

The Study of Cycles of Protest: Approaches to the Case of Spain



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Abstract This chapter studies secondary data (Annuals of the Ministry of the Interior) in order to relate protest events in Spain with those occurring in the rest of the world, using the model applied by Tarrow (Protesta Social. Hacer, Barcelona, 2002) in the case of Italian protests, and Herrera (América Latina Hoy 48:165–189, 2008), in the Argentinian protest. The hypothesis is that the Indignado Movement in Spain is the local expression of a global movement, framed within the Anti-Austerity Movement. On the basis of the concept of the “cycle of protests”, the frequency, intensity, sectoral spread and demands put forward have been analysed to determine the existence of a cycle of protests in Spain, in which the Indignado protest developed.

Keywords Cycles of protest · Frequency · Intensity · Indignados · Social movements

1 Introduction

Although the concept of cycles of protest (Tarrow 1983) is a useful tool to study the “what” and the “how” of social movements, few empirical studies have been undertaken using this methodology. It can be used to study the frequency and intensity of the protest, identify the players who mobilise society, the target of the protests and the demands made. The cycles of protest describe and explain intense periods of collective contentious action, “where recurrent flow and backflow dynamics can be observed” (Della Porta and Diani 2011). Likewise, the analysis

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of cycles of protest is especially useful to study political violence, an effect which is closely related to intensity.

According to Buerklin (1987), “practically all the time series which describe and explain social and political change show deviations and fluctuations of one type or another” and their results are subtle transformations in political regimes (Herrera 2008). That is exactly what is observed in the Spanish protests between the years 2008 and 2014, when mobilisations saw a gradual upturn after a period of normalisation of protest since the inauguration of the democratic regime (Jiménez 2011). The main causes of this increase in mobilisation were the fruit of the financial and debt crises suffered in the West, to which must be added the wave of democratisation in Middle Eastern countries (Romanos 2016). The explosion of the 15-M Movement as the central player in the indignation movement in Spain is a fundamental landmark in the study of this cycle of protest, reaching its moment of madness (Zolberg 1972) in the camps of 2011.

The purpose of this chapter is, firstly, to reflect on the study of cycles of protest as an analytical and methodological tool and also to examine the protests seen in Spain during the period 2008–2014, considering the possibility that they constitute a cycle of protest which forms part of a wider cycle of global mobilisation.

2 Political Conflict and Cyclical Elements¹

The contentious episode addressed in this chapter may be classified as a transgressive political conflict (McAdam et al. 2005), insofar as it involves emerging players which demonstrate the capacity to put new issues on the public agenda and use unfamiliar means of pressure. We understand protest as a collective strategy (Gamson 1990; Tarrow 1990) used by different players, with a greater or lesser degree of institutionalisation, against the State (Jenkins and Klandermans 1995) or the elites and which are public, discontinuous, direct and disruptive, to express inconformity with a certain state of affairs, and whose purpose is to influence political decisions (Tarrow 1990; Maturo and Hoskova-Mayerova 2018).

When the interactions between these mobilised players and the institutions take on a greater frequency than previously, with episodes of intensification, violent outbreaks in the response, generating new repertoires for protest—frequency, intensity and innovation—it is probable that they will coincide with a significant spread of the use of this political participation strategy (protest) from sectors accustomed to this recourse, including those which are poorly articulated and without prior experience in contentious collective action. All of which appears to favour a kind of

¹This point is profoundly inspired by the work of Herrera (2008) in which she offers theoretical and analytical arguments regarding the study of cycles of protest and proposes a series of indicators to measure the dimensions of the phenomenon. In her chapter, the case analysed is the cycle of protest in Argentina 1998–2005.

“solidarity”—at least initially—between the mobilised sectors, whether or not they have a track record of mobilisation.

Tarrow states that contentious episodes with these characteristics should be understood as a specific phenomenon which he calls “cycle of protest” (Tarrow 1983). Cycles of protest contain cyclical elements, which have been described by Tarrow (2002), in which: (a) the conflict is exalted, (b) the sectoral and geographical spread of the problem widens, (c) new social movement organisations appear and the old ones are strengthened, (d) new frames of meaning are created and (e) new forms of collective action are generated.

These periods display a great wealth in terms of the diversity, intensity, spread and innovation of collective action, and the demands of the different sectors involved have a certain unity. A thread may be traced connecting the many diverse demands of the mobilised sectors, a demand which is common to all those who have taken to the streets, a kind of conceptual coherence which supports the cognitive elements, elaborated within the diverse groups (Tarrow 1983). Thus, within a cycle, a “master frame” is produced (Snow and Benford 1992) under whose umbrella each movement develops a variety of demands and the corresponding discursive elements which: (a) diagnose the situations identified as unfair, (b) identify those responsible for the unfair situations, (c) set out the desired prognosis, and (d) provide justifications for the strategies they have developed. This master frame usually has a significant impact on the citizens, modifying their assignation of meanings, as well as their attitudes and actions, becoming a permanent feature of the political culture (Tarrow 1997).

In short, cycles of protest are especially fertile in relation to the politics of societies, but also for the discipline which studies them. Understanding these episodes as historical phenomena with internal consistency—and not as a set of behaviours operating independently, though with certain proximity—provides a rich field: (a) to analyse the relationships between social movements and organisations of social movements, (b) to research the itineraries of those organisations and their leaders, identifying forms of organisation, as well as patterns of action and the promotion and spread of protest, (c) to reflect on the interactions established between movements and elites, and, finally, (d) to allow cycles of protest to be related with cycles of reform (Tarrow 1983).

Having set forth the empirical implications of a contentious cycle and the analytical wealth of the concept, we propose to demonstrate that the episodes of confrontation seen in Spain between 2008 and 2014 constitute an episode with features of a cycle, but which also forms part of a process of response on a global scale, whose origin is in the financial and debt crisis which affected Western economies, and the wave of democratisation in the Arabic countries of the Middle East. To perform this study, we have replicated the operationalisation of Herrera (2008), as it is opportune and since we assume that the case studies have similar characteristics.

3 Methodological Details for the Study of Cycles of Protest and Data

As stated previously, the study of cycles of protest requires the examination of a series of dimensions that reveal relevant aspects regarding the development of the transgressive political conflict. Specifically, the dimensions of a cycle of protest are: (a) frequency, (b) intensity, (c) spread, and (d) innovation. Of these categories, this chapter centres on frequency, intensity and sectoral spread. But as well as the dimensions which could bear witness to the emergence of a cycle of protest, we shall also examine the demands that have given rise to the promotion of the contentious events. This latter category allows us to approach a description of the “us” and of what is at stake (Tourine 1981) in the conflict.

This descriptive analysis of the dimensions described above allows us, firstly, to determine whether the Spanish protest was passing through a cyclical phase and, secondly, to relate this to other contentious phenomena globally, determining the local character in a transnational mobilisation process (Sergi and Vogiatzoglou 2013).²

The following is a description of each of the analytical categories studied:

- (a) Frequency: this measures the reiteration of protest events reported by the sources used, and is the number of events produced in a given period of time.
- (b) Intensity: this dimension refers to the disruptive capacity of the protest action. To measure the intensity of a cycle, Tarrow (2002), uses a classification of protest repertoires: conventional, confrontational or violent. However, depending on the working data in this first stage, we have measured the intensity through the indications of violence seen during the events. Specifically, the intensity indicator was constructed from the number of events with violent acts as a percentage of the total number of protest events (Herrera 2008; Urban and Hoskova-Mayerova 2017).
- (c) Spread: this dimension measures sectoral spread. The players who promote the mobilisation and who play the role of affected sectors in a situation identified as unfair (Klandermans 2002) were determined. They constitute the “us” of the protest.
- (d) Demands: this dimension reflects the content of the protest, that is, the cause that is defended or espoused before the authorities as a problem to be addressed (Fig. 1).

The data used in this chapter was extracted from the Annuals of the Ministry of the Interior of the Spanish Government, which were elaborated from the data gathered by the different Government Sub-Delegations in each province. It should be noted that this data only provides an approximate view of a general situation and gives superficial evidence. In this regard, it must be declared that the data does not include the number of forbidden protests or those which were not communicated, and so we assume that they have a selection bias. Likewise, the spread and the demands are

²“Think globally, act locally” is the slogan on which the framework of collective action of the global justice movement rested. Flesher studied collective identity in the global justice movement.

Concept	Dimension	Indicator	Index
Cycles of protest	Frequency	N° of events per year	[0.inf]
	Intensity	Violent events: Total number of violent acts / total number of protest events	[0.100]
	Spread	Type of player / total number of events per year	[0.100]
	Demands	Type of demand / total number of events per year	[0.100]

Fig. 1 Operationalisation of the cycle of protest. Source The authors and Herrera (2008:172)

limited to the categorisation made by the Ministry itself with a very narrow filter, which produces limited results although they are pertinent for the definition of the cyclical nature of the protest.

4 The Indignados Political Conflict: Cyclical Characteristics

1. Frequency

An increase in the number of protest events is the primary indicator of the commencement of a cycle of protest. Although this is simple, accessible data, it allows us to determine whether the protest is spreading or receding.

The following conclusions can be drawn from Fig. 2:

- (a) Commencement of the cycle: if we examine the normalisation of protests between the years 1980 and 2008 (Jiménez 2011), the number of demonstrations was at all times below 15,000 events per year, with a downward tendency

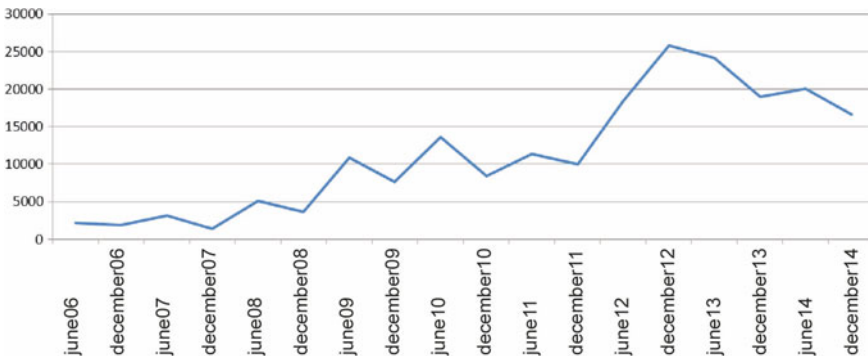


Fig. 2 Evolution of the volume of protests, 2006–2014. Source The authors, from Ministry of the Interior data

from the year 2000, though with considerable upturns in participation (The year 2004 saw an increase in participation in demonstrations in opposition to Spain's participation in the Iraq war and in response to the 11 March terrorist attacks in Madrid). It can be seen how, in 2006 and 2007, this low level of mobilisation remained constant. However, it was from 2008, with the first mobilisations in Iceland in response to the debt crisis, that the cycle of protests began in Spain. The upward trend continued until 2013.

- (b) The moment of madness: thus named by Zolberg (1972), it does not coincide with the moment of greatest frequency, in the second half of 2012. According to data crossed with other references (analysis of data from the press and specialised literature of the “Indignados” mobilisations), it may be concluded that the moment of madness in Spain was June 2011, with the demonstrations called by *Democracia Real Ya* and the camps of the 15-M Movement. Both groups can be considered the ‘early birds’ of indignation in Spain, spreading the protest to other groups and spheres that were becoming precarious as a result of the cuts imposed in response to the financial and debt crisis.
- (c) Latency: the demobilisation process began as from the first half of 2013. It is probable that this abandonment of street protests occurred for several reasons: the enactment of the “gag law”,³ which increased state repression of transgressive conflict and generated fear of taking to the streets; likewise, after two years of demonstrations, the effect on the government and public policy were scant. An effect of the first two reasons was to consider the electoral option as a tactic of the social movements (McAdam and Tarrow 2011), that is, to create a political apparatus to stand in the elections and develop a political programme born out of the protests.⁴

Likewise, through the study of frequency, it is possible to observe that over the same period in which there was an upturn in mobilisations in Spain, other protests erupted in different countries, among which stood out the protests in Iceland (2008), Greece (2010–2012), the Arab Spring (2010–2013), Portugal (2011), Chile (2011), USA (2011), Mexico (2012) and Brazil (2013). In all of these, “new–new” characteristics have been observed (Castells 2013). Martí i Puig and Silva (2014, 11) defined this pattern through: (1) the spread and amplification of the information in real-time by the Internet and social networks; (2) the mobilisation of the citizens through autonomous, horizontal networks that promoted direct action in the urban space, often occupying it against the will of the authorities; (3) the call to democracy as a participatory and deliberative activity; (4) the activation of messages appealing more to common goods than to the services provided by the State or the market; and (5) the rejection of strong personal leadership (Bekesiene and Hoskova-Mayerova 2018). The collective action which occurred under these parameters can be understood as a “connective action” (Subirats 2015), in which the processes are hybridised, crossing the intangible barriers of informal political action and entering into insti-

³The “gag law” refers to Basic Law 4/2015, 30 March, on the Protection of Public Safety.

⁴This is reflected in the *Charter for Democracy* (2014) edited by various mobilisation groups, laying out their aspirations which are not represented in the institutions.

YEAR	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
EVENTS	4066	4527	8760	18568	21941	21297	44233	43170	36679
VIOLENCE	16	3	16	34	45	46	2	117	19
CONFRONTATION	253	101	154	273	286	314	7	441	197
TOTAL	269	104	170	307	331	360	9	558	216
INTENSITY*	6.61	2.29	1.94	1.65	1.5	1.69	0.02	1.29	0.58
INJURED	3	0	0	10	0	7	1	8	3
ARRESTS	7	0	8	19	24	1	0	14	5

*Intensity = (Total / Events) x 100

Fig. 3 Indications of the intensity of the cycle of protest. *Source* The authors, from the data of the Ministry of the Interior and Herrera (2008)

tutional political action. We can thus state that there exists a global framework for collective action.

2. Intensity

Our measurement of intensity used the same process as Herrera (2008), based on Tarrow's Italian case study. The work used the same arguments and approaches with the intention of replicating them in the Spanish case (Fig. 3).

The analysis of the indications of intensity shows that, as the frequency of the protests increases, the intensity of the conflict is reduced. It is especially striking that the year of greatest mobilisation, 2012, was the moment at which the intensity was closest to zero. Likewise, an upturn can be observed in 2011, just when the moment of madness took place.

As can be seen from Fig. 4, frequency takes over from intensity, with the year 2011 and its moment of madness standing out, with a slight upturn in intensity and a stagnation in the frequency. This is due to the fact that in the first days of the camps in May 2011, episodes of violence occurred in many of the enclaves in which the demonstrators crowded into the squares of their municipalities. Just afterwards, as pointed out by Tarrow, the frequency rose sharply and the intensity fell to a minimum, demonstrating the results of the cooperation/competition dynamic typical of cycles of protest. More specifically, at those moments in which most players "took to the streets" to protest, the media reported the events due to the magnitude that the phenomenon was acquiring. However, as some players resolved their demands, those who "stayed on the street" had to use "noisier" tactics to maintain media and public attention.

Another element to be considered in order to understand the dynamics of the intensity of the cycle is the relationship between the protest and police repression. Brockett argues that if police repression is used as a strategy of dissuasion in the moments of the explosion or in the ascendant phase of the cycle, this produces a multiplier effect on the levels of mobilisation (Brockett 2002). Indiscriminate repressive action ceases to be dissuasive and begins to stimulate popular support for the mobilised sectors when it is used during the peak of the cycle, that is, at the moment of madness. As indicated by Tarrow in the Italian case study, as the frequency increases,

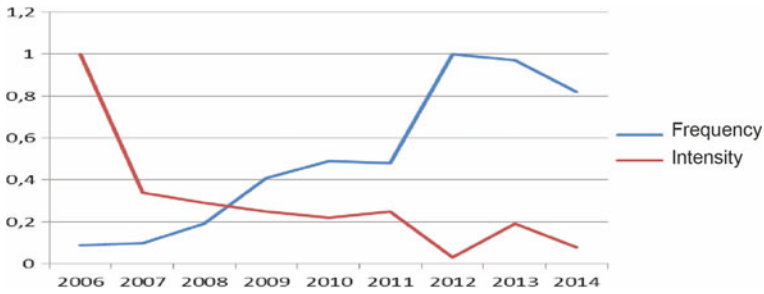


Fig. 4 Evolution of the intensity and frequency. *Source* The authors, from the data of the Ministry of the Interior

protesters resort to more conventional forms of action, which implies less confrontation with authority. That is, once the moment of madness and the violence that may be associated with it has passed, frequency and intensity are inversely proportional.

3. Sectoral spread. The players in the protest: emergence and transformation

McAdam (2002) notes the relationships established by “initiating movements” and the “derivatives” in mobilisation processes. There is a certain logic for the mobilising initiative to originate from players which are more institutionalised or predisposed to dispute (Kriesi 1999), who make up the group of social movement organisations. These are the organisations which have tended towards institutionalisation and commercialisation, as pointed out by Kriesi. However, the study of the sectoral spread of the protest in this cycle is not of those players who might have been expected, but of self-organising citizens.

As can be seen from Fig. 5, from the beginning of the cycle of protest, the associations took the leading role in the protest up to 2011, when they were relieved by the traditional trade unions. Also in a prominent, though secondary, position were the company committees, bodies involved in the negotiation of labour rights and closely related to the trade unions. This situation makes sense, especially as from 2012, when the labour reform which affected the social rights of the workers came into force. Despite the leading role of the trade unions from the end of 2011 onwards, the upward trend of citizens’ associations tells us, firstly, of the awakening of the citizens as a collective player and, secondly, as from 2013, how the activity of citizens’ associations was to be transformed into a contained conflict (McAdam et al. 2005) through established groups which, on diverse fronts, were to interact with the institutions without a high degree of mobilisation.

4. Demands

The demands of the cycles of protest, in the words of Tourine (1981), configure what is at stake, that is, the motivations that push citizens to take to the streets to fight for what is just. The demands bring meaning and coherence to those who decide to act against what they consider to be an injustice. The study of the demands determines, on the one hand, the development of the discursive framework of the cycle of protests

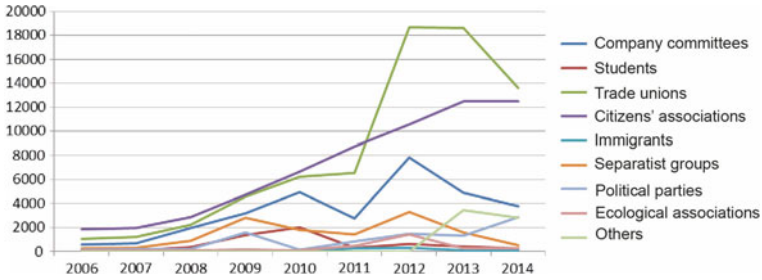


Fig. 5 Evolution of sectoral spread. *Source* The authors, from the data of the Ministry of the Interior

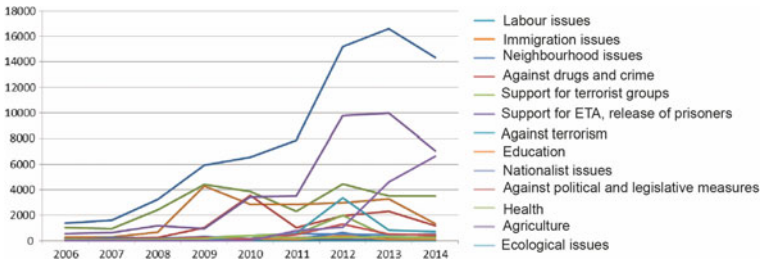


Fig. 6 Evolution of the demands. *Source* The authors, from the data of the Ministry of the Interior

(Hunt et al. 1994) and, on the other, it clarifies which are the concerns of the citizens at a given moment (Fig. 6).

It can be seen that the main concern of the Spanish people, within the cycle of protest, were labour issues. This was related to a certain extent to increasing unemployment, the frustration of the professional expectations of young university graduates and the constant cuts to labour rights. The increase in demands against political and legislative measures was particularly notable as from 2011, which was precisely the moment of madness and when the citizens’ associations became stronger than the trade unions. Lastly, nationalist and ecological issues, which currently occupy fourth and third places among motivations, respectively, had a prominent position. This influenced the appearance of political parties which promote options that represent these demands.

5 Conclusions

Despite the limitations of this chapter, the gains made through the study of the cycles of protest are significant to the study of the political conflict, its players and its discourse. Likewise, the operationalisation of the concept of the cycle of protests offers interesting resources for working with and on the cycles, although perhaps the relationships established between the different dimensions could be improved.

The descriptive results given seem to demonstrate that the period studied shows characteristics of a cycle of protest that opens up within a wave of mobilisations that is related to the protests in other countries or regions, such as Iceland, North Africa, Greece, Portugal, Mexico or the USA. It will be necessary to further study the causes in order to bring them all together under a single discursive framework, and thereby bring meaning to the global mobilisation.

With respect to the case study, it has been shown that the moment of madness took place after the cycle had already commenced. It would be pertinent to study the causes of this and to ascertain why the period of greatest frequency of mobilisation occurred in 2012. Likewise, the process of demobilisation appears to coincide with the appearance of more institutionalised players whose purpose was to take up the electoral option as a tactic of the social movements. Furthermore, the indications of intensity require more rigorous and deeper study of this phenomenon, since there is a relationship of variance between both dimensions, which in turn determines the sectoral spread between the players who lead the protest and determine the list of demands.

Therefore, it appears to have been demonstrated that indignation constitutes a cycle of protests in its own right within the Spanish protest, which should be treated and studied in particular through its own dimensions, and its effect on the development of politics and society in Spain must be determined. New lines of research which must be addressed are also opening up, such as the study of the mechanisms that determine the causes of this cycle of mobilisation and how they influence the development of the protest in different contexts.

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