

**ERC Consolidator Grant 2025
Research proposal [Part B1]¹**

**Protest, Public opinion and Electoral preferences:
How protest propels political change
PROPEL**

Cover Page:

- Name of the Principal Investigator (PI): **Ruud Wouters**
- Name of the PI's Host Institution for the project: **Hasselt University**
- Proposal duration in months: **60**

With advanced democracies facing a “crisis of representation” and protest on the rise, PROPEL considers the interplay between protest and public opinion (PPO) as a key force shaping the future of democratic politics. Whereas extant research has studied how movements capture parties or how street mobilizations develop into electoral challengers, PROPEL scrutinizes the essential—but critically overlooked—dynamic underlying these movement-party interactions: the impact of protest on public opinion, in its most consequential form being the party preferences citizens hold.

PROPEL asks: What is it in public opinion that gets affected by protest? And, when and how does this impact materialize? To address these questions, PROPEL develops an original political communication theory of PPO impact. Presented as a causal chain, the theory takes the features of protest (size, disruption, organizer, claim), the mechanisms of mediatization (mass and social media) and politicization (reactions of political actors in the public sphere), and the features of citizen receivers (predispositions) into account as key factors driving four kinds of PPO effects (issue-specific, system-generic, group-identity and party preference).

Empirically, PROPEL leverages an ambitious three stage research approach, moving from the first large N analysis of PPO impact by means of systematically mining extant protest and survey data, over unique tailored panel surveys tackling upcoming protest events, to full control experimental designs unrivalled in drawing causal inferences. Together, this threefold approach overcomes the case-study, sampling and exposure biases plaguing current work, moving the field from whether protest matters, to when and how it does. Doing so, PROPEL investigates the implications of protest in an era of shifting cleavage politics and assesses how an increasingly relevant means of democratic linkage deepens or endangers democracy as we know it.

¹ Instructions for completing Part B1 can be found in the ‘*Information for Applicants to the Starting and Consolidator Grant 2025 Calls*’.

Section a: *Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal*

Introduction

Early 2024, in reaction to an investigative report detailing a secret meeting on immigrant deportation plans between *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) prominents, neo-Nazis and wealthy sympathizers, hundreds of thousands of Germans hit the streets to protest the far-right. With three East-German state elections forthcoming and the AfD topping the polls, the many peaceful demonstrators aimed to counter the right-wing momentum and make AfD-supporters reconsider their stance. In response to the wave of strongly mediated protests, the AfD took a dent in the polls. In September, turnout in all three state elections increased and the AfD, contrary to expectations, managed to become the largest party only in the state of Thuringia.¹ Meanwhile, across Europe, farmers angry with the EU Green Deal lit hay bales on fire and blocked highways to protest nitrogen norms hitting their profession. Especially in The Netherlands, the disruptive farmers—using slogans like “how dairy you” and flying the Dutch flag upside down—harvested broad public support. A new political party, the ‘Farmer Citizen Movement’, dominated public debate and capitalized on the general public’s sentiment, landing a landslide victory in the provincial elections of 2022 and becoming part of the national government coalition in 2024.²

Both examples illustrate how protest profoundly shapes political conflict and makes its mark on party politics—and democracy more broadly—by influencing public opinion. With advanced democracies facing a “crisis of representation” (as highlighted by declines in voter turnout and the shrivelling of mainstream parties)^{3,4}, extant cleavage structures in flux (with new issues and actors entering the political space)^{5,6}, and street protest on the rise (more protests, more diverse issues and participants)^{7,8}, movement-party interactions like these are considered to decisively shape democracy as we know it.^{9,10} For a better understanding, scholars to date have studied how movements “anchor” or “capture” parties—like the MAGA movement with the Republican Party—or how street mobilizations develop into electoral challengers—like the Indignados and Podemos in Spain.^{11,12} The essential dynamic that underlies these movement-party interactions, however, has not been systematically studied. That is: the broader question of how protest affects public opinion, in its most consequential form being the party preferences citizens hold.¹³ With traditional forms of democratic linkage in decline, protest on the rise, and increasingly volatile citizens embedded in a more hybrid political communication environment, protest-public opinion (PPO) effects are expected to increasingly structure political conflict, driving voter-party re-alignment and cleavage formation in the years to come, making the momentum for PPO scrutiny now.

PROPEL (Protest, Public opinion, and electoral preferences) asks two straightforward research questions: (1) *what* is it in public opinion that gets affected by protest? And, (2) *when* and *how* does protest do so? Together, these empirical questions allow answering a broader, normative question about demonstrations’ democratic desirability: Does protest strengthen or undermine democracy?¹⁴ To answer these questions, PROPEL leverages an ambitious three stage research approach, moving from the first systematic large N analysis of PPO linkage through extant data, over unique tailored panel designs tackling upcoming protest events, to full control experimental designs unrivalled in making causal inferences. Across these approaches, mediatization (mass and social media) and politicization (the responses of political actors in the public sphere) are considered key mechanisms for PPO impact to materialize. As such, PROPEL develops and tests an original political communication theory of PPO impact. The crux of PROPEL lies in the combination of scaling up (first large N design) and honing in (being able to foresee protests and going timely in the field). My connection to Tilburg University (a survey hub) and experience with surveying demonstrators on the spot make this highly ambitious project also feasible.

State of the art: disciplinary divides and reinforcing biases

Research on protest impact has mainly been executed across three fields with a distinct focus each: sociology, political science and communication. For long, protest was the exclusive pet topic of sociologists, primarily focusing on the legislative consequences of protest, turning a blind eye to public opinion. PPO influence has not topped sociologists’ to-do-list, but they harvested tentative evidence that protest *can* influence public opinion and provide a broader framework that aptly contextualizes the PPO relationship.^{15,16}

Political scientists, in turn, for long studied public opinion but far less so protest. This spectacularly changed over the last decade with the increased relevance of protest as a means of democratic linkage. Political scientists have put public opinion centre stage as a movement outcome and strongly pushed the methodological frontier of PPO scholarship, leveraging state-of-the-art causal methods, looking at a variety of public opinion facets (e.g. issue salience, issue position) and scrutinizing conditionalities (e.g. citizen characteristics as moderators).^{17,18} Importantly, political scientist did so typically by exploiting the coincidence of a survey already being in the field when a major protest occurred—the so called Unexpected

Event during Survey Design (UESD).¹⁹ In sum, by means of a non-tailored survey instrument, on a case-by-case and data-driven basis, making use of whatever information available. Communication scholars, finally, stand out with their emphasis on media coverage as a key condition for protest effects to materialize. To that end, they have extensively scrutinized media coverage of protest and leveraged experiments to gauge how protest news—and journalists’ framing decisions—affect opinion formation.^{20,21,22} That is, communication scholars have put forward protest events as media events.

This brief state-of-the art highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the PPO puzzle, each discipline having its own focus and blind corners. Taking stock of the field, current PPO scholarship suffers from three reinforcing biases: (1) the field is plagued by a *case-study bias*: most work on protest and public opinion focuses on a single event, movement or issue in a single county, lacking the essential variation for theory testing, for which larger N designs are warranted. (2) Second, the field is plagued by a sampling on the *dependent variable bias*. The cases being scrutinized are picked exactly because they produced PPO effects in the first place. Typically, scholars experienced an impressive case of mobilization, suspected a PPO effect and leveraged the coincidence of a survey already being in the field. For progress, both a more random case selection should be made and a more tailored survey instrument should be leveraged. (3) Third and finally, the absolute lion’s share of empirical studies in the field suffers from ‘*exposure*’ bias. That is, most studies fail to account for exposure to protest. Rather, exposure is assumed, most often by simply comparing citizens before and after a protest. As a consequence, we know little about how protest links to public opinion and what mechanisms exactly underly PPO impact. To that end, a theory of how protest gets on citizens’ radar, and which elements exactly persuade what beliefs of citizens is needed. The key ambition of PROPEL is to develop and test such a theory, placing mediatization (mass and social media arena) and politicization (reactions by political actors) centre stage in a novel political communication theory of PPO impact.

Theoretical ambition: A political communication theory of PPO impact

Figure 1 depicts the overall framework of PROPEL. It presents a causal chain with protest, media and public opinion as the main building blocks. The central argument of the theory is that protest is a communicative act, and that each and every protest seeks to pass through the stages of the causal chain. Depending on the features of protest, coverage in mass media (mediatization), and the mediatized reactions of political actors (politicization), protest ends up on the radar of general citizens, (not) influencing a variety of attitudes and (intended) behaviours. Importantly, each stage of the model presents a protest with diverse junctions and hence varying itineraries to the public opinion destination, with protesters having only limited control over which pathway to follow. Therefore, rather than the straight(forward) path depicted here, the trajectory of an actual protest fans out like a tree diagram, with some trajectories ending abruptly (no media coverage), whereas others—e.g. large protests, extensive and positively valanced coverage, supportive debate—take a scenic route, and still others—e.g. violent protests, extensive negative media coverage, one-sided debate diffusing a “riots” frame—proceed over rough terrain. I detail my theory and introduce each block below.

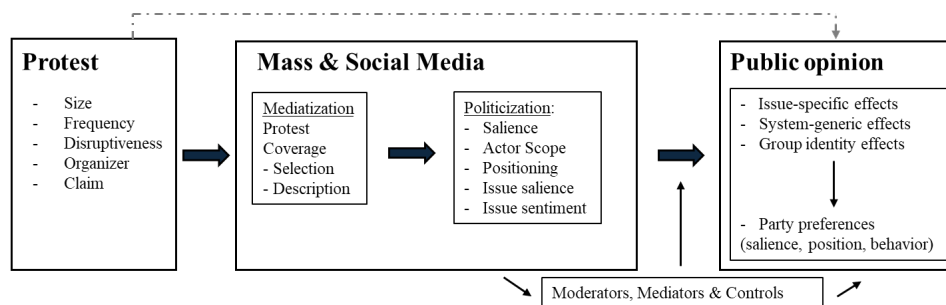


Figure 1 – Framework of PROPEL (simplified)

Protest features matter—my theory departs from protest as a “shock” that has the potential to alter citizens’ opinion formation. The weight of this shock is determined by its features. These features come in two guises: protest forwards a program claim (that what a movement substantively wants) and an identity claim (who are the mobilized, are they a substantive force?).²³ This combination of program (message) and identity (messenger) makes protest a very rich public opinion signal.^{24,25} First, the claim of a demonstration matters. I expect the extent to which it is moderate or radical, contains more or less blame attribution and which frame it forwards to affect opinion formation.^{26,27} For instance, the Dutch farmers succeeded to reframe the climate based nitrogen debate in a debate on government arbitrariness. Second, the identity of the demonstrators—as expressed by the turnout, the organizer type or event disruptiveness—matters too.^{28,29,30} For instance, I expect protest on purchasing power staged by a traditional organizer entrenched in routine politics (trade

unions) to affect citizens differently compared to the same protest organized by a grassroots hashtag movement (yellow vests), as the former activates all kind of (partisan) predispositions.

Whereas extant research on PPO impact most frequently studies “protest” writ large, PROPEL considers protest features as crucial. Critically, PROPEL argues that such features affect citizen opinion formation not only directly, upon citizens’ decoding of the event, but also indirectly, by means of the pathway protest follows throughout Figure 1: protests with particular features are more likely to be picked up by mass media (mediatization) and trigger particular debate (politicization), influencing how protest ends up on the radar of observers, determining the “bundled” nature of a protest shock.

Mechanisms of mediatization & politicization—The second step in my theory deals with the mediating mechanisms of mediatization and politicization. For protest to make its mark, it should be observed and perceived.³¹ Citizens rarely experience protest directly. Rather, they do so indirectly, through the mediatized footprint protest leaves.³² PPO effects materialize by protest first making it into the news (mediatization). Subsequently, this coverage can spill-over and spark debate among political actors that step into the public arena, further driving conflict escalation and media attention (politicization).

Extant research has primarily studied whether protest makes it into the news and how it is covered (arrow 1 in Figure 1).^{20,33,34} Pilot studies of mine made a beginning with untangling the subsequent step (arrow 2): the extent to which protest (that made it into the news) fails or succeeds in driving politicization among political actors on social media (taking into account the salience of the debate, the scope of actors involved, and the extent of polarization) and how protest makes its mark on the media agenda in the weeks following the protest.^{35,36,37} Based on these pilot studies, I expect exceptionally large protests to be more likely to trigger politicization supporting the protesters’ claim and to drive media coverage in the upcoming days; whereas disruptive protests will result in political actors delegitimizing protesters. Protest that is staged by grassroots organizations that succeed in unexpectedly mobilizing large masses are expected to create politicization peaks, as politicians anticipate a protest signal of unorganized grassroots citizens to be close to what median voters want. In sum, the baseline of my PPO theory is that by pushing an issue on the agenda, making it salient and having other actors publicly position themselves, protest gets on citizen’s radar, becomes meaningful and has repercussions. Mediatization and politicization are not only crucial as they expose citizens to protest, but also because they make protest meaningful, connecting it to ongoing debates, party politics and citizens’ predispositions.

Importantly, no studies to date empirically link measures of protest induced politicization to measures of public opinion. That is, a direct test of the main theorized mechanism—protest propels public opinion change through mediatized politicization—is absent. PROPEL innovates by (1) measuring variation in politicization surrounding protest (Block 2 in Figure 1) (2) explaining variation in politicization surrounding protest by means of the features of protest (First two arrows in Figure 1) (3) using these measures of politicization as predictors in models explaining public opinion formation (third arrow in Figure 1). This way, PROPEL empirically, and in a theoretically meaningful way, accounts for exposure to protest addressing the corresponding lacuna in extant research.

Public opinion effects—In the last block, PROPEL distinguishes four types of public opinion effects, all matching the information embedded in a protest signal: protest makes claims on a specific issue (issue-specific), challenges the functioning of institutional politics (systemic) and stages a form of intergroup competition (group identity), with partisan aspects (party preferences) being critical given protests’ role in democratic linkage. First, extant research has primarily looked into issue-specific effects, asking whether protest can raise salience, sway position, or activate citizens.^{18,38,39} Second, far less research has investigated systemic-effects, protest’s repercussions for democratic attitudes⁴⁰: exposure to protest can empower citizens, but also, by laying bare democratic malfunctioning, sow disaffection and alienation. Third, protest seeks to produce group identity effects. Protesters engage in “us” versus “them” boundary drawing and seek to distinguish in- from outgroups.^{41,42} Finally, a key and particularly overlooked aspect is how protest succeeds to (re)shape party preferences⁴³: the support for specific parties and politicians. This PPO effect is key to understand the structuring power of protest in contemporary cleavage formation.

PROPEL will dissect these four effects, and how and when they materialize. This approach allows considering whether PPO effects are cases of persuasion (altering issue attitudes) or rather activation (acting upon attitudes); the conditions under which protest polarizes (bimodal distribution), backfires (decrease support) or mobilizes (increase support); and the extent to which protest affects cleavage formation (the alignment between socio-structural aspects, issue positions and group evaluations). In all of this, I expect the features of protest, its mediatization and politicization, to be key factors determining PPO effects. For instance, I expect violent protests that leads to dismissive politicization to backfire, but disruptive protest that

manages to provoke supportive reactions to win hearts and minds. I expect protest to be more likely to raise salience and preach to the converted rather than sway issue attitudes, and I expect protest to be especially potent in fostering in-and out-group identities, driving affective polarization and cleavage formation.

Empirical ambition: scaling up and honing in

The empirical part of PROPEL consists of a three stage approach, combining extant and original data, with increased granularity and causal leverage, forwarding a dual strategy of scaling up and honing in. PROPEL overcomes case-study and sampling bias, by, for the first time, taking a large N approach systematically mining extant protest event and survey databases for “hits”—matches between protests and surveys—resulting in a rich database to test the scope conditions of PPO impact. Second, PROPEL overcomes exposure bias, by, rather than relying on coincidence and necessarily working with a blunt survey instrument, for the first time, surveying upcoming protests with a tailored panel survey instrument. Finally, vignette experiments, unrivalled in causal inference drawing, tackle the effect of politicization under conditions of forced exposure. Across these stages, mediatization and politicization are accounted for by complementing surveys with mass and social media content analysis data.

Unexpected Event during Survey Design (UESD): a systematic large N approach—Extant research exploited the coincidence of a survey being in the field when researchers experienced a massive mobilization—the so called (one shot) UESD approach.¹⁹ PROPEL drastically scales up the integration of protest event and public opinion data by systematically mining extant Protest Event Databases (PED) and surveys for “hits”. This approach pushes the field beyond sampling and case-study bias. This is not merely a quantitative extension, but allows for answering qualitatively new questions on the scope conditions of PPO impact. Given the recent availability and ubiquity of both PED and Public opinion datasets, such an approach is finally feasible.^{44,45,46} PROPEL will study protests on an all-inclusive set of issues, from the 2000s onwards, for Northwestern, Southern and Eastern European countries, each match of a protest with a survey being potentially a sound UESD case. I expect to need 250 workable hits for theory testing, which is a realistic expectation (see B2). In case of less hits, I will add the well-covered case of the US (many PED and surveys). The empirical strategy to analyse the relationship between protest and public opinion depends on the amount of hits and workable survey questions. In case of a large N and sufficient overlap in survey questions, a fully quantitative empirical strategy can be leveraged. Alternatively, a more qualitative approach, (re)coding protests and their outcomes, and employing Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) methods is more appropriate.⁴⁷ In all, this “scaling up” approach is unprecedented, ambitious and will lead to groundbreaking insights on how protest propels political change.

Tailored panel survey instrument approach—Next, PROPEL gathers original opinion data by surveying upcoming protests with a tailored panel survey instrument. By having full control over the survey and being in the known about the upcoming event, a more precise test of PPO impact is possible. I commit to field 6 to 10 panel surveys. In terms of case selection, I select events based on the features they are likely to display (e.g. issue, organizer, disruption) and their relationship to other selected cases. Doing so, I complete a theoretically meaningful grid of varying pathways of PPO impact (see Figure 1) and engage in paired comparisons to move beyond the dominant single case approach. For instance, inspired by recent protests, if a first case is a large, peaceful climate change demonstration; the second might be a disruptive climate demonstration. A third leg would be a disruptive farmer demonstration contesting climate change legislation.

The main risks are twofold: I am dependent on the supply of protest during the project, and I must be able to foresee protest in order to go timely in the field. First, protest is abound (even in lockdown Europe) so cases on contemporary salient issues will be available. Second, I have a track record of foreseeing and surveying upcoming protests and an international network as well as an elaborated monitoring procedure in place to scan for protests.^{48,49,50} For instance, whereas most observers were surprised by a grassroots wave of anti-corona protests hitting Belgium in 2022, I was in the field surveying the participants.⁵¹ Just one example of a contingency plan is that I might start with surveying a well-announced trade union protest to compare it in a second leg with a grassroots mobilization on a similar economic issue. In all, my track record shows that I am capable of surveying upcoming protests; a tailored survey instrument and a monitoring infrastructure will be in place; there is a clear idea of paired comparisons and contingency plans are up. Although the presented data collection is unprecedented, I have demonstrated the skills to be able to pull it off.

Experiments on politicization effects—Finally, I complement the observational studies with pre-registered experimental work tackling the mediating mechanism of politicization. In the “control” condition a protest event packaged as a news item is presented to a sample of citizens. This measures the baseline effect of

protest when it would be an isolated signal. In the “experimental” conditions, reactions (positive; negative) of politicians (different parties) are added to measure how elite cues—politicization—affect opinion formation.^{52,53} I expect the effects of protest features in the control condition to be dwarfed by the effects of the confluence of protest features and politicization in the experimental conditions. It are politicians who activate cleavage identity thinking by anchoring citizens’ opinion formation. I field 6 such experiments varying this generic blueprint. Having successfully designed much-cited protest experiments in the past,^{24,30} the current experiments for the first time will quantify the impact of politicization in a fully controlled experimental setting, unrivalled in causal inference drawing.

Mass and social media content analysis—In order to test my theory of PPO impact, the first two data collections described above are complemented with content analyses of mass and social media in the 20 days surrounding each protest. For mass media, all articles on the protest issue in a more liberal and conservative newspaper as well as a popular tabloid and alternative news medium are coded. For social media, I depart from the twitter/X accounts of all members of parliament and government. For instance, following political claims analysis and the core-sentence approach,⁵⁴ I map politicization by coding salience (number of actors engaging), scope (diversity of actors) and position taking (valence of reactions), which allows me to tap the (de)legitimizing or polarizing nature of the protest invoked debate.⁵⁵ Besides being dependent variables in their own right (how does protest drive politicization?) their critical contribution lies in being linked to the survey data. For instance, for the tailored panel designs this will be done by means of creating weighted exposure measures, assigning each respondent in the survey, based on her exposure to (specific) media, a “dose” of media content information (politicization).⁵⁶ Although prominent in work on electoral campaigns, to date, no such type of “linkage study” dealing with (the much more sudden political act of) protest has been published, although the topic essentially begs for such designs.

Team, planning and supportive environment—PROPEL will be conducted by a team of three Phd students, a Postdoc, and me as the PI. Additionally, student assistants are recruited for coding media content. An experienced postdoc is hired to mine protest-survey co-occurrence across datasets, Phd1 and 2 make dissertations on public opinion, Phd3 on politicization. As a PI, I supervise the full project and am responsible for coordination and management. Table 1 presents the planning: whereas the systematic UESD and experiments can easily be anchored on the timeline (dark grey) this holds less for the panel surveys and related content analyses (light grey) being dependent on the supply of protest during the project. I extensively elaborate in part B2 on how I will manage this highly original data collection strategy.

Additionally, PROPEL will greatly benefit from being connected to the sociology department of Tilburg, a hub for public opinion expertise, with colleagues acting as national coordinators and board members of internationally renowned survey programmes as ISSP, ESS and EVS (Prof. Ruud Luijckx; Prof. Tim Reeskens; Prof. Inge Sieben) and Tilburg University hosting internationally recognized high quality longitudinal panel studies like NELLS (Netherlands Longitudinal Life course Study) and LISS (Longitudinal Panel for the Social Sciences). On top, PROPEL will be strengthened by an advisory committee consisting of scholars with expertise in political communication and protest (e.g. Prof. Rens Vliegenthart;) and scholars experienced in tracking protest to facilitate protest monitoring (e.g. Prof. Mattias Wahlström).

Table 1. Planning		2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
<i>Development of the theoretical framework</i> (start/end)						
<i>Data Collection</i>	Systematic UESD mining					
	Tailored panel surveys					
	Mass & Social Media content analysis					
	Experiments					
<i>Analysis & papers</i>	Papers on UESD (3 à 5)					
	Papers on panel surveys (6 à 8)					
	Papers on politicization (2 à 4)					
	Papers on experiments (3 à 5)					

Conclusion—PROPEL investigates the democratic implications of protest in an era of shifting cleavage politics. It does so by developing and testing an original political communication theory of PPO impact, addressing how protest propels political change by focusing on the mediating mechanisms of mediatization and politicization. Scaling up and honing in by engaging in ambitious and unprecedented data collections matching the expertise of the PI, PROPEL dissects when and how protest proves powerful, and assesses how an increasingly relevant means of democratic linkage deepens or endangers democracy as we know it.

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