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Selecting and Coding Contentious Episodes

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Selecting and Coding Contentious Episodes

Abel Bojar, Swen Hutter, and Sophia Hunger

INTRODUCTION

As we laid out in the introductory chapter of our volume, we propose a rather ambitious and innovative empirical strategy to study contentious politics – what we label as Contentious Episode Analysis (CEA). Having situated our approach in the intermediate meso-level between the “narrative approach” and the “epidemiological” approach exemplified by conventional protest event analysis (for reviews, see Hutter 2014; Koopmans and Rucht 2002), we aim to accomplish two tasks simultaneously. On the one hand, we wish to preserve the rich ontology and conceptual breadth of the “narrative approach” by distinguishing between a diverse set of actors, actions, and interactions in our empirical design. On the other hand, we aim to leverage the empirical scope and rigor of the “epidemiological approach” of protest event analysis by building a quantitative, cross-national dataset that allows for a variable-based analysis of the unfolding of interactions in contentious episodes. Therefore, in our efforts to preserve the strength (and avoid the weaknesses) of the two extant approaches, the main aim we set forth is to build a dataset that gives an accurate and fine-grained picture of the dynamics of political conflict condensed to a limited set of variables.

As the first step in this empirical strategy, however, we need to delimit the geographical and empirical scope of our universe. As the scholarly literature on social movements and contentious politics has spanned various geographical units, types of actors, and issue areas, we first need to locate our approach in these multiple dimensions. As for geography, our focus is on the domestic level of European Union (EU) member states. In particular, we aimed to select a manageable number of countries with two selection criteria in mind: first, to provide representative geographical coverage of the EU and, second, to ensure sufficient variation in the states’ structural and institutional embeddedness in

the European economy. Thus, we have chosen four member states from three broad geographical regions: France, Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom (a member of the EU during the period of our research) from north-western Europe; Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal from southern Europe; Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania from centraleastern Europe. While some of these countries are members of the eurozone, others continue to use their national currencies. Some are creditor states in the international flow of financial capital. In contrast, others are debtors and found themselves in the center of the storm during the Great Recession as a result (for details on the economic and political contexts, see [Chapter 3](#)). Some are consolidated democracies with centuries of democratic history, while others are relatively recent democratizers or underwent democratic backsliding (Greskovits, 2015) during the period under scrutiny in this volume.

Regardless of geography and the political context we study, our central nexus is the interaction between two stylized types of political actors: governments and their challengers. To ensure that this nexus is indeed the central thread around which contention revolves, we decided to select policy episodes that are instigated by a government proposal¹ and, thus, likely to trigger reactions by challengers because of their inherently contentious nature (for instance, by confronting vested interests or imposing economic hardship on a broad segment of the population). More specifically and bringing us to the issue dimension, we prioritized economic policy episodes because the Great Recession and the ensuing Euro crisis provided fertile grounds for identifying a large number of proposals for austerity measures and economic reforms (at least four per country). As we know from an increasing body of scholarly work, the recent economic crisis and tide of austerity in Europe has also led to major political repercussions, particularly in the countries hardest hit.² However, we also allowed for our argument to travel beyond the economic domain as it is strictly understood. Of the sixty policy episodes we study overall, twelve (one per country) concern changes in the state's institutions, ranging from the organization of its legislative organs to rules governing the judiciary or changes in the media regime. Thus, as highlighted in the introductory chapter, we are interested in the dynamics of political conflict in episodes that have (a) occurred in twelve European countries during the Great Recession (from fall 2008 to the end of 2015) and (b) focused on relevant key policy proposals designed to come to terms with the consequences of the unfolding economic and political crises in most of these countries.

¹ That said, our general empirical strategy is applicable to episodes of contention initiated by challengers themselves or to ones beyond particular policy initiatives (such as against corruption or anti-democratic practices by state authorities).

² We refer the reader to our own previous volumes on electoral and protest politics in the Great Recession (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Kriesi et al. 2020).

While a detailed description of the content of the episodes follows in [Chapter 3](#), our goal in the current chapter is to outline how we get from these broad empirical ambitions to a functioning dataset that is readily amenable for empirical analysis. In the first part of this chapter, we introduce our selection strategy by answering the following questions: Based on what criteria did we identify the particular episodes in each country? How did we establish the time frame of the episodes and the main actors involved in the debate? What sources did we use to gather all relevant information for constructing the required variables for empirical analysis? How did we restrict a broad text corpus to a narrower one that is amenable for hand coding? In the second part of the chapter, we discuss the coding process itself. Given the fine-grained information that we need to filter out from a large text corpus, we relied on native-language coders, and we presented them with a set of detailed instructions to follow. The second part is thus dedicated to these instructions, followed by an overview of the variables we managed to assemble in the process.

Overall, we aimed for methodological innovation when developing CEA, meaning that we could not fall back on well-established routines but had to face trade-offs between setting out systematic rules at the start of the data gathering process and flexible adaptation throughout the process. As illustrated by the exchange with our critiques in the CEA symposium in the journal *Mobilization*, we are aware of the room for improvement in our data collection strategy and hope others will take up our approach and develop it further.

THE SELECTION PROCESS

Selecting ‘Policy Proposals at Risk’ from the International Press

The selection procedure for the episodes studied in this volume follows McAdam and Boudet’s (2012) advice that social movement research can only overcome its movement centrism by exploring a wider range of actions and actors (the key claim of the Dynamics of Contention program, see McAdam et al. 2001) and by no longer selecting on the dependent variable. In turn, McAdam and Boudet (2012) examine in their work “communities at risk,” that is, communities confronted with controversial decisions about large-scale infrastructural projects. We translated this idea to study the dynamics of political conflict in the Great Recession by focusing on what we call “policy proposals at risk.” As in McAdam and Boudet’s work, we consider cases where resistance to political reforms is likely to emerge – but whether and to what extent remain open empirical questions.

More precisely, we only consider key policy proposals at a relatively high risk of being contested in the public sphere. To select these proposals systematically and avoid selecting on the dependent variable (i.e., only taking proposals that led to the emergence of a strong challenger coalition in the streets), we have resorted to the international press as a radar for relevant events in the countries

under scrutiny. A proposal appearing in the international media may be the result of its high public visibility and international relevance, which, in turn, may or may not be the result of the expansion of the conflict by some challenger in the national public sphere. To put it differently, key proposals are the most likely targets for overt mobilization, but such mobilization may not necessarily occur.³ In operational terms, we define key proposals as proposals by national governments reported (more than once) in three international media sources: *The New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ). All three sources have a fairly large high-quality network of international correspondents. The *New York Times* is one of the most prestigious international newspapers; the *Financial Times* is the leading European quality newspaper specializing in economic affairs; the Swiss NZZ is another important European quality newspaper published in German. Essentially, selecting episodes from the international press helped us identify a relatively limited number of episodes per country while minimizing the risk of selecting on the dependent variable. After an initial test run, we realized that the three sources tended to underreport the centraleastern European countries in our sample. Therefore, we decided to supplement the sample with additional English-language outlets specializing in covering the region for a broader international readership (these were the *Baltic Times* and *Warsaw Voice*).

Country experts from our ERC project *Political Conflict in Europe in the Shadow of the Great Recession* ((POLCON) Dataset) read all reports published in these newspapers from 2008 to 2015 that mentioned the respective country. They systematically coded events relating to social-economic and institutional policy decisions. The resulting database contains almost 4,200 such mentions of events (ranging from 104 for Romania up to 778 for the United Kingdom).⁴ Around 45 percent were coded from the *Financial Times*, followed by the NZZ (29 percent) and the *New York Times* (21 percent). The two additional sources contributed 4.2 (*Warsaw Voice*) and 1.5 percent (*Baltic Times*), respectively.

Based on this event database, we selected the episodes for each country by first looking for (series of) months in which the international press reported on crisis-related economic and institutional policy measures in each country.

³ In fact, since the international press is likely to report on the announcement of key policy packages right after or very close to the announcement date, whether mobilizations against the proposal materialized were typically unknown at the time of reporting.

⁴ In the course of this exercise, we coded a larger set of events reported in the international press – from scandals, protests, election-related events, and government reshufflings to country-specific events (e.g., specific incidences such as the Smolensk disaster in the case of Poland) ($N = 7,391$). From the broader set of events, we can see that Romania is not less covered ($N = 348$), but the share of economic or institutional policy events is much smaller in comparison to the other countries in the sample. For empirical studies of how these different events shaped the electoral prospects of government and opposition parties, see Bojar et al. (2019) and Malet and Kriesi (2019).

Then we checked the specific proposals mentioned in these “windows of observation” and compiled a preliminary list of cases, usually covering five to ten cases.⁵ From these lists, we selected four economic and one institutional proposal for each country, based on their attention in the international press and country-specific knowledge about potential overlaps and relations between the various proposals. The final set of episodes that we selected are listed in [Table 2.1](#) by their names and the short labels assigned to them. In subsequent chapters of this book, we generally refer to the episodes by their full name, while in the descriptive tables, we indicate them via their short labels. Moreover, we offer a very detailed discussion of each proposal’s content and timing as well its economic and political context in [Appendix I](#). This information should be particularly helpful for readers not as familiar with the dynamics of European politics at the time.

Selecting Relevant Articles from the National Press

While international media might be good radar for getting only important policy proposals, they are, of course, rather limited for tracing how the dynamics of conflict evolve over time. Therefore, we opted for national media as the primary source to collect that kind of information. This choice follows a long-standing tradition in protest event analysis (PEA) and its further developments, such as political claims or core sentence analysis (see Earl et al. 2004; Hutter 2014). In addition, we complemented the quantitative information provided by the systematic coding of national newspapers with available secondary material, such as online timelines, government reports, and the scholarly literature.

We have chosen newspapers as sources because we are most interested in the publicly visible interactions among the three stylized actors. This follows our general approach to regard media as a master arena to observe conflicts in present-day “audience democracies” (Manin 1997). However, as with PEA, the approach we propose here can be used to study different types of material that systematically document the actions of various actors involved in a policy-related conflict (such as governmental or parliamentary protocols or documentation produced by the challengers themselves). For the present study, we opted to only rely on one leading center-left national newspaper per country to

⁵ For example, in the Italian case, we identify five windows of observation. The first one (June 2008 to December 2010) refers to Silvio Berlusconi’s labor market reform, the second one (May 2011 to October) to his austerity package. The third and the fourth windows are contiguous with the second window, but they refer to different packages, since in November 2011 Mario Monti took over the position of prime minister. From our knowledge of Italian politics, we know that Monti introduced a new austerity package in November 2011, and that in March 2012, he added a labor reform to this package. Finally, the fifth window of observation refers to Matteo Renzi’s labor market reform (September 2014 to December). In this last case, there are few mentions of the policy reform in the international press, but they form a contiguous sequence over three months.

TABLE 2.1. *List of policy episodes per country (episode names, short labels, and episode types in parentheses*)*

Country	Eco1	Eco2	Eco3	Eco4	Inst
France	Sarkozy–Fillon austerity package France (s)*	Sarkozy’s austerity package (b)	Hollande first austerity package (b)	Hollande– Valls budget cuts package France (b)	Decentralization
Germany	German bank-bailout (bo)	Bad banks (bo)	First Greek bailout (b)	Third Greek bailout (bo)	Constitutional debt brake
Greece	First bailout (imf)	Midterm adjustment (b)	Second bailout (imf)	Third bailout (imf)	TV shutdown
Hungary	I.M.F. bailout (imf)	2010 austerity package (b)	Pension nationaliza-tion (s)	Internet tax (b)	Media law
Ireland	Bank guarantee (b)	2009 austerity package (b)	I.M.F. bailout (imf)	Water tax (b)	Senate referendum
Italy	Berlusconi’s job reform (s)	Berlusconi’s austerity package (b)	Monti package (s)	Jobs act (s)	Judicial reform
Latvia	I.M.F. bailout (imf)	First 2009 austerity package (b)	Second 2009 austerity package (b)	2010 austerity package (b)	Eurozone entry
Poland	2009 crisis package (s)	Pension reform (s)	Tusk austerity package (b)	Labor code reform (s)	Constitutional court crisis
Portugal	PEC 1&2 (b)	PEC 3&4 (b)	I.M.F. bailout (imfl)	2012 austerity package (b)	Municipal reform
Romania	I.M.F. bailout (imf)	First 2010 austerity package (b)	Second 2010 austerity package (b)	New labor regulations (s)	Impeachment
Spain	Zapatero first austerity package (b)	Zapatero second austerity package (s)	Rajoy austerity package (b)	Bankia (bo)	Constitutional amendment
U.K.	Bank bailouts (bo)	2010 austerity package (b)	Tuition fees (b)	2011 austerity package, welfare reform (b)	Brexit referendum

* We also classified the economic policy proposals into four subcategories (indicated with the letters in parentheses): s = structural reforms, b = budgetary cuts, imf = I.M.F. interventions, bo = bailouts. Bailouts include recapitalizations and other forms of financial aid to domestic financial institutions as well as sovereign bailouts provided to other countries in the case of Germany (The first and the third Greek bailouts).

TABLE 2.2. *List of newspapers per country*

Country	Newspaper
France	<i>Le Monde</i>
Germany	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>
Greece	<i>Ta Nea</i>
Hungary	<i>Nepszabadsag</i>
Ireland	<i>The Irish Times</i>
Italy	<i>La Repubblica</i>
Latvia	<i>Latvijas Avize</i>
Poland	<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>
Portugal	<i>Publico</i>
Romania	<i>Ager Press</i>
Spain	<i>El Pais</i>
U.K.	<i>The Guardian</i>

document the actions by the various actors. The underlying rationale for the selection has been that, on the margin, center-left media are more likely to focus on austerity-related challengers than their center-right competitors. The selected newspapers are shown in [Table 2.2](#).

While we kept the source constant for all episodes in a country and aimed to select similar newspapers to allow for cross-national comparisons, the choice of only one newspaper per country was mainly due to pragmatic considerations. Thus, we must admit that our study falls short on a theoretically informed multi-source design. Here, we would like to note that PEA's advances in the last decades show potential avenues for further improvement of our novel approach in this respect. As Tilly (2002: 249) has emphasized in his essay on "event catalogues as theories," further elaborations of our CEA need to focus on both "a theory embodying explanation of the phenomenon under investigation, and another theory embodying explanation of the evidence concerning that phenomenon." In this book, we are careful in highlighting that what we establish as reoccurring features is based on a selective sample of media-represented actions and interactions only. However, as said before, we are not as concerned that we might not cover all types of events happening out there but rather that the newspapers we study might be biased compared to other media sources.

In practical terms, the selection of relevant articles⁶ – that is, articles published in the selected newspaper that referred to the policy proposals and/or

⁶ We focus on the "news" pages of the newspapers. We do not cover press commentaries and letters to the editors. However, we do include interviews. Furthermore, we only cover sections on national/international politics and economics. If possible, we excluded sections on local politics (if in a specific section), sports, and culture from our sample.

their potential elements in the case of policy packages – was made by a team of native-language-speaking coders⁷ (a total of fifteen), who worked under the close supervision of the authors of this book. We organized weekly meetings to supervise their progress and resolve difficult selection and coding decisions that inevitably arise in such a detailed coding process. Special care was taken to apply these decisions for all episodes in a harmonized manner to make the final dataset as comparable across countries and episodes as possible.

The selection of articles was organized into two major steps. In the first step of the selection process, our coders were asked to establish the time frame of the data collection and a keyword list to search for relevant articles in the newspapers' electronic archives. For seven of the twelve countries, the newspapers were available in the international news archive Factiva so coders could use its search functionalities to enter a relatively simple Boolean combination of episode-related keywords to locate and download the relevant articles. However, for five countries – Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania – the selected news sources were not listed in Factiva, so we had to download the articles directly from the newspapers' electronic archives. If the newspaper had no such archives, we looked for national databases that had access to the newspaper's archived articles. For instance, in the case of Hungary, we subscribed to the electronic database of EMIS (European Mathematical Information Service) to access needed articles from *Nepszabadsag*.

All in all, an episode timeline, as well as the final combination of search keywords, was established by an initial reading of selected articles from the newspapers as well as of other material that reported on the case (from Wikipedia, online reports, newspaper timelines, secondary scientific literature, etc.).

Regarding the time frame, the database from the international newspapers already provided some initial indications. Still, these were further refined in this step of the selection procedure and, if needed, at later stages. Note again that our episodes may end in one of two ways. They may end with the formal adoption of the (possibly modified) proposal by the government⁸ or, if the challenger continues to mobilize after the formal adoption of the proposal, they may end when the continuous stream of interactions between the government and its challenger related to the proposal breaks off (see [Chapter 1](#)). As an operational rule of thumb, we used a period of two months for assessing whether the interactions related to the proposal had indeed come to a halt before we declared the episode to have ended.

⁷ Note that our coders were PhD students from the European University Institute and, given their background, had a lot of country expertise. Moreover, they were trained in several sessions and constantly supervised by the authors of this book.

⁸ The only exception to this was the Internet Tax proposal in Hungary that ended with an outright withdrawal by the government. After the withdrawal, since no further mobilization took place, establishing the end of that episode proved unproblematic.

Based on the reading of this material, we established a set of keywords in a Boolean combination. In cases where the policy proposal was consistently referred to under a certain label (e.g., the 2014 Jobs Act in Italy or the more prolonged Water Tax debate in Ireland), this task was relatively trivial. Given the importance of our selected policy proposals at risk (which served as selection criteria), most of the proposals were referred to in a rather systematic way in the press (e.g., the austerity budgets in Ireland or Portugal). In cases lacking such a concrete label or when the public debate only focused on specific aspects of broader packages, the content of the policy measures proposed by the governments served as a reference point for the selection of keywords (for instance, “austerity OR (pension AND reform).” We opted for rather broad keywords in such cases and for manually deselecting the many “false positive” hits. Thus, we invested a lot of effort into coming up with a comprehensive keyword-based selection strategy.

In the second step of the selection process, the coders downloaded all articles found using the keyword search. These articles were used to establish a timeline of media attention for each policy proposal. This timeline showed the weekly counts of articles over the selected period. The coders then wrote a short report of about two pages per episode and interpreted the ups and downs in the timeline. They were asked to read articles published during peaks in media attention and further consult the material collected in Step 1. Overall, they delivered a short report answering the following questions:

- What is the policy proposal’s content?
- Which of its features became a matter of public controversy?
- How long did the controversy last?
- When were the critical moments of debate?
- What specific events were responsible for the peaks in the timeline (e.g., the proposal’s initiation, parliamentary votes, major demonstrations, election campaigns)?

While the articles selected by the keyword search were the potential universe to be coded, some only referred to the policy proposals as contextual information or they did not report on actions that we were interested in (Examples read like “Amongst others, the election campaign focuses on the water tax.” Or “Yesterday, the British Prime Minister attended the opening-night of the British fashion week. The visit took place in a period of growing resistance against his austerity bill.”). To be more efficient in deselecting such false positive articles, we relied on the search functionalities of the news archives. We selected all articles that in the headline and the context of the keywords in the main text referred to the policy proposal and actions we were interested in. In the final step, coders were instructed to download all these potentially relevant articles once more as a single text corpus and use it for the subsequent coding process. This left the coders still with a range of 100–2,000 articles to fully read and code (847 on average across all 60 episodes).

THE CODING PROCESS

As noted in the previous section, the basic building block of each contentious episode is identifying all actors that publicly interfered in the controversy related to the policy proposals under scrutiny. Since our theoretical framework is based upon the government–challenger–third party trichotomy, each episode coder was required to assign all of these actors to one and only one of the three categories. The main criteria for actor-type identification were laid out as follows:

- Government actors: all actors who are either part of the government narrowly understood – that is, cabinet members – or are affiliated with it through the party organizations of the ruling coalition or the institutions of the state and display a minimum level of unity with the government and broad agreement with the policy proposal.
- Challenger actors: all actors who display open opposition to the policy proposal at least once throughout the episode through contentious performances and protests and other public claims making that goes beyond routine verbal remarks.
- Third-party actors: all actors who do not openly challenge the policy proposal as per the definition provided above, nor do they form a part of the government either due to the absence of institutional links (e.g., a supra-national actor) or because of their explicit opposition or at least skepticism vis-à-vis the policy proposal (e.g. dissenters within the ruling coalition).

One important caveat of our approach, but a necessary simplification for the coding process, was that the actor identity (as coded) does not change throughout the episode. For instance, if an opposition party is a mere bystander in the early phases of contention but later becomes a protagonist in the non-routine forms of mobilization, coders were instructed to code them throughout as challengers. To make the right decision, country coders were instructed first to give a preliminary reading of all actors' actions throughout the episode to decide to which stylized category they belong. Sometimes, however, coders had to recategorize actors during the coding process itself as their changing roles throughout the episode became clearer. In such instances, coders had to redo the coding in light of the new actor categories (this was necessary given that we coded more detailed information for the challenger and government actions as compared to the third-party ones).

To provide an example of the sort of decisions we had to take alongside the coders concerning actor categories, consider the I.M.F. bailout episode in Hungary in the fall of 2008. After the fallout with its liberal coalition partner SZDSZ a few months earlier, the ruling post-socialist MSZP party had to take full responsibility for resorting to institutional creditors' help and the resulting budgetary measures. Liberated from the yoke of government, SZDSZ now had a free hand to criticize the measures alongside the main opposition party at the

time, FIDESZ. However, while FIDESZ occasionally engaged in nonroutine forms of opposition, such as boycotting the announcement of the measures in parliament as a personal affront to the prime minister, SZDSZ stayed at the conventional verbal forms of opposition (and occasional support). Hence, in this episode, SZDSZ was coded as a third party, while FIDESZ was coded as a challenger.

Importantly, each actor type can take on a variety of institutional forms. Therefore, coders were also instructed to place them in narrower institutional categories, noting the specific names of the organizations in the coding file. Overall, we categorized all the different actors into twenty such institutional forms, ranging from international actors through government institutions to parliamentary opposition and social movement organizations. [Table 2.3](#) summarizes these institutional categories, some of which directly map onto our stylized actor types (e.g., by default, unions and social movement organizations almost always act as challengers). In contrast, others fall into more than one category. For instance, as the Hungarian example above shows, opposition parties can act both as challengers and third parties depending on their particular role in a specific episode (for a detailed analysis, see [Chapter 6](#)).

Having established who is undertaking the actions, the next task for coders was identifying various characteristics of the actions themselves. The first and most trivial aspect of the action was its timing, by calendar day. Most of the

TABLE 2.3. *Institutional actor categorization*

-
1. EU actors (e.g., EU Commissioners, M.E.P.s etc.)
 2. Troika (European Commission, E.C.B., I.M.F.)
 3. Foreign governments
 4. Other international actors (e.g. foreign press, foreign opposition parties, foreign labor unions, etc.)
 5. National government
 6. National technocratic government
 7. President
 8. Local/regional authorities
 9. National central banks
 10. Other government institutions (e.g. Constitutional Court, councils, committees etc.)
 11. Government parties
 12. Business actors
 13. Experts, media (e.g., universities, think tanks)
 14. Mainstream opposition parties
 15. Radical-left opposition parties
 16. Radical-right opposition parties
 17. Nongovernmental organizations (N.G.O.s)
 18. Social movement organizations (S.M.O.s)
 19. Students
 20. Unions
-

time, newspaper articles provided direct reference to the day in question in relation to the publication day by such indicators as “yesterday” or “last Friday.” In a minority of cases (around 2.5 percent of all actions), however, the references were vaguer and merely indicated a broader time frame, such as “last four days,” “last week,” or “January.” In such cases, we coded the middle of that period as the action date.

Once the action’s timing was defined, the next variable of interest was the form of the action. As indicated in [Chapter 1](#), we differentiated two separate dimensions of each activity: the substantive aspect (the way actors relate to the policy proposal) and the procedural one (the form of action actors chose to express their position). In substantive terms, we can distinguish a range of actions from rejection to acceptance of a given demand/proposal. In procedural terms, the relationship between two actors can range from conflictive to cooperative. Along similar lines, Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 110f.) distinguish between three types of claims – identity, standing, and program claims. Actions related to the proposal’s substantive aspects correspond to program claims that call the other side to act in a certain way (in our case, to withdraw or modify the policy proposal). In contrast, actions related to procedural aspects correspond to identity claims (related to the constitution of the actor) and standing claims (about recognition of the other).

For each day during the episode, we recorded the actions (in substantive and procedural terms) of each (component) actor of the three types of actor with respect to the (components of the) target actors. As a general coding rule, coders were instructed to code both aspects of the action. We distinguished between these codes for the respective actor types as summarized in [Table 2.4](#).

To provide a few examples for the two aspects of action forms – substantive and procedural – take the negotiation between the Latvian government and the I.M.F. delegation regarding the second austerity package that the government had to implement in 2009. At one of the meetings (October 31, 2009), the government refused to comply with the creditors’ request to replace the reduction of a nontaxable minimum threshold with a progressive tax schedule. The substantive code in this case, would be 1 – “government sticking to original plans.” On the procedural front, however, it is the negotiation between the creditors and the government that we highlighted and, therefore, we assigned it a code of 6 – “government negotiates.” Fast-forward a year to another epicenter of the austerity saga, and consider the example of the Portuguese Communist Party in the context of the first austerity episode in Portugal. The P.C.P. is coded as challenger because of its proactive role in the mass protests against the government’s austerity package in summer 2010. On July 29, it called on the government to rescind the recent welfare cuts, and also announced several protest actions on the day throughout the country. In this case, the substantive challenger code is 1 – “challenger demanding withdrawal of proposal” and the procedural code is 4 – “challenger mobilizes.”

TABLE 2.4. *Action forms and their codes*

	Government	Challenger	Third parties
Substantive	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sticks to proposal 2. Adopts proposal 3. Raises doubts regarding proposal 4. Grants concessions on proposal to challengers 5. Withdraws proposal 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Demands withdrawal 2. Demands modification 3. Scale shift 4. Ready to accept proposal 5. Accepts modified proposal 6. Accepts original proposal 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Supports proposal 2. Opposes challenger's demands 3. Mediates 4. Opposes proposal 5. Supports challengers demands
Procedural	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Represses challenger 2. Deprecates challenger 3. Fails to recognize challenger 4. Circumvents legal barriers 5. Signals readiness to negotiate 6. Negotiates 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Constitutes itself 2. Threaten to mobilize 3. Announces mobilization 4. Mobilizes 5. Deprecates government 6. Stops mobilization 7. Signals readiness to negotiate 8. Negotiates 9. Demobilizes 10. Gives up 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Supports government action 2. Opposes challengers' actions 3. Mediates 4. Opposes government's actions 5. Supports challengers' actions

Of course, at the heart of contentious politics are the procedural action codes of challengers – namely codes 2, 3, and 4 – the ones referring to mobilization. The voluminous literature on action repertoires (e.g., Tilly, 2006) has long dealt with the innovative tactics and their impact on how the events unfold after various forms of action by challenger organizations. As a third aspect of action forms, we instructed coders to differentiate between the various forms of protest mobilization that challengers announce or undertake. Importantly, we cover here not only actual mobilization but also threats and calls for action. Table 2.5 shows how we distinguish forms of mobilization. In the case of the Portuguese example considered earlier, for instance, the mobilization code of the Portuguese Communist Party is 4 – “demonstrative form.”

Similarly to deciding on actor types, coding the right action form involved important decisions. On the government side, for instance, drawing the line

TABLE 2.5. *Forms of mobilization and their codes*

1. Direct democratic forms
2. Strikes and other forms of industrial action
3. Signature campaigns/petitions
4. Demonstrative forms
5. Confrontational forms
6. Violent forms
7. Other forms

between “government raising doubts” and government actually offering concessions was not always straightforward. Often it depended on the wording of the government’s statement. As an example: In the second bailout episode in Greece, the government at that time was forced to make some partial concessions to taxi drivers and hospital staff, who were among the professions affected by the cuts. Among these concessions, however, many government officials indicated that they were *considering* rather than actually enacting these concessions. Such statements of consideration were therefore coded as “raising doubt” rather than as actual concessions. Likewise, on the challengers’ side, what is considered as a “scale shift” depends on the particular episode. For example, the Indignados movement shifting its focus from Zapatero’s austerity measures and pension reform to a more general and more scathing assault on the establishment as such (“La Casta”) can be considered as a typical example of scale shift. Somewhat less straightforwardly, in the Tuition Fees’ episode in the U.K., when representatives of three trade unions announced that they were joining the students and expected more people to participate in the protests against the government, we took this announcement as an indication of the unions’ willingness to launch a more general challenge to the government beyond the particular policy proposal at hand, and hence coded it as a scale shift as well.

In view of the vast universe of actors in a highly diverse set of countries and episode types, as well as the theoretically unlimited variety of different action forms, our stylized ontology of contentious politics necessitates such case-by-case decisions for borderline cases. To ensure the maximum degree of comparability between coders and episodes, however, whenever such problematic cases arose, all coders were informed about the decisions we took and, if necessary, were required to update their codes.

Next, we also coded the *issue area* to which the various actions referred. In the case of episodes concentrated around a single thread, the coded issue was generally the episode label itself, such as in the Brexit referendum in the U.K. Other episodes, however, consisted of various elements, typically combining budget cuts with structural reforms. A case in point is the Sarkozy–Fillon

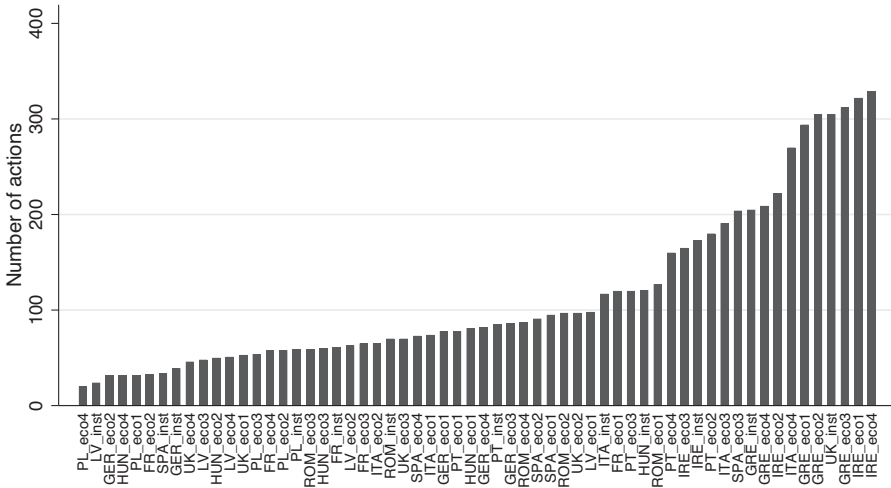


FIGURE 2.1. Total action count per episode

episode (see [Table 2.1](#)), consisting of a pension reform and a freeze in public spending. Another example is the austerity program introduced by the Rajoy government in Spain in late 2011 that consisted of budget cuts and a labor reform. The issue codes assigned by the coders thus proved essential in determining the central thread of the episode, helping us to place each episode into more detailed categories than the economic versus institutional distinction with which we had started out (for details on the classification, see [Chapter 3](#)).

All in all, the coders identified a total of 6,889 actions across the sixty episodes. However, the distribution of the total number of actions is heavily skewed with a few episodes – such as two of the Irish austerity episodes and three of the Greek episodes and the Brexit episode in the U.K. – containing significantly more action counts than the rest. We show the action count distribution in [Figure 2.1](#).

Having specified who (actor) did what (action) when (timing) about which aspect of the policy proposal (issue), the final task for coders was to reconstruct the chain of interactions between all actions in an episode. This proved the most challenging aspect of the coding because unlike the substantive and procedural aspects of the actions – which news articles tend to report on at great length and depth – coverage tends to be less thorough on the causal antecedents, or the prior actions to which the contending parties are responding. Nevertheless, given our ambition to undertake a dynamic analysis in this volume (see the chapters in [Part III](#) of the book), we emphasized uncovering the chain of events that led up to any particular action. Therefore, once all relevant actions had been identified, and the coders had coded their forms, their task was to uncover the particular action that triggered the action at hand. In around one-third of

the cases, the articles provided the necessary information. For instance, in a straightforward (but relatively rare) instance of police repression, the articles naturally report on both the repression and the mobilization that triggered the repression itself. In such cases, coders had no difficulties identifying which of the preceding actions served as a trigger and used the action ID assigned to the triggering action as the *trigger variable* of the current action. In the rest of the cases, however, the coders were required to revert back to the articles that reported on the preceding actions in reverse chronological order. This somewhat labor-intensive procedure, combined with the contextual understanding of the episode they had acquired at this point, allowed them to pinpoint the actions that served as the trigger for the original actions under analysis.

We can illustrate the importance of this recursive coding method via the first austerity episode in France, consisting of budget cuts and a pension reform raising the retirement age (the very first entry in [Table 2.1](#) and see details in [Chapter 3](#)). [Figure 2.2](#) illustrates the relationship between the actions via arrows that connect the chronologically preceding triggers with the actions they triggered. Black boxes stand for government actions, gray boxes stand for challenger actions, and white boxes stand for third-party actions. The chronology of the events starts from the top (G1), when the government announces the proposal in February 2010 and ends with an unsuccessful demonstration by unions in November 2010 after the adoption of the reforms. The chain of events indicates that identifying the triggers is not always straightforward, based on pure chronology alone. A recursive reading of previous events is necessary, short of explicit references in the articles. For instance, this last mobilization was indeed in response to the previous government action (G34, corresponding to the final adoption of the proposal). However, other activities, such as C33 by Force Ouvrière and other French unions, are responses to government actions that are not the ones immediately preceding in the chronological order (in the case of C33, it is a response to the draft legislation on pension reform, presented in July – G12). Thus, in our coding procedure, it proved essential for the coders to check back for all potential candidates as possible triggers and select the one with the highest substantive correspondence with the particular action under study.

We shall illustrate the importance of identifying the triggers and reconstructing the action sequences in more detail in subsequent parts of the book. [Chapter 6](#) analyzes the characteristics of entire action sequences connected via the triggers: for instance, one running between G1 to C58 according to the action tree in [Figure 2.2](#). Most importantly, we will use the trigger to construct lagged action variables, which form the backbone of the dynamic analysis we propose in [Part III](#).

To sum up the coding process, we illustrate what the complete set of codes looks like using the examples of the Latvian and the Portuguese actions referred to in [Table 2.6](#).

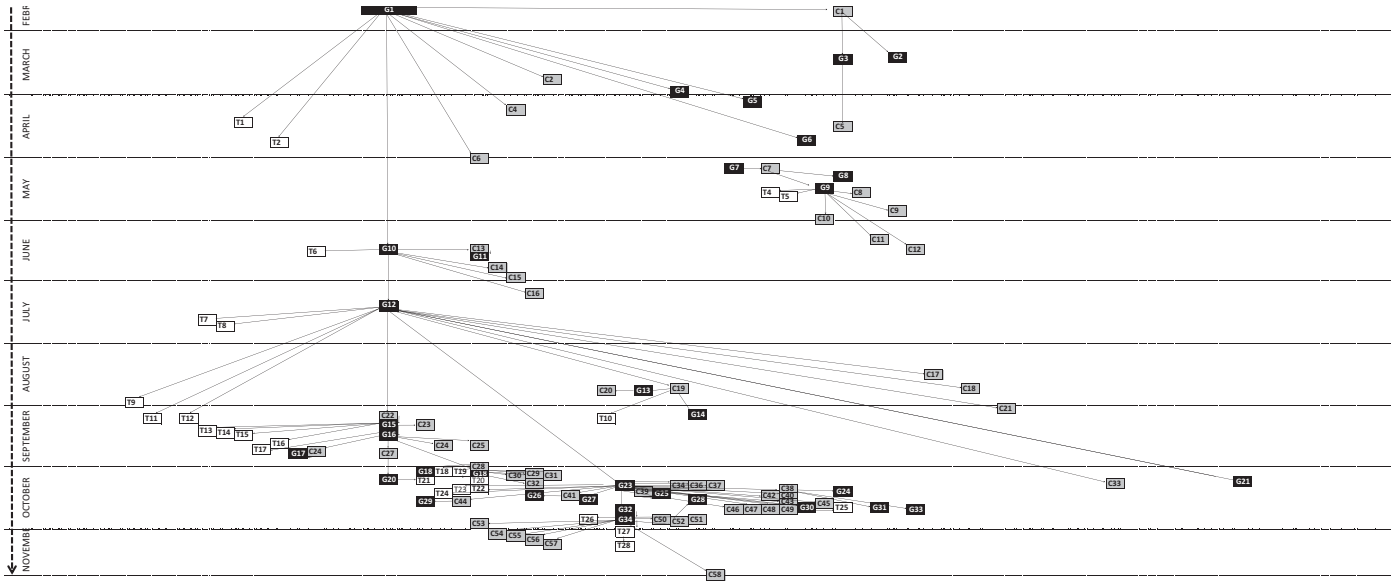


FIGURE 2.2. Actions and triggers in the Sarkozy-Fillon austerity episode.

TABLE 2.6. *Illustration of the complete code set*

Episode	Action id	Actor type (3-way stylized)	Actor type (institutional)	Date	Substantive	Procedural	Mobilization	Trigger id	Issue
LV_eco3	9	government	national govt	31oct2009	sticks	negotiates	_	8	2010 budget
PT_eco1	538	challenger	radical left opposition	29jul2010	Demands withdrawal	mobilizes	demonstrative	15	PEC II package

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have introduced the main methodological building blocks of CEA. We hope CEA will be useful for scholars in the contentious politics tradition who aim for a systematic coding and analytical toolkit to examine and compare the course of contentious episodes.

In general, CEA shares many features with political claims-analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999). Adding another extension of the original protest event analysis, claims-analysis considers action forms other than protest actions, an essential step in the direction of the method we propose. However, claims-analysis does not include the dynamic and interactive component that is characteristic of CEA and, consequently, its application has fallen short of adequately embedding protest and challenger activities in the stream of public claims making.

Similarly, CEA shares features with event structure analysis, which also aims to infuse narratives with “greater rigor and explicitness” (Griffin 1993: 1094). Generally, the goal of CEA is to specify the concepts of the DOC program in such a way that they can be applied to systematic *comparative* analyses across episodes. In this respect, our approach differs from the one chosen by Griffin (1993), who relied on event structure analysis (originally proposed by Heise 1989) as a procedure that allows reconstructing the causal structure of the narrative about an *individual* episode – in his case, a lynching episode that took place in Mississippi in 1930.⁹

While we did not cover all our methodological choices in this chapter – we shall discuss the statistical techniques we use for the dynamic analysis of action sequences in **Part III** – we have offered a detailed overview of the episode selection, article selection, and coding process that underpins CEA. As a brief recap, selecting the article corpus for hand coding involved two distinct steps. First, we identified the main “policy proposals at risk” based on reporting in the international press, followed by a careful time frame and keyword selection for each episode. In the second step, we downloaded all articles found with these keyword searches in the selected national news sources.

Once the episode-specific text corpus was established and downloaded, we instructed our trained coders and country experts to code the following characteristics of each action: the day of occurrence, the stylized type of actor undertaking it (according to the government–challenger–third-party trichotomy), the actor’s institutional character, the substantive and procedural form of the action, the type of mobilization by challengers (if and when they occur), the narrower issue area of the action, and, finally, the trigger for the action. While we believe that relying on these codes allows us to capture the essence of contentious episodes, it is important to note that some forms of actions will

⁹ For other insightful but single case applications, see also Bloom 2015; Ermakoff 2015; Isaac et al. 1994.

inevitably pass under the radar of our scrutiny. For instance, some actions (e.g., closed-door meetings without media access) are by construction beyond the reach of our research design. Other related stories may have been overlooked because our keyword choices might have failed to pick up every news article with tangential relevance for our purposes.

With these limitations in mind, the rest of the book builds on these codes and offers empirical analyses of the sixty contentious episodes from various angles. **Part II** takes episodes as units of analysis and describes them in terms of their contentiousness, actor configurations, the pace and complexity of the involved action sequences, and the governments' responsiveness to the challengers. As we shall show in the corresponding chapters, our detailed coding scheme offers a unique opportunity to operationalize systematically the concepts we introduce in this part. For instance, to understand the level of conflict – or in our terminology, the contentiousness of an episode – a detailed list of actor-specific action repertoires is necessary. Likewise, to provide a systematic mapping of coalition dynamics across the various episodes, the actor codes we outlined in **Table 2.3** will prove essential.

Part III takes the process a step further by introducing a novel method to study the dynamics between the contending actors. This method is rendered feasible by our careful identification and coding of trigger events. With the help of these triggers, as we explain in detail in **Chapters 6** and **8**, we can provide a systematic test of many prominent themes in the contentious politics literature. Does government repression reduce or escalate conflict? Are overtures toward an adversary reciprocated by the latter? Does third-party involvement help to bring contenders to the negotiating table? To answer these questions based on many cases, one requires sequential data where individual actions are arranged in a causal chain. Relying on this sequential data, **Part III** aims to uncover the determinants of the action forms as a function of past actions, actor characteristics, and the contextual characteristics of episodes. Before we proceed to the empirical analysis, however, we shall discuss these contextual characteristics in the **next chapter**.

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