

**SCIENTIFIC ABSTRACT: Meanings of protest in an era of democratic erosion**

Protests are usually perceived as playing a key role in democratic societies, allowing ordinary people to make their voices heard beyond the ballot box. However, in recent years, rising levels of protests in many countries have coincided with concerns about democratic backsliding. Although some scholars have theorized that protests protect against democratic erosion, little is known about how citizens perceive contemporary protests. Much research in political science treats protest as essential to democracy, yet we know little about whether ordinary citizens share this view. In light of these trends, researchers must investigate the urgent question of how citizens perceive the role of protest in current political climates. While there is extensive scholarship on why protests erupt and how they succeed or fail, far less attention has been given to understanding what protest actually *means* for ordinary citizens, and how people’s understandings of protest relate to their political behavior.

Three main research questions guide the project. First, the project seeks to determine what types of meanings of protest exist in academic literature (RQ1: Meanings of protest in scholarship). Addressing this question will produce an original typology of scholarly meanings, which is essential for comparing scholarly and popular meanings of protest. The second research question asks what types of meanings of protest are held by ordinary citizens (RQ2: Meanings of protest for citizens versus scholars). To address this question, we will gather original data to develop a categorization of people’s meanings of protest, and highlight potential gaps in the literature. The third research question investigates how ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest relate to patterns of political participation (RQ3: Protest meanings and political behavior).

The proposed project combines two empirical studies that address these research questions. First, a literature mapping (Study #1) will produce an authoritative typology of scholarly meanings of protest. This study will use data-driven bibliometric tools to produce a comprehensive analytic mapping of the literature on protest over time and across geographic contexts. We will analyze data from both standard proprietary datasets (e.g., Web of Science) as well as recently developed open access sources to conduct a global analysis, with a focus on advancing open access literature mapping research throughout the social sciences. Second, a cross-national survey (Study #2) will investigate ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest, including how their protest meanings relate to their political behavior and key individual-level socio-demographic characteristics. The cross-national survey will build on a tested survey instrument, and we will analyze the data using a combination of manual and AI coding. Study #2 includes an analytic comparison between the types of meanings identified in the academic literature in Study #1 and those expressed by ordinary citizens in Study #2. The survey will also include an experimental component to identify mechanisms that explain the relationship between individuals’ protest meanings and their political behavior. The work plan’s integration stage will leverage the findings from both studies to design next-step collaborative research in diverse contexts that compares meanings of protest with meanings of other key concepts in democratic theory (e.g., voting, representation). This integration will equip the research team to break new ground in understanding the meanings of protest in an era of democratic erosion, which will deepen our knowledge of the political implications of increased protest participation in contemporary democracies.

## A. SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

How do people understand the role of protest in current political climates, and how does this understanding relate to their political participation? These questions are critically important as evidence suggests that contemporary democracies face threats of erosion (Gessler & Wunsch, 2025; Gidron et al., 2025; Waldner & Lust, 2018; Wunsch, 2025; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). While some scholars perceive protests as liberal reactions against democratic backsliding (Claassen et al., 2024; Druckman, 2024), others argue that protests may undermine trust in institutions and weaken support for democracy (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021; Uscinski et al., 2021). Yet little is known about how ordinary citizens understand the meaning of protest.

This question is increasingly urgent as research shows a shift in political participation toward lower voter turnout and higher rates of non-electoral participation, including protest (Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Dalton, 2017, 2022; Kostelka et al., 2023; Kostelka & Blais, 2021; Oser, 2022b, 2022c). Given evidence that protest is on the rise, it is critical to understand what protest actually *means* for ordinary citizens. This project aims to integrate the two strands of the literature reviewed below—of collective and individual perspectives—to investigate meanings of protest for ordinary citizens.

**A.1. Analysis of protest at the collective level.** Early scholarly accounts of protest, focusing on the collective or group level, often treated it as an eruption of *destructive emotion* (Kornhauser, 1959; Smelser, 1962). Many scholars later rejected this view, conceptualizing protest as *rational action* by social groups aimed at using protest as a political resource to disrupt oppressive power structures (Lipsky, 1968; Piven & Cloward, 1977), or obtaining concrete benefits (Amenta et al., 2010; Meyer & Tarrow, 1997). This rational perception focuses on identifying effective movement actions and strategies (Bosi et al., 2016; Boulding 2010, 2014; Boulding et al., 2025; Chenoweth, 2023; Gessler & Hutter, 2021; Uba & Engeman, 2024; Uba & Jansson, 2025), and analyzing the opportunities created by external conditions (Borbáth & Gessler, 2020; Borbáth & Hutter, 2025; Höltmann et al., 2024; Hunger & Hutter, 2025; Hutter, 2014).

A different group of studies has theorized protest as a *cultural process* (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; McAdam, 2000). Seeing protest in this way means that the grievances, identities, objectives, strategies, and outcomes of protests are culturally and discursively constructed (Benford & Snow, 2000; Bennett et al., 2018). Viewing protest as a cultural process provides an understanding of the dynamic, open-ended, and contested process of meaning construction in collective action.

Both rational and cultural perceptions of protest have changed significantly with the rise of digital communications. Scholars have highlighted how online networks have transformed protest strategies and opportunities, while creating new spaces for meaning contestation (Anduiza et al., 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Lavi, 2020; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). However, since these perspectives often focus on group actors as the unit of analysis—such as movements, social groups, or organizations—they offer only limited insights into the meanings of protest at the individual level.

**A.2. Analysis of protest at the individual level.** Studies of protest that focus on individuals as the unit of analysis investigate people’s motivations, attitudes, and behaviors. A key question in these analyses concerns individuals’ incentives to participate in protest, especially in light of the free rider problem (Olson,

1965). In van Stekelenburg and Klandermans’ (2023) theoretical synthesis of the social psychology of protest, they identify three types of motivations for protest participation: instrumental, expressive, and identity-driven.

Instrumental motivations relate to protest as a means for citizens to influence political outcomes (Galais et al., 2024). A key factor that affects whether people with instrumental motivations participate in protest is political efficacy, meaning people’s belief that participating in politics can have an influence on political outcomes (Boulianne et al., 2023; Oser et al., 2022; Oser, Feitosa, et al., 2023). Another key factor for people with instrumental motivations is the cost of abstention, which can be an important driver when the stakes are considered to be high (Aytaç & Stokes, 2019). Expressive motivations relate to people’s desire to express their views and values through protest, regardless of the political outcomes. A pivotal factor studied in this context is people’s normative attitudes (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2021; Oser, 2022a; Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023). Finally, identity-driven motivations highlight how social identity (Tajfel, 2010) can motivate protest through the strength of a person’s identification with a group (Arikan & Ben-Nun Bloom, 2019; Borbáth et al., 2023; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2018).

Recent studies indicate that all three types of motivations—instrumental, expressive, and identity-driven—are affected by the use of online social networks. Most studies have found an overall positive relationship between social media use and protest participation (Oser, 2022a; Valenzuela, 2013). While these individual-level studies provide an understanding of people’s motivations, attitudes, and behaviors, they often rely on a static understanding of meaning based on predefined and closed questions (Plescia, 2025; Suchman & Jordan, 1992).

This overview of research on protest at both the collective and individual levels clarifies that there is a need to integrate research across these levels to fully capture the breadth of citizens’ meanings of protest in contemporary democracies.

**A.3. Integration: Ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest.** Informed by this literature, the proposed project builds on recent related work on the “*Meanings of Voting*” (Plescia, 2025) to investigate ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest. Adapting Plescia’s (2025) investigation of voting, the proposed project’s focus on the meanings of protest is arguably an even more urgent topic of inquiry, given the unresolved questions in the literature noted above regarding the motivations for and implications of shifting protest trends. Our study focuses on individual perspectives using closed-ended questions, as well as open-ended questions that inductively identify people’s meanings of protest. Furthermore, since non-participation is a common yet understudied phenomenon, we will also examine the meanings of protest for both protest participants and non-participants.

To identify a wide range of meanings of protest, we follow Plescia’s (2025) approach of distinguishing between people’s perceptions of a concept that has no meaning, one or more meanings, or “anti-meanings.” People may assign no meaning to protest if the concept of protest is completely unrelated to their life experience. Alternatively, if protest has a meaning for them, this indicates that they can articulate what it signifies in their lives. People may assign a variety of meanings to protest, and they may even assign contradictory meanings. Finally, some individuals may assign “anti-meanings” to the term (Campbell &

Nyholm, 2015). Unlike having no meaning, anti-meaning represents not an absence or void, but rather a set of normatively negative perceptions relating to a term. In Plescia’s (2025) study, anti-meaning has been employed to understand people’s meanings of voting as ineffective, unethical, or a waste of time. In this study, we adapt the concept of “anti-meaning” to denote strongly negative views of protest, such as perceptions that it is ineffective, unethical, harmful, or unfulfilling.

We draw on Plescia’s (2025) argument about the importance of investigating “no meaning” and “anti-meanings” in our focus on protest, with the aim of advancing research on non-participation in non-electoral activities (Oser, 2022a, 2022b; Valgarðsson et al., 2022). Most research exploring non-participation in protests has focused on the failure to mobilize potential sympathizers (McAdam, 1986; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). However, little is known about why most ordinary citizens do not participate in protests. By exploring variations of no meaning and anti-meanings, the proposed study will contribute to our understanding of both participation and non-participation in protest.

The proposed study will also explore aspects of protest that are intrinsically different from voting. Examples of relevant features of protest include how individuals perceive conflict with law enforcement, transgressions of the law, and violence. Exploring these themes is crucial because the use of violent tactics can have a decisive impact on protest outcomes (Fachter, Ben-Nun Bloom, and Canetti, 2024). However, the perception of a particular tactic as “violent” is itself subject to interpretation (Manekin et al., 2024; Manekin & Mitts, 2022). By analyzing these types of protest-specific topics, this study will contribute to addressing unresolved questions about the seemingly contradictory trends in electoral and non-electoral participation in recent years.

## B. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND EXPECTED SIGNIFICANCE

**B.1. Research questions.** Three main research questions guide this project, which will be conducted in collaboration with Prof. Carolina Plescia.<sup>1</sup> First, the project seeks to determine what types of meanings of protest exist in the academic literature (RQ1: Meanings of protest in scholarship). Second, the project investigates what types of meanings of protest exist for ordinary citizens (RQ2: Meanings of protest for citizens versus scholars). As many studies have shown gaps between scholars’ and citizens’ definitions and assessments of key political concepts (Blais et al., 2023; Canache, 2012; Dalton et al., 2007; Gidron & Tichelbaecker, 2025; Hernández, 2019), we will compare scholars’ and citizens’ understandings of the meanings of protest to identify potential gaps that merit future research. The third research question asks how ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest relate to their patterns of political participation (RQ3: Protest meanings and political behavior). Addressing this question will identify relationships between types of protest meanings and types of political behavior in an era of shifting participation patterns, while taking into account key individual-level socio-demographic characteristics.

**B.2. Expected significance.** Given that some scholars view protests as liberal responses to democratic backsliding, while others argue that protests can undermine democratic stability, the project will clarify how

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<sup>1</sup> See Prof. Plescia’s webinar of her 2025 “*Meanings of Voting*” book in the webinar series for the PI’s ERC project: <https://www.prd-erc.eu/events>.

ordinary citizens view protest in an era democratic erosion. In addition, given the centrality of protests for democracy in many scholarly accounts, this project will contribute to our understanding of why most people do not participate in protests. This contribution will be achieved through the project’s innovative focus on anti-meanings and no meanings of protest. Assessing the various meanings that citizens attribute to protest will also help identify specific reasons why protest may appeal to distinctive socio-demographic groups by assessing the covariates that the literature uses to explain political participation. Finally, the project will establish a foundation for next-step research aimed at identifying key differences in how individuals understand protest relative to voting, thus contributing to ongoing scholarly debates about the relationships between conventional and unconventional forms of political participation.

### C. RESEARCH DESIGN DESCRIPTION, PRELIMINARY FINDINGS, AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The multi-method research design builds on my ISF-funded research (grant no. 1246/20) on political efficacy in the digital era (Boulianne et al., 2023; Hooghe et al., 2024; Oser, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Oser & Boulianne, 2020; Oser, Feitosa, et al., 2023) and on my ERC Starting Grant project on participation and representation in the digital age (Han et al., 2024; Lindqvist et al., in press; Lyrvall et al., 2025; Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023).<sup>2</sup> A core outcome of these projects to date is the identification of contradictory trends in people’s attitudes toward political participation.

On the one hand, evidence suggests the growing importance of engaged citizenship norms and non-electoral participation (Boulianne et al., 2023; Oser, 2022c; Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023). On the other hand, research shows that traditional citizenship norms and electoral participation remain central to people’s perceptions of democracy (Oser, Feitosa, et al., 2023). Specifically, we observed a decline in the importance of protest in young people’s perceptions of good citizenship norms (Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023).

These findings highlight the need to understand people’s meanings of protest, since different meanings may have different implications for political behavior. The following description of the proposed project’s empirical studies builds on this prior research to investigate ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest and how these relate to political behavior. The integrated work plan (Table 1) provides information about the project’s empirical studies, which will undergo relevant ethical review. All manuscripts noted as research outcomes are intended for submission to high-impact peer-reviewed academic journals, and replication files will be made available for all studies according to FAIR principles (i.e., Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse of digital assets).

**C.1. Study #1, Literature mapping.** The first empirical study uses data-driven bibliometric methods to conduct literature mapping in order to inform the creation of an authoritative typology of meanings of protest in academic research. Due to the extensive number of studies on protest and the need to reduce subjective bias in selecting studies for review, the proposed study will employ novel data-driven bibliometric methods. This approach will enable a comprehensive mapping and analysis of the literature on protest, produced using a methodological approach that has been applied in prominent literature mapping studies (Fils & van Eck,

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.prd-erc.eu/publications> for an updated list of publications from the ERC project.

2018; Walter & Ophir, 2024). To achieve this, I will build on my prior collaborative work using literature mapping to investigate key political science terms (Abdala et al., 2025; Han et al., 2024; Shoshan & Oser, 2025; Shoshan, Oser & Castro, 2026). The questions that motivate the literature mapping in this project are:

RQ1a: What types of meanings of protest are found in scholarly research? (*RQ1a: Literature meanings*)

RQ1b: What are the most prominent studies that form the theoretical foundation in this literature, and who are the prominent scholars in this field? (*RQ1b: Prominent studies and scholars*)

RQ1c: How do the meanings of protest and the prominent studies change over time and across contexts? (*RQ1c: Historical and contextual analysis*)

Study #1 will answer these research questions using literature mapping methods of bibliometric analysis and visual mapping techniques. These methods enable scholars to create images of networks that clearly communicate complex information, while providing comprehensive coverage of research fields. This methodology reduces the level of subjective judgment often present in traditional literature reviews (Wagner et al., 2022). Article searches will be conducted in recognized scholarly databases using semi-automated statistical methods that ensure both broad recall and high precision (Huang et al., 2015). The resulting dataset will be analyzed using the bibliometric visualization tool VOSViewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010, 2014), alongside standard statistical analyses using quantitative analytical tools such as the bibliometrix package in R. I have already begun collaborating with research team members to develop the search terms for the proposed study and to produce preliminary findings. A preliminary search in the Web of Science, a leading scholarly database in terms of scope and accuracy, yielded 42,466 results.<sup>3</sup> While this magnitude of studies cannot be analyzed using traditional literature review methods, literature mapping is ideally suited for analyzing such large datasets (Fils & van Eck, 2018).

To investigate *RQ1a: Literature meanings*, we conduct an analysis that identifies the main themes in the entire academic literature on protest and the relationship between these themes, specifically regarding the extent to which they are studied together in scholarly research. To this end, we will create the type of map referred to in the literature as a “co-occurrence” map, which visualizes the relationships between keywords of studies related to the topic of protest. Co-occurrence maps have been successfully used in previous studies to identify research themes and the relationships between them in various fields, including political science (Han et al., 2024; Shoshan & Oser, 2025; Shoshan, Oser & Castro, 2026; Walter & Ophir, 2024).

To investigate *RQ1b: Prominent studies and scholars*, we will create a literature map that identifies groups of canonical studies that are frequently cited together in the records included in the comprehensive dataset of studies on protest. This type of map, known as a “co-citation map,” is used to identify the canonical studies of a research field, the areas of research within the canonical literature, and the relationships between these areas of research in terms of how frequently they are cited together (Shoshan & Oser, 2025; Walter & Ophir, 2024). To identify prominent scholars in the field, we will use recently developed analytical tools to

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<sup>3</sup> Conducted on July 27, 2025. The Boolean search term for this preliminary search was: "protest\*" NOT "protestant\*" (Topic). In subsequent stages, this term will be refined to include related terms that meet established relevance thresholds confirmed through automatic and semi-automatic methods (Huang et al., 2015), following Shoshan and Oser (2025).

identify authors’ gender and affiliated country context, and will analyze how these socio-demographic characteristics of prominent authors change over time (Grossman et al., in press).<sup>4</sup>

To investigate *RQ1c: Historical and contextual analysis*, we will begin by dividing the comprehensive dataset of studies on protest into relevant historical periods, which is a common approach in this field (Fils & van Eck, 2018; Shoshan, Oser & Castro, 2026; Walter & Ophir, 2024). For each of these periods, we will create a co-occurrence map, and compare the main themes and types of meanings these themes represent. This analysis will show whether meaningful changes have occurred in the types of meanings assigned to protest in academic literature across different historical periods. We will expand upon this periodic historical analysis approach by using a recently developed “temporal overlay” technique that identifies thematic clusters and over-time evolution (Colavizza et al., 2021). The contextual analysis is facilitated by identifying the national context of each study, and analyzing changes in the geographic context of prominent studies over time.

By answering these three research questions through literature mapping, we will develop an empirically-grounded and comprehensive overview of the types of meanings of protest in scholarly literature, assess the evolution of these meanings over time, and identify the most prominent studies and scholars that have contributed to informing each type of meaning.

Preliminary findings: We tested the capabilities of literature mapping on this topic by creating a preliminary keywords co-occurrence map of records on protest published in 2024 (Figure 1). The map identifies five clusters representing five themes of research. A preliminary analysis of the clusters identified in the map suggests that they focus on the following main themes:

- 1) Protest and social structures (red)
- 2) Collective action and participation (green)
- 3) Protest and social media (blue)
- 4) Protest and political outcomes (yellow)
- 5) Resistance and repression (purple)

These are early-stage preliminary findings of the co-occurrence map due to the time-limited nature of the dataset that we have constructed thus far. Validating and elaborating on these results to obtain definitive findings that answer our research questions will require a series of systematic and skilled research steps. Following the literature mapping approach that we developed in a previous study (Shoshan & Oser, 2025), these steps include: 1. Expanding the search term; 2. Retrieving all available records going back to the earliest study on record; 3. Eliminating duplicates and spelling variations; 4. Creating a comprehensive keyword co-occurrence map; 5. Analyzing the clusters to establish the theme associated with each; 6. Identifying the type of meanings of protest associated with each theme in the map; 7. Dividing the dataset into relevant historical periods, and comparing the themes identified in each period; and 8. Creating a co-citation map that identifies

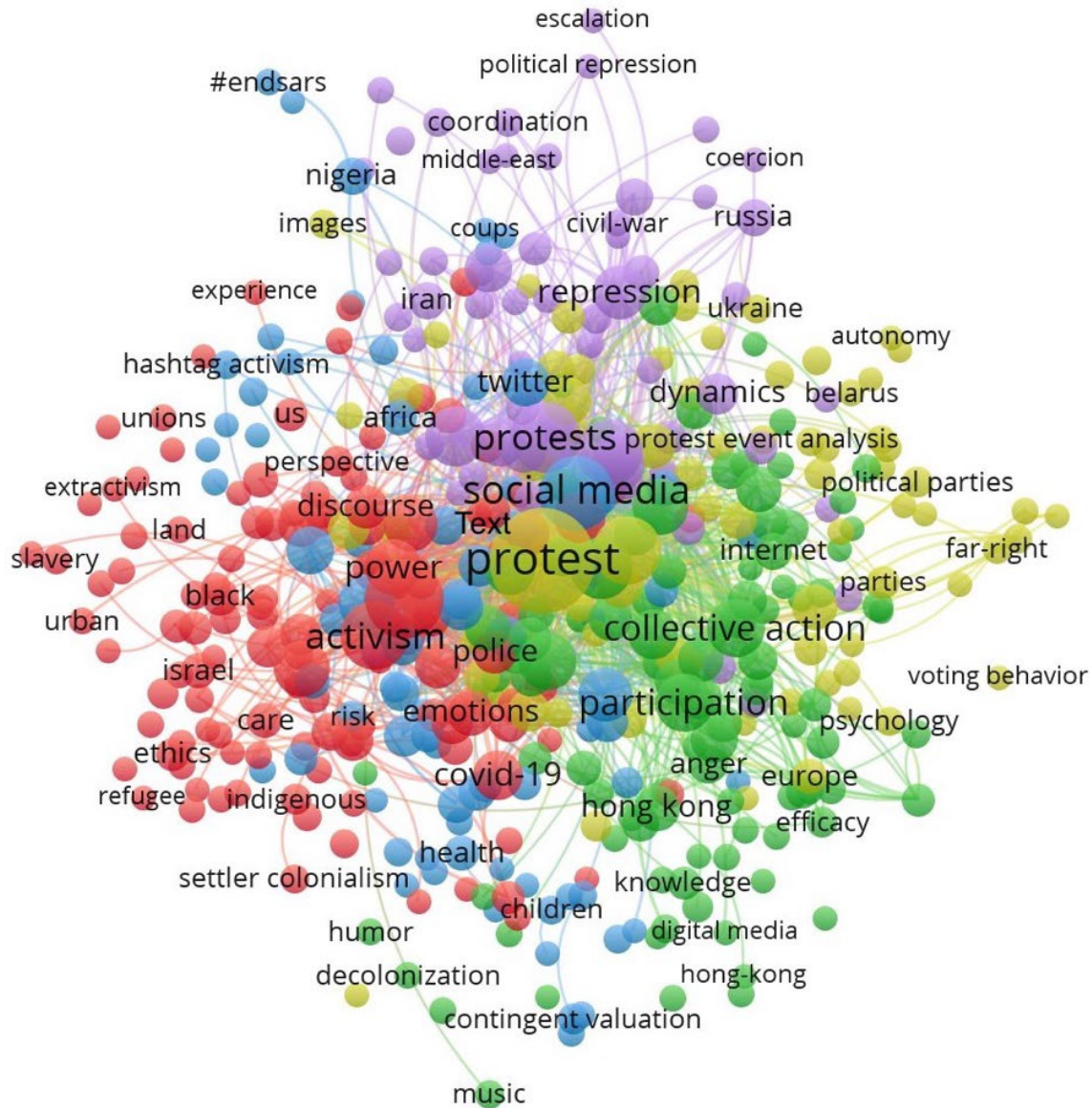
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<sup>4</sup> To analyze gender, we will follow Grossman et al.’s (in press) approach of using the *genderize.io* package, which is an API that identifies a person’s gender based on first names and country of affiliation. Consistent with other studies using this approach, Grossman et al. (in press) report successfully assigning gender to about 97% of the authors in their study based on this information.

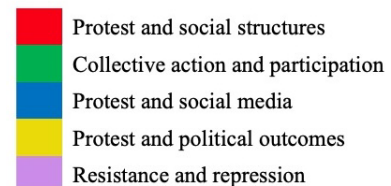


canonical research areas. The expected output for this analysis (Outcome 1.1) is a manuscript featuring a comprehensive bibliometric analysis that will include the creation of an original authoritative typology of meanings of protest in academic literature.

**Figure 1.** Main themes in scholarship on protest published Jan. 1 – Dec. 31, 2024, co-occurrence map.



*Notes:* Analysis of publication data on 1,962 records downloaded from the Web of Science. n=445 keywords out of N=7,559.





In addition to this first manuscript using data from Web of Science—a proprietary database that does not permit public posting of its data—we will conduct a complementary analysis informed by recently developed open access tools (Alonso-Alvarez & van Eck, 2024; Céspedes et al. 2025). This analysis is motivated by a recognition of the global growth of protest behavior and scholarship. Our previous literature mapping research on voting, for example, indicates that the field is dominated by male scholars affiliated with institutions in the United States and other developed democracies, and that its most prominent studies have been authored almost exclusively by men (Abdala et al., 2025). We expect to reach a similar finding using the Web of Science dataset for protest.

However, recent research indicates that literature mapping research that uses open access datasets may lead to a more comprehensive coverage of the field compared to proprietary datasets such as Web of Science (Alonso-Alvarez & van Eck, 2024; Culbert et al. 2025). We expect that open access databases may identify a more heterogeneous set of studies, with more diverse authors in terms of characteristics such as gender and country of affiliation. An additional promise of this approach is that the data and replication code can be posted publicly, in accordance with contemporary best practices in the social sciences. The planned outcome for this analysis (Outcome 1.2) is a manuscript that will contribute both substantively and methodologically, which we envision submitting to review to a journal such as *Political Science Research Methods*.

Taken together, the manuscripts produced in Study #1 will provide a uniquely comprehensive answer to RQ1 on the meanings of protest in scholarship. The insights from the literature mapping study will directly inform our development of the cross-national survey in Study #2.

**C.2. Study #2, Cross-national survey.** The second empirical study is a cross-national survey of countries that are diverse in terms of their levels of democratic development, and their citizens’ patterns of political engagement. This study investigates the following research questions:

RQ2: What are ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest, and how do they compare with the meanings identified in the scholarly literature? (*RQ2: Citizens versus scholars*)

RQ3a: How do distinctive meanings of protest correlate with citizens’ key individual-level characteristics, including socio-demographic characteristics and political behavior? (*RQ3a: Individual-level correlates*)

RQ3b: What mechanisms explain the identified associations between individuals’ *meanings of protest* and their *protest behavior*? (*RQ3b: Meaning-behavior mechanisms*).

I have prepared a preliminary selection of countries in coordination with the project’s international collaborator, Prof. Carolina Plescia, and in consultation with leading survey firms. The work plan in Year 2 (2027-2028) includes steps to finalize country selection based on updated data at that time (See Table 1, work plan for Study #2). The country selection rationale aims to produce a parallel dataset to Plescia’s (2025) focus on the meanings of voting. Plescia’s (2025) selection criteria included selecting diverse countries in terms of their electoral systems and compulsory voting policies. As recent evidence indicates a robust relationship between voter turnout and protest levels (Kikuta, 2025), it is useful to retain these electoral-oriented selection criteria for the proposed project’s focus on protest. In addition to these criteria, Plescia (2025) selected a diverse group of countries in terms of their ranking on the liberal democracy index from the Varieties of

Democracy (V-Dem) Institute based on their 2023 data, yielding a selection of 13 countries (See Plescia 2025, p. 50, Table 3.1 “Case selection”).

Consultation with several leading survey firms indicates that it is feasible to implement a study on “the meanings of protest” for most of these countries, although our focus on the topic of “protest” will not be feasible in some contexts due to potential legal challenges to implementation, and expected biased responses due to social desirability bias (namely for Kenya, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Turkey). In addition, the proposed project plans to add Israel as a country case study due to the importance of protest to Israeli politics in recent years, and the important question of the degree to which Israeli protest movements and political behavior contribute to or ameliorate contemporary democratic challenges (Gidron 2023; Gidron et al., 2025; Oser 2022a). This yields a planned country sample of 10 countries in which the survey will be conducted online: Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Estonia, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Serbia, Sweden, and the United States. According to measures produced by the Varieties of Democracy Institute, which is one of the most prominent and widely used academic indices of democracy, our planned country sample is diverse on several key measures, including regime classification, the liberal democracy index, and the participatory component index (Nord et al., 2025). The newly added country, Israel, ranks around the middle of the selected countries on all of these measures. See Table 2 for additional details.

The survey instrument will include open-ended questions, as well as a battery of closed-ended questions about the meanings of protest, adapting the survey instrument developed by Plescia (2025) focused on the meanings of voting (see Plescia et al. 2025 for the full survey instrument and dataset). The main empirical insight informing the survey instrument is that open-ended questions about the meanings of abstract concepts, provided with minimal direction from the researcher, can help to overcome the limitations of including only closed standardized questions (Plescia, 2025, Chapter 2). The second insight is that respondents may not provide a complete answer when asked a question only once. Follow-up questions that ask: “What else?” are therefore important to obtain a fuller range of meanings from the same respondent (Haddock & Zanna, 1998). Building on these insights, the survey instrument will include the open-ended question: “What does protest mean to you?” and two follow-up questions that ask respondents about other meanings they may hold.

To refine the survey instrument, we will follow contemporary best practices of conducting qualitative pre-testing and cognitive interviews, as well as a small-n pilot survey that will also include a pretest of the experimental component. To obtain high-quality data on respondents’ political behavior, we will follow innovations introduced by Theocharis and van Deth (2018) to include close-ended questions (i.e., yes/no questions concerning the past 12 months) about a larger number of political activities than in standard cross-national surveys, along with an open-ended question that invites respondents to note additional actions taken. While this innovation will facilitate gleaning comprehensive data on citizens’ political behavior, our survey design will also address a consistent challenge of the overestimation of political participation in survey-based research due to social desirability bias and memory failures (Anduiza & Tormos, 2022). To date, most research on respondents’ bias of overestimating their political participation to create positive social impressions has focused on the act of voting, and the degree to which non-electoral participation may be mis-estimated has received little attention. However, methodological research shows that self-administered

surveys have produced less social desirability bias compared to face-to-face modalities (Anduiza & Tormos, 2022), and our online survey instrument will be self-administered. While the field has not developed consistently reliable methods for completely eliminating social desirability bias, we will incorporate recent innovations that recommend the use of vignette designs in which respondents receive information about what others think about a topic before expressing their own opinions (Bischof et al., 2025). We will also use question wording alternatives tested by Persson and Solevid (2014) which reduce this bias through the inclusion of “face-saving” responses (e.g., “have not done it before but consider doing it in the future”).

Our investigation of the research question about citizens’ and scholars’ understandings (*RQ2: Citizens versus scholars*) will include an analysis of both the open-ended and closed-ended responses about the meanings of protest. This will involve a systematic analysis of variations in the meanings of protest that are identified. The open-ended questions will be analyzed using manual coding and AI coding techniques, including topic modeling. We expect that these findings on protest may align with Plescia’s (2025) work on voting in terms of the identification of meaningful overlap in the interpretation of results from the open-ended and closed-ended questions. The results of this analysis will be integrated with the findings of Study #1 on the scholarly literature’s identification of the meanings of protest. The resulting manuscript (Table 1, Outcome 2.1) will focus on theoretical insights gained by comparing the findings from Study #1 (Literature mapping) and Study #2 (Cross-national survey). This comparison is necessary to highlight meaningful gaps in the literature that can be addressed in future theoretical and empirical research.

Having established citizens’ meanings of protest and how they compare to the literature, we will proceed to investigate how distinctive meanings of protest correlate with key individual-level characteristics, including socio-demographic characteristics and political behavior (*RQ3a: Individual-level correlates*). To answer this research question we will examine the relationship between individuals’ distinctive meanings of protest and the individual-level socio-demographic characteristics that are theoretically meaningful for this field of research, such as age, socio-economic status, left-right ideology, and affective polarization (Anduiza et al., 2019; Borbáth, 2024; Boulding & Holzner, 2021; Gidron et al., 2025; Giugni & Grasso, 2019; Grasso, 2014, 2016, 2018; Kostelka & Rovny, 2019; Torcal et al., 2016; Uba & Bosi, 2022). For political behavior, we will build on Plescia’s (2025) work and prior literature on political participation patterns (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Oser, 2022c) to distinguish between conventional participation (e.g., voting, campaigning, and contacting officials), and unconventional participation (e.g., signing a petition, taking part in a demonstration, and online engagement).<sup>5</sup>

A central tension identified in Plescia’s research in relation to political behavior is that one group of theories, *focused on voting*, suggests that some key mechanisms, such as political knowledge and efficacy, underlie all types of political behavior, including conventional and unconventional forms of participation (Borbáth & Hutter, 2022; Hutter & Kriesi, 2013; Lee & Valenzuela, 2024). Another set of theories, focusing on *political participation more broadly*, argues that conventional and unconventional participation are driven

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<sup>5</sup> For the sake of brevity, only two main categorizations of participation are noted here. The project’s research outcomes will analyze additional and more nuanced categories as discussed in the literature (e.g., Teorell, Torcal & Montero, 2007; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018) and reviewed in Oser (2022c, pp. 817-818).

by different mechanisms. These theories imply that having any meaning of voting should correlate with higher overall levels of conventional participation. Conversely, having an anti-meaning of voting should correlate with higher overall levels of unconventional participation. Plescia’s findings about voting provide support for both sets of theories. On the one hand, *having a meaning for voting* correlates with higher levels of voter turnout and of unconventional participation, supporting claims about similar mechanisms. On the other hand, *having an anti-meaning of voting* correlates with lower levels of voting but higher levels of unconventional participation, supporting the argument that different mechanisms drive both behaviors. We will report findings on this central tension in a manuscript (Table 1, Outcome 2.2) that promises to shed new light on the meanings citizens attribute to political behaviors that have shifted in prevalence in recent years, particularly amid declining voting rates and a concurrent rise in protest activities.

To answer the final research question of Study #2 about what mechanisms explain the identified associations between individuals’ *meanings of protest* and their *protest behavior* (RQ3b: *Meaning-behavior mechanisms*) we will build on Study #1 to design experimental components for the cross-national survey. The precise design for these experimental components cannot be fully determined in advance, since the findings from Study #1 will guide the experimental design. However, we plan for the experimental component to include an investigation of the effects of the content of protest campaigns on citizens’ understandings of protest, with particular attention to protest valence. An experimental design is necessary to investigate this question in order to assess the causal impact of the protest valence on individuals’ likelihood of participation. For example, a relevant experimental component would include a randomized vignette treatment in which one group of respondents is exposed to a radical right protest (e.g., a Nazi march), a second group is exposed to a relatively mainstream policy-oriented protest (e.g., families and teachers in support of education funding), and a third group is exposed to a radical left protest (e.g., climate activists damaging art). Recent innovative studies that have included experimental components on related topics will inform the survey design (e.g., Giebler et al., 2025; Kaftan & Gessler, 2025; Martini & Torcal, 2019; Rico et al., 2020; Susanszky & Borbáth, 2025; Wunsch et al., 2025). This type of experimental exposure to distinctive protest valences will provide new insights into the meanings citizens attribute to different types of protest, and how this affects their intention to participate politically.

As noted in Table 1, Study #2 will produce a dataset on the meanings of protest that we will post publicly on the Harvard Dataverse as a valuable resource for the scientific community, consistent with Plescia et al.’s (2025) publicly posted dataset on the meanings of voting. Our survey fieldwork will follow accepted practices and the code of ethics of the American Political Science Association, the American Psychological Association, and the World Association for Public Opinion Research. In addition, we plan to conduct research on each of the research questions in Study #2 to produce a stand-alone manuscript for submission to high-impact peer-reviewed journals. Finally, we aim to assess whether some of the findings produced in Study #2 could be published as a relatively concise book, such as in the *Cambridge Elements* series.

**C.3. Project integration, potential pitfalls, and strategies to address them.** We will promote the visibility of the project’s findings in academia and among the general public (Table 1, Outcome 3.1), and establish a foundation for the design of future multinational collaborative research (Table 1, Outcome 3.3).

Our next-step research design will focus on comparing ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest with the meanings of other terms related to political participation, including voting and representation (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2022; Lavi et al., 2024; Plescia, 2025). The international collaboration with Prof. Carolina Plescia provides a valuable foundation for future comparisons of her findings on ordinary citizens’ meanings of voting with those of the proposed project. Additionally, the work plan includes planning and conducting an international workshop in years 3-4 of the project (Table 1, Outcome 3.2).<sup>6</sup> The workshop will focus on presenting the project’s outcomes and gathering input from international experts on future research that could be conducted in the context of potentially broader research collaborations. We anticipate that a key component of this next-step multi-country collaborative research will be to select ideal country case studies for conducting qualitative interview fieldwork, informed by the cross-national survey findings. This type of intensive multinational fieldwork has the potential to shed new light on individual-level mechanisms that link the meanings of protest with political behavior, and would be ideal to advance with the support of multi-country grant funding such as the European Research Council Synergy grants, a Horizon 2020 Consortium, the U.S.-Israel Binational Science Foundation, or the German-Israeli Foundation.

The main *theoretical challenge* of the proposed project is to synthesize studies of protest to develop a theory-informed typology of the meanings of protest in academic literature in Study #1, while integrating these insights into Study #2’s cross-national survey. Although different theoretical approaches to studying protest have been in dialogue with one another, conversations across multiple lines of research have been limited, with some exceptions (e.g., Giugni & Grasso, 2022a, 2022b; Hutter, 2014; Hunger & Hutter, 2025). My academic record reflects my capacity to meet this challenge by using multiple methods to synthesize scholarship on political concepts and behavior across different levels of analysis (Han et al., 2024; Lindqvist et al., in press; Oser et al. 2022; Shoshan & Oser, 2025).

A potential pitfall is that the work plan requires a relatively *large and skilled research team*. As noted in the summary of my most recent ISF grant achievements (project number 1246/20), I have worked to proactively address this challenge by collaborating with colleagues at BGU and beyond to strengthen student recruitment and training, and by participating actively in leadership roles in national and international associations, conferences, and research workshops, including as an elected member of the Israel Young Academy and its three-person executive committee. Through these efforts, I have already identified several highly qualified potential research team members for the proposed project. These include two research team members from my current ERC project, whose funding on that project will conclude before the expected start date of the proposed ISF project: Francisca Castro, currently a postdoctoral researcher, has expertise in literature mapping and large-n survey analysis methods; and Barak Zur, a PhD student at Tel Aviv University, brings expertise in large-n analysis and computational text analysis.<sup>7</sup> The main challenge at this stage is securing sufficient resources to launch the project’s work plan.

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<sup>6</sup> This workshop will ideally take place in person. However, we can use online workshop systems I have developed through the ERC project (<https://www.prd-erc.eu/events>) if preferable due to budget scarcity or political instability.

<sup>7</sup> See the project website’s team page (<https://www.prd-erc.eu/team>) for additional information about these researchers.

## TABLES

**Table 1.** Integrated work plan (*MA* = *MA student*; *PhD* = *PhD student*; *PD* = *postdoctoral researcher*)

| Outcomes                                                               | Years <sup>a</sup> | Task description & research team members responsible for tasks <sup>b</sup>                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Study #1. Literature mapping</b>                                    | 1-2                | Research team members: MA1 (Y1-2); PhD1 (Y1-2); PD1 (Y1-2)                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>1.1, Manuscript: Scholarly meanings of protest, RQ1</i>             | 1<br>1<br>1-2      | Design literature search and retrieve dataset<br>Conduct literature mapping analysis<br>Draft manuscript, present at conferences, and submit for publication                                                         |
| <i>1.2 Manuscript: Global investigations via open access data, RQ1</i> | 1<br>1<br>1-2      | Design literature search and retrieve dataset<br>Conduct literature mapping analysis<br>Draft manuscript, present at conferences, and submit for publication                                                         |
| <b>Study #2. Cross-national survey</b>                                 | 2-4                | Research team members: PhD1 (Y3-4); PD2 (Y3-4)                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>2.0, Survey: Conduct cross-national survey</i>                      | 2-3<br>3-4         | Finalize country selection and conduct survey<br>Clean and code dataset in preparation for public posting at Harvard Dataverse                                                                                       |
| <i>2.1, Manuscript, RQ2</i>                                            | 2-3<br>3-4         | Analyze data to answer RQ2 (Citizens versus scholars)<br>Draft manuscript, present at conferences, submit for publication                                                                                            |
| <i>2.2, Manuscript, RQ3a</i>                                           | 3<br>4             | Analyze data to answer RQ3a (Individual-level correlates)<br>Draft manuscript, present at conferences, submit for publication                                                                                        |
| <i>2.3, Manuscript, RQ3b</i>                                           | 2<br>3<br>4        | Design survey experiment to answer (RQ3b: Meaning-behavior mechanisms)<br>Analyze mechanisms that connect protest meaning and political behavior<br>Draft manuscript, present at conferences, submit for publication |
| <b>Project integration and next-step plan</b>                          | 2-4                | Research team members: All                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>Outcome 3.1: Public scholarship, meanings of protest</i>            | 2-4<br>2-4         | Create public-facing summaries of research outcomes (All)<br>Create and implement a broad distribution plan (All)                                                                                                    |
| <i>Outcome 3.2: International workshop for next-step research</i>      | 3-4<br>4<br>4      | Submit international workshop applications (ISF, Rothschild, BGU) (PD2)<br>Plan and conduct an international workshop (PhD1, PD2)<br>Consult workshop colleagues to specify next-step research (PhD1, PD2)           |
| <i>Outcome 3.3: Next-step grant app.</i>                               | 3-4<br>4           | Assess Israeli and international next-step grant applications (PhD1, PD2)<br>Prepare and submit grant applications for next-step research (PhD1, PD2)                                                                |

<sup>a</sup> The timeline is strategically budgeted for the PI to supervise and mentor research team members to be credited authors and co-authors on the published outcomes of the project.

<sup>b</sup> Summary of personnel timing:

| Team members | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 | Year 4 |
|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| MA#1         |        |        |        |        |
| PhD#1        |        |        |        |        |
| PD#1         |        |        |        |        |
| PD#2         |        |        |        |        |



**Table 2.** Preliminary country selection criteria for large-n survey

| <b>Countries</b> | <b>Regime classification</b> | <b>Liberal democracy index</b> | <b>Participatory component index</b> |
|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Australia        | (1) liberal democracy        | 0.81                           | 0.70                                 |
| Brazil           | (2) electoral democracy      | 0.71                           | 0.63                                 |
| Colombia         | (2) electoral democracy      | 0.56                           | 0.63                                 |
| Estonia          | (1) liberal democracy        | 0.85                           | 0.63                                 |
| Hungary          | (3) electoral autocracy      | 0.32                           | 0.53                                 |
| Israel           | (2) electoral democracy      | 0.62                           | 0.60                                 |
| Italy            | (1) liberal democracy        | 0.70                           | 0.75                                 |
| Serbia           | (3) electoral autocracy      | 0.22                           | 0.55                                 |
| Sweden           | (1) liberal democracy        | 0.84                           | 0.65                                 |
| United States    | (1) liberal democracy        | 0.75                           | 0.66                                 |
| <b>Average</b>   |                              | <b>0.64</b>                    | <b>0.63</b>                          |

Source: Nord et al. (2025). For regime classification see p. 14. For the liberal democracy index and the participatory component index, see p. 62.

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