

Harmonizing Survey and Event Data Measures of Protest?¹

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This essay addresses the utility of using political protest measures derived from social surveys with news media coded event data to evaluate the validity of each. While our primary purpose in the Survey Harmonization Project is to assess the validity of survey data, the comparison between these two data streams has implications for the validity of both methodologies. These two worlds of contentious politics research have quite different foci in terms of the major events that are captured, measurement details and methods of capturing “real world” protest. While both attempt to capture participation in and/or the willingness to engage in contentious protest action, they have quite different ways of capturing these processes and distinctive strengths and limitations. In brief, I argue that surveys are better at capturing individual differences in the participation in or legitimacy of nonviolent protest regardless of the target or issue of protest while event data are best at capturing the incidence of actual protest events that are “newsworthy” and have governmental targets and political grievances. Despite these differences, aggregate measures derived from these two data streams can be useful for comparison. In past studies (Dalton et al. 2006; Jenkins et al 2009), they seem to be moderately correlated in country-year format. In this discussion, we discuss the merits of each approach, what they best capture and respective limitations.

Event data measures are more useful for capturing aggregate counts or population normed rates of protest actions, especially violent and dramatic protests that are seen as “newsworthy” and for which there is news space but these measures miss significant smaller, less contentious and less newsworthy events. The logic of their inclusion in the standard “news data” inventory is coverage by conventional news media. Hence there is significant and often unknown selection bias in inclusion of these protests into protest data sets. Surveys are best at capturing the legitimacy of protest actions as a way of advancing political claims but, depending on the survey, may leave unclear the nature of these claims or the specific targets and issues of protest actions. In non-democratic contexts, surveys are especially vulnerable to response bias as respondents are concerned about police monitoring and giving appropriate answers. First I summarize the methodologies used in the two types of protest data and then outline a logic of comparison that might be used to assess the validity of both.

Methodology. At first blush, the differences between survey measures and event data are sufficiently large that one might see these as oblique and largely complementary ways of tapping different aspects of contentious politics. Surveys are, of course, conducted on the basis of individual responses, either to random sample surveys or online surveys that exhibit various degrees of random selection. The focus is the individual respondent and her/his responses to a set of questions. The questions about protest typically focus on “willingness” or “have done” specific standard types of protest while using a very limited range of common event forms, such as “lawful demonstrations,” “strikes,” and the like. Despite the ostensive focus on past participation and/or willingness, one can argue that the key feature actually tapped is protest

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legitimacy (Kaase et al. 1973). In other words, even though the question is ostensibly about past participation and/or willingness to engage in a particular form of protest, the underlying construct being tapped is likely a view that protest is a legitimate form of political expression and one that one might adopt under specific conditions. While respondents might be asked to report past participation in protest and this is often treated as exhibiting greater potential for future protest than simple “willingness” to do specific actions in the future, the truth is that these are imperfect measures and more likely to simply represent the view that protest is a legitimate political tactic and sufficiently effective to be legitimate. In these surveys, the target and the issues of this protest is left implicit with insights provided depending on the survey’s other questions about specific grievances, the legitimacy of the government and feeling thermometers for specific groups and institutions. Sometimes additional questions are included that can be used to gauge the role of interpersonal friendship networks and work and family ties that are known to facilitate protest participation. The concept of “protest potential” is abstracted away from particular grievances and social relationships, capturing a generalized attitude or potential that can be activated in particular unspecified contexts.

A key problem with these type of data is response bias, especially in non-democratic contexts. Where protest is rare and coercively regulated by the security police, respondents can be expected to provide “approved” answers that may or may not represent “potential.” The harsher and more systematic the surveillance system, the less useful these responses are in gauging protest potential. In the recent Arab Awakening, observers were caught by surprise by the rapid growth and support for anti-governmental protest in contexts which had had very few protest events and even less popular support and participation. This “potential” was in some sense there prior to the protest upsurge but unmobilized given the surveillance system and a culture of acquiescence that generated very low expressions of protest potential. Suddenly with the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor and the ensuing set of protests staged by a small number of activists, a series of protests were staged that generated mass widespread participation and support. Did this “potential” for protest exist before? Or was it simply unmeasured because of response bias? Surveys of Tunisia and Egypt (etc.) prior to this protest upsurge showed very little willingness or participation in protest (under 5%). Nonetheless mass participation in anti-governmental protests ensued, raising serious questions about the idea of tapping “protest potential” through these surveys.

Nonetheless, there is a large body of research has drawn upon these measures, typically by studying populations in institutionalized democracies where protest has greater public legitimacy and is more widely used as a method to express grievances and make political claims (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). These have been highly useful for understanding individual factors that affect protest potential and legitimacy and, suitably aggregated, can be used in ecological analyses of protest that can dovetail with event data measures.

Event data are largely derived from private news media reports and those of state-owned media companies, although it is useful to note the existence of event data derived from coding of official records maintained by police and other governmental officials charged with public order maintenance. Typically these are coded in terms of 24-hour days, which can be aggregated to weeks, months, years or other time units. In terms of space, studies vary widely in terms of the inclusion of geographic location with some providing GIS coordinates and others simply

designating country, city name or other geographic units. These can then be aggregated to study the count or the population normed rates of specific types of contentious politics events. Normally there is an event framework consisting of 5 to over a dozen event forms at varying levels of specificity. In some event data sets, information is also provided for the specific issues, targets, injustice frames and claims making activities being used by protestors in each event.

There are significant limitations of these data. The most pressing concern is news selection, i.e. that news reports only report “all the protests worthy of being reported” (to paraphrase the *New York Times*). The point is that news space is limited (i.e. the “newshole”), editors and reporters are selective about the protests that they think are “newsworthy” and relevant to their audiences, that geographic location, legitimacy of the protestor, time of day, the stature of the target of the event and a range of other less well understood features probably enter into the decision to report protests in news stories. Private media companies are, after all, operated on a for-profit basis and, as such, must make calculations about the interests of their audiences. Hence reporting protests in far-away countries or remote locations are less likely. Violent, large-scale and dramatic protests are more likely to be reported than nonviolent, small and routine events. Protests in public squares and other public spaces are more likely to be reported while those in private and semi-public spaces (e.g. schools, private businesses) are often neglected. The point is that there is systematic news selection which enters into the construction of event data sets. While studies have found that there is relatively little descriptive bias (i.e. details of the nature of protest behavior) at least in Western newspapers, this has received little attention in other forms of news media reports. A recent innovation used by some has been to tap into multi-source coding, using multiple newswires and news sources (including online news sites), making the assumption that this enhances completeness and thereby representativeness. No doubt it does but, because there is no existing universe of all protests against which news reported events can be compared, we really have only a crude sense of these improvements. Further work comparing different news sources and sensitivities to locations, event intensity, and reporting system are needed to better understand the validity and selection processes involved with news-derived event data. Some have done comparisons against official police records (Oliver et al. 2001, 2002), finding understandable selection biases in both systems but also finding that intercorrelations are often low enough (i.e. below .5) to raise serious questions about validity.

What should be done? The argument advanced here is that both methods for studying contentious politics and protest in particular should be used along with an awareness that both provide a limited picture of reality. Survey measures are individual-centered and often stripped of the specific objectives and claims of protestors while event data are aggregate, neglect the individual, and are more readily contextualized (despite generally very real limitations on this front as well with regards to the intentions and claims of actors). Surveys are more misleading in non-democratic contexts, especially if “potential” questions are taken at face value. It seems better to assume that the key dimension being tapped is protest legitimacy, not actual participation and/or willingness to engage in protest actions. News-derived event data in this sense have an appealing character. They report “hard” events that are reported in news sources as having actually happened. However, there is significant selection bias in these data sets, only some of which is understood. Further, despite appearing to be “hard” data, the details of such events in terms of their issues, targets and specific claims making may be poorly covered in

existing news stories. Multi-source coding no doubt improves the validity of “news-data” but we really don’t have a precise metric for how much.

Nonetheless, there are ways in which these two types of data can be brought together fruitfully to evaluate each other and to better capture the complexity of protest. Below I outline a few rules for comparing survey measures and event-data measures that might help clarify the relationship between these two ways of studying protest and contentious politics.

- Surveys are best at capturing the legitimacy of protest despite ostensibly being about past participation or willingness to engage in nonviolent protests such as public assemblies, marches and demonstrations. They do not really capture potential except in the sense that respondents think that protest is a legitimate tactic and are willing to entertain its use. These measures probably underestimate certain types of protest, such as highly contentious and/or violent protests, where response bias is a problem. In non-democratic contexts, significant and unknown response bias likely exists, raising questions about the validity of these measures.
- Event data are best at capturing a wide range of protests, especially violent and dramatic large-scale events that are newsworthy or likely to be monitored by public order keeping agencies. Hence they likewise have a better purchase on events that are in public arenas such as public squares, streets and other public assembly settings. They do not capture smaller, localized protest, and those with non-governmental targets.
- Surveys are stronger in institutionalized democracies and imperfect measures of protest participation and potential in non-democratic settings. Respondents are guided by concerns about revealing anti-regime sentiments to surveys and prone to response bias in these settings. At the same time, news data are also less reliable in non-democratic settings due to state control of media, both private and state-owned. State-owned national media are more selective than private media. (International vs. national private media may be about the same?) Multi-source coding no doubt improves the validity of these measures but by an unknown amount.
- An interesting comparison would be to use both sets of measures in a setting such as Tunisia or Egypt during the period immediately prior to the “Arab Awakening” protests. Likely survey measures would show very low protest potential (under 5% of respondents) but, nonetheless, massive and widely participated-in protests did ensue. Was there no protest potential or are we looking at response bias and poor measurement of protest potential?