



Article

# Political trust, extra-representational participation and the openness of political systems

International Political Science Review

2016, Vol. 37(2) 151–165

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/0192512114559108

[ips.sagepub.com](http://ips.sagepub.com)



**Daniela Braun**

University of Munich, Germany

**Swen Hutter**

European University Institute, Italy

## Abstract

The relationship between trust in representative political institutions and extra-representational participation (ERP) is contested. Generally, scholars have assumed that distrust is a major source of ERP. However, empirical studies have yielded inconclusive results. This article contributes to the debate by linking it to recent studies on how contextual factors affect the amount of ERP and interact with micro-level predictors. We take an innovative stance by conceptualizing the openness of political systems in both institutional and cultural terms, and by arguing that the negative micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP should be stronger in more open political systems. With a multi-level analysis of 22 European democracies, we show that citizens who distrust representative institutions are indeed more likely to engage in ERP. Most importantly, our findings indicate that the more open a political system is in cultural terms, the stronger the negative micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP.

## Keywords

Political participation, political trust, protest, political opportunity structures, social movement studies, Europe

## Introduction

The recent wave of protest related to the economic crisis underscores the idea that activists engaged in extra-representational participation (ERP)<sup>1</sup> not only raise specific political demands, but also criticize representative political institutions more generally. Apart from fighting against austerity measures,

---

### Corresponding author:

Swen Hutter, European University Institute, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Via dei Roccettini 9, 50014 Fiesole, Italy.

Email: [swen.hutter@eui.eu](mailto:swen.hutter@eui.eu)

protests by the Indignados and Occupy groups vehemently criticized representative democracy, and called for alternative forms of democracy under the slogan “democracia real ya!” (real democracy now!) (della Porta and Reiter, 2012). Similarly, protests against infrastructure projects are often portrayed as challenges to the way representative democracy works. This is well illustrated by massive demonstrations and petitions against a new train station in the German city of Stuttgart in 2010. As an on-site demonstration survey shows, more than 50 per cent of the respondents identify democracy deficits as the main reason for their protest against the project (Ramid et al., 2012).

These examples highlight that distrust in representative political institutions is often seen as a key source of ERP. Unsurprisingly, this micro-level relationship has been a central topic of political participation research since the late 1960s (e.g., Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Gamson, 1968; Gurr, 1970; Inglehart, 1977; Muller et al., 1982; Nilson and Nilson, 1980). However, scholars still disagree on how the two concepts are theoretically and empirically linked. In theoretical terms, the literature offers contrasting hypotheses. The standard approach is in line with the above examples. It assumes a negative relationship (e.g., Dalton, 2006; Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Inglehart, 1977) and claims that citizens who are disaffected with established channels of representative democracy are more likely to engage in protest and other forms of ERP. By doing so, citizens seek to more directly intervene in the political process with specific demands rather than simply choosing broad ideological packages in elections. However, other scholars (e.g., Dubrow et al., 2008; Norris et al., 2005; van Aelst and Walgrave, 2001) have challenged the standard assumption because citizens in established democracies are increasingly likely both to perceive such forms as legitimate and to take part in them. Unfortunately, the available empirical findings offer no conclusive answer, since studies report negative, positive and statistically non-significant effects (Norris, 2011: 223f.).

This article attempts to shed light on this ongoing scholarly controversy by linking it to recent studies on how country differences both affect the overall amount of ERP and interact with micro-level predictors (e.g., Anderson and Mendes, 2006; Dalton et al., 2010; Dubrow et al., 2008; Fatke and Freitag, 2013; Marien and Christensen, 2013; Morales, 2009; Spina, 2014; van der Meer et al., 2009; Vráblíková, 2014). As the literature on political participation has long suffered from an “individualistic bias” and has only recently started to systematically examine the impact of factors relating to the political context (Kriesi, 2008: 148), we rely on the political opportunity structure approach within social movement studies to identify central elements of the political context faced by protesters (for a review, see Meyer, 2004).

More specifically, we consider macro-level factors that indicate how open or accessible a political context is for mobilization. Thus, this article focuses on the question of how the micro-level association between political trust and ERP might be conditioned by the openness of political systems. Contributions by Dalton et al. (2010) and Marien and Christensen (2013) question whether the negative association between political trust and ERP might be stronger in *closed* political contexts. However, they find little support for this idea. That is why this article takes an innovative stance in answering the question in two ways. Firstly, we introduce and empirically support the counter hypothesis, that is, that the negative micro-level association is stronger in *open* political contexts. Secondly, we follow the social movement literature by looking at factors that indicate not only the *institutional* but also the *cultural* openness of political systems (see Gamson and Meyer, 1996).

The article is structured as follows. The next section elaborates the micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP. Thereafter, we introduce the contextual level and discuss the expected direct and contingent effects of a political system’s openness. In the following section, the data, indicators and methods are presented. We rely on data from the first five rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) and cover 22 European democracies. The subsequent section presents our empirical findings, while we conclude with a summary and the implications of our results.

## Political trust and extra-representational participation: The micro-level relationship

For decades, scholars have alluded to political distrust<sup>2</sup> in order to explain why people take part in demonstrations and other forms of ERP (e.g., Gamson, 1968; Gurr, 1970; Muller et al., 1982). Norris et al. (2005: 189) have labelled this micro-level explanation “disaffected radicalism”. The reasoning why political distrust should feed ERP has changed over time, however. In the early 1970s, scholars like Gurr (1970) and Crozier et al. (1975) described ERP as rebellious behaviour and a threat to political systems, whereas participation in representative forms was considered as a stabilizer. Since then, the idea of demonstrations, petitions and boycotts as disruptive and irrational behaviour has been replaced by another perspective. In this view, ERP is conceived as an alternative and legitimate channel for political action, that is, as a more direct and issue-specific possibility for participating in the political process (e.g., Dalton, 2006; Inglehart, 1977). Nevertheless, citizens who are critical of political authority in general, and of representative democracy in particular, are still expected to be more likely to engage in such “elite-challenging activities” (Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002: 302).

*Hypothesis 1: The less citizens trust representative political institutions, the more likely they are to take part in ERP.*

Empirically, the link between political trust and ERP has been explored in various studies. Contrary to the theoretical arguments, most studies have shown that taking part in such activities is not directly linked to political trust (for overviews, see Norris, 1999: 261ff, 2011: 223f). This missing link has been revealed in various empirical studies, for example, early, in the five-nation Political Action Study (Barnes and Kaase, 1979: 437–440), but also more recently in studies based on selected countries or large-scale cross-national comparisons (e.g., Booth and Seligson, 2005; Dalton et al., 2010; Norris et al., 2005; Schussman and Soule, 2005; Thomassen, 1990). Contrary to these findings, some studies have been able to detect a significant negative relationship between political trust and ERP (e.g., Dalton, 2004; Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Norris, 1999, 2011). A recent study has even found evidence for the counter thesis by empirically showing that political trust is positively related to ERP (Dubrow et al., 2008).

To sum up, despite strong theoretical arguments that the less citizens trust political institutions, the more likely they are to take part in ERP, empirical studies do not offer a conclusive answer. In our opinion, this is mainly due to ignoring or inadequately embedding this micro-level relationship in its broader political context. Dalton (2004: 176), for example, has already pointed to cross-national variations in this regard by showing that, whereas in Italy and France, political trust and ERP are positively related, a negative relationship was found in most other Western democracies. The following section illuminates in detail how this missing element might help resolve the controversy.

## Introducing the contextual level to illuminate the micro-level relationship

The idea that activity outside of mainstream political institutions is closely tied to its wider political context is far from a recent discovery. It is one of the key insights of the so-called “political opportunity structure approach” within social movement research. Starting with Kitschelt’s (1986) seminal study on anti-nuclear mobilization, social movement scholars have focused on institutional factors in a cross-national perspective to assess the opportunity structure faced by challengers (e.g., Hutter, 2014; Kriesi et al., 1995).

However, empirical studies of political participation did not take particular notice of social movement research, and on the whole looked at micro-level factors to explain people's engagement in ERP (Kriesi, 2008: 148). Admittedly, this has changed lately, since an increasing number of studies try to explain ERP by incorporating individual and contextual factors. In line with social movement literature, these studies focus on the direct effects of institutional elements of the political context on the amount of such activities. Country selection determines whether studies focus on general measures of democratic development (e.g., Anderson and Mendes, 2006; Dalton et al., 2010) or on specific aspects of the political opportunity structure faced by protesters in democracies (e.g., Dubrow et al., 2008; Fatke and Freitag, 2013; Morales, 2009; Spina, 2014; van der Meer et al., 2009; Vrábliková, 2014). In general, studies report stronger positive effects on the level of ERP when it comes to democratic development as compared to the variation found among democracies.

Apart from this, political participation scholars have started to focus on how contextual factors interact with micro-level predictors. To the best of our knowledge, only two studies have begun to look at how the micro-level association between political trust and ERP might be conditioned by its context. In their large-scale comparative study of 79 countries, Dalton et al. (2010) expect that grievances in general, and political dissatisfaction more specifically, should be more important triggers of ERP in closed than in open systems. "In closed systems, grievances may stimulate protest because they provide the motivation to overcome the barriers to protest activity" (Dalton et al., 2010: 57). Empirically, they do not find support for the hypothesis, as the interaction between political dissatisfaction (measured by trust in parliament) and political development (measured by the World Bank's rule of law index) is not significantly related to ERP.

Marien and Christensen (2013) focus on variation among 26 established democracies. Again, the authors expect that political trust should have a stronger negative effect on ERP in closed systems: "[W]hen the political system makes it difficult for citizens to channel demands into the political decision-making, the non-institutionalized activities are to a larger extent driven by distrust. Conversely, when the political system invites citizen input, the non-institutionalized activities are not to the same extent expressions of political distrust". Measuring institutional openness by the effective number of political parties and fiscal decentralization, as well as by a combined index of the two, their empirical findings are mixed at best. While the results suggest that distrust is a more important source of ERP in closed systems as measured by the effective number of parties, the other two measures of the political context do not yield significant interaction effects.

Recapitulating these findings, we can easily see that the results are less clear than theoretically expected. In spite of the observable cross-national variation in the micro-level relationship, bringing contextual-level indicators in to enlighten the link between trust and ERP has not yet clarified the relationship in a satisfactory way. The crucial question is why the empirical evidence does not meet the theoretical expectations. In our opinion, the cited authors were on the right track when trying to explain the micro-level relationship through the lens of cross-national variation, but the present study adds two important innovations to solve the puzzle.

*Firstly*, in theoretical terms, both cited studies argue that the negative effect should be stronger in closed political systems. By contrast, we suggest the reverse argument: the negative effect of trust in representative institutions on ERP should be more pronounced in *open* political contexts. In broad brush strokes, social movement scholars expect that open political systems encourage political mobilization in general. As Kriesi et al. (1995: 46) argue, "the aggregate level of mobilization increases with the weakness of the state and the inclusiveness of elite strategies, and will be highest where both combine".<sup>3</sup> In such political contexts, citizens have many channels through which to be heard and, therefore, ERP is more likely to be the terrain of those who are dissatisfied with the way they can actively participate in these other easily accessible channels. Thus, distrust in representative political institutions should not be seen as a proxy for political grievances in

general but as signalling a more specific critique of the way representative democracy works. This argument mirrors the general movement literature that sees grievances (in our case, distrust) as a necessary but insufficient condition for protest activism (see McAdam, 1982). In a closed context, with only few opportunities, there is only limited ERP, regardless of the level of political distrust. However, as opportunities for ERP increase, it is those who are dissatisfied who will act on the opportunities provided by the political context.

*Secondly*, existing studies on the political trust–ERP link emphasize institutional characteristics of the political context. This focus on institutional factors has been criticized in the social movement literature. In an influential contribution, Gamson and Meyer (1996: 287) argued that “opportunity has a strong cultural component and that we miss something important when we limit our attention to variance in political institutions and the relationships among political actors”. Therefore, they urged scholars to incorporate cultural or perceived opportunities into their models. Thus, access seems to depend both on formal institutional settings and on more informal preconditions. Focusing on both sides of structural arrangements is a common feature of neo-institutional approaches (see, e.g., Scharpf, 1984). To put it differently, it is argued that what should be taken into account is not just increasing numbers or types of access options, which are, for example, provided by more decentralized political systems or multi-party systems, but also the way that established political authorities deal with challenging activities and how citizens perceive the chances to influence those in power.

Against this background, we argue that for a full understanding of the relationship between political trust and ERP, we need to rely on both institutional and cultural factors when referring to the openness of political systems. Building on Scharpf’s (1984) work, Kriesi et al. (1995: 33–37) introduced the concept of “prevailing strategies” to the study of social movements for getting closer to this cultural side of opportunity structures. Prevailing strategies refer to the kind of strategies authorities usually employ when they deal with challengers. Such strategies are not set in stone but have a long history and are linked to the general conceptions of statehood and state–society relations prevalent in a given country. More specifically, Kriesi et al. distinguish between exclusive and inclusive strategies: a strategy of exclusion is characterized by repression and tends to lead to a polarization of conflicts, whereas a strategy of inclusion tries to incorporate challengers and might lead to a moderation of conflicts. When a strategy of inclusion prevails, political authorities are expected to deal more responsively with citizens’ demands and citizens should perceive that their political activities can make a difference. By contrast, when a strategy of exclusion prevails, political authorities are more insulated from citizens’ demands and, in turn, citizens should perceive the authorities as less accessible.

When it comes to our main interest, that is, the contingent effects of a political system’s openness on the association between political trust and ERP, we assume that both cultural and institutional openness set in motion the same mechanism introduced above. In a closed context in institutional or cultural terms, we expect only limited ERP, regardless of the level of political distrust. By contrast, political systems that offer many access points, and where authorities facilitate the mobilization of challengers, encourage citizens’ participation in the political process. However, as institutional and cultural opportunities for ERP increase, we expect that it is those who are dissatisfied with representative institutions that will be most likely to act on the alternative opportunities provided by the political context. Accordingly, we formulate two hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2a: The more open a political system in institutional terms, the stronger the negative micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP.*

*Hypothesis 2b: The more open a political system in cultural terms, the stronger the negative micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP.*

## Measurement and methods

To test our hypotheses, we adopt a multi-level research design and rely on the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS allows us to focus on contextual variation among established democracies and it offers sophisticated measures of our main individual-level variables (political trust and ERP) and many control variables. The analysis takes into account a maximum of 25 countries covered in the first five ESS rounds.<sup>4</sup> Details on the phrasing of survey questions, their coding and descriptive statistical information are provided in the Online Appendix (see Table A.1, available at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>).

### *Extra-representational participation*

The main ESS questionnaire covers three ERP items: signing petitions, boycotting products and taking part in lawful public demonstrations. Following the standard approach in the literature, we do not emphasize differences between these forms, but consider them as part of a common, one-dimensional action repertoire (see Quaranta, 2013). Therefore, our key dependent variable indicates whether respondents have taken part in at least one of the three activities. Firstly, this should minimize the effects of specific events, since the opportunity to take part in at least one of the three activities does not depend as much on single campaigns (e.g., the large-scale demonstrations against the war in Iraq in 2003). Secondly, the decision is empirically supported by a factor analysis, which indicates that the three items load on a different factor than representational forms of participation covered by the ESS, that is, contacting a politician, working for a political party. However, we cross-checked our results by relying on single items only (see below).

### *Trust in representative democracy*

The ESS asks about trust in different political institutions, for example trust in a country's parliament, in politicians, in political parties, in the legal system or in the police. Generally, regulatory institutions are conceived as similarly relevant to the political system as representative institutions. However, since the logic of our argument focuses on representative institutions, we rely exclusively on the key representative institutions and actors in modern democracies: national parliament, politicians and political parties. The question for each object of trust has been asked using a 0–10 scale with 10 indicating the highest level of trust. According to the established procedure used in the majority of studies on political trust (see Braun, 2013: 78–83), we combined the three items into one single measure.

### *Institutional context factors*

Following the social movement literature, we look at the power dispersion within and between political institutions to get closer to the access options provided by the political system (see Hutter, 2014: 44–48). More specifically, we rely on three indicators to assess institutional openness. By doing so, we are able to cover all three dimensions of power dispersion identified by Vatter (2009) in his re-assessment of Lijphart (1999). *Firstly*, we rely on Lijphart's (1999) executives-parties dimension to assess the horizontal power-sharing within institutions. This index combines information on the number of effective parties in parliament, the absence of minimal winning and single-party majority cabinets, the proportionality of electoral systems (Gallagher index) and a measure for cabinet dominance (average cabinet duration). *Secondly*, we assess the vertical power dispersion with fiscal decentralization, that is, the share of regional and local government as percentage of total

taxation (see Morales, 2009).<sup>5</sup> *Thirdly*, we take into account direct democracy as providing additional access to challengers. More specifically, Hug and Tsebelis' (2002) differentiation of referenda is used to construct an index. The index ranges from zero (no referenda) to four (required referenda and three types of non-required referenda available). The countries differ significantly on all three indicators: Switzerland turns out to be the most open or accessible context based on all three indicators, whereas the United Kingdom differs most in terms of Lijphart's executive-party dimension and Slovenia in terms of fiscal decentralization. Regarding direct democracy, seven countries under scrutiny offer no such instruments at the national level (see the Online Appendix Table A.2, available at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>).

### *Cultural context factors*

The cultural side of political opportunities is less often discussed in the literature and it is harder to come up with established quantitative indicators. Here, we follow the literature on political culture that either relies on qualitative descriptions or aggregates of individual attitudes to construct indicators for cross-national research. More precisely, we suggest assessing the cultural (or perceived) openness of political systems with the help of three measures.

To begin with, we propose relying on Jepperson's (2002) distinction between statist and non-statist societies; it refers to the dominant conception of statehood and state-society relations that prevails in a given country. The concept of "statism" can be seen as the ideational supplement to institutional state strength and comes close to the notion of prevailing strategies introduced before. It refers to a continuum between two ideal types: a vision of a centralized and totally autonomous state at one end and a totally decentralized form of political power within an active and organized society at the other. That is, the statist vision locates collective authority in a strong organizational centre, whereas the non-statist vision locates it in society at large. Note that the distinction explicitly refers to the prevailing visions in a society that do not necessarily correspond to the state's strength in institutional terms. For example, Jepperson (2002: 67) refers to the British case where centralization and high state capacity do not coincide with statist beliefs and where the development of the political system was not based on a "myth of the state".

To use Jepperson's instructive distinction for quantitative research, we follow Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas' (2001) study on associational involvement and rely on a dummy variable to distinguish statist from non-statist societies. France is a key example of high statism, as are most continental European countries with an absolutist legacy. By contrast, the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries are found on the other side of the continuum (although they exemplify different types of non-statist societies). As shown in Table A.2, the UK is classified as a non-statist society but as the "closest" political system in terms of institutional access options. The French and Italian cases nicely illustrate that the institutional openness of a political system (rather closed in France versus rather open in Italy) is not necessarily congruent with the prevailing conception of the state within the country (both belong to the statist group).

In addition, we propose two attitudinal indicators based on survey data: the aggregate level of both party responsiveness and political trust. Since we are located now at the contextual level, we are not interested in each individual's evaluation per se, but in the aggregate levels for each country. This aggregation of individual attitudes is the second approach taken by the scholarly literature to operationalize political cultures more generally, and it allows us to get closer to the way citizens actually perceive the openness of a political system. In other words, we take the level of perceptions in a society as an indicator for the cultural openness of the political system: higher responsiveness or trust indicates a more open political context.

On the one hand, we use citizens' evaluations of whether political parties represent their views well to assess the openness of representative institutions in each country. As with statism, this measure focuses on the way citizens perceive the responsiveness of parties and not on more objective institutional features, such as the number of parties, which we included to operationalize institutional openness. On the other hand, we look at the aggregate level of political trust to capture the atmosphere of reliability in a society. By including this measure, we take into account both the individual-level effect of political trust and its "ecological" or "societal" effect, that is, how the social prevalence of political trust affects ERP. As Welzel and Deutsch (2012: 466) argue, "[a]lthough neglecting the ecological effects of values is common practice, it is inappropriate from both a multi-level perspective and a developmental point of view". Following our theoretical argument, we expect that the *aggregate* level of ERP increases with the *aggregate* level of political trust, but, in contexts where representative political institutions are generally trusted, it is those who are more dissatisfied with these institutions who are most likely to act on the opportunities provided by the political context. Both measures vary significantly across countries. The average trust level is highest in Denmark (5.79 on a 10-point scale) and lowest in Bulgaria (1.93), whereas the share of citizens that feel well represented by a political party differs from 86.6 per cent in Switzerland to 28.9 per cent in Slovenia (see Table A.2).

Empirically, the three indicators of cultural openness are highly, although not perfectly, correlated with each other. The correlation coefficient  $r$  between the aggregate level of responsiveness and political trust is 0.55 ( $p < 0.05$ ). The respective mean values of the two attitudinal indicators are significantly higher for non-statist societies as compared to statist societies ( $t$ -test;  $p < 0.05$ ).<sup>6</sup> This suggests that all three measures tap the same underlying dimension of cultural openness.

### **Control variables**

The general aim of the individual-level analyses is to measure the relationship between trust in representative democracy and ERP. However, our analysis aims to control for other possible effects, in order to get an unambiguous answer. Therefore, we take into account the core individual-level sources of ERP as control variables: social-structural characteristics, political involvement and political preferences (for details, see the Online Appendix).

### **Statistical models**

Since the combination of individual and contextual indicators within one model can cause statistical problems (e.g., resulting in the underestimation of standard errors), we estimate the effects using a multi-level approach. More precisely, we estimate logistic multi-level models using STATA 12 to appropriately take into account the structure of our data since individuals are simultaneously nested in countries and time (ESS round), whereas the higher levels are not purely hierarchical. Methodologically speaking, our higher levels are non-nested or cross-classified, and our individuals are nested within this cross-classification. To take the idiosyncratic, country-round-specific changes in the main variables of interest into account, we controlled in each model for the ESS round and the interaction between country and round. Following the logic of hierarchical modeling, we compute our models stepwise, starting with the empty model without any independent variables (results not shown). The findings show an intra-class correlation (ICC) of .16, signifying that 16 per cent of the variance can be explained by contextual-level indicators.

### **Empirical findings**

We discuss the findings of six logistic multi-level models explaining an individual's ERP (for regression tables, see Table A.2 in the Online Appendix, available at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>).



Firstly, we estimate the individual-level effects (Model 1a) independently from the contextual-level indicators, but controlling for country and time effects (Model 1b). Then, we enter stepwise our contextual indicators into random-intercept models (Models 2–4). Finally, Models 5 and 6 test the cross-level interaction effects to explore whether cultural and/or institutional context factors shape the micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP. For the sake of simplicity, Models 2–6 report the results based on the indices for institutional and cultural openness, but we cross-checked our results by focusing on the individual indicators separately (these results and other robustness checks can also be found in the Online Appendix).

The results reported in Models 1a and 1b show that distrust in representative institutions is a source of ERP. Thus, the findings support the standard assumption found in the literature: the less citizens trust in representative institutions, the more likely they are to take part in political activities outside of institutionalized and representational channels (supporting Hypothesis 1). While this contrasts with studies that could not find a significant link between political trust and ERP (e.g., Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Booth and Seligson, 2005; Dalton et al., 2010; Norris et al., 2005; Schussman and Soule, 2005; Thomassen, 1990), it corroborates recent studies that found such a link (e.g., Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Norris, 2011). Although these effects are not very strong, we think that the results clearly indicate that discontent with *representative* forms of democracy is a source of citizens' engagement in *extra-representational* activities, since we controlled for many alternative social-structural, biographical and attitudinal factors associated with participation, as well as for country and time effects. Furthermore, the findings for the micro-level control variables support the standard expectations in the scholarly literature (for details, see the Online Appendix).

Let us now turn to the *direct* effects of the openness of political systems on the amount of ERP. As shown in Table A.3 (Models 2–4, available online at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>), all significant effects support the claim that the amount of ERP increases with the openness of the political system. To be more precise, only the cultural index, but not the institutional one, turns out to be significantly related to ERP. This is consistent with the results found by other scholars who tried to assess the influence of institutional context factors and mostly failed to do so. Thus, it seems that it is not the institutional structure per se, but rather its openness, as it is perceived by the citizens of the state, that influences the amount of ERP. This underscores Gamson and Meyer's (1996) advice that (social movement) scholars should focus both on institutional and on cultural elements of the political opportunity structure faced by protestors. This finding is highlighted when comparing the ICC of the different models. We have already mentioned that about 16 per cent of the variance can be attributed to the original contextual level, as the empty model showed. This value can be reduced, generally, step by step, in each model we presented. About 2 per cent of the variance can be ascribed to the institutional factors (Model 2), but 9 per cent is due to cultural contextual factors (Model 3).

The findings for the single contextual indicators support the results based on the two combined indices (tables available from the authors). All three factors used to assess cultural openness significantly affect the amount of ERP, whereas this holds for only one of the three institutional factors. In other words, ERP is more widespread in non-statist societies, as well as in countries with higher aggregate levels of party responsiveness and political trust. This finding underscores that all three measures tap the same underlying dimension, and it also confirms Welzel and Deutsch's (2012) advice to incorporate both individual-level and societal effects of values on ERP. By contrast, we only find such a significant effect for our measure of fiscal decentralization: the more decentralized a country, the higher the amount of ERP. Hence, more access options along the vertical dimension seem to increase participation but not power dispersion along the horizontal dimension. In contrast to Fatke and Freitag's (2013) comparative study of Swiss cantons, the degree of direct democracy is also not significantly related to the amount of ERP in our cross-national study (see also Morales, 2009: 202).

What do our results tell us about whether and how the micro-level association between political trust and ERP is conditioned by the institutional and cultural openness of political systems? For this purpose, Models 5 and 6 report the interaction terms between the two contextual indices and trust in representative institutions. Regarding cross-level interaction effects, we can observe a negative and significant interaction effect only on the cultural side of political opportunities: the more open a political system is in cultural terms, the stronger the negative micro-level association between political trust and ERP. This tends to support Hypothesis 2b, but does not support Hypothesis 2a. Furthermore, the findings are contrary to the arguments by Dalton et al. (2010), as well as those by Marien and Christensen (2013), that political distrust should be a more important source of ERP in closed political contexts. By contrast, it supports our reasoning on the insufficient role of grievances (in our case, distrust in representative democracy) for explaining ERP. In closed political contexts, with few opportunities, there is only limited ERP, regardless of the level of political distrust. However, as opportunities for ERP increase, it is those who are dissatisfied who will act on the opportunities provided by the political context.

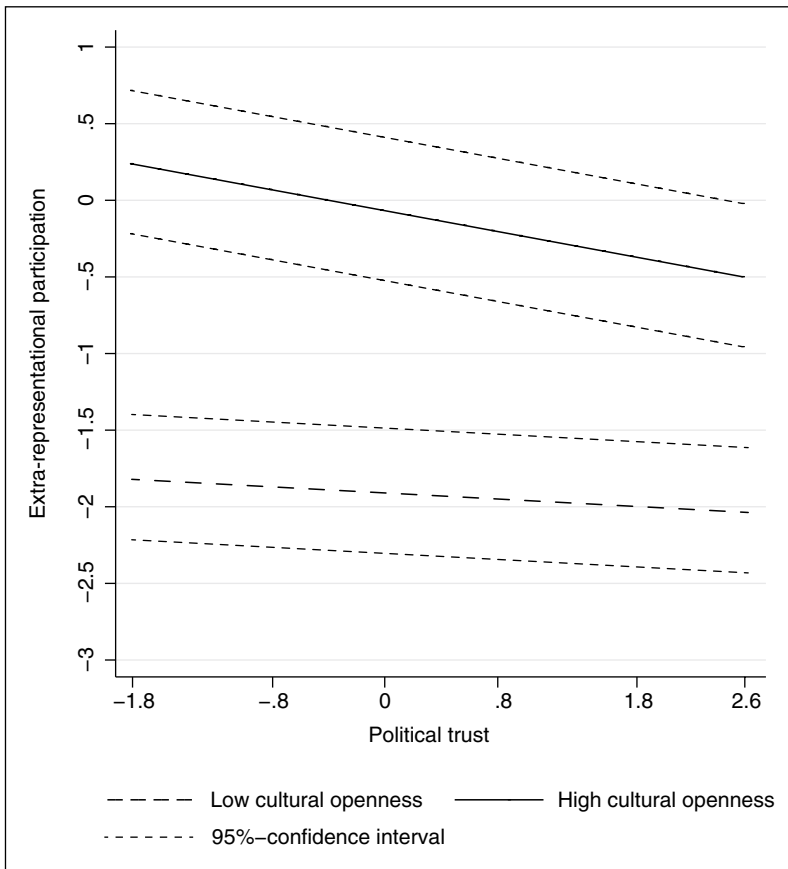
Separate analyses with the single forms of ERP as the dependent variable (instead of the combined measure) show that the same mechanism is at work, although the size of the interaction effect between political trust and the cultural openness of political systems is stronger for “taking part in lawful demonstrations” and “signing petitions” than for “boycotting products”. This might be explained by the fact that boycotting is often motivated by political consumerism and market choices that fulfil personal objects with or without further collective purposes (e.g., Copeland, 2014). By contrast, participation in demonstrations and petitions seems more motivated by the intention to affect existing political institutions and/or policies.

Finally, to get closer to the size of the overall interaction effects, Figure 1 illustrates them graphically. The figure shows that in countries with a closed system in cultural terms, we find far lower levels of ERP and no pronounced differences between citizens with low and high levels of trust in representative institutions. In countries with higher perceived openness and thus culturally more open political systems, the overall amount of ERP is far higher and we find a strong negative relationship between political trust and ERP. While the effects are not huge, they point to a substantial and interesting difference that helps us to illuminate the cross-national differences in the linkage between political trust and ERP. Moreover, the results again underline that the political context faced by ERP should not just be modelled by referring to institutional factors, but that scholars should also take into account the cultural or perceived openness of political systems, as suggested by Gamson and Meyer (1996).

## **Conclusion**

This article considered the debate over the relation between trust in representative institutions and involvement in ERP. More precisely, we highlighted that the literature offers inconclusive empirical findings as to whether those citizens who distrust representative institutions are more or less likely to engage in ERP. We moved one step further in resolving this controversy by linking it to recent research that deals with the questions of how contextual factors affect the amount of ERP and interact with micro-level predictors. To do so, we reviewed the literature on social movements and introduced both institutional and cultural factors that indicate the openness of political systems.

Empirically, the study covered 22 established European democracies that were included in the first five rounds of the ESS. Relying on multi-level logistic regressions, we showed that people who distrust representative political institutions are indeed more likely to take part in petitions, public demonstrations or boycotts (see also Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Norris, 2011). As we controlled for many alternative micro-level explanations, we think that this negative micro-level



**Figure 1.** The micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP in open and closed contexts. Note: Marginal effects plot; the lines indicate the effect of political trust on ERP when the index of cultural openness is at its minimum and maximum value.

relationship indicates that discontent with representative forms of democracy leads people to take part in extra-representational forms of participation.

More importantly, though, our results highlight that one should indeed embed this micro-level relationship in its broader political context. Firstly, we showed that in culturally more open political contexts, citizens are more likely to engage in ERP. While the cultural or perceived openness of political systems is significantly related to the amount of ERP, institutional openness is not. This underscores that political participation scholars should focus in particular on cultural or perceived elements of the context faced by protesters, as emphasized in the social movement literature (see Gamson and Meyer, 1996). Furthermore, we found that the micro-level relationship between political trust and ERP is conditioned by the openness of the political system: the more open a political system in cultural terms, the stronger the negative micro-level association between political trust and participation in such activities. This finding is in line with the general argument in social movement studies that grievances are a necessary but insufficient condition for protest mobilization (for a classical statement, see McAdam, 1982). In a closed context, there is only limited ERP, regardless of the level of distrust. However, as opportunities for ERP increase, it is those who are dissatisfied with representative institutions who exploit the opportunities provided by the political context.

Referring back to the examples in the introduction, our results underscore that a critique of representative democracy is a major source of engagement in ERP. However, such a critique tends to differentiate participants from non-participants far more in those democracies that are generally perceived as already quite open to citizens' demands. Thus, in line with the idea of "critical citizens" or "critical democrats" (see Norris, 1999, 2011), we could interpret this as a sign of a vibrant and critical political scene, where those disaffected with representative political channels do not become apathetic but, rather, raise their voice in alternative, extra-representational channels. Following Qi and Shin's (2011) dynamic model of democratization, the contingent effects of a political system's openness on the association between political trust and ERP could even be interpreted as yet another stage in democratic development. As in earlier stages, those dissatisfied with democracy-in-practice are most likely to act upon the opportunities provided by the political context and their activities might trigger further institutional reforms.

Future research should, however, rely on alternative data sources, both to better understand the claims made by the protestors when criticizing representative democracy (e.g., della Porta and Reiter, 2012; Ramid et al., 2012), as well as to answer the question of how (sustained) protest participation and unfulfilled expectations might influence citizens' attitudes towards representative institutions. The latter type of question would require panel data to disentangle the complex relationship between the two micro-level concepts studied in this article. Another avenue for further research would be to study differences between the three forms of ERP more carefully. While our own results suggest that the same mechanisms are at work, the size of the effects seems to differ. In addition, we could turn the research question around and ask what, if any, is the threshold value for cultural "closure" beyond which people actually start doing ERP at any cost in closed systems. In this case, one would probably need to focus not only on absolute values of cultural or perceived openness but also on relative and sudden shifts over time. Nonetheless, the present article has made a start by comparing European democracies, and our findings invite scholars to take into account the wider political context—and in particular its cultural side—when studying ERP.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors thank the reviewers and the journal editors for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. An early version of this manuscript was presented at the IPSA Congress 2012 in Madrid, where we received valuable comments.

### **Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### **Notes**

1. In this article, we rely on five waves of the ESS where citizens' involvement in ERP can be operationalized as participation in boycotts, petitions and public demonstrations. Scholars disagree on how to label these forms of participation. The label "unconventional", as suggested by Barnes and Kaase's (1979) path-breaking study, seems outdated because most of these forms are no longer seen as illegitimate by the wider public. Therefore, authors subsume the three forms under the labels "protest behaviour" (e.g., Dalton et al., 2010), "non-institutionalized" (e.g., Hooghe and Marien, 2013) or "elite-challenging" (e.g., Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002). In this article, we adopt Teorell et al.'s (2007: 340ff) label by distinguishing forms of participation with respect to the main channel of expression (representational versus non-representational).
2. The concept of political trust can be defined as a positive orientation of people towards political objects and is based on specific standards and expectations. Thus, political trust does not refer to horizontal

relationships between people but to vertical relationships between citizens of a state and their political authorities or institutions.

3. Note that this expectation holds for moderate forms of participation, such as those covered in this article. Thus, the overall level of participation is expected to increase with the openness of the political context, while the involvement in more radical (often violent) action forms is expected to decrease (see also Kitschelt, 1986: 66).
4. Although we take into account a maximum of 25 countries, the models presented in this article are based on 22 countries as some contextual measures were not available. However, we counter-checked the analyses taking into account the full number of countries when possible without detecting major differences in the results (see robustness checks in the Online Appendix, available at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>).
5. We did not take into account Lijphart's second federal-unitary dimension, since this measure does not travel well to the Eastern European context.
6. This is also confirmed by the results of the factor analysis that we used to construct a single composite measure for cultural openness (all three indicators load on one factor, see the Online Appendix, available at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>).

## References

- Anderson, Christopher J and Silvia M Mendes (2006) Learning to lose: Election outcomes, democratic experience and political protest potential. *British Journal of Political Science* 36(1): 91–111.
- Barnes, Samuel H and Max Kaase (1979) *Political Action*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Booth, John A and Mitchell A Seligson (2005) Political legitimacy and participation in Costa Rica: Evidence of arena shopping. *Political Research Quarterly* 58(4): 537–550.
- Braun, Daniela (2013) *Politisches Vertrauen in neuen Demokratien*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Copeland, Lauren (2014) Conceptualizing political consumerism: How citizenship norms differentiate boycotting from buycotting. *Political Studies* 62(1): 172–186.
- Crozier, Michel, Samuel P Huntington and Joji Watanuki (1975) *The Crisis of Democracy*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dalton, Russell J (2004) *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dalton, Russell J (2006) *Citizen Politics*. 4th ed. Washington DC: CQ Press.
- Dalton, Russell J, Alix van Sickle and Steven Weldon (2010) The individual-institutional nexus of protest behaviour. *British Journal of Political Science* 40(1): 51–73.
- della Porta, Donatella and Herbert Reiter (2012) Desperately seeking politics: Political attitudes of participants in three demonstrations for worker's rights in Italy. *Mobilization* 17(3): 349–361.
- Dubrow, Joshua Kjerulff, Kazimierz M Slomczynski and Irina Tomescu-Dubrow (2008) Effects of democracy and inequality on soft political protest in Europe. *International Journal of Sociology* 38(3): 36–51.
- Fatke, Matthias and Markus Freitag (2013) Direct democracy: Protest catalyst or protest alternative? *Political Behavior* 35(2): 237–260.
- Gamson, William A (1968) *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- Gamson, William A and David S Meyer (1996) Framing political opportunity. In: Doug McAdam, John D McCarthy and Mayer N Zald (eds) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.275–290.
- Gurr, Ted Robert (1970) *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hooghe, Marc and Sofie Marien (2013) A comparative analysis of the relationship between political trust and forms of political participation in Europe. *European Societies* 15(1): 131–152.
- Hug, Simon and George Tsebelis (2002) Veto players and referendums around the world. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 14(4): 465–515.
- Hutter, Swen (2014) *Protesting Culture and Economics in Western Europe. New Cleavages in Left and Right Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Inglehart, Ronald (1977) *The Silent Revolution*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, Ronald and Gabriela Catterberg (2002) Trends in political action: The developmental trend and the post-honeymoon decline. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43(3–5): 300–316.

- Jepperson, Ronald L (2002) Political modernities: Disentangling two underlying dimensions of institutional differentiation. *Sociological Theory* 20(1): 61–85.
- Kitschelt, Herbert (1986) Political opportunity structures and political protest: Anti-nuclear movements in four democracies. *British Journal of Political Science* 16(1): 57–85.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter (2008) Political mobilisation, political participation and the power of the vote. *West European Politics* 31(1-2): 147–168.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter, Ruud Koopmans, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Marco Giugni (1995) *New Social Movements in Western Europe*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lijphart, Arend (1999) *Patterns of Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Marien, Sofie and Henrik Serup Christensen (2013) Trust and openness: Prerequisites for democratic engagement? In: Kyriakos N. Demetriou (ed.) *Democracy in Transition. Political Participation in the European Union*. New York: Springer, pp.109–134.
- McAdam, Doug (1982) *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Meyer, David S (2004) Protest and political opportunities. *Annual Review of Sociology* 30(1): 125–145.
- Morales, Laura (2009) *Joining Political Organisations*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Muller, Edward N, Thomas O Jukam and Mitchell A Seligson (1982) Diffuse political support and antisystem political behavior: A comparative analysis. *American Journal of Political Science* 26(2): 240–264.
- Nilson, Douglas C and Linda Burzotta Nilson (1980) Trust in elites and protest orientation: An integrative approach. *Political Behavior* 2(4): 385–404.
- Norris, Pippa (1999) Conclusions: The growth of critical citizens and its consequences. In: Pippa Norris (ed.) *Critical Citizens. Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.257–272.
- Norris, Pippa (2011) *Democratic Citizens. Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, Pippa, Stefaan Walgrave and Peter van Aelst (2005) Who demonstrates? Disaffected rebels, conventional participants, or everyone? *Comparative Politics* 37(2): 189–205.
- Qi, Lingling and Doh Chull Shin (2011) How mass political attitudes affect democratization: Exploring the facilitating role critical democrats play in the process. *International Political Science Review* 32(3): 245–262.
- Quaranta, Mario (2013) Measuring political protest in Western Europe: Assessing cross-national equivalence. *European Political Science Review* 5(3): 457–482.
- Ramid, Nina, Wolfgang Stuppert and Simon Teune (2012) Protest und Demokratie. Kritik am repräsentativen Regieren und die Entdeckung der Straße durch die GegnerInnen von Stuttgart 21, unpublished paper, Social Science Research Center Berlin.
- Scharpf, Fritz W (1984) Economic and institutional constraints of full-employment strategies: Sweden, Austria, and West Germany, 1973–1982. In: John Goldthorpe (ed.) *Order and Conflict in Contemporary Capitalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp.257–290.
- Schofer, Evan and Marion Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001) The structural contexts of civic engagements: Voluntary association membership in comparative perspective. *American Sociological Review* 66(6): 806–828.
- Schussman, Alan and Sarah A Soule (2005) Process and protest: Accounting for individual protest participation. *Social Forces* 84(2): 1083–1108.
- Spina, Nicholas (2014) Decentralisation and political participation: An empirical analysis in Western and Eastern Europe. *International Political Science Review* 35(4): 448–462.
- Teorell, Jan, Mariano Torcal and José Ramón Montero (2007) Political participation. Mapping the terrain. In: Jan van Deth, José Ramón Montero and Anders Westholm (eds.) *Citizenship and Involvement in European Democracies*. London: Routledge, pp.334–57.
- Thomassen, Jacques (1990) Economic crisis, dissatisfaction and protest. In: Kent M Jennings, Jan van Deth and Samuel H. Barnes (eds) *Continuities in Political Action*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- van Aelst, Peter and Stefaan Walgrave (2001) Who is that (wo)man in the street? From the normalisation of protest to the normalisation of the protester. *European Journal of Political Research* 39(4): 461–486.

- van der Meer, Tom WG, Jan van Deth and Peer LH Scheepers (2009) The politicized participant. Ideology and political action in 20 democracies. *Comparative Political Studies* 42(11): 1426–1457.
- Vatter, Adrian (2009) Lijphart expanded: Three dimensions of democracy in advanced OECD countries? *European Political Science Review* 1(1): 125–154.
- Vráblíková, Kateřina (2014) How context matters? Mobilization, political opportunity structures, and non-lectoral political participation in old and new democracies. *Comparative Political Studies* 47(2): 203–229.
- Welzel, Christian and Franziska Deutsch (2012) Emancipative values and non-violent protest: The importance of ‘ecological’ effects. *British Journal of Political Science* 42(2): 465–479.

### **Author biographies**

Daniela Braun is a lecturer and researcher at the Geschwister-Scholl-Institute for Political Science, University of Munich.

Swen Hutter is a research fellow at the European University Institute in Florence.