) affirmed that U.S. antinuclear activists tried to influence elections but made only a passing reference to some state-level referendums in 1976. Kriesi (2004) glossed over elections in his handbook chapter "Political Context and Opportunity." Similarly, Meyer (2002) overlooked electoral studies altogether when he advocated the adoption of a variety of disciplinary insights in social movements studies. As a result, few scholars have related elections to the protest and almost no empirical work has quantified the causal effects of the former upon the latter (Madestam et al., 2013). Despite this void, the benefits of focusing on elections are undeniable because protest research should move toward a more explicit specification of political variables (Meyer, 2004). As compared to the context oriented and ever-growing list of political opportunity variables, elections are an essential element of routine democratic politics and most social movements are bound to pay attention to them. Scholars of social movements and mass politics need therefore to "become sensitive to the circumstances of mobilization" (Price, 2019, p. 422). The proximity of elections might be one of these circumstances.

2.1. Electoral politics and the protest in the United States

Recently, Kriesi (2016) has expressed concern about the compartmentalization between elections and movements. McAdam and Tarrow (2010) have also wondered why two cognate literatures—social movements and electoral studies—have evolved separately. The exception might be the U.S., the country that these two authors (2010, 2012) have in mind when discussing the five ways in which social movements and elections are connected.

First, the electoral option, or how the movements may devote their resources to endorsing candidates in elections. Some examples are the Townsend movement, which contributed to the election of politicians favourable to social security programmes during 1930–40s (Amenta et al., 1992); Martin Luther King's father's claim that he had "a suitcase full of votes for" John F. Kennedy during the 1960 presidential election; and how the civil rights movement increased the number of Blacks running for office as well as the number of those who became elected (Andrews, 1997). Recently, the youth movements contributed to Obama's 2008 presidential campaign (Michaelsen, 2015), and the Tea Party facilitated the growth in Republican votes in the 2010 midterm elections (Madestam et al., 2013). Also, Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's murder might have eased the victory of Biden in the 2020 presidential election (Teeselink & Melios, 2021).

Second, proactive electoral mobilization, or how the movements mobilize when they perceive elections as a threat or opportunity to their interests, help explain why protesters try to influence agenda-setting and public opinion during the electoral process (Teeselink & Melios, 2021). Third, reactive electoral mobilization, or how the protest may increase after a disputed electoral outcome, is mostly related to the so-called election corruption movements that have denounced electoral fraud in non-democratic countries. Occasionally, the electoral malaise also affects democracies: the recount dispute in Florida in the 2000 presidential election (Bush vs Gore), whose outcome prompted protests in more than 100 communities across the country, and the 2020 turmoil, when Trump encouraged his supporters to oppose the ratification of the presidential electoral outcome at the Capitol, are examples of this. Even if the outcome is not disputed, movements usually react to the post-electoral phase: Farm worker movements intensified their protests during Eisenhower's presidency (Jenkins & Perrow, 1977), and Reagan's election in 1980 led to a growth of coalitions between feminist and peace organizations (Meyer & Whittier, 1994) and increased the activity of poor and homeless groups (Imig, 1998).

Fourth, movement-induced party polarization, or how the tension between uncompromising activists and moderate candidates produces polarization, is visible in many different countries. Some examples are the uneasy relationship between the Christian right and the Republican Party in the 1994 elections (Green et al., 2001), and the fluctuating interactions during the 2010 electoral cycle between Republicans and the Tea Party movement, which shifted from outright mutual hostility to

coordination strategies (Karpowitz et al., 2011). Fifth, the connection between long-lasting political regimes and the subsequent fate of social movements sectors, which has translated into three stable electoral regimes in U.S. politics: The Republican (1900–32), Democratic (1932–68), and Republican regimes (1968–2008) have been flanked by like-minded movements as proven by the affinity between Democratic administrations and the ensuing mobilization of labour-oriented, civil rights, and leftist movements, and Republican administrations and conservative pro-life, Christian right and militia movements.

Out of the different ways in which elections and the protest are connected, only proactive electoral mobilization touches upon our research objective. Heaney (2013), who has surveyed how the polls relate to the protest, does not shed much light either on the impact of elections on the intensity of social mobilization. If any, he refers to the timing of elections as an element that may alter the opportunity structure of the movements but does not elaborate on this.

3. Hypothesis: The electoral protest cycle

The aim of our research is to determine whether the social protest is responsive to electoral dynamics, or to test if the proximity of elections augments the size of the protest. To our knowledge, only a few studies have marginally connected the intensity of the protest to elections: In France, parties promoted protest activities during elections, but this did not occur in Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain (Hutter, 2014), whereas coalitions of socio-political actors in Mexico produced cycles of contention before and after elections (Trejo, 2014).

We argue that the logic of the elections-protest relationship is akin to that of the electoral business cycle hypothesis, which posits that governments are opportunistic because they promote expansionary policies during election time to increase the odds of re-election. Similarly, social movements are opportunistic, even if activists are not aware of their opportunism (Meyer, 2003), as they increase their mobilizing efforts during elections to gain visibility and leverage.[2]

As early as 1960, the Michigan School established the importance of time in elections: At the end of the so-called funnel of causality were the factors that, by being closest to election day, were meant to have the strongest influence in the final vote choice. Timing is also important because numerous studies have shown that voters have a short-term memory and are affected by events that, occurring within days before casting their ballots, generate emotions such as enthusiasm or anger (Civettini & Redlawsk, 2009). Not only voters but especially parties, both in government and opposition, are affected by such events, social protests being a good example of them. Elections thus become a political opportunity for social movements, who may use them to visualize their claims, show their muscle to the contending parties, and bag electoral promises that may be costly to break. How best to do that? By intensifying their mobilizing efforts as election day gets closer because they "rationally seek the most direct lines of influence they believe possible" (Meyer, 2003, p. 39).

A way of intensifying these efforts is by promoting attendance but doing so requires finite resources. Social movements will then have a stronger incentive to bolster turnout the closer the next election is. This first strategic mechanism leads to our key hypothesis: The turnout per protest will increase as election day draws nearer.

As long as the number of protests (frequency) does not fall, the total number of protesters (size) will be also larger. As protesting is not cost-free, social movements have a rational incentive to strategically choose the timing of the protests, scaling their efforts down when the next election is still distant, and bolstering them up when it is approaching, thereby creating an "electoral protest cycle." This second mechanism leads to expect that the number of protests will increase as election day draws nearer (insofar the turnout per protest does not fall, the total number of protesters will be also larger). However, since larger protests bear more weight on political representatives especially before elections,

[2]Save for the study by Lehman-Wilzig and Ungar (1985), who attributed the decline in protest in Israel to the dampening of inflation by the government before elections, the electoral business cycle literature has not considered social mobilization.

it is in this period when social movements have a stronger incentive to switch from staging multiple, smaller-scale protests across the country to fewer, larger-scale protests in a limited number of locations. This third strategic mechanism runs counter to the second one, as it leads to expect that the number of protests will decrease but their average turnout will increase as election day draws nearer (the effect on the total number of protesters being unclear).

The core of our research is devoted to the first strategic mechanism: the turnout per protest. Although we are not concerned with protest frequency itself, descriptive information on the time distribution of the number of protests is provided as it will allow us to better understand the links between elections and the protest.

3.1. Controls for potentially confounding factors

We also control for a series of other factors, different from our key independent variable, that may affect the numerosity of a protest. The idea is to verify whether the expected effect of the electoral cycle on the number of protesters still holds even after a broad set of potential confounders is contemplated. The most obvious controls for studies on protest frequency that use time periods (months, weeks ...) as the unit of analysis are factors that vary along time, such as the popularity of the government. In contrast, we focus our attention on protest turnout, so our unit of analysis is the protest event in each location, and the most obvious controls are the characteristics of these events. Further, these aspects of the protest, about which our database has extensive information, have not been resolved yet (Blee & Currier, 2006).

To begin with, we consider the impact of three features related to the *organizers of the protest* on social mobilization. The first one is the diversity of the organizers: Protests may be organized by political parties, unions, professional associations, or student organizations, to name just a few, or by several of these types of organizations. Protests organized by a heterogeneous and diverse pool of organizers, which usually create ad hoc umbrella organizations for this purpose, might have a higher convening power (Phillips, 1991).

The resources and the political restraint of the organizers are also considered. In a similar vein to the resource mobilization theory, which anticipates that well-endowed SMOs with various resources (leadership, money, political allies ...) are bound to have successful political outcomes, we expect that protest events that are organized by resourceful actors will be larger. Following Lohmann (1993), protest events will be more numerous when the organizers are moderate, as potential participants will perceive that the costs associated with the mobilization are lower. Compared to other promoters of the protest, most political parties are both resourceful and moderate. Indeed, several studies point to a positive effect of political parties' involvement in the numerical success of social protests: French parties promote large protest activities during elections (Hutter, 2014); in Mexico, socio-political coalitions have generated contentious politics before and after elections (Trejo, 2014) and the number of protest events is connected to keystone organizations such as leftist parties and indigenous organizations (Price, 2019); and student protests during the 2000s were larger in Latin America when they were supported by parties (Disi, 2020).

Unions may as well be considered resourceful and relatively moderate actors. Also, unions have started to join forces with various social movements in many places so that their role in mobilizing people in contentious politics cannot be dismissed (Carroll & Ratner, 1995; Diani, 2019). This is also true for Spain, where unions have regularly managed to take large numbers to the streets (Romanos & Sádaba, 2022).

Next, we control for the impact of *the diversity and type of claims*. Many protests exhibit multiple claims, or are multi-issue, to attract a broader audience (Wang & Soule, 2016). Following Lowi's (1972) typology of policies, we have classified claims into four different categories: regulatory, which ask for the regulation of certain types of behaviour (e.g., the legalization of abortion); distributive, which aim to extend goods and services to specific constituencies (e.g., battered women's shelters); redistributive, which are connected with the welfare state (e.g., the extension of pension benefits); and constituent, which set the rules that distribute power and jurisdiction within government policies. Also, foreign policy

decisions pertain to this category since they may alter the geopolitical status of the country. The focus is on the last one because of the salience of territorial issues (the secessionist challenge) in Spanish politics. Secessionism is a good example as well of a displacement-goal as it includes the elimination or replacement of the antagonist (Gamson, 1975), or the substitution of the actual political elite by a new one in the newly created state. As this sort of claims is difficult to tackle politically by conventional means, it opens the room for "street politics" and usually gathers high numbers in a few locations.

Later, we control for the impact of the *ideology of the government* on social mobilization. As Byrne (1997) has noted, social movement supporters lean towards the left of the political spectrum, and left-wing ideologues are among the people who are more likely to protest (Price, 2019). Also, in pluralist systems of interest intermediation where unions are divided along ideological lines, unions are more bound to show their muscle under conservative governments, as shown for instance by the 2012 general strike against the labour reform in Spain and the Enough is Enough campaign in Britain in 2020. Thus, the more numerous left-oriented social movements should increase their mobilizing efforts in the presence of right-wing governments.

Finally, we control for the impact of *city size* on social mobilization. City size should matter because, everything else constant, larger locations provide a larger pool of potential demonstrators. In fact, urban dwelling has been linked to a higher propensity to protest, even in authoritarian countries (Ong & Han, 2019). Given that they are not the focus of our research, we have not advanced formal hypotheses for the control factors although we clearly have conjectures (for instance, we anticipate the number of protesters to be larger when the protest advocates constituent demands). Table A1 in the online appendix lists our expectations for each control.

4. Data on social protest in Spain from January 2000 to December 2020

Since the 80s the protest has undergone a process of normalization in Spain. Comparatively speaking, Spain exhibits one of the highest participatory rates in demonstrations in the global North and survey data point to an increase in the number of both protests and participants. There are more women and middle-aged groups amongst the protesters. Further, people without higher education, uninterested in politics, not affiliated to any association and who do not dwell in big cities are increasingly taking to the streets (Jiménez, 2011).

Even though protesting is not entirely cost-free, the policing style in Spain conforms to a model of negotiated management (Blay, 2013), soft repression (Martín García, 2014), or bureau-repression, whereby noncriminal legislation is applied for the regulation of the use of public space. Thus, administrative fines with a clear dissuasive effect might be imposed on protesters but police or penal interventions are rare (Maroto et al., 2019).[3] To test our hypotheses, we employ a dataset (DISDEM-ECOPOL, 2022) which gathers information on all the protest events in Spain from January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2020. For each protest event, information has been retrieved on the date, duration, and location of the protest, the type and number of participants, the repertoires, claims, organizers, allies, and targets of the protest, among many other variables. Our dataset is arguably the most complete in Spain so far. Although there are other excellent datasets on social protest in the country, they do not cover such a long period (Carvalho, 2022; Portos, 2016) or focus on a single social movement (Fillieule & Jiménez, 2003). Notice that counting with information on a long span of time is rare in social movements studies (Blee & Currier, 2006), but central to test our key hypothesis on the effect of the electoral cycle.

[3]A comparison of the police reforms during the transition to democracy in Spain and Portugal shows that the Spanish police experienced a faster and deeper reform than the Portuguese (Palacios, 2010). Repression has probably no effect on the universe of protests and hence on our argument. Although 32% of the marches and demonstrations were reported as illegal, hard repression is seldom used: 90.6 of all marches and demonstrations proceeded without any type of casualty. Even such exceptional cases as the consultation on the Catalan independence, October 1st, 2017, or the general strike, May 29th, 2012, that exhibited many detainees or wounded, have not precluded further protests by secessionists or unions.

The dataset uses protest event analysis (for a detailed discussion of its pros and cons, see Hutter, 2014): the top two newspapers by circulation in the country, centre-left El País and centre-right El Mundo, have been daily analyzed by a team of four specially trained coders. The unit of observation of the original dataset is the protest event, which may take place in several locations. We have reshaped the dataset so that the unit of observation is the protest in a location. Moreover, given that the numerical success of the protest is bound to depend heavily on the repertoire (i.e., the number of protesters is unlikely to be the same in rallies and hunger strikes), we work only with demonstrations and marches, the core element of the protest repertoire in Southern Europe (Kriesi, 2016). Our restricted dataset has 2,255 observations, of which 2,039 have information on all the variables employed in our analyses.

4.1. Operationalization of the size of the protest and the time to election day

Unlike most studies that use protest frequency (qualitative research, for instance, often graphs annual time series of protest events at the national level), we focus on turnout. Our dependent variable is then the number of participants in the protest in each location, which has several advantages over the number of protest events. First, Tilly and Rule (1965) claim that the quantification of participant-days is the best way to measure political disturbances. Second, reliable data on the number of participants exist thanks to news and press coverage, cell phone records, and geolocated social media (Sobolev et al., 2020). The media coverage of protest turnout has gradually stuck to a logic of normalization, not underestimating demonstration size, and paying more attention to discrepancies in the estimates between organizers and the police (Wouters & Van Camp, 2017). Prior to these developments, Jacobs estimated the size of stationary demonstrations based on the square footage of the site, the percentage of the site occupied by the participants, and the crowd density. In the early 70s, the U.S. Park Police in Washington DC "developed their own variant of the Jacobs method" and the newspapers soon followed suit (McPhail & McCarthy, 2004, p. 15). Third, Biggs (2018) notes that it is appropriate to focus on large protests because they are not likely to be underreported or omitted in newspapers. Finally, focusing on the participation rate is more akin to the logic of social movements: when compared with other actors in civil society, they are usually worse endowed with resources and should therefore invest them strategically through the organization of a few but well-attended protest events.

When discrepancies in numbers occur, we have computed three alternative (and increasingly conservative) measures: the arithmetic mean, the geometric mean, and the minimum. In the main analyses, we employ the arithmetic mean, but we have run robustness (sensitivity) analyses with the other two measures (results do not change).

Our key independent variable is the number of days to election day. By election day we refer to national elections (both chambers are elected concurrently). Research considering the proximity of elections has treated it so far as binary, electoral period or not (Trejo, 2914; Lehman-Wilzig & Ungar, 1985). Quantifying the number of days to election day is a more fine-grained measurement. We have computed the number of days to election taking the difference from the day when the elections were celebrated to the day when the protest started (i.e., a protest taking place a week before election day will be coded as seven days away while a protest held a week after will be coded as roughly four years away).[4] Data on the day of elections has been retrieved from the webpage of the Spanish Ministry of the Interior and data on the day of the protest has been taken from the dataset.

Three comments are in order. First, almost 94% of the demonstrations and marches last a single day. When the protest lasts more than one day, we have computed the number of days from the start day of the protest to election day. Second, for those events taking place after November 10, 2019 (during the still ongoing 14th legislature), we have estimated the number of days to December 10, 2023 (four years after the last election). And third, although elections

[4]Some protests may be called in response to election results, and this makes it harder for us to find statistically significant relationships. However, we have chosen to assume this challenge over other alternatives, such as excluding those observations.

occur on a regular schedule (every four years), they can be called earlier, and citizens know at least 54 days in advance when the next election will be held. As we are aware that this poses a challenge, we have rerun the model in our robustness analyses with a more sophisticated measure of the time to election day and results do not change.[5]

4.2. Operationalization of the control variables

Our first three controls are related to the organizers of the protest. For each protest, information was retrieved on the parties, unions, and professional associations that were responsible for its organization, alongside many other types of actors, considering up to 25 different types of organizers. Protests may be organized by a single organizer, several organizers of the same type, or several organizers of different types.[6] Table A2 in the online appendix reports the number of protests organized by each type of organizer: Some have been very active (labour unions 634, followed at some distance by political parties and human rights organizations, with 257 and 239, respectively), while others have merely contributed to a handful of demonstrations and marches.

For our first control (the diversity of organizers), we have computed a cardinal variable that counts the *number of types of organizers* of each protest. For instance, a demonstration organized by several farmers' organizations counts as organized by a single *type*.[7] Table A3 in the online appendix shows its distribution. For our next two controls (protests organized by political parties and unions), we use the binary variables *organized by a political party* (1 = yes, 0 = no) and *organized by a labour union* (1 = yes, 0 = no). Should there be several organizers, it suffices that one of them is a party (union) for the variable to be coded as 1. We know from Table A2 that there are 257 protests organized by parties and 634 by unions.

Our next two controls relate to the protests' claims or demands. The dataset considers up to 36 different topics, including workers' rights, health, environment, and minority rights. Again, they are not exclusive because protests may involve more than one. Table A4 in the online appendix lists them all and reports the number of protests for each claim. Some were especially popular (civil rights, non-discrimination, and freedom in 623; for/against parties and politicians in 553; workers' rights in 486), while others were far less frequent. For our fourth control, we compute a cardinal variable counting the *diversity of claims* in each protest.[8] Table A5 in the online appendix shows its distribution.

Mirroring Lowi's typology (1972), we created four binary variables to check whether each protest included (1 = yes, 0 = no) regulative, distributive, redistributive, and constituent claims. For instance, the *constituent claim* binary variable was coded as 1 for all the protests with one of the following topics: territorial identity, self-determination, independence; anti-war; anti-terrorism; regime type; electoral system reforms; and condemnation of the Franco regime. For each topic, only one of the four claims has been ascribed. Alongside single-topic protests, there might be multi-topic protests that translate into different claims.[9] Table A6 shows the mapping of the 36 topics into the four types of demands, and Table A7, the

[5]To keep things simple, we have used the actual election date to compute the number of days to election in the main analyses. For most of the period, this poses no problem. The 2015 elections were held as scheduled. The 2000, 2004, and 2008 ones were called a few days in advance (21, 28, and 35, respectively). The 2023 one will be anticipated only slightly, if at all. The only two elections that were called substantially earlier were the 2011 and the April 2019 ones (140 days and 455 days, respectively). The 2016 and the November 2019 were snap elections, scheduled by law since no government was formed. For the alternative measure in the robustness analysis, we model the expected election date as a moving average of the day when it was originally scheduled and the day it took place and compute the days to the expected election date instead of the actual election date.

[6]For instance, the October 12th, 2020, "Protest against Pedro Sánchez during 12-O national festivity," was organized by only one radical right populist party: VOX. The February 10th, 2019, "Protest against Pedro Sánchez and for the Unity of Spain" was organized by three political parties: Ciudadanos, PP, and VOX. The March 8th, 2009, "International Women's Day 2009" demonstration was organized by one party (PSOE) and two labour unions (CCOO, UGT).

[7]This is the case of the November 29th, 2009, farmers' demonstration organized by three different associations: ASAJA, COAG, and UPA.

[8]For example, the March 26th, 2003, "Students against the Iraq war" protest incorporated five different topics: (a) financial or banking system, (b) capitalism; (c) foreign governments and institutions; (d) political parties and politicians; and (e) anti-war.

[9]An example of a multi-topic claim is the June 18th, 2020, "Miners' strike" protest, which espoused "cuts to public services" (redistributive type), "unemployment, dismissals, redundancy procedures" (distributive), and "civil rights, non-discrimination and freedom" (regulative).

frequency of each type. In our main analyses, we keep things simple and employ a binary specification (1 = the protest has constituent claims, 0 = it does not). After all, constituent demands, such as territorial issues, in general, or the secessionist challenge, in particular, are very salient in Spanish politics and not easily dealt with in conventional ways. Table A7 shows that there are 801 observations coded as 1.

Our next control has to do with the ideology of the national government. We use the binary variable *right-wing national government* (1 = right-wing, 0 = left-wing). We code it as 1 when the conservative People's Party (Partido Popular, PP) is in power and 0 when it is the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE). Our data cover part of the sixth to part of the 14th legislature. Thus, the variable is coded as 1 in the sixth and seventh legislatures (under PP's Prime Minister [PM] José María Aznar), 0 in the eighth and ninth (under PSOE's PM José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero), 1 again in the 10th, 11th, and first part of the 12th (under PP's PM Mariano Rajoy), and 0 in the second part of the 12th as well as the 13th and 14th (under PSOE's PM Pedro Sánchez). Table A8 summarizes this and shows that the average number of protests per day was higher under right-wing governments (0.34 versus 0.25). Finally, we use a three-fold ordinal variable of *city size* (1 = size up to 200,000; 2 = size from 200,001 to 1,000,000; and 6 = size larger than 1,000,000). Table A9 in the online appendix reports the distribution of this variable.

Table A10 in the online appendix shows the summary statistics (observations, mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum) and variance inflation factors (VIFs) of the variables. All the VIFs lie well below the values that indicate potential collinearity problems (the mean VIF is 1.29 and the maximum one, 1.48). Because the dependent variable is numerical, we run ordinary least squares regression models.

5. Results

Figure 1 shows the results of our main model. Numerical variables have been rescaled to 0–1, so that their effects can be appreciated (this does not affect significance levels). Table A11 in the online appendix shows the full numerical results (first column), alongside two other popular rescaling procedures.[10] Each horizontal line in Figure 1 represents an independent variable, the point standing for the best estimation of its effect upon the dependent variable, and the line, for its 95% confidence interval. If a confidence interval crosses the vertical line drawn at the origin (zero) of the horizontal axis, the effect of the variable is not statistically significant. If it does not cross it and is located at its right, the effect is positive, whereas if it is located at its left, the effect is negative.

Our results are consistent with our hypothesis: the closer election day, the larger the turnout. Or the longer the time (number of days) to national elections, the lower the number of participants. This suggests that social protest is indeed responsive to electoral dynamics. Importantly, this result holds even after controlling for a reasonably large set of potential confounders.

As to the controls, the signs of all their effects conform the theoretical expectations we advanced in Table A1 in the online appendix (except for the diversity of claims, which is slightly negative), and half of them are also statistically significant. In particular, the size of the protest is larger when the protest is organized by parties and when constitutive demands are in place. There is also some evidence that city size has a positive effect on the number of participants. However, neither the diversity of organizers, nor that of claims attain statistical significance, and the same applies to being organized by a union. Likewise, although the effect of a right-wing (PP-led) national government is positive, it lacks statistical significance. This is consistent with the high mobilizing power that conservative and religious-oriented groups exhibited during the Socialist government in 2004–10 (Aguilar, 2012). This topic deserves more scholarly attention as the focus has generally been on left-leaning activist groups.

[10]Gelman (2008) centres all the numeric inputs and divides them by two standard deviations, while leaving binary inputs as 0 versus 1. The traditional standardization procedure centres all the variables and divides them by one standard deviation. Again, the results of these two methods are identical as regards significance levels.

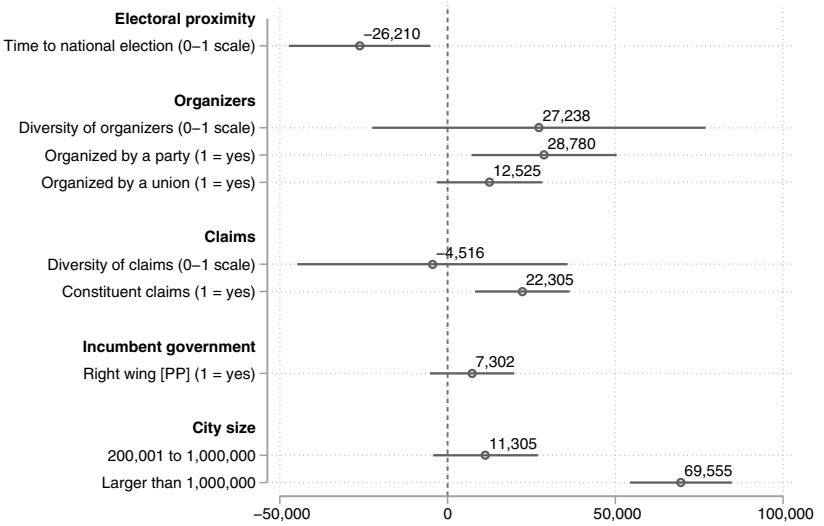

Figure 1. Effects of the analysed factors on the number of protesters. *Source:* Own elaboration, based on DISDEM-ECOPOL (2022). *Notes*: Estimated effects and 95% confidence intervals. See column 1 of Table A11 for full numerical results.

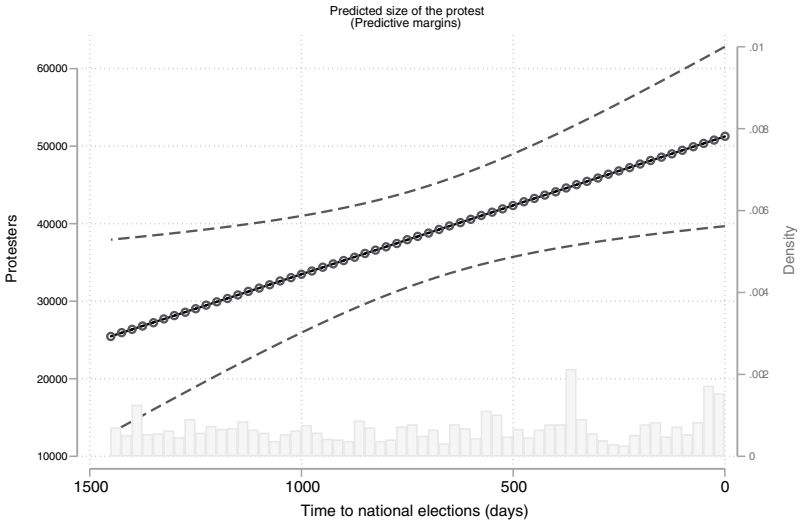

Figure 2. Effects of electoral proximity on the number of protesters. *Source:* Own elaboration, based on DISDEM-ECOPOL (2022). *Notes*: Predictive margins and 95% confidence intervals.

Back to our key hypothesis, Figure 2 displays the predictive margins of the number of protesters, i.e., the number of expected protesters as a function of the days remaining to election day, holding all the other variables constant. When elections are distant, i.e., 1,400 days or almost four years away, the predicted number of protesters, holding everything else constant, is somewhat below 27,000; when they are close, i.e., 100 days or three months away, the figure is almost 50,000.

Our results are robust (they remain qualitatively unaltered) to a battery of sensitivity analyses, reported in the online appendix. As the above-mentioned Table A11 shows, this is the case when we use two alternative standardization procedures. As Table A12 illustrates, this is also the case when we use two alternative (and more conservative) measures of our dependent variable (the geometric mean

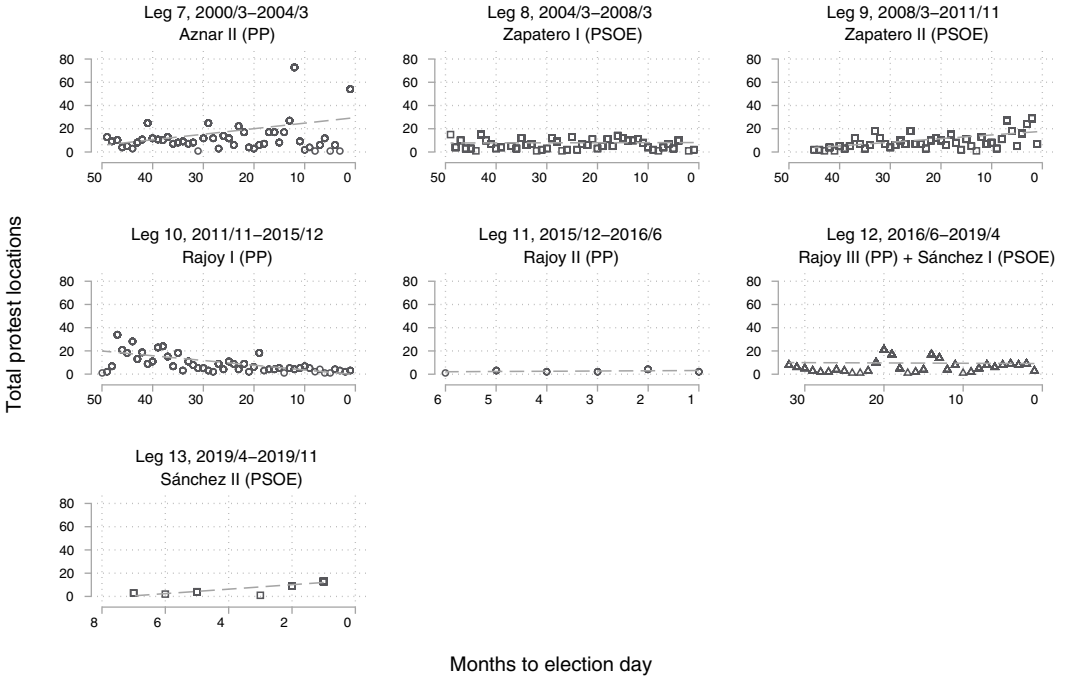

Figure 3. Evolution of protest frequency along the electoral cycle, per legislature. Source: Own elaboration, based on DISDEM-ECOPOL (2022).

of the number of participants and its minimum instead of the arithmetic mean). Likewise, results do not change when we consider alternative specifications of our key independent variable. As reported in Table A13, results hold when we open the possibility of non-linear effects of the proximity to election day; moreover, the interaction of our key independent variable with itself ("time to national election squared") is far from statistical significance. Results persist as well when we employ the more sophisticated version of our key X in which we model the expected election date to deal with the challenges posed by early elections (see Table A14, where we also test a model which considers eventual non-linear effects of this refined variable). Finally, results hold again true if we opt for a seven-fold operationalization of city size (results available on demand).

All in all, we understand that our results provide strong and robust evidence consistent with our hypothesis. Now, in line with our theoretical discussion, there might be other mechanisms at work related to protest frequency. Figure 3 below shows the evolution of protest frequency for each legislative period: in three legislatures (eighth, 11th, and 12th), it was basically flat; in another three (seventh, ninth, and 13th), it tended to increase; and only in one, the 10th, did it fall. The correlation between protest turnout and frequency is slightly positive, but far from statistical significance (r = 0.0395, *p*value = 0.1589).

6. Discussion and conclusions

The empirical impact of elections on the intensity of social mobilization has been seldom analyzed and we contribute to fill this gap with the help of a 20-year protest event dataset. A protest electoral cycle is in place in Spain whereby as election day gets closer, the number of participants in the protest augments. This finding can be plausibly expected in other party-centred democracies where the protest is normalized, and harsh repression is rare. As the protest in democracy has become another means to do politics, politicians are bound to be responsive to turnout in demonstrations as a shortcut to get to know the preferences of their voters. For the protest to have a potentially larger political effect it must be not only crowded but also

closest to election day as voters have a short-term memory. So, if social movements want to send a message to the political contenders, they should strive to mobilize their rank-and-file when elections are near, allocate strategically their mobilizing events, and organize not many, but large protests during election time.

Even though the connection between mobilizing efforts and the call to the polls seems logical, it has not been tested so far. We have set out to do it by analyzing the effect of the number of days to election day on the number of participants in the protest. Our main finding confirms that the social protest is sensitive to electoral dynamics: Turnout in protests grows as elections approach. This result holds when we control for a battery of potentially confounding factors.

First, turnout rises when the protest is organized by political parties. Resources and political restraint, as the two features that characterize most of them, may explain why this traditional vehicle of mobilization has not lost its convening power despite its widely shared declining membership. Second, the number of participants goes up when the protest revolves around constituent claims. The finding that parties have a high mobilizing capacity seems to travel well elsewhere, but the relevance of constituent claims to the intensity of the protest is probably country-specific: the ETA terrorist threat (which ended in 2011), the challenge of secessionist movements, and the salience of territorial identities pertain to the Spanish political scenario.

The idea that diversity matters (that the heterogeneity of organizers and claims is related to more numerous protests) has not attained statistical significance; this may be due to the convening power of parties and the high turnout around protests exhibiting constituent demands. The expectation that the number of protesters would grow under right-wing governments has not proven statistically significant either, even though the number of protests does rise under the ruling of the conservative party PP as compared to the socialist party PSOE. The mobilization capacity of conservative movements under left-wing governments is not unique to Spain and deserves more scholarly attention. Finally, the two largest and most populated cities in Spain, Madridand Barcelona, have been found to hold the most numerous protest events, as expected.

Our descriptive analysis of protest frequency does not uncover any systematic trend related to the electoral cycle. This suggests that the link between protests and elections runs mainly through the increase in turnout and not so much through the increase in frequency.

The uncovering of a protest electoral cycle makes an important contribution to the underexplored topic of why some protests mobilize more people than others. Also important is the effect of resourceful and moderate organizers as well as of the type of claim on the turnout. All these factors help us understand better "the circumstances of mobilization" (Price, 2019, p. 422) and open the way for future research on this topic.

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