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Frontmatter
More Information

Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity

Based on extensive data and analysis of sixty contentious episodes in twelve European countries, this book proposes a novel approach that takes a middle ground between narrative approaches and conventional protest event analysis. Looking particularly at responses to austerity policies in the aftermath of the Great Recession (2008–2009), the authors develop a rigorous conceptual framework that focuses on the interactions between three types of participants in contentious politics: governments, challengers, and third parties. This approach allows political scientists to map not only the variety of actors and actor coalitions that drove the interactions in the different episodes but also the interplay of repression/concessions/support and of mobilization/cooperation/mediation on the part of the actors involved in the contention. The methodology used will enable researchers to answer old (and new) research questions related to political conflict in a way that is simultaneously attentive to conceptual depth and statistical rigor.

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Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity

Studying the Dynamics of Government–Challenger Interactions

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Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

Contents

List of Figures *page* vii
List of Tables xi
List of Contributors xv
Preface xvii

PART I A NEW APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF CONTENTIOUS EPISODES

1 Introduction: A New Approach for Studying Political Contention – Contentious Episode Analysis 3
Hanspeter Kriesi, Swen Hutter, Abel Bojar, Argyrios Altiparmakis, Theresa Gessler, Sophia Hunger, Katia Pilati, and Julia Schulte-Cloos

2 Selecting and Coding Contentious Episodes 24
Abel Bojar, Swen Hutter, and Sophia Hunger

3 The Economic and Political Contexts of the Episodes 44
Hanspeter Kriesi and Sophia Hunger

PART II VARIETIES OF CONTENTION

4 Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Mapping Contentiousness 67
Theresa Gessler and Swen Hutter

5 Actors Configurations and Coalitions in Contentious Episodes 91
Theresa Gessler and Swen Hutter

6 Action Sequences and Dynamic Indicators of Contention 110
Abel Bojar and Argyrios Altiparmakis

7 Outcomes: Government Responsiveness 132
Sophia Hunger and Julia Schulte-Cloos

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Frontmatter
More Information

PART III DYNAMICS OF INTERACTION

8 Interaction Dynamics in Contentious Episodes: Path-Dependence, Tit-for-Tat, and Constructive Mediation 147
Abel Bojar and Hanspeter Kriesi

9 The Governments' Reactions to Challengers and Third Parties 166
Hanspeter Kriesi

10 The Effect of Repression on Protest 190
Katia Pilati

11 Turning Points 211
Abel Bojar

12 The Greek Case 236
Argyrios Altiparmakis

PART IV CONCLUSION

13 Conclusion 255
Abel Bojar and Hanspeter Kriesi

Appendices 271

References 305

Index 317

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CAMBRIDGE

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978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

Figures

2.1 Total action count per episode *page* 38
2.2 Actions and triggers in the Sarkozy–Fillon austerity episode 40
3.1 The timing of the episodes, by country and type 46
3.2 Economic sentiment indicator (ESI) (2007–2015), by region and country 49
3.3 Development of unemployment (2007–2015) and the timing of the episodes, by region 50
3.4 Quality of democracy in the twelve countries 56
4.1 Dimensions of contentiousness 70
4.2 Contentiousness by challenger, by episode and country 79
4.3 Intensity and disruptiveness of the challenger 80
4.4 Contentiousness by third parties and by the government 81
4.5 Contentiousness by the challenger and by the government/third parties 83
5.1 Types of challenger coalition and contentiousness by the challenger unions plus opposition parties 99
5.2 Types of actor configuration 106
6.1 Stylized illustration of sequences with and without overlaps 112
6.2 Distribution of our pace and complexity metrics in our episodes 117
6.3 Scatterplot of pace and complexity per episode 118
6.4 Average sequence pace, by country 119
6.5 Average complexity, by country 121
6.6 Average sequence pace, by episode type 121
6.7 Average complexity, by episode type 122
6.8 Predicted probability of episode clusters, by episode severity 125
6.9 Predicted probability of episode clusters, by satisfaction with democracy 125

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

6.10 Predicted probability of episode clusters, by government type 126
6.11 Average complexity by episode clusters entailing external involvement 127
8.1 Schematic illustration of action lags 155
8.2 Predicted probability of action repertoires as a function of past actions by the same actor (predicted probabilities with 95 percent confidence intervals) 158
8.3 Predicted probability of action repertoires as a function of past actions by the adversary (predicted probabilities with 95 percent confidence intervals) 159
8.4 Predicted probability of action repertoires as a function of past third-party actions (predicted probabilities with 95 percent confidence intervals) 161
9.1 Government reactions to challenger actions, by configuration of challenger for all episodes: predicted probabilities 173
9.2 Concessions in union- and civil-society-driven episodes, in reaction to challenges by unions, civil-society organizations, and other types of actors: percentage shares of government actions 174
9.3 Government reaction to challenging action by cabinet type: predicted probabilities for unpopular and popular center-left and center-right cabinets 177
9.4 Government reaction to challenging action by divided government: predicted probabilities for all partisan and union-driven episodes with undivided and divided governments 180
9.5 Government reaction to challenger actions by configuration of challengers and third-party action, for all episodes except for civil- society challenges: predicted probabilities 183
9.6 Government reaction to challenger action, for all episodes with international actors supporting government, challengers, or neither: predicted probabilities 186
10.1 Daily count of repressive measures and of protests in Greece across contentious episodes 201
10.2 Daily counts of protests and radical actions (confrontational and violent actions) during the second bailout and the TV shutdown in Greece 202
10.3 Effects of government repression on challengers' radical actions (see Table A10.1 for full models) 205
10.4 Effects of government repression on challengers' protests, considering episodes classified according to actors' configurations (see Table A10.2 for full models) 206
10.5 Effects of government repression on challengers' protests in Greece (see Table A10.3 for full models) 207

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

10.6 The moderating effect of the different political orientation of cabinets (see Table A10.4 for full models) 208
10.7 The moderating effect of different alliances of international actors with challengers (chall+) and governments (gov+) on the impact that repression has on protests (see Table A10.5 for full models) 209
11.1 Stylized illustration of points of opening and points of closure 214
11.2 Number of points of opening and closing 217
11.3 Predicted probabilities of points of opening 225
11.4 Predicted probabilities of points of closure as a function of actor types and relative number of days since beginning of episode 227
11.5 Predicted probabilities of actor types and action forms in different phases of the episodes 230
12.1 Protest events in Greece, 2010–2012 242
A3.1 Government popularity and timing of the episodes (2007–2015), by country and region 283

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

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978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

Tables

1.1 Detailed action repertoires of the three actor types *page* 17
2.1 List of policy episodes per country (episode names, short labels, and episode types in parentheses) 29
2.2 List of newspapers per country 30
2.3 Institutional actor categorization 34
2.4 Action forms and their codes 36
2.5 Forms of mobilization and their codes 37
2.6 Illustration of the complete code set 41
3.1 Economic indicators, country averages for the five episodes 48
3.2 Mean severity by country and episode type 52
3.3 Determinants of severity of proposed measures 54
3.4 Government electoral vulnerability: standardized vote intentions for the cabinet parties at the start of the episodes, by country 57
3.5 The correlates of government vulnerability (vote intention, standardized): OLS regression coefficients, t-values and significance levels 59
3.6 Pressure from above: share of international actors among all actors intervening during the starting month of the episode, by country – minimum, mean, and maximum 60
3.7 Determinants of the timing of the economic policy episodes (September 2008–2015): OLS and fixed effects regressions – regression coefficients, t-values, and significance levels 62
4.1 Types of contentious episode 72
4.2 Frequency of procedural and substantive actions, by actor type 73
4.3 Dimensions, indicators, and descriptive statistics for contentiousness 75

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

4.4 Country averages for contentiousness (sorted by challenger contentiousness) 78
4.5 Bivariate correlation table (N = 60) 87
4.6 Impact of general and episode-specific factors on challenger and overall contentiousness (OLS regressions) 88
5.1 Institutional character of all actors, by percentages 93
5.2 Diversity and institutional character of challenger by country 96
5.3 Types of challenger coalitions 97
5.4 Positioning of third parties by country 101
5.5 Diversity and institutional character of third parties, by country 103
5.6 Types of third-party configuration 104
6.1 Frequency distribution of actions in terms of the number of further actions they trigger: percentages 113
6.2 Summary of length and duration of sequences 115
7.1 Categorization of government responsiveness by Gamson (1975) 134
7.2 Operationalization of substantive and procedural responsiveness 135
7.3 Categorization of episodes 136
7.4 Substantive government responsiveness: means, standard deviations, and p-values of t-tests comparing the means 142
7.5 Procedural government responsiveness: means, standard deviations, and p-values of t-tests comparing the means 143
8.1 Overview of hypotheses 153
9.1 Configurations of challengers: list of partisan and civil-society challenges 169
9.2 Episodes with divided governments: shares of challenger and third-party actions attributable to actors from government parties 179
9.3 Episodes with international support of government and challengers 185
10.1 Challengers' engagement in different forms of protest mobilization across countries (row %) 199
11.1 Summary of our hypotheses 223
11.2 Logit models of points of opening 224
11.3 Logit models for points of closure 226
11.4 Turning points and their types (percent of total) 228
12.1 Greek contentious episodes in comparison 237
12.2 Comparison of challengers across Greek contentious episodes 239
12.3 Comparison of mobilization forms across all Greek contentious episodes 239
12.4 Action typology: distribution of action types 241
A3.1 Coding rules for severity measure 280

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

A3.2 List of governments in the twelve countries during the period covered 281
A6.1 List of contentious episodes by clusters according to their sequence types 285
A6.2 Multinomial logistic regression on the determinants of episode-clusters 286
A8.1 Distribution of action codes by country and actor type 289
A8.2 Government path-dependence models 290
A8.3 Challenger path-dependence models 290
A8.4 Government threat models 291
A8.5 Challenger threat models 292
A8.6 Government–third-party models 293
A8.7 Challenger–third-party models 294
A9.1 Government reaction to challenger actions by configuration of challenger, cabinet composition, divided governments, and third-party actors, for all episodes: mlogit model parameters, t-values, and significance levels 296
A11.1 Multinomial logit models on actor and action types across the episode phases 303

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CAMBRIDGE

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978-1-316-51901-1 — Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity
Edited by Abel Bojar , Theresa Gessler , Swen Hutter , Hanspeter Kriesi
Frontmatter
More Information

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Frontmatter
More Information

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Frontmatter
More Information

Preface

Contentious Episodes in the Age of Austerity is the final product of the project "Political Conflict in Europe in the Shadow of the Great Recession (POLCON)" funded by the European Research Council.[1] POLCON has previously studied the structuration of the European party-political space relying on election campaign data in *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis* (Hutter and Kriesi 2019) as well as the patterns of European protest activity relying on semi-automated protest event analysis in *Contention in Times of Crisis* (Kriesi et al. 2020). Both of these volumes focused on particular venues of political conflict: the electoral arena and the protest arena, respectively. A common intuition among many observers of the Great Recession (2008–2015) at the time was that it would turn out to be a watershed event in transforming European politics, possibly for the foreseeable future. Yet, the cautious conclusion we drew from our empirical works was the opposite: European politics, apart from a few noteworthy exceptions such as Greece or Hungary, was propelled forward by forces and mechanisms largely familiar from earlier times. It was business as usual, it would seem.

In some ways, our current study brings the two arenas – the electoral arena and the protest arena – together by studying a wide range of political actors and their action strategies in the wake of contentious policy proposals put forward by governments in their attempt to address the adverse consequences of the Great Recession. While some of the protagonists in our study coincide with the main actors driving the anti-austerity protest wave that we studied in our previous work – such as the Indignados movement in Spain or the traditional trade unions in Italy and France – others are party actors that came to prominence during this period either as government parties responsible for harsh

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Frontmatter
More Information

austerity measures (e.g. Fianna Fail in Ireland) or as opposition parties aligning with challenger organizations to fight governments in parliaments, in the streets or in international forums (e.g. Syriza up until their rise to power in 2015). Still others are what we call 'third-party actors' (such as foreign governments, supranational institutions, constitutional courts etc.) because their functional role in the policy episodes we study was a form of mediation between governments and their challengers that often, however, meant a close alignment with one or the other.

Our approach to study political conflict in what we call 'policy episodes' follows in the footsteps of the *Dynamics of Contention* tradition (McAdam et al. 2001) that advocated a turn towards the middle ground between the narrative approach that traditionally dominated the field and the epidemiological approach of protest event analysis. Our main goal in this volume is to offer a solution to scholars who wish to implement this middle ground in a systematic fashion. Although the scope of our study is limited by the choice of the kind of episodes we study (mostly economic episodes, initiated by a government proposal), we hope our proposed method travels beyond what we show in the present volume and it will be used by scholars studying other forms of political conflict.

As any innovation in the social sciences, our approach had to overcome formidable challenges that we are acutely aware of. The empirical material we rely on in our analysis is exhaustive only to the extent that our keyword-based search from the national presses allows us to capture the full timeline of events in the respective political settings. The complexity of actions and actors needed to be condensed into a scheme that is amenable to interpretation and coding. The answers to where to begin and where to end the coding of a given episode were guided by operational rules that we laid down in the beginning, but at times the coding had to be adjusted to the empirical reality of episode-specific idiosyncracies. Although we are optimistic that many of these limitations can be overcome and fine-tuned by future applications of our method, we regard some degree of simplification of a complex political world a necessary price to pay for the systematic scheme that we present to our readers.

Some of the choices in the way we structured our volume and the types of analysis we undertook were informed by the extremely useful feedback we have received along the way. We are particularly grateful to all the participants of our POLCON conference in October 2018, who highlighted some of the main problems that we could still address in time. Special thanks are due to Mark Beisinger and Mario Diani, who acted as discussants to individual papers and chapters that we presented at the conference. No less important were the comments we received at the discussion from Edgar Grande, Elisabeth Iversflaten, Zsolt Enyedi, Line Rennwald, Sofia Vasilopoulu, Herberth Kitschelt, Liisa Talving, Thomas Sattler, Silja Hausermann, Anton Hemerijck, Philip Manow, Ondrey Cisar and Stefaan Walgrave. Parts of our work have also been presented at the third LSE–Oxford-Sciences Po 'Young Doctors'

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Frontmatter
More Information

Political Economy Workshop, where we received equally helpful comments from Michael Zemmour, acting as discussant, as well as other participants, such as Tim Vlandas (conference organizer), Margarita Gelepithis, Charlotte Haberstroh, Sonja Avlijas, Angelo Martelli and David Hope, among others. Moreover, we greatly appreciated the opportunity to take part in the symposium organized by *Mobilization* with the conceptual summary paper of our project ("Contentious Episode Analysis"), where we received highly constructive remarks from David Meyer, Alex Hanna, Pamela Oliver and Sidney Tarrow.

Last but not least, none of this would have been possible without the painstaking effort to browse through and code thousands of articles by our research assistants at the European University Institute and beyond. In no particular order, we would thus like to express our gratitude for their coding efforts to Lola Guyot, Sophia Hunger, Anna Kyriazi, Argyrios Altiparmakis, Ieva Grumbinaie, Ieva Bloma, Zsofia Suba, Nodira Kholmitova, Gulzat Baialieva, Davide Morisi, Johannes Karremans, Radek Michalksi, Grzegorz Krzyzanowski, Frederico Ferreira Da Silva, Delia Radu, Nena Oana, and Mateus Alves. Likewise, the support we have received from our administrative staff, above all Maureen Lechleitner, proved crucial in the successful implementation of this project, and so we would like to extend our gratitude to her as well.

Let us conclude by pointing out that this volume is the result of intense cooperation between all of its contributors. The individual chapters have been written in the framework of the project and their authors have contributed not only to their own chapters but also to data collection, conceptual and methodological discussions, as well as data analysis.

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