

Has Protest Increased Since the 1970s? How a Survey Question Can Construct a Spurious Trendⁱ

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Abstract

The literature on political participation asserts that protest has increased over the last four decades, all over the world. This trend is derived from surveys asking questions about participation in various forms of protest, including demonstrations, boycotts, and *unofficial* strikes. The latter question made sense in the context in which it was formulated, Britain in the early 1970s, and with regard to the original methodological aim, measuring ‘protest potential’. The absence of a generic question on strikes, however, distorts our understanding of protest. Two sources of data on Britain in the 1980s and 1990s – a population survey and an event catalogue – comprehensively measure strikes. They show that strikes greatly outnumbered demonstrations and other forms of protest. Another claim in the literature, that protesters are highly educated, no longer holds once strikes are properly counted. Strikes in Britain, as in many countries, have dramatically declined since the 1980s. This decline more than offsets any increase in demonstrations and boycotts, meaning that the total volume of protest has decreased. The episode illustrates how survey questions, when replicated without scrutiny, can misconstrue social trends.

Keywords: Protest; social movements; strikes; political participation; sociology of knowledge

Protest is on the rise. There is ‘an international trend towards rising rates of unconventional or elite-challenging behavior’ (Inglehart 1997: 312); ‘the proportion of citizens engaged in protest politics has risen, and risen dramatically, during the late twentieth century’ (Norris 2002: 197); ‘more challenging protest activities display a marked increase from 1975 to the present’ (Dalton 2008b: 90); ‘the citizenry exhibits a growing readiness for, and actual participation in, various forms of protest’ (Rucht 2007: 713); ‘protest levels are increasing, even as nations develop economically and politically’ (Dalton, Van Sickle and Weldon 2010: 71); ‘citizens in advanced democracies have become more likely to participate in social movement activities’ (Dodson 2011: 490); ‘since the 1970s there has been a dramatic rise in the number of people claiming to have engaged in protest’ (Saunders et al. 2012: 263). In short, we live now in a ‘social movement society’ (Neidhardt and Rucht 1993; Meyer and

Tarrow 1998). The rise in protest is welcomed for counterbalancing the fall in voting and party membership (e.g. Power Inquiry 2006: 48–9; Dalton 2008a: 71). This trend in protest, widely accepted in sociology and political science, derives from population surveys carried out since the early 1970s. A standard battery of questions asks whether the respondent has taken part in particular forms of protest, such as lawful demonstrations or unofficial strikes. Only a minority of adults have undertaken any of these actions (aside from signing a petition), but this proportion has increased over time in most countries.

This apparent trend, I will argue, is spurious, at least for Britain. The standard battery of questions – canonized by the World Values Survey – does not properly capture participation in strikes, and so misses the bulk of protest actions. Strikes are the one form of protest on which governments collect statistics (Franzosi 1989). These statistics show that strikes have declined dramatically since the 1980s in Britain, as in many countries. The decline in strikes more than offsets the increase in some forms of protest captured by survey questions. The notion of a ‘social movement society’ is sustainable only if we ignore the collapse of the labour movement. My argument rests on two sources of evidence from the 1980s and 1990s. The British Social Attitudes survey is exceptional for including questions on strikes *tout court*. The European Protest and Coercion Dataset comprehensively catalogues events. Both sources demonstrate that strikes dominated other forms of protest actions. Analysis of events also reveals how surveys smooth away the temporal volatility of protest. Besides distorting our view of change over time, the survey questions also paint a misleading portrait of the typical protester. The assertion that education is positively associated with protest (e.g. Dalton 2008a: 69; Norris 2002: 201; Rucht 2007: 715) is no longer tenable when strikers – who tend to be less educated – are properly counted.

The definition of ‘protest’ requires some preliminary remarks. The term is sometimes used narrowly – with an indefinite article – to denote a particular type of gathering, synonymous with a march or demonstration (e.g. Caren, Ghoshal and Ribas 2011). The term is also used broadly to denote collective action which combines the expression of grievance and the demand for change, directed against a powerful adversary. In this sense it is differentiated from more institutionalized means of exercising political voice, classically voting; it is also commonly differentiated from lethal violence. This article uses the broader concept, as specified or implied in the literature quoted above, focusing on ‘confrontational tactics such as marches, strikes, and demonstrations that disrupt the day-to-day life of a community’ (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004: 263; see also Piven and Cloward 1977: 3–4). Such actions are costly for the participants: strikers lose wages, demonstrators give up time (and usually pay for travel); participants sometimes risk steeper costs, such as arrest or injury. Even a boycott is costly because the purchaser foregoes a superior product. The element of significant cost differentiates these actions from signing a petition, which takes a moment.ⁱⁱ Most British adults have signed a petition, and the government has instituted a website to

encourage petitions, whereas the other protest actions are genuinely unconventional. It should be emphasized, though, that my intention is not to impose a particular definition of protest, but rather to show how a battery of survey questions came to define the phenomenon, which had the unintended consequence of undercounting strikes.

This article focuses on Britain, where the survey questions were originally formulated, and which experienced significant protest from the 1970s to the 1990s (Rootes and Saunders 2005). In the early 1970s, mass strikes challenged the government's attempts to curb the power of the labour movement; the general election of 1974 was precipitated by a coalminers' strike. In the late 1970s, widespread strikes stoked wage inflation and disrupted ordinary life, symbolized by power cuts and uncollected rubbish. The coalminers' strike in 1984 concentrated resistance to the Conservative government. Foreign policy was challenged by the anti-war movement, famously in the women's camp outside the Greenham Common airforce base, started in 1981. The environmental movement used novel forms of direct action to resist motorway construction. Finally, the government's poll tax provoked in 1990 'the most widespread campaign of civil disobedience seen in Britain in the twentieth century' (Rootes 2003: 142). Northern Ireland is excluded for theoretical and empirical reasons. Its politics operated according to a different logic, dominated in the 1970s and 1980s by violence. It is also covered less comprehensively by the surveys used here.

1. Surveying protest

After the Second World War, population surveys transformed the study of electoral politics; public opinion could be measured, or perhaps constructed, scientifically (Osborne and Rose 1999; Savage 2010: ch. 8). The same tools could be applied to protest. Surveys were initially undertaken of protesters or members of movement organizations (e.g. Parkin 1968), and such surveys have continued (e.g. Saunders et al. 2012). In order to compare the characteristics of participants with those of non-participants, however, it is necessary to sample from a population or sub-population. One of the earliest examples was a survey of black university students in the American South in 1962, asking whether they had taken part in sit-ins against segregation (Biggs 2006). These sit-ins were the harbinger of a wave of protest that transformed politics in the 1960s. In Britain there was nothing comparable to the Civil Rights movement in the USA or to 1968 in France, but the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Parkin 1968) and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (Thomas 2002) had a major political impact. This phenomenon demanded investigation using population surveys. The most ambitious project was the Political Action Survey (PAS), launched in 1971, eventually involving eight countries (Barnes and Kaase 1979). Alan Marsh – a doctoral student at the London School of Economics and Political Science – played a leading role, pioneering the survey questions which now dominate the field.

Compared to voting, protest – or ‘unorthodox political behaviour’, as PAS preferred – poses problems for survey methods. Such actions ‘occur irregularly, infrequently, and in specific, often local, contexts of mobilization’ (Barnes and Kaase 1979: 42). Most obvious is the numerical problem. Because unorthodox political action is (by definition) confined to a small minority, this increases sampling variability. In a sample of a thousand adults, for example, if only eight have undertaken an occupation, then the comparison between occupiers and the rest lacks statistical power. Marsh (1974) therefore developed a scale of ‘protest potential’: respondents were asked not just whether they had taken part but also whether they would or might do so.ⁱⁱⁱ (A similar scale was constructed around the same time by Muller; e.g. Muller 1979.) This neatly overcame the problem of small numbers: only 6 per cent had taken part in a lawful demonstration in the preceding ten years, but a further 51 per cent said that they would or might do so (Marsh 1977: 45).

Aside from numbers, there is the problem of definition. Formally, PAS defined unorthodox or unconventional political behaviour as that which ‘does not correspond to the norms and customs that regulate political participation’ (Barnes and Kaase 1979: 41). No rules or laws ‘encourage the regular occurrence of street protests, demonstrations, boycotts, rent strikes, political strikes, the occupation of administrative premises and so on’ (Marsh 1977: 39). An obvious objection is that many types of protest are defined and protected by law (as the category ‘lawful demonstration’ proves); certainly almost all instances of protest are shaped by norms and customs. What proved extraordinarily influential was not the theoretical definition but the measurement tool: the list of specific actions given to respondents (Marsh 1977: 45; cf. 1974: 110). These actions were selected to be arrayed on a unidimensional and cumulative scale of protest potential; respondents physically sorted cards representing forms of action.

At one end of this continuum are mild forms of protest like signing petitions and peaceful marches, at the other end are extreme forms of deliberate damage to property and the use of personal violence. Between these extremes are ordered: demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, occupations, and similar activities. (Marsh 1976: 18)

As evidence of the influence of this scale, Marsh’s (1977: 42) diagram is reproduced in a leading textbook which has gone through five editions (Dalton 2006: 65).

The question on strikes has an intriguing history. Marsh’s preliminary exploration in 1972 included strikes as one of the ‘stimulus examples’. This was subsequently changed to refer to a particular subtype: *unofficial* strikes (Marsh 1974: 109–10). As Marsh recalls,

pilot respondents themselves queried whether we meant official or unofficial (or ‘wildcat’) strikes and it seemed to me that unofficial strikes had become a touchstone of unorthodox political action in contrast to the more orthodox official actions. (personal communication, 31 January 2013)

An unofficial strike is formally one that ‘takes place contrary to union rules and contrary to agreed procedures’ (Eldridge and Cameron 1964: 35; also Marsh and Evans 1973: 330). There is no implication that it breaks the law. An unofficial strike may be legal; an official strike may be illegal. The distinction between official and unofficial is inherently ambiguous: what begins as an unofficial strike can be retrospectively endorsed by the union leaders, and thus deemed official; aficionados differentiate ‘official unofficial’ from ‘unofficial unofficial’ strikes (Crouch 1978: 226).^{iv} Clearly the unofficial strike is a slippery category. Its significance can be understood only in the particular context of Britain in the early 1970s.

Unofficial strikes emerged – and were construed – as a social problem in the 1960s. Indeed, criticism of this particular tactic provoked rebuttal in the *British Journal of Sociology* (Eldridge and Cameron 1964). The Donovan Commission, established to investigate conflict between labour and capital, claimed that ‘95 per cent of stoppages are unofficial, and unofficial strikes are becoming more common’; it warned that ‘the economic consequences are obvious and serious’ (Royal Commission 1968: 266–67). The legislative solution pursued by the Conservative government was the Industrial Relations Act of 1971, fiercely opposed by trade unions (Moran 1977). Amongst other provisions, the Act removed legal protection from unofficial strikes: trade unions would be liable for the ensuing financial loss. In the spring and summer of 1972, the new National Industrial Relations Court was tested by a case involving unofficial ‘blacking’ – refusal to handle goods – and picketing by dock workers. A farcical saga ended with five shop stewards in prison, provoking massive strikes and proving the new system to be unworkable (Darlington and Lyddon 2001: ch. 5). In this context, we can understand why Marsh isolated unofficial strikes to construct the cumulative scale of protest potential: they ‘mark a third threshold position, wherein the question of conscious illegality arises’ (Marsh 1977: 41–43) – in his thesis (but not the book) the sentence continues, ‘especially since the Conservative Government was still pursuing its anti-strike legislation at the time of the survey’ (Marsh 1976: 53). The Act was fatally weakened by the end of 1972, and was finally repealed in 1974. By then, as will be seen below, the profile of strikes had been transformed.

Marsh’s question on unofficial strikes transcended its original historical context and specific methodological purpose, to enter the pantheon of survey questions. The PAS questions were adopted by the European Values Survey, with slight modification. The standard battery asks whether the respondent has ever done, might do, or would never do five ‘forms of political action’: signing a petition, joining in boycotts, attending lawful demonstrations, joining unofficial strikes, and occupying buildings or factories.^v The most important alteration was asking whether the respondent has ‘actually *done* any of these things’ – over their entire lifetime – rather than ‘during the past ten years’. This mitigates the methodological problem of small numbers but loses temporal precision; respondents may be recalling actions performed several decades earlier. As part of the World Values Survey

(WVS), these questions have now been asked consistently in over seventy countries, from Albania to Zimbabwe.^{vi} They therefore constitute the most important source of data on protest at the population level.

Some studies continue to examine ‘protest potential’, combining what respondents have done with what they say they would or might do. Most recent studies, though, focus exclusively on what respondents have done. No longer are the five forms of action justified as thresholds along a unidimensional and cumulative scale. It is assumed that ‘these five examples tap the most common forms of collective action’ (Dalton, Van Sickle and Weldon 2010: 61). Whereas social scientists in the 1970s spent pages conceptualizing their object and justifying their measurement, now the standard battery of questions are taken to define protest. ‘Blackboxing’ has occurred, to purloin Latour’s (1999: 304) term denoting ‘the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success’. This is most pronounced when the five forms of action are summed to make an index (e.g. Dalton, Van Sickle and Weldon 2010) or dichotomized into any action versus none (e.g. Corcoran, Pettinicchio and Young 2011). Even without such aggregation, blackboxing remains an apt metaphor: these questions have not been scrutinized or calibrated against other surveys and other kinds of data. This article is a first step.

[Figure I about here]

Let us begin with the survey evidence for Britain. Figure I plots the proportion of WVS respondents who have ever participated in the forms of action (petitions excluded).^{vii} This series is typically extended back to 1974 using PAS (e.g. Dalton 2006: 68; Norris 2002: 197). The conjunction is invalid, because the questions differed in time horizon: the past ten years in PAS, ever in WVS. The average British respondent in WVS was in their mid forties, and so was referring to almost three decades of adult life. Conjoining these surveys would create an erroneous increase in participation from the early 1970s to the early 1980s. The graph’s vertical bars indicate 95 per cent confidence intervals. Over quarter of a century, the proportions of adults having boycotted and having demonstrated both show a pronounced increasing trend ($p < 0.001$).^{viii} This is the chief source of evidence, in Britain as in other countries, for protest becoming more common in recent decades.

2. Unofficial strikes and strikes

The question on unofficial strikes deserves scrutiny. Oddly, the category excludes the very strikes that exemplify political protest or elite-challenging behaviour. As Crouch summarized at the end of the 1970s, the ‘sudden escalation of conflict in Britain’ in the early part of the decade was due

not to a sudden rash of unofficial strikes (their increase has been a gradual post-war development which began to attract political attention from the mid-1960s onwards),

but to a series of long official strikes which were in part a response to government action. (Crouch 1978: 229)

In 1971 a strike against the Industrial Relations Bill involved 1.25 or 2 million workers, 3–5 per cent of the adult population (Department of Employment 1972a: 438; Gennard 1971: 258). The 1974 coalminers' strike led to the three-day week and provoked the government to call an early election to resolve 'who governs Britain?' Of comparable political significance were the 1984 coalminers' strike and the Wapping strike against News International in 1986. The latter three strikes led to pitched battles between picketers and police. But none of these massively contentious strikes would be captured by WVS questions – unless the strikers also went on an accompanying demonstration (or in the case of News International, boycotted its newspapers).

The demarcation between unofficial and official strikes is blurred, as we have noted above. This ambiguity makes it a poor empirical measure. Government statistics on 'work stoppages' (explored in more detail below) attempted such a demarcation in 1972. Note how the date, indicating heightened concern about unofficial strikes, coincided with Marsh's work. Admitting 'serious practical difficulties in defining stoppages as unofficial', the government could only identify strikes 'known to be official' (Department of Employment 1972b: 810; Silver 1973: 101). The distinction was dropped altogether in 1981.^{ix} If statistical experts could not identify unofficial strikes, it is not clear how respondents interpreted the question – especially when recalling events that took place decades earlier.

Government statistics do allow us to estimate the proportion of strikers contributed by official strikes for the period from 1960 to 1980, two decades before the first wave of WVS. (When the series on strikes known to be official was first published in 1972 it was retrospectively extended to 1960, using figures originally compiled for the Donovan Commission.) Strikes known to be official contributed 52 per cent of the total number of workers involved (see Appendix S1 in the online supplement). Given that the remainder included strikes of indeterminate status (as well as strikes by unorganized workers and lockouts), it is clear that unofficial strikes contributed well under half. From 1990, unofficial strikes have been estimated from newspaper reports (Gall and Cohen 2013: 96). They accounted for a quarter of the total number of workers involved in the nine years ending in 1999, when WVS last posed the question on unofficial strikes. In both periods, then, official strikes predominated.

This finding cannot be directly extrapolated from acts to lifetime experience. Hypothetically, the same workers who joined official strikes could also – on other occasions – have joined unofficial ones: in that case, the question on unofficial strikes would fortuitously capture the people who had ever joined strikes of any kind. To test this hypothesis, we require a survey asking whether respondents had ever gone on strike, *tout court*.^x The British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) asked this question from 1983 to 1990 (excepting 1988).^{xi} Only

respondents who had belonged to a union at some point in their lives (56–7 per cent) were asked. The remainder must be treated as never having gone on strike, which means underestimating the proportion, though the discrepancy is surely small. Pooling all years (there is no statistically discernible difference among them), 19–20 per cent of adults had participated in strikes. This is more than double the WVS proportion for unofficial strikes, 7–9 per cent (pooling 1981 and 1990). The average striker in these surveys (WVS 1981–1990 and BSA 1983–1990) started work around 1960, and so experienced the heyday of unofficial strikes in the 1960s and 1970s. What could explain the great difference – exceeding one in ten adults – between proportions in WVS and BSA? Either many workers who had gone on official strikes had never gone on unofficial strikes, or many respondents who had actually gone on unofficial strikes did not identify them as such (and so incorrectly answered the question in the negative), or some combination of the two. Whatever the explanation, the WVS question elicits only the tip of the iceberg of strikes. With a proper estimate of strikes from BSA, we see that more adults had gone on strike (19–20 per cent) than had demonstrated (12–16 per cent) even by 1990 (see Figure I). Thus strikes were actually the most commonly experienced form of protest (excepting petitions, of course) for people in the 1980s.

In sum, the WVS question on unofficial strikes is severely misleading. It relies on a distinction that is often impossible to draw and it omits the majority of strikes – including the most politically important ones. Once the magnitude of participation in strikes is properly appreciated, how does this alter the trend in protest?

2. Strikes and other protest events

[Figure II and III about here, ideally stacked vertically]

The trajectory of strikes over the long term can be traced using government reports on ‘work stoppages’.^{xii} Figure II shows the total number of workers who went on strike in each year. (Appendix S1 in the online supplement specifies sources and calculations.) The denominator is the adult population – rather than the number of employees, as is usual with strikes – to match surveys. The ratio of strikers to adults fell by over four fifths from the 1960s and 1970s to the 1990s and 2000s. Direct comparison with Figure I is not possible, as already emphasized. Although survey questions are often described as a measure of ‘protest activity’ or ‘protest levels’ (Dalton 2006: 67; Dalton, Van Sickle and Weldon 2010: 71), the number of individuals in a given year who have ever protested differs fundamentally from the number of protest acts in each year. Recall that the average survey respondent is in their mid forties, which means that the answer encapsulates almost three decades of adult life. Aside from the long time lag, the survey questions fail to distinguish between protesting once and protesting a hundred times. They similarly ignore the duration of protest events, which varies greatly for strikes (and occupations). The importance of this duration is revealed in Figure III, which

shows the total number of working days lost by strikers in each year. The series does not simply repeat Figure II ($r = 0.65$). The 1970s and 1980s loom larger, eclipsing the 1960s, because strikes lasted longer. The decline after the 1980s is still more pronounced.

To truly measure protest *activity*, then, we need comparable data on other sorts of protest events. Sociologists in many countries, like Germany (Rucht 1998) and the USA (McAdam et al. n.d.), have compiled catalogues of protest events over several decades, but there is nothing comparable in Britain.^{xiii} The sole comprehensive source is the European Protest and Coercion Dataset (EPCD), collected by Ronald Francisco (2009). Spanning the period 1980–1995, this dataset was compiled from Nexis; the most common sources for Britain were Reuters, *Glasgow Herald*, *Guardian*, Press Association, *Independent*, and *Daily Telegraph*. Crucially for my purpose, the number of participants in each event is recorded. Where precise information was lacking, this figure is approximate: ‘hundreds’ is estimated as 300, ‘thousands’ as 3000, and so on. Ongoing events are entered for every day; to clarify this point, we should refer to the unit of observation as the daily event. There were over 27,000 daily events in Britain, divided into about ninety types, from press conferences to bombings.^{xiv}

EPCD has not been validated, which perhaps accounts for its neglect by social scientists. The figures for strikes can be compared to government statistics. Two major anomalies are due to ‘Days of Action’ – general strikes – staged by the Trades Union Congress: one supporting a pay rise for healthcare workers in 1982, another protesting against the banning of unions at GCHQ in 1984. EPCD counts over a million strikers in each event. These numbers are implausibly high and so I substitute figures derived from government statistics.^{xv} One further downward adjustment is necessary. Government figures on days lost are calculated for the normal working week, whereas EPCD usually counts strikes as continuing on Saturday. I therefore discard all strike days on weekends (though if a strike began on the weekend this initial day is retained). Thus pruned, EPCD records a total of 66 million working days lost, compared to 70 million days from government statistics (Figure III). The annual correlation between the two series is remarkably high ($r = 0.99$).

[Table I about here]

Having vindicated EPCD figures on strikes (with a few downward adjustments), we can compare participation across types of events. Table I summarizes all events in EPCD. Strikes accounted for two thirds of the total number of participants in each daily event, or participant-days for short. This total aggregates very disparate events. To create a category that approximates the demonstration specified in survey questions, demonstration can be combined with march, rally, and vigil. Together these accounted for 4.2 million participant-days. An additional category can be created for more confrontational events: occupation, obstruction, civil disobedience, riot (including prison riots), break in, and disruption. These accounted for a further 1.5 million participant-days. Of the remainder, the largest category by far comprises slowdowns by workers (pruned by omitting weekends, as with strikes). EPCD

includes boycotts and petitions, but these numbers are not meaningful as those actions are far less newsworthy. The ‘symbolic’ category is dominated by a single event, when households momentarily switched off their lights in solidarity with coalminers.^{xvi} Overall, demonstrations account for a tiny fraction of the volume of protest, while strikes represent the great bulk. Figure IV compares strikes, demonstrations, and occupations over the period. The decline of strikes clearly dominates the series.

[Figure IV about here]

These figures count ongoing events separately each day. It might be objected, perhaps, that counting days tips the scale in favour of strikes. Theoretically, I would argue that going on strike – and losing wages – for a week represents a greater protest than attending a demonstration for an afternoon. Nevertheless, we can eliminate duration by counting an event spanning several days only once, taking the maximum number of participants in any single day.^{xvii} The longest ongoing event, lasting over eight years, was the occupation outside Faslane Naval Base to oppose Trident nuclear missiles. (Note that this would not be covered by the WVS question on occupation, which refers specifically to buildings and factories.) As Table I shows, the number of strikers was 11.7 million (government statistics, in Figure II, count 10.2 million). Demonstrators numbered 4 million, and occupiers fewer than half a million.^{xviii} Although demonstrations feature more prominently if we count participants rather than participant-days, they are still greatly outnumbered by strikes.

In sum, then, strikes dominated other forms of protest in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Strikes contributed sixteen times more participant-days than demonstrations, and at least two and a half times the number of participants. This disparity is greater than the difference revealed by surveys: recall that 19–20 per cent of adults in the 1980s had gone on strike, while 12–16 per cent by 1990 had demonstrated. The divergence between survey and event presumably reveals that people who had ever gone on a strike tended to have struck more times than people who had ever gone on a demonstration had demonstrated. However protest is measured, it is clear that the decline of strikes in the 1990s and 2000s (Figures II and III) more than offsets any increase in demonstrations (Figure I). The apparent upward trend in protest is due to the mismeasurement of strikes (asking only about *unofficial* strikes), compounded by a question (asking have you *ever*?) which condenses a lifetime into a binary response.

3. Strikers and other protesters

Now that we appreciate the true magnitude of participation in strikes before the 1990s, we can see whether the portrait of the typical protester needs retouching. Many characteristics – such as belonging to a trade union or adhering to the Left (e.g. Dalton 2008a: 69) – will be associated with strikes as with other forms of protest, and so it does not matter if strikes are underestimated. Education, however, is a different matter. The literature derived from surveys

unequivocally asserts a positive association. There is a ‘strong tendency for the better educated to engage in protest’ (Dalton 2008a: 69); ‘education proved by far the best predictor of experience of protest politics, followed by social class’ (Norris 2002: 201); ‘it is those who are formally the most advantaged who are the primary base of protest whereas those who have no educational qualifications are the most quiescent’ (Parry, Moyser and Day 1992: 75; see also Kaase 1990: 37; Meyer and Tarrow 1998: 13). This association has even been dubbed an ‘iron law’ (Rucht 2007: 715).

[Figure V about here]

This association is worth probing using WVS in 1990 ($n = 1356$). That year is chosen as intermediate of the three waves which asked the battery of five questions, and as the nearest to the years (1983–1990) in which BSA asked about participation in strikes. WVS asked one question on education, the age at which the respondent completed (or expected to complete) full-time schooling or higher education. There are two important control variables. One is sex, as men protest more than women. The other is age, which commingles life-cycle and cohort effects. Logically, the probability of ever having done something can only increase over the lifetime. Substantively, the hypothesis of an upward trend in protest implies that more recent birth cohorts should have been more likely to have protested. The effect of these variables on each form of protest is estimated using logistic regression, entering quadratic terms for age and education. (Results are presented in Appendix S2 in the online supplement.) Figure V shows the predicted probability that the respondent had ever participated in each form of protest, setting sex to male (the mode) and age to 44 (the median). Note that the probabilities exceed the proportions in Figure I simply because men protest more than women. For boycott and lawful demonstration, there is a strong positive association with education (both terms tested jointly, $p < 0.001$), just as the literature claims. There is no association, however, for occupation of buildings or factories. The association for unofficial strike is negative, though it is not quite statistically significant at the conventional level ($p = 0.06$). Thus the iron law is vindicated for only two out of four forms of protest. If we combine participation in *any* of the four forms, the law holds: someone with a university degree is twice as likely to have protested as someone who left school at 14.

This combined result, however, depends on the preponderance of boycotters and lawful demonstrators over unofficial strikers. It will change when strikers are properly counted: recall that 19–20 per cent of adults had gone on strike by the late 1980s. BSA confirms the negative association between strikes and education, controlling again for age and sex (pooling 1983–1990, $n = 13,471$). Most likely to have gone on strike were people without qualifications and those who held only the Certificate of Secondary Education (a qualification for less academic pupils, instituted in 1965). Unfortunately BSA did not include the WVS questions on protest.^{xix} We can, however, illustrate how the measurement of strikes would make a difference using WVS in 1990. Choose 19.5 per cent of respondents who had gone on

strike by taking the 9.5 per cent of respondents who had gone on unofficial strike, and then add 10.0 per cent from individuals with the highest predicted probability of going on unofficial strike – from logistic regression using age, sex, education, and participation in the other three forms of protest. Then recalculate participation in any of the four forms of protest – with strikes *tout court* in place of unofficial strikes – and again estimate the effect of education, controlling for age and sex. Figure V depicts the result as a grey curve. Overall, education has no positive effect. Even if we include signing petitions to create a portmanteau measure of participation, education still has no positive effect.

Although this exercise is only approximate, what is certain is that only some forms of protest – demonstrations especially – increase with education. Strikes show the opposite gradient. The characteristics of the average protester will therefore depend on the numerical significance of each form of protest. In Britain in the late 1980s, many more adults had been on strike than had been on a lawful demonstration or undertaken a boycott. The iron law linking higher education and protest is sundered – or at least can be preserved only if one redefines protest to exclude strikes.

Conclusion

A significant literature claims that protest has increased since the 1970s, using the evidence of population surveys. This trend, I have argued, is spurious, at least for Britain. It is spurious because the surveys do not ask about participation in strikes *tout court*, and so fail to capture an important form of protest. The question on unofficial strikes is an inadequate substitute, because the distinction between unofficial and official is ambiguous, because the most politically oriented strikes have been official, and because unofficial strikes – even in their heyday – accounted for a minority of strikers. Surveys that rely on this question, like WVS, have greatly underestimated participation in strikes. In the 1980s, as BSA reveals, about one in five respondents had gone on strike, which is twice the number who reported (in WVS) going on an unofficial strike, and significantly more than had demonstrated or boycotted. Government statistics show a severe decline in striking. Adjusting for population, the number of strikers fell by 83 per cent from the 1970s to the 2000s (Figure II), while the number of strike-days fell by a whopping 95 per cent (Figure III). This tremendous decline will have overwhelmed the modest increase in participation in demonstrations (Figure I). Far from increasing, protest in total must have declined. Besides inverting the actual trend, the underestimation of strikes in surveys also distorts the portrait of the typical protester. At least for Britain in the period before the late 1980s, the inclusion of strikes eliminates the positive association between education and protest.

Whether the apparent increase in protest is spurious in other countries remains to be seen. It will depend on two factors: the trend of strikes and their importance compared to other protest events. The importance of strikes varies greatly across countries. For the period 1975–

1989, strikes contributed about half the total participants in ‘unconventional events’ in France, but only 1 per cent in Switzerland (Kriesi et al. 1995: 22–23). The trend in strikes, though, is consistent in developed democracies – downward (e.g. Franzosi 1995). In the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, and Sweden, for example, strikes (especially measured by working days lost) have declined steeply since the 1970s and 1980s, almost to extinction (van der Velden et al. 2007: 23; see also Wallace and O’Sullivan 2006).

To the extent that the pattern found in Britain is a general one, this has important implications for contemporary democracy. According to the literature on political participation, the highly educated exert a disproportionate political influence because they are overrepresented among voters (as well as donors, of course) and also among protesters (e.g. Dalton 2006: 71). Once strikes are adequately measured, we see that overrepresentation in protest is a recent development rather than an enduring pattern. Before the 1990s, Britons with a degree were far more likely to have demonstrated, but less likely to have gone on strike. Given the prevalence of strikes, the differences cancelled out. Only with the dramatic fall in strikes has protest become the preserve of the middle class. This shift has coincided with escalating economic inequality in Anglophone societies. Uncovering the causal relationships between these two trends is an urgent question for further research (e.g. Kristal 2010; Western and Rosenfeld 2011).

One response to my argument is to claim that strikes do not belong to the domain of political participation, that they do not challenge elites and do not belong to social movements (to echo the phrases quoted in the introduction). That such a claim could be entertained reflects the marginalization of the labour movement in academic research, in parallel with its waning political power (Barker et al. 2011; Hetland and Goodwin 2011). Of course scholars may define concepts to suit their purpose, so long as the definition is clear; conceivably the trend of ‘protest-minus-strikes’ is worth examining. Nevertheless, the political significance of strikes deserves recapitulation. Firstly, strikes contest one crucial relationship of power in capitalist societies, between employers and workers, and challenge the reigning ideology that insists on the inevitability and legitimacy of ‘market’ outcomes. Secondly, many strikes target the state directly as employer. Thirdly, some strikes inconvenience the public as consumers or disrupt the economy, which invites intervention by the government. Fourthly, some strikes lead to physical confrontation between picketers and strike-breakers, thereby directly implicating the state as guarantor of public order. All four points are exemplified by the coalminers’ strike in 1984, which ‘challenged the very core of Thatcherism’s strategy towards the nationalized industries in particular and the trade union movement in general’ (Richards 1996: 1). The climactic clash between picketers and police at Orgreave colliery involved at least ten thousand combatants. Over the course of the strike, eleven hundred workers were arrested. The Prime Minister famously denounced the strikers as ‘the enemy within’ – ‘more difficult to fight, and more dangerous to liberty’ than the foreign state with which her

government had just been at war. Defining a category of political participation which excludes this strike would seem eccentric if not perverse.

This article has highlighted the limitations of population surveys for tracing protest – compared, for example, to voting. One limitation is the problem of small numbers. Most people vote; few protest. Surveys therefore question respondents about their actions over a long (and often indeterminate, as in WVS) time horizon – smoothing away the jagged temporality of protest, eliminating its volatility (compare Figure I with Figures II and III). Yet the essential character of protest is that it occurs in waves (Biggs 2003, 2005; Koopmans 2004). Another limitation is the condensation of past action into a binary response. While an individual can vote only once at determined intervals, an individual can join multiple protest events, and events can extend for a long time. Protest clusters socio-spatially as well as temporally. The point is most readily made by example. In the late 1980s, coalminers represented only 3–5 per cent of adults who had ever gone on strike, according to BSA. And yet in the period 1980–95 they accounted for *half* of all participant-days in strikes – and only slightly under half of all participant-days in strikes, demonstrations, and occupations.^{xx} In short, the volume of protest bears little relation to the number of people who have ever protested. Surveys can partially overcome this problem by asking respondents not just whether but also how many times they had undertaken a particular form of protest (Saunders et al. 2012). Most importantly, event catalogues deserve greater investment.^{xxi}

Finally, this creation of a spurious trend is an interesting case in the sociology of knowledge. Social scientists in the early 1970s innovated measurement tools for a particular theoretical purpose and in a particular historical context. Given the importance of unofficial strikes on the British political agenda, and given the goal of measuring gradations of willingness to protest, it was reasonable to focus exclusively on this specific type of strike. But labour-capital conflict was rapidly transformed. In the same year that Marsh conducted his survey, a scholar of industrial relations observed that ‘the niggly unofficial strikes which seemed to be bringing Britain to the verge of economic destruction only five years ago are lessening in significance because of the massive and lengthy confrontations’ – *official* strikes – ‘that have become part of the industrial scene’ (Silver 1973: 98). Once PAS had asked the battery of questions across several countries, the methodological imperative was to replicate it in subsequent surveys – despite the transformation of the social phenomenon to be measured. Thus WVS adopted the same questions (albeit extending the time horizon, a difference curiously ignored), in effect fossilizing and globalizing the peculiarities of Britain in the early 1970s.^{xxii} As a standard battery of questions is deployed in multiple surveys, it comes to define the phenomenon itself. Rather than conceptualizing the phenomenon of theoretical interest and interrogating various sources of evidence on it, social scientists simply download a convenient dataset. The conclusion is not, of course, to avoid systematic data collection. The point is to understand how our measurement tools can blinker as well as illuminate.

Notes

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ⁱⁱ In non-democratic states, by contrast, petitioning is costly because public dissent will draw retaliation (e.g. Glaeser 2011: 480).

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Potential’ was also theoretically motivated, as Marsh was arguing against the stereotype that the British were deferential (Almond and Verba 1963); willingness to protest counted as contrary evidence. Rootes (1981) elaborates an important critique of protest potential.

^{iv} Legislation passed in 1990 sharpened the distinction by forcing trade unions to repudiate unofficial strikes in writing (Lyddon 2007: 345).

^v The first wave of WVS usually included two other questions from PAS, on vandalism and violence. In the fifth wave, the two questions on occupation and unofficial strikes were often dropped.

^{vi} Questionnaires in many other languages use the equivalent of ‘wildcat’ rather than ‘unofficial’ strike (French *sauvage*, German *wilder*, Italian *selvaggio*). In the British context, at least, the terms are not synonymous; wildcat implies a strike *against* the union rather than merely unauthorized by it (Marsh and Evans 1973: 330, 347). Cross-national analysis cannot ignore these terminological differences and associated institutional differences; in Germany, for example, a *wilder Streik* is illegal (Muller 1979: 39, 41). A question about participation in strikes *tout court* would surely be less sensitive to cross-national differences. I owe the point about translation to Paolo Campana.

^{vii} European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association 2006; World Values Survey Association 2009. The file *process_wvs.do* (part of the online Supporting Information) contains Stata commands to replicate the analysis. The denominator excludes ‘don’t know’; this response accounted for less than 6% of any question.

^{viii} Trends are estimated by logistic regression with year as independent variable. All *p*-values reported are two-tailed.

^{ix} To justify further restrictive legislation, the government published rough estimates for 1987–1988 (Secretary of State for Employment 1989: 1). Unofficial strikes accounted for over 2 million out of 7.2 million working days lost; no figures were provided for workers involved.

^x Major surveys of British political participation in 1984 and 2000 are unsuitable because the strike question was circumscribed – ‘about an issue which you feel is political’ and ‘to influence rules, laws, or policies’, respectively – and because they specified shorter time horizons (Parry, Moyser and Day 1992; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004).

^{xi} British Social Attitudes Survey n.d. The file *process_bsa.do* (part of the online Supporting Information) contains Stata commands to replicate the analysis. The denominator excludes

‘don’t know’ and ‘not answered’, which together accounted for 1%. Note that BSA includes respondents aged 18 and over, while WVS starts at 15.

^{xii} Work stoppages include lockouts as well as strikes, a distinction blurred in principle and in practice. By any reckoning, lockouts represent a tiny fraction of the total.

^{xiii} Rootes (2003) compiles environmental protests from 1988 to 1997. Appearing after the completion of this article, Bailey (2014) catalogues all types of protest but only from selected intervals between 1978 and 2012.

^{xiv} Francisco n.d. The file *process_kansas.do* (part of the online Supporting Information) contains Stata commands to replicate the analysis.

^{xv} My judgment comes from newspapers (*Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *The Times*) and newswires (Associated Press, Reuters).

^{xvi} EPCD records two million participants in this event, but the source referred to a dip in electricity equivalent to this number of lightbulbs, suggesting at most hundreds of thousands of people (*The Times*, 19 October 1992).

^{xvii} Ongoing events are identified as having the same characteristics (type of action, identity of protesters, target, issue, description of event, location, and nation) on successive days.

^{xviii} This method underestimates participation in longstanding occupations, of course, because it does not account for circulation of people staying for a brief time. As with strikes, participant-days is a superior measure.

^{xix} BSA asks whether the respondent had ever gone ‘on a protest or demonstration’ about ‘a government action which you thought was unjust or harmful’ but this formulation elicits a significantly lower proportion than the WVS question on lawful demonstrations.

^{xx} In BSA, coalminers are identified by industry classification (coal extraction); this calculation is restricted to years following the great strike (thus omitting 1983–1984). The calculation from EPCD counts coalminers only, and not protest by their wives or supporters.

^{xxi} Note that analyses of protest events may also exclude strikes (e.g. Soule and Earl 2005: 362; Walker, Martin and McCarthy 2008: 46).

^{xxii} The question on lawful demonstrations also bears the imprint of the democratic systems in the ambit of PAS, where demonstrations are only exceptionally unlawful. When extended to newly democratic or even authoritarian countries by WVS, this question has the same disability as that on unofficial strikes: many demonstrations are unlawful and so the number of respondents participating in strictly lawful ones represents the tip of an iceberg. I owe this observation to Neal Caren and Olga Onuch.

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Figure I: *Participation in protest, 1981–2005 (WVS)*

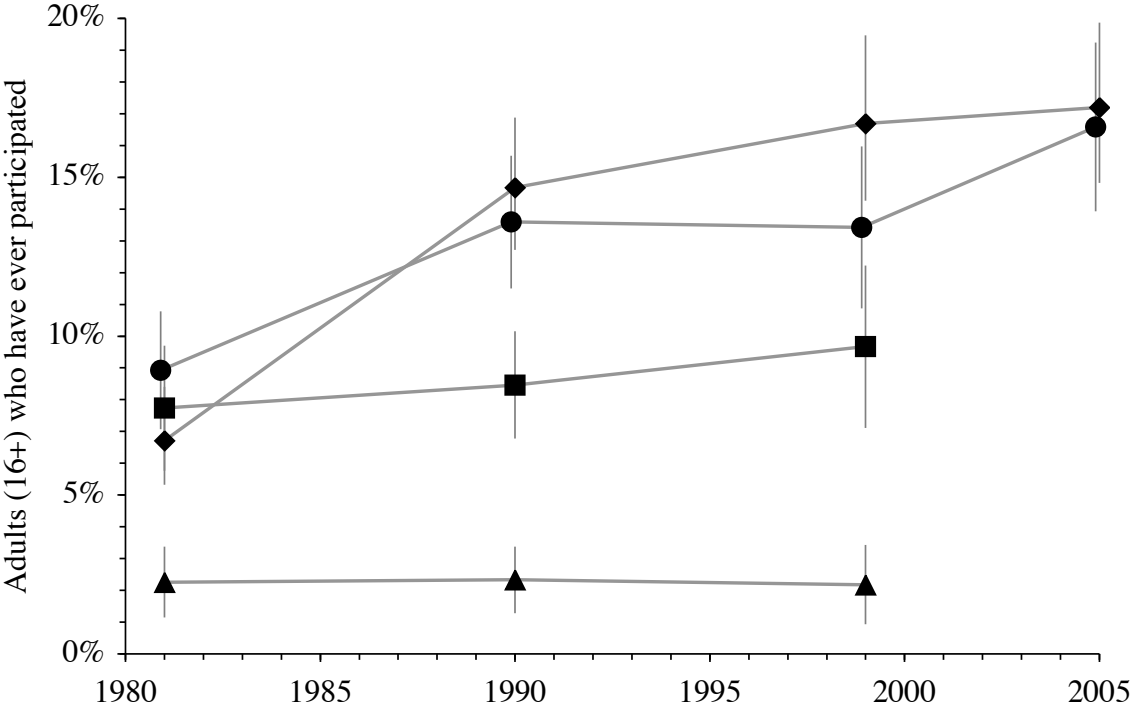


Figure II: Participants in strikes, 1946–2012

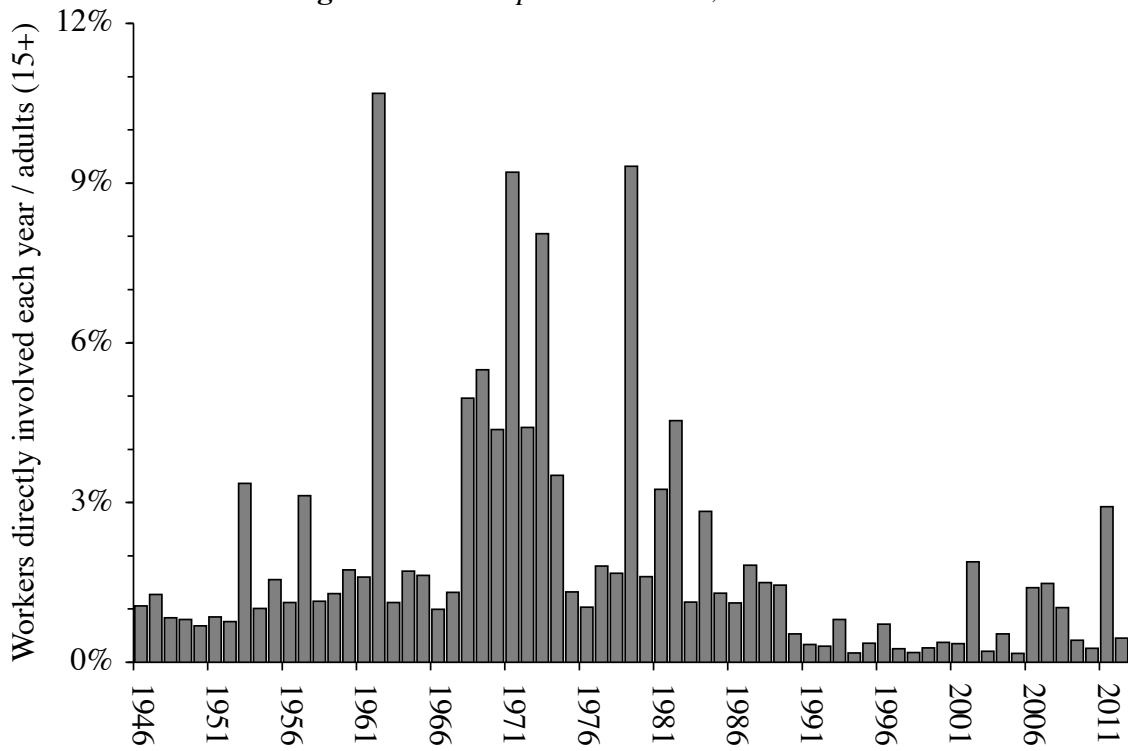


Figure III: Participant-days in strikes, 1946–2012

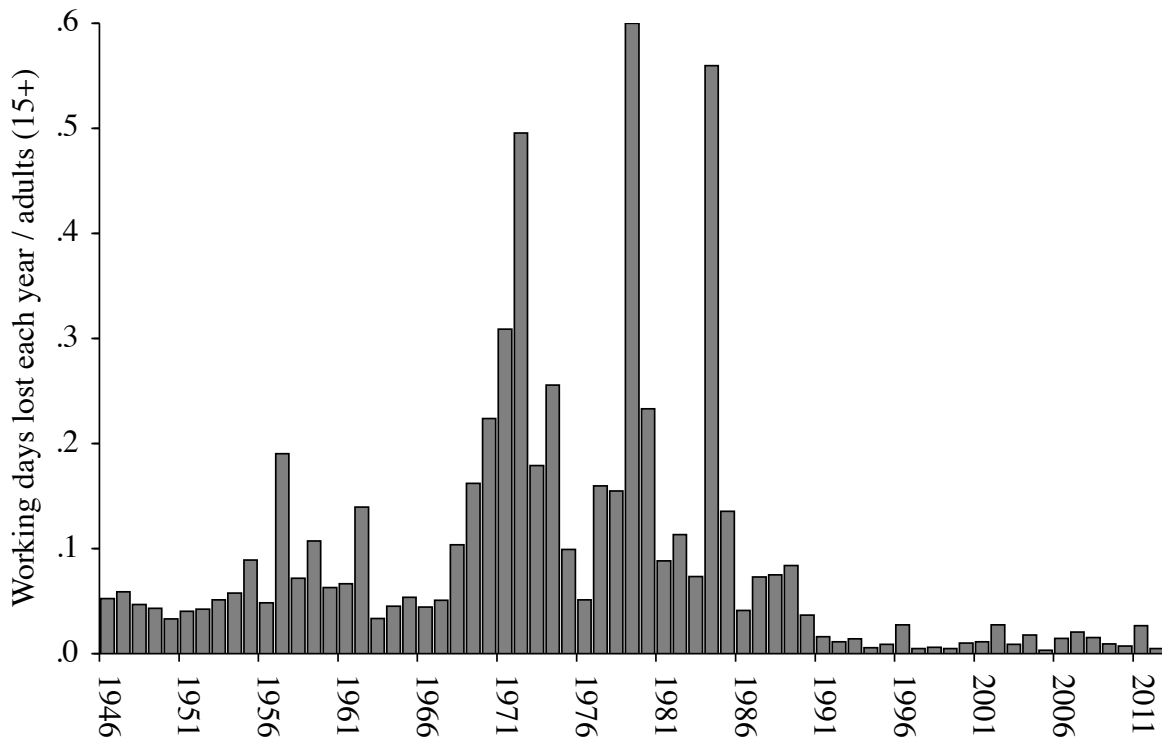


Figure IV: *Participant-days in protest events, 1980–1995 (EPCD)*

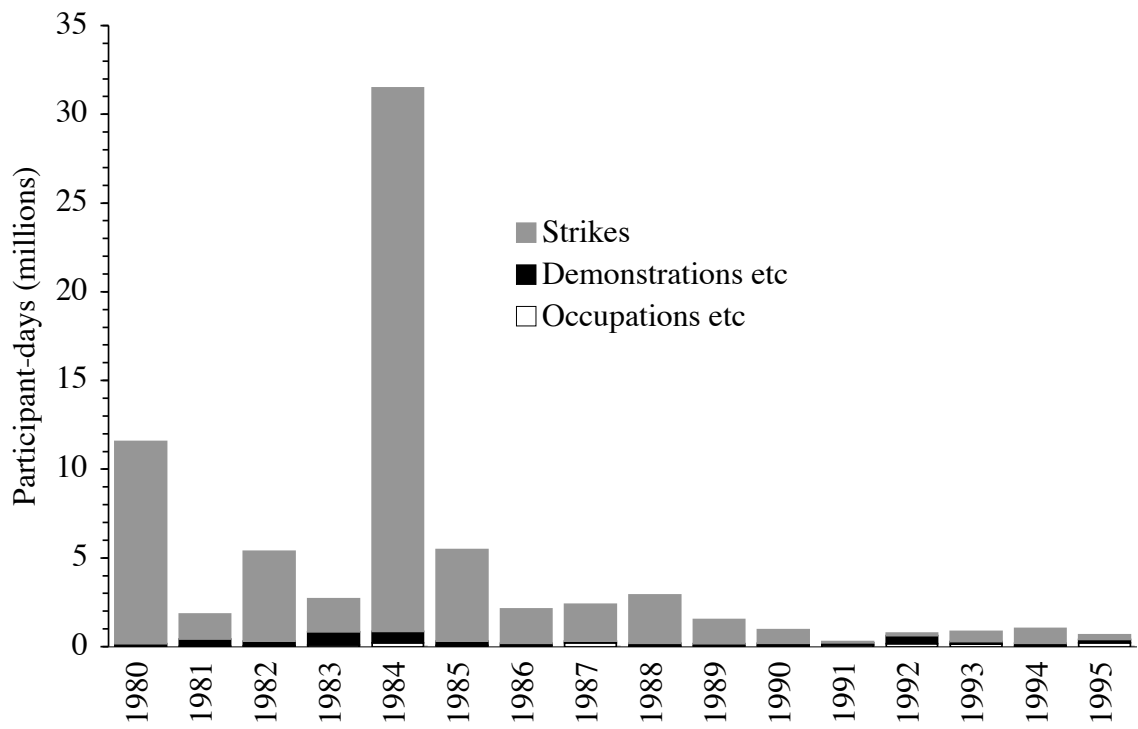


Figure V: *The effect of education on protest (WVS 1990)*

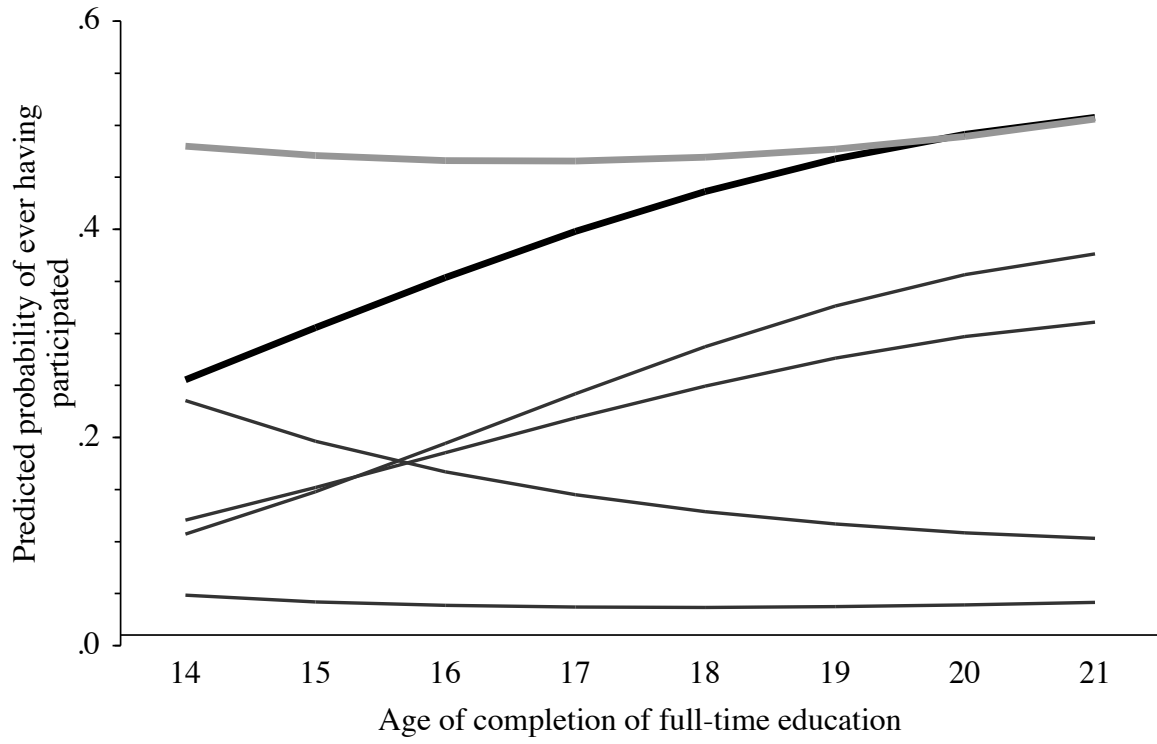


Table I: *Protest and repression events, 1980–1995 (EPCD)*

<i>Action</i>	<i>Participant-days (millions)</i>		<i>Participants (millions)</i>	
Strike	66.3 *	67%	11.7	49%
Demonstration etc	4.2	4%	4.0	17%
Occupation etc	1.5	2%	0.4	2%
Slowdown	20.0 *	20%	2.5	10%
Symbolic	2.1	2%	2.1	9%
Boycott	2.0	2%	1.4	6%
Petition	1.1	1%	1.1	5%
Other	1.0	1%	1.0	4%
Total	98.2	100%	24.1	100%

Note: * Excluding weekends