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Citation: Gonzalez Santos, F., Hoffmann, M. & Mercea, D. (2024). Protesting at the intersection of individual characteristics and obstacles to participation: An analysis of the in-person, online and pivoting styles. *Journal of European Public Policy*, pp. 1-28. doi: 10.1080/13501763.2024.2418962

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To cite this article: Felipe G. Santos, Matthias Hoffmann & Dan Mercea (26 Oct 2024): Protesting at the intersection of individual characteristics and obstacles to participation: an analysis of the in-person, online and pivoting styles, Journal of European Public Policy, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2024.2418962](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2418962)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2418962>



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Protesting at the intersection of individual characteristics and obstacles to participation: an analysis of the in-person, online and pivoting styles

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ABSTRACT

Engaging with long-standing debates on the crisis of democracy, manifested as a downturn in civic involvement, this paper scrutinises the evolving landscape of protest participation. First delineating three distinct protest participation styles – in-person, online and what we conceive of as a pivoting style – we identify individual characteristics among protesters that are associated with each style and consider how different obstacles to participation are linked to these individual styles. Using novel survey data from six European countries, we show that online support can be a viable alternative for individuals unable to join protests due to obstacles they face. The online participation style is more common among people who lack connections with social contacts that can facilitate their participation. The in-person style is prevalent among older participants who are less frequent social media users while the pivoting style is more often realised among young, more biographically available people who are media omnivores. Participants who do not embrace the in-person style lack consensus mobilisation whereas those exhibiting a preference for the online or the pivoting styles face obstacles relating to action mobilisation. We conclude the article with a call for a more nuanced understanding of protest participation, as symptomatic of a transformation of democracy.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 6 November 2023; Accepted 11 October 2024

KEYWORDS Protest; social movements; mobilisation; participation styles; obstacles

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2418962>.

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Introduction

Substantial concerns have been raised about a crisis of democracy in western societies – driven by a combination of decreasing electoral turnout and a diminishing allegiance to political parties (Mair, 2013). Yet, some authors have signalled that these declines in electoral participation, particularly acute among younger cohorts, go hand in hand with the development of a more ‘assertive’ form of citizenship and increased engagement in non-electoral politics (Dalton & Welzel, 2014). However, demonstrating in the streets remains a variety of non-electoral political action embraced by few (Quaranta, 2018). Street protesters can be seen as a small but significant part of a wider pool of individuals amenable to participation, a contingent designated as the *mobilisation potential* of a social movement (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Tapping into their mobilisation potential, movements ultimately seek to incentivize *action*, by instilling the motivation to participate and removing *obstacles* to participation.

At the same time, the affordances and the ubiquity of digital media have enabled adaptations and innovations in the contentious repertoire of activists (van Laer & van Aelst, 2010), throwing into question the understanding of protest participation as an act performed exclusively with one’s body and bound to a specific space and time. Starting from these insights, the present analysis examines three *styles* of protest participation. We use the term to refer to ways in which people participate that may combine in a dynamic fashion as citizens negotiate structural conditions, personal circumstances and preferences (Bennett *et al.*, 2011). First, we contrast an online participation style – manifested as an expression of online support for a protest – with an in-person participation style that entails joining a protest at a physical location. Then, we inquire into a third, the pivoting style, which involves switching between online and in-person participation in different protest episodes.

To consider these possibilities systematically, we report findings from a bespoke nationally representative, online, panel survey conducted in six European countries (Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the UK) that queried individuals about their involvement in the most salient protest episodes in their respective countries, as well as the reasons they had to not partake in them. These episodes cover a range of different issues, hence assuring that different grievances and a broad ideological spectrum were activated. We must contend, however, that our interest in this study is not in a comparison of country- or issue-specific context conditions, but rather in using a broad set of observations to disentangle different styles of participation on the individual level, across country contexts. We use this data to answer the following research questions. First, which individual attributes are associated with the realisation of each of the three participation

styles? (RQ1)? Second, what obstacles to participation help to delineate the three participation styles (RQ2)?

Our results indicate that each participation style represents a distinct combination of individual characteristics and the obstacles individuals face. Moreover, we find that the online style, specifically, allows individuals to overcome obstacles – e.g., physical distance from the site of a protest – to be involved in street actions. Finally, we conclude with a set of reflections on the place of the online and pivoting styles in contemporary social movement protest. We discuss their significance in a communication environment where organisers have seized on online communication to facilitate collective action (Cammaerts, 2021) as well as to recruit participants (Saunders *et al.*, 2012); and which the latter use to prime their participation (Mercea, 2014). In the following section, we introduce the theory underpinning our understanding of the three protest participation styles and propose six main hypotheses for their analysis.

Theoretical framework: from mobilisation potential to protest participation

We begin our investigation of protest participation from the seminal characterisation of the act of joining a single, public, demonstration as a stepwise process, by Klandermans and Oegema (1987). These scholars argued that, at each step along the way, the *mobilisation potential* of a movement may shrink and the number of individuals who ultimately make it to a protest site diminish. Support for a movement, among the public, may not translate directly into a willingness to participate in its actions and, eventually, into actual participation. Accordingly, mobilisation is a delicate act of aligning individual resources, grievances and motivations with movement-provided incentives for participation and the removal of obstacles to it, within propitious social settings that can act as (in)formal recruitment networks (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987).

In short, ‘motivation and barriers interact to activate participation’ (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987, p. 520). On the one hand, despite obstacles being credited for leading to a high dropout rate among those willing to physically attend a protest (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987), little systematic investigation of these obstacles – let alone their conceptualisation – has followed this observation (but see Santos, 2020). On the other hand, the assumption of a linear trajectory from mobilisation potential to protest participation as a series of binary choices is apposite as long as the question under consideration conceives of participation as an action performed with one’s body (Foster, 2003), whose involvement in a physical act of protest connotes successful mobilisation and the confluence of individual thoughts, emotions and actions.

Expanding participation through digital communication

Notably, the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has prompted a rush to make sense of what they bode for non-electoral political participation. Such participation – encompassing, *inter alia*, demonstrations, petition signing or online advocacy – was at once considered with concern when juxtaposed to a decline in voter turnout and political efficacy, in many democratic countries (Norris, 2011); and, conversely, with optimism for its potential to widen ‘citizen involvement’ (Dalton, 2017, p. 8). ICT usage for non-electoral participation was cogently broken down into digitally supported acts that in some way enhance offline involvement; and digitally enabled acts that take place entirely online as they exploit technologically afforded opportunities for networked connectivity and interaction (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

More specifically, ICT usage has, for some time now, been a basis not only for protest mobilisation but also for expressive albeit remote participation in it (for a review of relevant literature and an outline of the mechanism see Boulianne *et al.*, 2020). While there is long-standing evidence of protest participation that is complemented by online communication – such as when protestors post about police presence at a demonstration, on social media (Bastos *et al.*, 2015) – repertoires of non-electoral political engagement have transpired solely online (Theocharis *et al.*, 2023). In this light, it seems timely to examine together the factors contributing to protest-going, online support for a protest and the option to switch between the two. From this perspective, we contend that online support for a protest does not amount to outright failed participation, *i.e.*, stopping short of in-person participation. Thus, participation is no longer only the result of a linear course of overcoming potential obstacles. Instead, it can be conceived of as a dynamic process whereby individuals make use of the resources at their disposal (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) to partake in a protest, in the context of the structural conditions they face, resulting in a participation style, or indeed the foregoing of participation.

In this article, we focus on three participation styles: in-person, online and the pivoting style. We advocate for an empirical investigation of the extent to which online support for an onsite protest is due to an incomplete mobilisation process directed at in-person participation; or, alternatively, whether it is a participation style in its own right. When conceptualising protest participation as the result of individuals realising or not realising a particular style, then, the logical conclusion is that conceiving of individuals as split along a participant/non-participant divide does not account fully for the changes in political participation patterns observed over the last two decades (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Theocharis *et al.*, 2023). Instead, we propose to understand participation as a nexus of factors that affect the individual – be these personal resources,

motivations or obstacles to participation – that together contribute to the likelihood of attending protests in person, supporting them only online, or switching from in-person participation to online support between different protests. We call the latter, the ‘pivoting style’.

Furthermore, evidence of interconnections between online communication and street protests (Bastos *et al.*, 2015) intimates that protest behaviour that falls short of physical participation need not be readily disqualified as non-participation. Instead, it opens the door for the consideration of ‘the social and political characteristics of individuals drawn to a particular protest’ (Hunger *et al.*, 2023); and, we would add, of the avenues through which they manifest their support for it. In this way, while understanding participation as a personal choice from a variety of possible actions, it is also important to pay attention to structural obstacles faced by some individuals that may favour certain styles and discourage others.

Pivoting between in-person and online participation

Altogether, then, we can question the factors that combine to make a participation style more likely than the other. The scholarship reviewed thus far underscores an important point: the three protest participation styles are ripe for an integrated analysis. Kindred research has evidenced a correlation between online and offline participation (Noland, 2017). Alternatively, we may conceive of digital acts of contention as expressions of consensus mobilisation (Klandermans, 1984), and hence a prerequisite to action mobilisation. Consensus mobilisation entails efforts by a social movement to secure ‘support for its viewpoints’ while the latter, action mobilisation, is the process of recruiting people for participation in collective action (Klandermans, 1984, p. 586). Consensus mobilisation is thus instrumental to engendering support towards a movement’s goals while action mobilisation is key to securing participation in the actions it takes to attain that goal (Hunger *et al.*, 2023).

From this perspective, in-person participation, for instance in street protests, is seen as the endpoint of a recruitment process, in which a certain mobilisation potential can be identified, that gradually narrows to the few who actually ‘show up’. This implies fundamentally different perspectives on acts of online participation. First, they may be regarded as variations in the playbook of the action-mobilised that can be tied together with concomitant participation in street protests (Bastos *et al.*, 2015; Earl *et al.*, 2013). Second, they may be construed as expressions of consensus that fall victim to attrition along the road to offline protest.

On this continuum from in-person to online participation, then, we delineate the pivoting style as sitting between these two poles. This third style embodies an alternative dynamic, namely of someone who engages in

street action in one instance and resorts to online participation in another. Admittedly, this conceptualisation does not allow us to explore patterns of participation in which people engage in both in-person and online action at one and the same time. However, we expect this issue to circumscribe the understanding of in-person participation because, as already mentioned, it reflects specifically the reality that some participants may join a protest on the streets while simultaneously engaging in acts of support for it online (Earl *et al.*, 2013). As such, if one were able to participate in person then the fact that they supported the same protest online would reinforce rather than dislocate their participation in the street protest.

Conversely, it is important to note that our primary theoretical interest is in delimiting the three participation styles in relation to one's readiness to protest and to the obstacles people face that, we would posit, confine their ability to participate. We do so to assess individual attributes that make people more likely to embrace one participation style over the other two (RQ1); and ask what obstacles to participation help to delineate the three participation styles (RQ2)? Crucially, whatever participation style people may exhibit, we conceive of these individuals as protesters, as opposed to non-protesters, who forego participation of any kind. Therefore, while in the following section, we draw on the literature on predictors associated with protest participation, we do so to derive expectations specific to the three participation styles outlined above. Below, we formulate our main hypotheses relating to each RQ.

Research hypotheses

First, it can often be the case that people who are sympathetic to a cause are unable to overcome personal obstacles to participation (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Personal obstacles may arise due to limits to one's biographical availability imposed by caring duties; by one's relationship status – having a partner makes one less likely to be available to protest; or by one's employment status; or, finally, by one's age – with young people more likely to participate than older people (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006). In view of this, we hypothesise that online supporters are biographically less available than those who pivot between in-person protest and online support (**H1a**) and even less so than those who participate in person (**H1b**).

Second, in-person participants are more likely to be structurally available for protest (Schussman & Soule, 2005) by virtue of being embedded in germane social networks – organisational as well as personal – that act as a milieu for recruitment into collective action (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Social relations, these authors proposed, can incentivize participation by, *inter alia*, providing pertinent information and increasing one's motivation to overcome obstacles to participation. Conversely, the absence of

network embeddedness may represent a social obstacle to participation that decreases the likelihood of participation. Hence, we posit that online supporters are less likely to be embedded in activist networks than in-person or pivoting participants (**H2**).

Third, in-person participants are likely to possess a sense of group efficacy, i.e., they hold the view that collective action can bring about desired outcomes for a social group (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010). Closely connected to it is *action support* or the ‘perceived willingness of other group members to engage in collective action’ (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010, p. 182). We presume that this sense of group efficacy is equally present among in-person and pivoting participants while being absent among online supporters due to their more limited social embeddedness (**H3**).

Fourth, becoming involved in protest, as an in-person participant, is more likely if one is also more widely engaged, politically (Schussman & Soule, 2005). Evidence to date shows a relation between protest participation, individual grievances and the degree to which one is interested in and informed about politics (Corrigall-Brown, 2012; Schussman & Soule, 2005). We would therefore posit that both in-person and pivoting participants are more likely to be aggrieved, interested and informed about politics than those opting for an online participation style (**H4**).

Fifth, one reason for our supposition is that in-person participants are likely to source political information from both legacy and social media (Ismail *et al.*, 2019; Mosca & Quaranta, 2016). Such participants were described with the term *media omnivores*. Second to them, *digital univores* – who only sourced political information online – were less likely than omnivores but more likely than *traditional univores* (sourcing political information from legacy media) to go along to a demonstration. As to an underlying mechanism for these relations, prior work indicated that ‘integrated media use’ – i.e., the combined use of a plurality of sources, on different channels and platforms – increases the likelihood of civic participation (the latter was measured with an index of 12 items comprising, inter alia, ‘local rallies, protests ... or marches’, Nah & Yamamoto, 2018, p. 1069). As these scholars explained, while integrated media use had a direct, positive, relation to civic participation, analogous cross-platform information-seeking, and political discussion mediated the association. Put differently, partaking in a plurality of media activities, via multiple channels and platforms, makes one more likely to engage in civic participation, including in street protests. Additionally, a meta-analysis pointed to a supply-led dynamic where the diffusion of purpose-built digital media that facilitate political participation (e.g., petition sites) has acted as a driver of offline participation, including in street protests (Boulianne, 2020, p. 962). That analysis, however, reported on a single dimension of the relationship between media usage – to wit, of purpose-built digital media – and in-person protest participation. A separate

systematic review (Lorenz-Spreen *et al.*, 2023) cited evidence that the informational use of social media, more broadly, leads one to participate in online civic movements – a relation mediated by external political efficacy, viz. the sense that one can influence politics (Chen *et al.*, 2019). Mosca and Quaranta (2016, pp. 340–341), specifically, argued that omnivore diets furnish individuals with the necessary ‘cognitive and mobilization resources’ for in-person participation in demonstrations, which they describe as ‘more costly’ than online political participation. That is, while through legacy media one glean information about the broader political context, through digital media one gets access to content generated directly by social movement actors about actions they take (Ismail *et al.*, 2019), such as demonstrations, and participation in them. Thus, in relation to the *omnivore-univore* distinction of media consumption patterns, we surmise that in-person and pivoting participants are media omnivores (**H5a**), more likely to possess higher informational resources, whereas online supporters are digital univores (**H5b**).

Additionally, to supplement these analyses of the factors associated with separate participation styles, we probe people’s reasons for non-participation. As already discussed, we expect those who participate in person or who pivot between in-person and online participation to be more biographically and structurally available; to be more convinced about the efficacy of protests, as well as more interested and informed about politics than those opting to support a protest online. Accordingly, notwithstanding how available or engaged participants are, we anticipate that those exhibiting the online participation style face more challenges to transforming their interests into engagement in collective, public actions.

If, as we envisage, online supporters are the least socially embedded, we anticipate that they face more challenges to transforming their interests into engagement in collective, public actions than in-person participants and those pivoting between online and in-person participation styles. Using Klandermans’ (1984) vocabulary, we expect online supporters to explain their non-participation by reference to reasons related to ‘action mobilization’ – i.e., citing difficulties with reaching the location of an event, finding the time to participate in it, lacking the company to attend a protest or perceptions of risks associated with participation – more than in-person or pivoting participants (**H6a**). Contrariwise, we hypothesise that explanations based on arguments linked to ‘consensus mobilization’ – i.e., a lack of awareness about a protest or of agreement with its goals – are most likely to be reasons for non-participation in a protest event among in-person demonstrators (**H6b**). Lastly, we expect those pivoting between online and in-person participation to face obstacles related to action mobilisation more often than in-person demonstrators but less so than online supporters (**H6c**).

In the regression analyses that follow, we include several controls. Cognate research has determined that higher socio-economic status makes one more

likely to participate, electorally and non-electorally, thanks to the skills and resources accumulated through education and a good income (Dalton, 2017). Comparative research, furthermore, pointed to participants as more likely to be better educated (Bernhagen & Marsh, 2007). Similar research further suggested that those right-of-the-center were more likely to protest in Eastern Europe whereas people with left leanings were more likely to protest in Western Europe (Borbáth & Gessler, 2020).

Data and methods

The data reported in this study is drawn from an online panel survey administered from 21 February to 11 March 2022 ($N = 10,347$ respondents) by the international polling organisation YouGov in six Eastern and Western European countries – namely, Denmark ($N = 1001$), Germany ($N = 2024$), Hungary ($N = 2051$), Italy ($N = 2101$), Romania ($N = 946$), and the United Kingdom ($N = 2224$). YouGov matched respondents to the national population with respect to age, education, region, sex and past vote with the aid of active sampling methods and quotas for each country. Earlier research has deliberated on the representativity of panel-based survey data (Elliott & Valliant, 2017). By means of simulations and online experiments, it concluded that the sampling protocols instituted by pollsters such as YouGov have produced data that is ‘broadly representative’ (Miratrix *et al.*, 2018, p. 290).

In what follows, we distinguish between in-person participation and online support, using a combination of multinomial and binary logistic regressions, and analyses of variance which, additionally, encompass the possibility of pivoting between the two. Therefore, we examine the orientation of survey respondents towards the three participation styles to establish the characteristics and obstacles that distinguish those who exhibit the three styles from non-participants and from each other.

Participation styles

To categorise individuals in one of our three participation styles, we queried survey respondents about their involvement in public protests. With the assistance of country experts, we identified the most significant protest episodes, drawing the largest number of participants in each country, from 2015 to 2021.¹ While in some instances, episodes are country-specific (like pro- and anti-Brexit protests in the UK or pro-Government rallies in Hungary and Romania), other episodes like the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion protests or mobilisations in relation to the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic revolved around similar issues in the different countries. In sum, broader issues like anti-austerity and workers’ rights, the environment, the pandemic, far-right and anti-far-right protest, democracy, global justice,

and civil rights were common themes spanning most of our countries. Hence, as protests were instigated by actors from across the ideological spectrum and on different yet often aligned themes, we expected to query a wide range of citizens who engaged in this exceptional form of extra-institutional political participation during the period we captured in our survey. Taking the different protest episodes and/or issues into account would be theoretically warranted, the methodological constraints that come with a small-n problem render this unfeasible and led us to pool our data.

Respondents were asked: 'Let us think back to the period between 2015 and 2021. Did you participate in any of the following demonstrations?' The answer options were: 'Yes, more than once'; 'Yes, once'; 'I did not participate in its street protests but I supported the demonstration online'; 'I did not participate in the demonstration but I agree with the ideas it defended'; 'No, never'; 'Never heard of this protest'; 'I don't know'. We included the answer option for agreement with the ideas espoused by a protest to isolate online support from other forms of expressive participation. Subsequently, we created a variable for each episode registering whether the respondent had participated in the protest by joining it in person (options 'Yes, more than once' or 'Yes, once'), supported the protest online (option 'I did not participate in its street protests, but I supported the demonstration online') or, simply, did not participate in the event (all remaining answer options).

Online support, specifically, has previously been operationalised through content analysis as the expression of a positive opinion, namely towards the Black Lives Matter movement (van Haperen *et al.*, 2023). These researchers inferred a favourable stance towards the movement through a combination of human coding and supervised machine learning of a corpus of #blacklivesmatter tweets. Reflecting on Ackermann and Manatschal (2018) conceptualisation of online volunteering, however, this working definition of online support as a favourable expression towards a social movement seemed to restrict a likely broader range of cognate activities. The latter scholars used an index of eight online volunteering activities – e.g., inter alia, contributing an entry on Wikipedia, offering online expertise – to measure online volunteering. In our case, rather than to restrict the definition of online support to expressive actions only or, alternatively, to provide a catalogue of actions connoting support (which, as in the case of Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018, would have not been exhaustive or sufficiently context-sensitive in respect to, for example, the utilisation of different social media), we opted for a general statement of support allowing respondents to report any action they conceived of as online support. While cognizant of limitations inherent to such self-reporting – most pertinently, the risk of over-reporting of a behaviour due to 'identity-related self-reflection' (Brenner & DeLamater, 2016, p. 337) – we made this choice because we were interested in comparing

the three styles to each other without delving into further distinctions among the underpinning actions (cf. Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018, p. 4460).

Thus, using a list of survey items to ask respondents whether they attended a set of named street protests that had taken place in the six-year period preceding the survey or, if they had supported any of them online, we invited an unconstrained recall of any form of action online that they performed in support of a specific protest. Based on this distinction and on the earlier theoretical discussion, we defined the three participation styles. If an individual joined all the protests that they did on the street, we categorised that person as oriented towards the in-person style. Instead, if an individual declared that all their involvement with the listed protests consisted of supporting them online, we understood that person to be oriented towards the online style. Thirdly, if a person joined some protests in person while supporting others online, we classified that individual as oriented towards the pivoting style. Our data does not allow us to explore instances in which individuals engaged in the same event both through in-person and online participation. Finally, those who did not participate in any of the protests that we listed were categorised as non-participants. In Appendix, we provide a table with the protest events in each country, as well as the distribution of participation styles by country and issue category. We do not detect clear-cut patterns connecting participation styles to policy issues, across countries.

Independent variables

In the regression analyses that we ran, we registered respondents' biographical availability through four different variables: their age, sex, whether they were in charge of dependents of any age, as well as the amount of time they dedicate to work. To measure age, we relied on a continuous variable while using a binary item for sex. We inquired about respondents' caring duties with the following question: 'Do you have any family member – either young or old – in your care?'. Finally, we operationalised working time with a four-point scale based on the following survey item: 'Which of these applies to you? Working full-time (30 or more hours per week); Working part-time (8–29 hours a week); Working part time (Less than 8 hours a week); Full time student; Retired; Unemployed; Not working; Other', assigning a value of 1 to the last five options and a specific value to each of the remaining ones. Next, we accounted for respondents' network embeddedness with two variables. First, we combined 14 items recording organisational membership into a dummy variable (where 1 = membership of at least one organisation and 0 = no membership). Second, we created an activist friendship index (i.e., the proportion of personal contacts affiliated to an organisation or who previously participated in a protest).

Next, we included a 5-point scale variable measuring whether respondents believed protests can influence the situation in the country, to account for perceptions of group efficacy. To incorporate individuals' grievances in our model, we employed a 10-point scale to ascertain the degree of satisfaction with the government and a 5-point scale to operationalise egotropic economic grievances (Item: 'How does the financial situation of your household now compare with what it was 12 months ago?'). Political interest was recorded on a five-point scale varying from 'very interested' to 'not at all interested'. For media consumption, drawing on the delineation between legacy and social media, in political communication (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018) and social movements studies (Ismail *et al.*, 2019), we built a composite index for the frequency of using legacy media (television, radio and both legacy and online newspapers), and a separate one for social media (social networking services, online videos and messaging apps), to get political information. For each item in the indexes, we measured frequency of use with a six-point scale ranging from 'several times a day' to 'not once in the last 7 days'. Accordingly, legacy univores were people who only used legacy media for political information whereas social univores were those who only relied on social media for the same purpose. Omnivores, finally, were those who relied on both types of media for political information.

Finally, for our controls, we used country-specific items asking survey respondents about their income. To record educational attainment, we used categorical variables which we recoded into a three-point scale for low, middle and higher education. We employed a 10-point scale for measuring conflict over cultural liberalism as a contemporary manifestation of ideological cleavages (Pirro & Portos, 2021). We also controlled whether respondents lived in an urban or rural area. Except for the dummies, we standardised all variables to a 0–1 range before merging each national dataset into our data for analysis, to be able to compare the size of our model coefficients. Table 1 includes summary statistics for all the independent variables prior to standardisation, as well as a reference to the hypothesis with which each of them is associated. Lastly, our regression models also contained country controls.

Prior to running our statistical models, we employed multiple imputation (Rubin, 1987) to tackle the prevalent problem of incomplete data in survey research. As some survey participants tend to skip some questions or portions of them, some observations contain missing data. Given that incomplete information in survey responses is rarely distributed randomly (Penn, 2007), removing cases in which data is missing may lead to biased results. Through multiple imputation, we, therefore, generated five datasets using a probabilistic model based on the variables we incorporated into our study. Each replacement value has a random element to account for the unpredictability of the predictions. For this purpose, we utilised the 'mice'

Table 1. Summary statistics for independent variables.

Associated hypotheses	Variable	Minimum	Q1	Median	Q3	Maximum	Mean	SD
H1	Age	18	30	41	56	90	42.85	15.52
	Female	0	0.00	0	1	1	0.49	0.50
	In charge of dependents	0	0	0	1	1	0.30	0.46
	Work	1	1	3	4	4	2.60	1.40
H2	Civil society organisation member	0	0	0	1	1	0.45	0.50
	Activist friends	1	1.5	2	2	4	1.84	0.68
H3	Protest influence	1	3	4	5	5	3.64	1.20
H4	Satisfaction with government	1	2	5	8	11	5.11	3.19
	Perception of household finances	1	2	3	3	5	2.58	1.04
H5	Social media frequency	1	2.67	4	5	6	3.89	1.45
	Legacy media frequency	1	2.5	3.25	4.25	6	3.33	1.12
Controls	Political interest	1	2	3	3	4	2.67	0.89
	Formal education	1	2	2	3	3	2.15	0.69
	Cultural liberalism	0	5.4	6.8	8	10	6.69	2.02
	Urban	0	0	0	1	1	0.36	0.48

R package (van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). After creating the randomly imputed datasets, we calculated the estimates for each of them and subsequently pooled the results. We include the results of our non-multiply imputed models with some model fit statistics in Appendix.

Reasons for non-involvement in a protest

To grapple with some of the obstacles to participation that people might face, we asked survey respondents about the reasons they had for not participating in different protest episodes (H6). If participants claimed non-involvement in any of the survey's protest episodes, we inquired about their reasons with the question: 'Why did you not participate in the protests? (select all that apply)'. The answer options were 'I did not have time to protest'; 'The protests were too far from where I live'; 'Protests do not change anything'; 'I did not agree with the message of the protestors'; 'I was concerned for my safety'; 'My friends and family did not protest'; 'Because citizens should not protest their government'; 'Due to lockdown restrictions'; 'I was not aware of the protests'. With this item, we were able to form a more complete understanding of not only participation but also its generally more common counterpart, non-participation; and, moreover, how reasons for non-participation, pertaining to the absence of consensus or action mobilisation in some protest episodes, may relate to the three styles of participation we identified.

Results

Protestors and their participation styles

We begin our analysis with an investigation into RQ1, querying the individual attributes associated with each style of participation we identified. The frequency of each style of participation, in the six countries, is reported in [Table 2](#). As expected, non-participation is most prevalent in all of the countries. Of the three styles, the online style is the most common in every country. On the other end, with the exception of Denmark and the UK, the two countries with the lowest proportion of individuals favouring the in-person style, the pivoting style is the least common of the three.

Following on, we model a multinomial logistic regression, to test our hypotheses and probe the three styles conceptualised in this article, in relation to the whole population. Subsequently, we run a series of binary logistic regression analyses on a sample that includes only individuals exhibiting one of our three styles of participation, excluding all citizens that did not participate or support protests in any way, in any of the protest episodes we listed in our survey. By doing so, we can contrast how each group of

Table 2. Proportion of individuals exhibiting each style of participation, per country.

		Online	In-person	Pivoting	Non-participants
Germany	<i>N</i>	149	165	114	1596
	% of total population	7.36%	8.15%	5.63%	78.85%
	% of participants	38.55%	26.64%	34.81%	
Denmark	<i>N</i>	50	24	31	896
	% of total population	5.00%	2.40%	3.10%	89.51%
	% of participants	22.86%	29.52%	47.62%	
Hungary	<i>N</i>	244	135	125	1547
	% of total population	11.90%	6.58%	6.09%	75.43%
	% of participants	26.79%	24.80%	48.41%	
Italy	<i>N</i>	292	212	189	1408
	% of total population	13.90%	10.09%	9.00%	67.02%
	% of participants	30.59%	27.27%	42.14%	
Romania	<i>N</i>	178	133	97	538
	% of total population	18.82%	14.06%	10.25%	56.87%
	% of participants	32.60%	23.77%	43.63%	
United Kingdom	<i>N</i>	210	68	69	1877
	% of total population	9.44%	3.06%	3.10%	84.40%
	% of participants	19.60%	19.88%	60.52%	

individuals following each of the identified styles of participation compares to the rest of the country as well as with each other. Furthermore, as country and protest issue contexts may influence the results, we include and discuss separate models below and in Appendix. Country model results are widely aligned with those presented in the main text, while issue models indicate that a small number of variables are associated with engagement in protests on certain issues but not others (e.g., frequency of legacy media usage is associated with in-person participation across a range of issues) However, we present these models with a note of caution due to the low number of observations for some cases.

The multinomial logistic regression analysis, with non-participation as the reference category, is presented in Figure 1.² The figure describes the

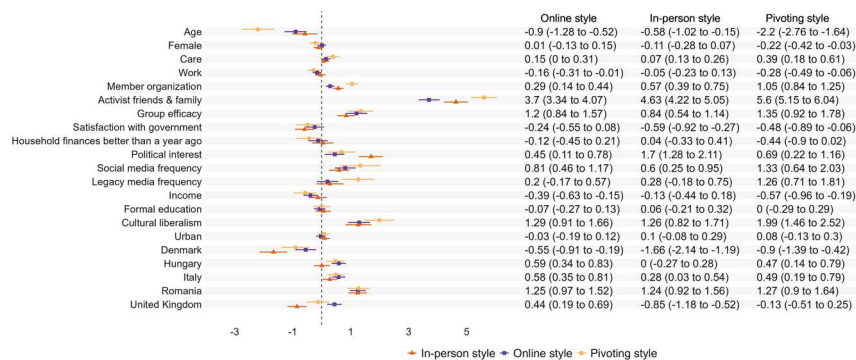


Figure 1. Multinomial logistic regression of the online, in-person and pivoting styles (reference category: non-participants).

coefficient plots for each variable and participation style, as well as the coefficients, with their 95 per cent confidence intervals in brackets. Starting with the variables related to biographical availability (**H1**), we can observe that older people are less likely to embrace any of the three participation styles. Those who embrace a pivoting style, specifically, stand out from non-participants due to their greater likelihood of being men (not female in the model) and having dependents in their care. Moreover, the pivoting style is associated with working fewer hours. Altogether, this initial exploration reveals the pivoting mode as a way of accommodating the needs of protest participants who may be better able to organise their work schedules than to coordinate their caring duties in order to join a street protest in person.

We now move to our variables measuring network embeddedness (**H2**). We observe that, in line with previous studies (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; Schussman & Soule, 2005), being part of close networks (through membership of a civil society organisation), as well as of open networks (i.e., having personal contacts who are involved in activism) are significantly correlated with any style of protest participation. The coefficient of the variable for activist friends and family is the largest predictor for all three styles of participation.

Focusing on more motivational aspects (**H3–4**), our model indicates group efficacy (i.e., their greater belief in the capacity of protests to influence the situation in their country) and interest in politics make people more likely to embrace all three styles of participation. When it comes to grievances, the picture is more nuanced. Lower levels of satisfaction with government are significantly associated with the in-person and pivoting styles. Moreover, having the perception that one's household finances are worse off than a year before is related to the pivoting style. In sum, individuals embracing any of our three protest styles display greater levels of motivation and political interest than non-participants. While group efficacy similarly relates to all three participation styles, political interest is more strongly associated with the in-person style. Furthermore, the pivoting style is also associated with a greater degree of personal economic grievances.

Turning to the association between media consumption and our protest styles (**H5**), we find that those favouring a pivoting style of participation are media omnivores. This style is associated with a higher frequency of consumption of both social and legacy media. Those grouped under the online style appear to be digital univores, as they only stand out for their frequency of consumption of social media. Finally, we cannot assert that individuals who embrace an in-person style are significantly different from non-participants as far as their media consumption is concerned. Accordingly, we draw attention to a pattern that helps nuance earlier scholarship (Mosca & Quaranta, 2016), whereby two media consumption profiles map onto two participation styles. On the one hand, those pivoting between in-person and online participation

are comparatively big media consumers both with regard to the variety of their media diets as well as to the frequency of their consumption. On the other, those who prioritise an online participation style are more likely to get their political information on social media.

Turning to the country controls, to explore between-country differences, we can see that compared to Germany (the reference category), Denmark is negatively associated with all three styles of participation, indicating a lower propensity to engage in protest in the country. On the opposite side, we can locate Italy and Romania, which are positively associated with all three participation styles. This result reveals greater involvement in protests, in these two countries, irrespective of the modality of participation. In Hungary, we see that people prioritise either a pivoting or online style of participation. Furthermore, citizens of the United Kingdom prefer the online style, as this country control is positively associated with that style and negatively related to the in-person style. These country differences may be linked to distinct protest cultures and political opportunities and further research should look into the specific reasons for these differences. Crucially, we find that our results are similar across countries³; The only instance of a country model with significant results in a different direction from the cross-country model is in the case of Romania. There, age is positively correlated with the online mode, whereas in our general model, these two variables are inversely related. We also find widely similar results across issues (see Appendix for details). The only instances in which we find a statistically significant result in the opposite direction from the main model is, first, for satisfaction with the government. It is positively associated with performing an in-person and a pivoting style, for pro-government protests. Second, cultural liberalism is negatively related to performing an online style of participation, for far-right protesters.

Setting participation styles apart from each other

Next, we sought to further unravel differences among the three participation styles through binary logistic regressions, in which we compare each style of participation against the other two, while excluding non-participants from the sample (Figures 2–4). In the Appendix, we include country and protest issue models, whose results are widely aligned with those presented here. First, Figure 2 displays the results of the binary logistic regression in which we compare the online style against the other two. We note that the likelihood of exhibiting the online participation style is higher among women. Those who embrace this style are more likely to lack network embeddedness and are less likely to be aggrieved or interested in politics than those adopting the other two styles.

Finally, our model does not detect any significant differences between the online and the other two styles in relation to media diets. Looking into the

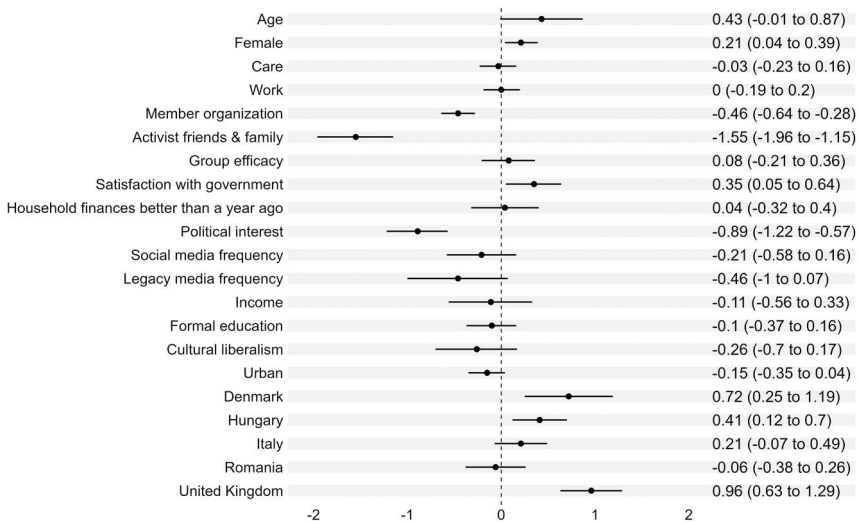


Figure 2. Binary logistic regression for the online style.

country controls, we can see that Denmark, Hungary, and the United Kingdom are positively associated with the performance of the online style of participation, as compared to Germany, the reference category. Second, we explore the characteristics of those favouring an in-person style (Figure 3). Those embracing this participation style are more likely to be older than the rest of the protesters and are less likely to have a sense of group efficacy. At the same time, they show greater political interest than the other protesters, but they do not seem more aggrieved. Finally, the in-person participants are less likely to use social media for political information. Altogether, the in-person style of participation seems to be preferred by older individuals who are interested in politics who rely less on social media for political information than the other protesters. This is the case notwithstanding the fact that this group stands out for their lower belief in the capacity of protest to change the situation in their country. Comparing countries, in contrast to what we found when analysing the online style, the performance of the in-person style is negatively associated with Denmark, Hungary, Italy and the United Kingdom. Put differently, Germans appear more likely to participate in person than people in the other four countries.

Third, we turn our attention to the pivoting style (Figure 4). We see that older people are less likely to follow this style and those who have dependents in care are more likely to embrace it. Being part of both close as well as open networks increases the likelihood that someone exhibits this participation style. Also, those exhibiting this style are more likely to feel economically aggrieved than the rest of the protesters, even if they do not stand

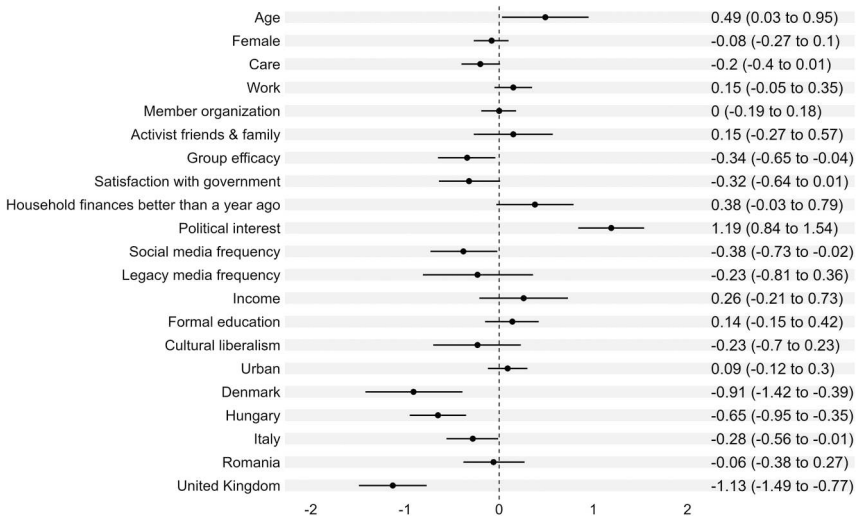


Figure 3. Binary logistic regression of the in-person style.

out for their level of satisfaction with the government or their political interest. Finally, those favouring the pivoting style have distinct media diets from the rest of the protesters and are more likely to consume both legacy and social media more frequently than their counterparts. Interestingly, no country control is related to the pivoting style, indicating a similar predisposition for this pattern of participation across our country cases.

As was the case with the multinomial regression model, our results are homogeneous across countries and issues. There are no instances in which significant results in a country model go in a different direction from the cross-country model, and the only deviation in the issue models is that satisfaction with government is negatively associated with performing an online style, as opposed to an in-person or pivoting style, for pro-government demonstrators. There is an interesting result in relation to living in an urban area, in the country models. Whereas in the three cross-country binary logistic regression models, living in an urban area has no effect on the outcome variable, in the Hungarian and Romanian country models, we see that living in an urban area has a significant and positive relation to embracing in-person participation and a negative and significant relation with performing the online style. This difference may indicate that, in these two Eastern European countries, people living in rural areas face more challenges to participate in street protests, possibly because there is a greater proportion of protest opportunities in urban areas and/or because of greater difficulties with travelling from rural to urban areas. We reflect on the implications of these findings in the final section.

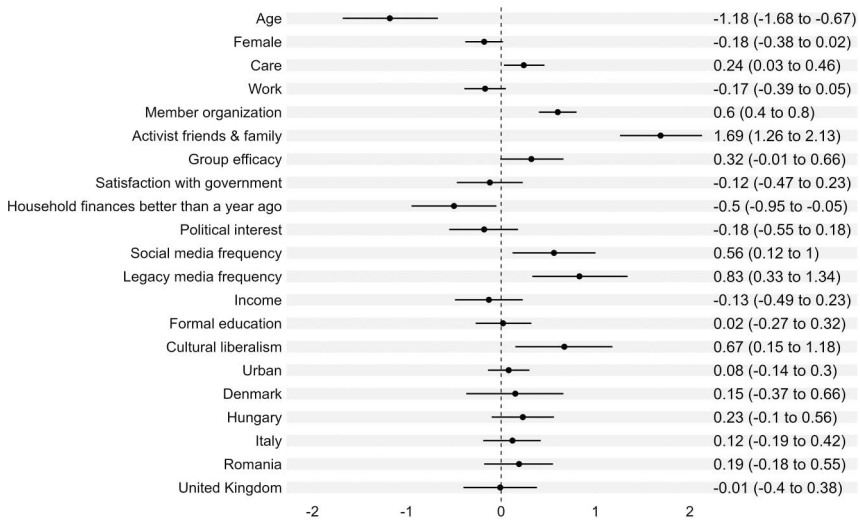


Figure 4. Binary logistic regression of the pivoting style.

Participation styles and reasons for non-involvement

We now turn our attention to the reasons why people did not participate in the protest episodes we inquired about in our survey. Focusing on RQ2, we considered how the three participation styles related to the reasons why people did not become involved in the protest episodes. Table 3 provides the proportion of respondents from each group who selected the given reason for at least one protest episode. In Appendix, we included another table exploring reasons for non-participation, per country and protest issue, along with a discussion about them.

We ran a one-way ANOVA test for each variable, to examine the variables for which the mean was significantly different across groups (see Appendix). This holds true for all cases with the exception of the answer 'I did not have time to protest'. For the rest of variables, for which the mean was statistically different across groups, we employed a Tukey HSD test to identify the group that was different from the rest at a 95 per cent level of statistical significance. Overall, we find that those favouring the in-person style stand out from the other two groups across most categories. They are more likely to say that their non-involvement in a protest episode is owed to them not agreeing with the message of the protestors and because they were not aware of the protest. Conversely, they are significantly less likely to have refrained from participation because the protests were too far from where they lived, because they were concerned for their safety, because their friends and family did not protest or because citizens should not protest their government. Those exhibiting the in-person style were furthermore less likely

Table 3. Reasons for non-involvement in a protest episode by participation style.

	Online	In-person	Pivoting
I did not have time to protest	31.72%	31.93%	34.47%
The protests were too far from where I live	56.56%	39.22%	56.41%
Protests do not change anything	28.09%	25.94%	31.20%
I did not agree with the message of the protestors	65.12%	70.84%	68.52%
I was concerned for my safety	33.21%	17.57%	36.32%
My friends and family did not protest	24.00%	10.36%	28.21%
Because citizens should not protest their government	18.23%	7.37%	22.65%
Due to lockdown restrictions	26.05%	20.87%	24.22%
I was not aware of the protests	29.77%	39.75%	24.22%

than those embracing the online style to have decided not to protest due to lockdown restrictions. Finally, they were significantly less likely than those embracing the pivoting style to have shunned a protest on grounds that ‘protests do not change anything’.

This second analysis points to patterns that complement our previous findings. Corroborating **H6a**, on the one hand, reasons for non-involvement relating to action mobilisation have greater prominence among those exhibiting the online and pivoting styles. Conversely, reasons related to consensus mobilisation are relatively more prevalent among participants adopting the in-person style (**H6b**). In other words, the in-person style is more common among people facing fewer obstacles to their participation than the rest of the protesters. Their decision to participate in a protest relates to their awareness and interest in the mobilisation and not to their capacity to attend the event. By contrast, the greater prominence of motives relating to action mobilisation among individuals exhibiting the online and pivoting styles indicates that they may face additional obstacles preventing them from deciding on their in-person participation exclusively based on their motivation.

In light of these findings, for those oriented towards the in-person style, participation seems comparatively more likely to hinge on whether they agree with the goals and tactics of a protest. Conversely, the other two groups are likely to face relatively more obstacles that make their pathway to street participation more sinuous. It is under such circumstances that those oriented towards the online or the pivoting style appear to turn to online activities that enable their involvement in protests they likely cannot join in person. Put differently, the online style seems to expand the protester base of a contentious episode by providing opportunities for participation to individuals who, most likely, would not be able to physically join a demonstration.

Discussion and conclusion

In delving into the multifaceted realm of protest participation, our analysis illuminates the intricate interplay between personal attributes, obstacles, and

diverse styles through which individuals engage in protests. Across six European countries, our investigation delineates three distinct participation styles – online, in-person, and the pivoting style. The three participation styles, we contend, are marked not only by qualitative differences in one's involvement but, importantly, also by differences among those who embrace them and the obstacles they face. Our findings – based on a unique set of survey items probing participation in large protests across six countries – show that specific individual attributes are distinctly associated with the three styles (RQ1). They portray protest as a complex and diverse field of behaviour, populated by variegated groups of people whose participation style reflects this diversity. Protest styles are not only an outcome of a 'positive choice' (i.e., to do something). They are also associated with specific obstacles that preclude the involvement in protests of some individuals more than others (RQ2).

First, online support for street mobilisations may serve, in many cases, as an alternative to in-person participation for people who are motivated but are unable to overcome certain obstacles. The regressions indicated a consistent relation between believing that protests can influence the situation in a country as a motivation for involvement, and online protest support, either independently or combined with in-person participation. At the same time, the most prominent reasons for non-involvement, among these two groups, were related to 'action mobilization' (i.e., with distance, safety and network concerns, Klandermans, 1984).

Second, focusing on those arguably more affected by such challenges, namely people who only support protests online, the obstacles they face may be a function of their limited connection to social movement networks – both to organisations and to personal friends linking them to social movement circles. This finding resonates with previous research (Santos, 2024; Schussman & Soule, 2005) highlighting the role that organisations and activist social contacts play in facilitating participation. Hence, highly motivated potential protesters who have little social support to overcome obstacles to participation appear likely to turn to more accessible online activities to express their support for a protest episode they may be unable to join physically.

Conversely, a lack of protest-related online engagement may likewise have to do with obstacles to participation, albeit in the online domain. Our regression analyses indicate that those adopting the in-person participation style are older and use social media less often than those embracing the other two styles, to get political information. Hence, one may presume that less experience with utilising the tools that help support a protest online – e.g., social media apps – may in fact act as an obstacle to online rather than in-person action mobilisation.

Considering the profile of those who exhibit the pivoting participation style further supports this argument. Those who are able to combine in-

person and online participation seem to use legacy and social media for political information more often than their counterparts. Their example helps nuance the understanding of the relation between media consumption and protest participation to the extent that they embody a conjunction of domains (cf. Mosca & Quaranta, 2016), namely of on- and off-line participation; and, of legacy and social media usage, respectively. They also seem to be more biographically available (younger, working fewer hours, and more likely to be men), while caring commitments do not prevent them from attending a protest onsite. Combined with their greater motivation originating from their grievances and beliefs in the efficacy of protests, this group of people is able to engage in both street and online action, depending, on the face of it, on what is more suitable to their circumstances at the time of each protest.

More generally, our paper contributes to the literature on non-electoral political participation by highlighting the variety of paths to protest participation. We would argue that people's (in)ability to circumvent certain obstacles may not lead strictly to a binary decision between participation and non-participation (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Instead, we propose that protesters may embrace one of at least three possible participation styles. Digital communication offers a distinct, expressive style of protest participation (Boulianne *et al.*, 2020) that, we contend, need not be construed as failed action mobilisation. It is not only that posting to social media about a protest is correlated to in-person participation, as these authors proposed. Moreover, showing support for a protest online is not simply a reflection of a corrosive individualisation of protest participation (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Instead, it may constitute a distinct participation style of people who are consensus mobilised but who, at the same time, encounter obstacles to action mobilisation they cannot surmount. At the same time, we must acknowledge that protesters are likely to embrace a participation style based on their weighing of multiple factors and circumstances against obstacles to participation. Different participation styles ought to then be regarded as transient outcomes reflecting that balance.

Finally, while we had to pool our data to run our regressions, we recognise that country- and issue-specific contexts need to be addressed in future research with larger-*n* studies. While we sought to investigate whether protest participation styles are associated with specific individual characteristics, across a diverse range of protest issues and in different countries, follow-up studies should focus on a systematic investigation of whether these associations play out differently under different contextual conditions. Further work could thus explore what protest characteristics accommodate which participation styles as well as what additional group and individual characteristics (e.g., ethnicity) warrant consideration. For example, researchers could scrutinise participation styles in relation to the left- or right-wing

leaning of a protest; or to a protest's core claim (e.g., for universal participation on issues such as climate change or based around subgroup grievances such as anti-immigration rallies); or, thirdly, to look at participation beyond the most prominent protests in a country.

Additionally, we would like to see more work building on these insights into participation styles to further delineate them (e.g., to distinguish mixed mode participation – on- and offline – within the same protest from the pivoting style, across different protests). Also, future research could elaborate on obstacles to online protest participation more explicitly by accounting for digital literacy as a necessary condition for navigating the online domain. We expect these analyses not only to help push the boundaries of academic knowledge but also to serve practitioners seeking to understand the evolution of the protest participant base. Ultimately, for agents of social change to tap into the mobilisation potential more fully, they may offer alternative pathways to participation accounting for multiple obstacles. Equally, to increase the impact of a social movement on political decision-making, by raising the WUNC of a protest – its worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (Tilly, 1999) – they will need to portray different modes of participation as an integral part of the same struggle.

Notes

1. Please see Appendix for the list of protest episodes from each country.
2. As the regression results reported in this paper originate from multiply imputed data, we are not reporting model fit statistics.
3. For separate country models see Appendix.

Acknowledgements

The authors are very grateful to Sophia Hunger and Swen Hutter for their guidance throughout the review process. Likewise, they would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the participants in the workshop 'Europe's Changing Protest Landscape' (WZB Berlin, 8–9 June 2023) for their constructive comments and especially Johanna Bjarnadottir and Ruud Wouters who acted as critical readers of an earlier version of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors wrote this article while in receipt of funding from the Volkswagen Foundation (grant no. 98144) and from the European Union – NextgenerationEU – and the Romanian Government, under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan for Romania,

contract no. 760038/23.05.2023, cod PNRR-C9-I8-CF204/29.11.2022, disbursed by the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, within Component 9, Investment I8.

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