

AmericasBarometer Insights: 2010 (No.42) *

The Normalization of Protest in Latin America¹

Mason Moseley
Vanderbilt University
mason.moseley@vanderbilt.edu

Daniel Moreno
Ciudadanía, Comunidad de Estudios Sociales y
Acción Pública, Cochabamba, Bolivia
dmorenom@gmail.com

Social movements and mass protests have been defining aspects of Latin American politics, even precipitating sharp political reactions and consequences in several recent cases. For example, mass protests played key roles in five of seven “acute” institutional crises since 2000 (González 2008). Protests contributed to the 2003 resignation of Bolivian president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and the 2001-2002 episodes of Argentine critical political instability, which included the deposal of two presidents in less than a month.

In short, protests matter in the Americas, and for that reason it is important to know *who* protests—that is, what are the characteristics of

* The *Insights* Series is co-edited by Professors Mitchell A. Seligson and Elizabeth Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt University.

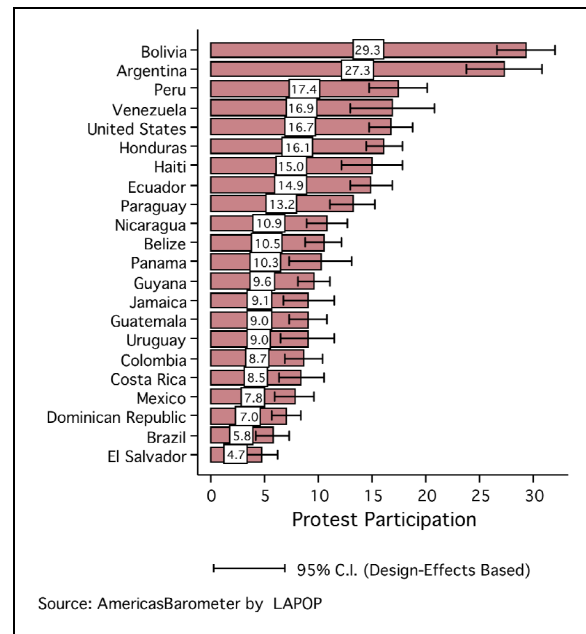
¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>
The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

those who participate in aggressive modes of political action? In this *Insights* report, we report on national average levels of self-reported protest participation in the region and then go on to present evidence regarding the most important determinants of protest participation in two cases, Argentina and Bolivia.² We argue that in these two countries mass protest is more conventional than radical; we discuss in our conclusion the implications this may have for the region more generally.

The data come from the 2008 *AmericasBarometer*.³ In face-to-face interviews in twenty-one countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and a web survey in the United States, a total of 25,279 people responded to this question:

PROT2.⁴ During the last year, did you participate in a public demonstration or protest?

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents who Participated in Protest, 2008



² The content of this *Insights* report is drawn from a working paper (Moreno and Moseley 2010), which contains more extensive theory and empirical analysis.

³ Funding for the 2008 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

⁴ Non-response was 11.17% for the entire sample. The question was not asked in Chile.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents for each country who indicated they “sometimes” or “almost never” participated in protest during the previous year (the remaining option provided was “never”). It is quite apparent that Argentina and Bolivia had the highest rates of protest participation in Latin America, as almost one-third of citizens in each nation participated at least to a limited extent in protest during the year prior to the survey.

In the remainder of this report, we consider in more detail the predictors of protest participation in these two countries, for two primary reasons. First, most empirical tests of dominant theories have focused on advanced industrialized democracies (e.g., Norris et al. 2005; Opp 1990; Schussman and Soule 2005). By focusing on Argentina and Bolivia, we extend extant research beyond its typically more limited geographic focus. Second, the two countries themselves are quite dissimilar on a number of key economic and sociopolitical variables.⁵ The use of these two cases, then, approaches a “most different systems” design, allowing us to home in on commonalities across the cases, and simultaneously parse out ways in which certain explanations might account for protest in one country better than the other.

Disaffected Radicalism versus Conventional Strategic Resources

Theories of why people protest are numerous and diverse. We focus on two theoretical perspectives – disaffected radicalism and conventional strategic resource – and test them against one another to determine which better explains protest in Argentina and Bolivia.

Popular during the 1960s and 1970s, the disaffected radicalism thesis holds that protest is

⁵ For example, while Argentina is one of Latin America’s wealthiest countries, with GDP per capita of \$9,483, Bolivia ranks among the region’s poorest nations with GDP per capita of \$2,002 (International Monetary Fund 2009). Bolivia is also one of Latin America’s most unequal countries, while income distribution in Argentina is relatively egalitarian by Latin American standards (U.N. Human Development Report 2009).

a response to abject economic and/or political conditions, and constitutes a rejection of the key representative institutions of the political system (Jenkins 1993, Dalton and van Sickle 2005). Following this line of thought, widespread political protest is a threat to the legitimacy of democracy, as citizens express discontent not with particular leaders or issues, but with the political system itself (Norris et al. 2005).

According to this view of contentious politics as disaffected extremism, protest substitutes for conventional participation (Muller 1979). That is, protestors generally come from destitute socioeconomic backgrounds, and do not take part in the political process through conventional channels like voting, party membership, and civic associations. Protestors might also be younger and less educated on average than non-protestors.

In stark contrast to the view of protest politics as seditious radicalism, an increasing number of scholars argue that protest has actually “normalized”, and is simply another form of conventional political participation in modern democracies. Adherents of this theoretical tradition claim that disaffected radicalism is an artifact of the time period during which it emerged, and that citizens in contemporary societies utilize protest as another strategic resource for political expression (Inglehart 1990, Norris 2002). Thus, the conventional strategic resource perspective of protest as a participatory outlet for active democrats would seem to indicate that demonstrators resemble those who participate through traditional channels – that is, middle-class and educated citizens who vote, are members of political parties, and take part in civic organizations. In fact, this notion that protestors resemble “conventional” participants has been corroborated by a number of empirical studies, many of which focus on protest participation in the developed world (e.g., Dalton and Van Sickle 2005; Norris et al. 2005).

If one of these two theories were capable of explaining protest participation in such divergent economic and political environments as those of Argentina and Bolivia, it would seem to lend unprecedented explanatory power to a theory that has to date only been systematically

tested in advanced industrialized democracies. Thus, we seek to ascertain if the disaffected radicalism or conventional strategic resource thesis better explains the dynamics of protest participation in Argentina and Bolivia.

To date, most of the literature on recent mass protests in Argentina and Bolivia has depicted protests more as a manifestation of specific grievances and economic deprivation than as a potentially normalized form of political voice. Indeed, these accounts have focused on Argentina's economic crisis in 2001-2002, and the specific objectives of the indigenous movement in Bolivia in recent years. However, we have some reason to believe these descriptions are misleading, as contentious politics has become more normalized in recent years in both countries (Moreno 2009). In the following section, we outline our strategy for testing these competing explanations of protest participation.

Research Design and Data

We use logistic regression analysis to assess the probability that citizens participate in protests based on the socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors deemed relevant by the both disaffected radicalism (DR) and conventional strategic resources (CSR) theories. In implementing this strategy, we first are able to discover which individual-level characteristics have the most powerful substantive effects on protest participation. Second, this research design allows us to observe whether there are common factors predicting participation in protests across these two distinctive cases, and whether a single theory can be used to explain protests in both Argentina and Bolivia. Finally, this approach will help us develop specific explanations for each of the two nations, to the extent that a single theory fails to perfectly predict protest in both countries.

For our analyses, we examine data from the 2008 *AmericasBarometer* surveys of Argentina and Bolivia. For Argentina, the project used a national probability sample design of voting-age adults, with a total N of 1,486 people taking part in face-to-face interviews in Spanish. Data used

for Bolivia come from a probability sample of the adult population of the nine departments in the country; a total of 3,003 interviews were conducted in the Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara languages to guarantee representation of individuals who are monolingual in any of these languages.

Results and Discussion

The results of the full logistic regression model, which is the same across both country cases, are presented in the appendix.⁶ Here we describe the results and their significance.

In Argentina, five variables have significant effects on the likelihood that one participates in protest. In line with the CSR theory, interest in politics, community activity, and union membership have positive effects on the likelihood that citizens participate in protest marches or demonstrations. In particular, one's involvement in activities directed toward solving community problems has a strong effect on his/her likelihood of participating in protest – indeed, citizens who have taken part in these activities have almost ninety-percent higher odds of also participating in protest than those who have not. Additionally, Argentine protestors have negative evaluations of the current president (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner), and younger citizens, as is typically the case, are more likely to take part in protest demonstrations and marches.⁷

⁶ The statistical analyses employ information from the sample design in order to produce accurate standard errors and confidence intervals. For a discussion on the relevance of using information from the sample design in calculating errors see Kish and Frankel 1974; Knott 1991; Skinner, Holt and Smith 1989.

⁷ While we acknowledge the potential problems associated with predicting protest participation in the past with current evaluations, we argue that almost all of the variables in our model are relatively constant over time. Indeed, the only variable that could present a problem is the presidential evaluation question, considering the fact that Fernández de Kirchner took office *during* the time period under consideration (Morales was Bolivia's president throughout). However, given that many Argentines viewed her presidency as a continuation of her husband's (Néstor Kirchner), we do not think this presents a significant problem in our analyses.

In Bolivia, both interest in politics and community activism also have powerful positive effects on the chances that one participates in protest. Unlike Argentina, however, voting is also a strong predictor among Bolivians, as voters are much more likely to engage in contentious political behavior than nonvoters. Also, support for democracy seems to be positively associated with protest participation, as Bolivians who believe democracy is the best form of government are *more* likely to take part in protest marches and demonstrations. Unlike Argentina, and surprisingly, age and presidential approval are not significant predictors of protest participation.

Table 1 indicates our hypotheses regarding the empirical implications of each theoretical approach, and summarizes our findings for each hypothesis. As far as the two dominant theories are concerned, these results do not lend much support to the disaffected radicalism thesis. System support and support for democracy fail to achieve statistical significance in Argentina, while system support actually has a *positive* effect on the odds of participating in a protest march or demonstration in Bolivia, precisely the opposite of what the theory would predict. Socioeconomic indicators also fail to predict protest participation in either case, as neither wealth nor education has a significant effect. Finally, conventional political participation seems to have a powerful positive effect on the likelihood that citizens protest, undermining the DR claim that protestors are political outsiders who substitute contentious behavior for conventional participation.

On the other hand, the conventional strategic resource explanation fares relatively well in our models. As mentioned above, interest in politics is a potent explanatory variable in both Argentina and Bolivia, and the effects of socioeconomic variables suggest that protest has indeed “normalized” across income groups. In addition, several modes of conventional political participation turn out to be strong predictors of contentious political behavior, as voting, union membership, and activity in one’s local community have meaningful positive effects on protest participation in one or both of the cases under examination.

Table 1. Hypotheses and Summary of Findings

	Argentina	Bolivia
Disaffected Radicalism:		
H1.1: System Support	Mixed	False
H1.2: Socioeconomic conditions	False	False
H1.3: Conventional participation	False	False
Conventional Strategic Resources:		
H2.1: Interest in politics	True	True
H2.2: Socioeconomic conditions	True	True
H2.3: Conventional participation	Mixed	True

While it does seem that protest has become relatively “conventional” in both Argentina and Bolivia, there are several key differences between our results across the two countries. First, every indicator of conventional participation in the model has a positive effect on protest in Bolivia, leading one to conclude that protest participation has been absorbed almost completely into the conventional “repertoire” in Bolivia. In Argentina, the fact that age and presidential approval have significant negative effects indicates that protest has not completely normalized—that is, younger Argentines are more likely protestors, as are those who disapprove of the Kirchner administration. In this respect, Argentina does reflect the image presented by the disaffection thesis to some, but not comprehensive, extent.

Conclusion

To conclude, our results strongly support the central claims of the conventional strategic resources theory that protest has become a “normalized” form of political voice. Both in

Argentina and in Bolivia, individuals who protest are generally more interested in politics and likely to engage in community-level activities, seemingly supplementing traditional forms of participation with protest. The case for conventional strategic resources theory is even stronger in Bolivia, where there is a significant, positive relationship between voting and support for democracy and participating in a protest march or demonstration. In Argentina, protests seem to have some elements linked to implications of the disaffected radicalism theory; the fact that youth and more anti-government positions are related to higher participation in protests suggest that disaffected radicalism could in part explain protests in Argentina. Nevertheless, the results do not support the disaffected radicalism view that protestors are political outsiders, disconnected from the traditional political arena and driven by extreme economic or political deprivation.

One potential reason for the differences we observe between Argentina and Bolivia—namely, that support for democracy and voting are significant predictors of protest participation in Bolivia but not Argentina—is the degree to which demonstrations are led by actors within government in Bolivia. Indeed, the governing political party, the MAS, has taken a central role in promoting “politics in the street” in Bolivia, whereas non-government actors in Argentina like the *piqueteros* and various trade unions have taken the lead in organizing protests and demonstrations. Thus, while protest in Argentina might not appear as normalized as it is in Bolivia as it relates to other forms of conventional participation, it has still taken a central role in the repertoire of contention for politically active citizens.

While this paper has focused only on two countries in Latin America, both of which have experienced particularly high levels of protest, we maintain the findings here are suggestive of a larger trend. In many Latin American countries, street protests and marches have come to play a crucial role in citizens’ efforts to influence government actions and policies, in conjunction with other more conventional forms of participation. Given the fact that this mode of political expression is capable of creating

instability, and occasionally can trigger a country’s descent into political disarray (e.g. Argentina in 2001-2002 or Bolivia in 2003), it would seem vital to explain why this type of participation has emerged in some economic and political contexts but not others. Efforts to illuminate the institutional determinants of protest are still in their nascent stages (see Machado, Scartascini, and Tomassi 2009), but represent a crucial avenue for future research if we are to expand our understanding of contentious political behavior in contemporary Latin America.

References

- Crozier, Michael, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki. (1975). *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dalton, Russell J. and Alix van Sickle. (2005). “The Resource, Structural, and Cultural Bases of Protest.” *Center for the Study of Democracy*, University of California, Irvine.
- Gurr, Ted Robert. (1970). *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kish, Leslie, and Martin Richard Frankel. (1974). “Inference from complex samples.” *The Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 36, no. 1: 1-37.
- Knott, Philip. (1991). “A model-based look at linear regression with survey data.” *The American Statistician* 45, no. 2: 107-12.
- Inglehart, Ronald. (1990). *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- International Monetary Fund. “World Economic Outlook Database.” Accessed April 15, 2009. <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/02/weodata/weorept.aspx>.
- Laserna, Roberto, José Gordillo, and George Komadina. (2006). *La trampa del rentismo*. La Paz: Fundación Milenio.
- Laserna, Roberto, and Miguel Villarroel. (2008). *38 años de conflictos sociales en Bolivia. Descripción general y por períodos gubernamentales*. La Paz: CERES - COSUDE - Instituto para la democracia.
- Jenkins, J.C. (1983). “Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9: p. 527-553.

- Long, Scott. (1997). *Regression Models for Categorical and Limited Dependent Variables*. Thousand Oaks - London - New Delhi.
- Machado, Fabiana, Carlos Scartascini, and Mariano Tommasi. (2009). "Political Institutions and Street Protests in Latin America." *Inter-American Development Bank: Working Paper No. 110*.
- Moreno, Daniel and Mason Moseley. 2010. "The Normalization of Contentious Politics: Explaining Participation in Protests in Latin America." Prepared for presentation at the 2010 Midwest Political Science Association Conference.
- Moreno, Daniel. (2009). "La Marcha Nuestra de cada Día. Normalización de la Protesta en Bolivia." In *Cultura Política en Tiempos de Cambio. Institucionalidad Conflicto y Región en Bolivia*, edited by Observatorio de la Cultura Política en Bolivia, 71-90. Cochabamba: Ciudadanía.
- Muller, Edward N. (1979). *Aggressive Political Participation*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Norris, Pippa, Stefaan Walgrave, and Peter Van Aelst. (2005). "Who Demonstrates? Antistate Rebels, Conventional Participants or Everyone?" *Comparative Politics* 37, no. 2.
- Norris, Pippa. (2002). *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Opp, Karl-Dieter. (1990). "Postmaterialism, Collective Action and, Political Protest." *American Journal of Political Science* 34(1): p. 212-235.
- Schussman, Alan and Sarah Soule. (2005). "Process and Protest: Accounting for Individual Protest Participation." *Social Forces* 1083.
- Skinner, C. J., D. Holt, and T.M.F. Smith, eds. (1989). *Analysis of complex surveys*. New York: Wiley.
- United Nations Development Program. (2009). "Human Development Report 2009, Overcoming Barriers: Human mobility and development." <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2009/>.

Appendix 1. Logistic Regression on Determinants of Protest Participation

	Argentina		Bolivia	
	Odds ratio	P>t	Odds ratio	P>t
Voting	.923	.737	1.467	.009
Interest in politics	1.013	< .001	1.010	< .001
System support	1.002	.661	1.000	.940
Wealth	1.028	.577	.981	.653
Education	1.030	.194	1.028	.075
Gender (female)	1.207	.312	.933	.462
Age	.977	< .001	.996	.408
Party affiliation	.948	.737	1.208	.142
Support for democracy	1.003	.527	1.005	.038
Community activity	1.875	< .001	1.329	< .001
Vote for current president	1.285	.277	.935	.629
Presidential approval	.988	.004	.003	.740
Union membership	1.016	.006	1.013	< .001
Ideology (Right)*	.816	< .001	1.093	< .001
N	1096		2526	

* As the inclusion of ideology drastically reduces the number of available observations, results for this variable come from a different model fitted in each country with all other covariates included. However, in the model including ideology, results for all other variables remain similar.