



# Protest and Order. Democratic theory, contentious politics, and the changing shape of western democracies

## Rendicontazione

### Informazioni relative al progetto

#### POWDER

ID dell'accordo di sovvenzione: 757452

[Sito web del progetto](#)

#### DOI

[10.3030/757452](#)

Progetto chiuso

#### Data della firma CE

25 Agosto 2017

#### Data di avvio

1 Aprile 2018

#### Data di completamento

31 Marzo 2023

#### Finanziato da

EXCELLENT SCIENCE - European Research Council (ERC)

#### Costo totale

€ 1 373 022,00

#### Contributo UE

€ 1 373 022,00

#### Coordinato da

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITAET ZU  
BERLIN



Germany

Questo progetto è apparso in...



## Ricerca e strategie per prevenire la radicalizzazione e l'estremismo violento

# Periodic Reporting for period 4 - POWDER (Protest and Order. Democratic theory, contentious politics, and the changing shape of western democracies)

**Periodo di rendicontazione:** 2022-02-01 al 2023-03-31

## Sintesi del contesto e degli obiettivi generali del progetto



Protest is a significant form of contemporary political participation. In the democratic order, political protest finds both an imaginative horizon and an advantageous institutional counterpart. The research project aims to analyze the interrelationship between protest and political order under the contextual conditions of the changing shape of modern western democracies. Two groups of questions are connected to this study perspective, which were tackled by means of a democratic-theoretically-led synchronous comparison of selected contemporary protest movements – digital protest movements, transnationally organized climate protest movements, migrant resistance movements, and the rightwing identitarian movement: The aim was to clarify firstly the extent to which the new forms of protest question the premises of democratic orders: What potential for further development lies within the new forms of protest on the one hand, and what are the challenges to democracy on the other? Secondly, the aim was to determine the influence and relevance held by the democratic order itself in an age of the changing shape of democracy with regard to the specific formation of the new forms of protest, and what statements can be made on how the formation of the order is changed, in turn, by the new forms of protest themselves.

One of the core achievements of the research project hence was to further conceptualize the interrelationship of protest and the democratic order. By bringing different strands of research together, we were able to formulate a research perspective that combines strong theoretical interpretive categories with empirically sound research approaches. Thereupon, we gained insights on the influence and relevance of the democratic order to the specific formation of new forms of protest and on how contemporary protest movements question and negotiate premises of democratic orders – i. e. via rhetorical strategies, the enactment of bodily protest practices or the provision of alternative digital infrastructures for democratic politics. We not only gained a deep understanding of current protest dynamics, but also of contemporary social and political transformations within modern democratic societies. The project thus takes up the notion of political protest as especially sensitive to

social change to provide society with relevant, scientific expertise on challenges as well as innovations to the democratic order.

## Lavoro eseguito dall'inizio del progetto fino alla fine del periodo coperto dalla relazione e principali risultati finora ottenuti



The development of a theoretical framework for the analysis of contentious politics in modern democracies represents one of the major achievements of the research project. The framework is based upon a critical theory of democracy that combines analytical perspectives from social theory and democratic theory to allow for a better understanding of how social structures, legal institutions, and political engagement interact in protest. In line with this, a first distinction can be drawn between reformist and transformative forms of protest: While reformist protest does not challenge the given dimensions of the modern democratic order, transformative protest politicizes the basic principles of that order. The criteria furthermore include: 1) expanding the circle of those who benefit from the fulfillment of democracy's promises; 2) the establishment of discursive democratic spaces; 3) a balance between dramatization and exchange; and 4) a willingness to become someone else. The project's research perspective and the criteria for normative evaluations of political protest thus enable us to substantially distinguish between emancipatory and regressive forms of protest. Against the backdrop of an interpretative research perspective, the empirical subprojects have worked out the different ways of how and to what extent democracy is imagined, negotiated, and problematized within protest, and how these protests interact with the democratic institutions in place. It could be shown that digital protests put forward new understandings and workings of the public sphere. Climate protest sheds new light on the relationship of democracy and time and foregrounds reflections on the conditions of democratic ordering. In their protest, irregularized migrants imagine and prefigure new forms of co-existence that transcend established political boundaries. While also claiming to act in the name democracy, right wing movements demand the fallacious return to a homogenous people. Accordingly, studying these protests reveals the complex fabric of democratic orders, democratic norms and their preconditions.

We have discussed and disseminated our research results within the scientific community and a broader public:

- In July 2021, the research group has hosted an international workshop, bringing together leading scholars from the fields of democratic theory and social movement research to present their work on the conceptualization of political protest. This important exchange resulted in a Special Issue in the journal *Democratic Theory* that systematizes and deepens the debate on the meaning of protest along our research perspective (see: Gobbi et al 2022).
- First excerpts of the analytical framework and the criteria for a substantive normative assessment of political protest have been presented by PI Christian Volk within the scientific community in numerous talks and keynotes and will be published in 2024 with Suhrkamp.
- The members of the research group have discussed their research at international conferences and workshops. Moreover, they succeeded in influencing the research fields adjacent to the subprojects through the organisation of conferences and working groups with subsequent publications (for the field of migration studies, see Glathe/Gorriahn 2022; for the field of digital transformations, see Staemmler et al 2022).

- Beyond the scientific community, expertise from the project was repeatedly requested; PI Christian Volk was asked in numerous interviews about his assessment of the legitimacy and success of the climate protests and other movements (see for example Spiegel, Stuttgarter Zeitung (print), WDR (radio)).

## Progressi oltre lo stato dell'arte e potenziale impatto previsto (incluso l'impatto socioeconomico e le implicazioni sociali più ampie del progetto fino ad ora) ▼

The comparison of the protest movements investigates (I) recurring patterns, but also contrasting assessments with regard to the interrelationship between the political order and the protest movements, examines at a second level (II) the different manners in which the new forms of protest challenge democratic-theoretical dimensions, and attempts at the third level (III) to reconstruct a general democratic-theoretical determination of meaning of present-day protest movements. The interweaving of empirical research, social theory, and democratic theory allows for a critical perspective on protest and its meaning. Along this perspective, political protest is more than an unconventional form of citizen participation that provides crucial inputs for political systems. The project has impressively shown how democratic principles are interpreted and articulated in innovative ways in the coordination and communication of protest. Political protest thus becomes a highly relevant yardstick for emergent democratic as well as antidemocratic practices. The development of criteria for normative evaluations of political protest represents a step beyond the state of the art. Future research approaches may take these results as a starting point in order to develop empirically grounded and theoretically sophisticated analyses of the changing shape of democracy.



Logo of the project

**Ultimo aggiornamento:** 24 Luglio 2024

**Permalink:** <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/757452/reporting/it>

European Union, 2025

