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Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Mapping Contentiousness

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Chapter 4: Conceptualizing, measuring, and mapping contentiousness

Theresa Gessler and Swen Hutter

Introduction

Portugal and Spain were among the countries hardest hit by the global financial crisis, which led to the Eurozone's near-collapse after the revelation of Greek public debt in late 2009. Both countries experienced a massive economic shock, as indicated by objective and subjective indicators (Chapter 3). Faced with a dire economic situation and increasing European pressure, the mainstream left in government – PS in Portugal and PSOE in Spain – announced severe austerity measures throughout 2009 and 2010 (e.g., Bremer and Vidal 2018). Consequently, the two countries saw union-organized protest against the measures early in the crisis (e.g., Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015; della Porta et al. 2017a; Kriesi et al. 2020; Portos 2019). Both countries experienced a turning point in 2011 when further non-institutional actors entered the scene: *Geração à Rasca* (Screwed Generation) in March 2011 in Portugal and *15M* (named after the first large-scale protests on May 15, 2011) in Spain. According to some estimates, almost five percent of the Portuguese population took to the streets on March 12, 2011 (Carvalho 2018: 98).[1] 15M and the battle cry of the central organizing network *Democracia Real, Ya!* (Real Democracy Now) led, after the first demonstration with about 20,000 participants on Puertas del Sol, to weeks of mass protests across the country.

Protest event data highlights the similar dynamics in Portugal and Spain up to early 2011 and the strongly diverging trends after that first period. Portuguese protest, as Carvalho (2018) puts it, "deflates and follows a stop-and-go pattern, while in Spain it escalates into an

[1] The Portuguese mobilization not only preceded the Spanish, it also served as a more general precursor in terms of action repertoires and discourse for the protests that followed across Southern Europe (see Baumgarten 2013; Flesher Fominaya 2017).

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unceasing and sustained wave of contention until the end of 2013" (see also Portos and Carvalho 2019). As is well documented, the massive protest wave in Spain spilled over into electoral politics, giving rise to a new party, Podemos, and leading to a significant restructuring of Spanish politics (e.g., della Porta et al. 2017b; Vidal and Sánchez-Vítores 2019). In Portugal, the follow-up protests were mainly organized by institutionalized actors, especially the major unions and left-wing opposition parties, and no new party emerged (e.g., da Silva and Mendes 2019). Thus, the two cases underscore that similar grievances and starting points of mobilization can lead to starkly different outcomes. As the insightful paired comparison by Carvalho (2018) shows, these differences are due to factors endogenous to the challengers' activities on the streets (such as their action repertoire and coalition strategies) and exogenous ones (such as the responses of institutionalized actors).

In this chapter, we build upon such detailed case studies but innovate in two respects. *First*, we move beyond an exclusive focus on the most well-known cases of anti-austerity mobilization during the Great Recession. By contrast, we look at all 60 episodes covered in this book and ask: *How contentious are the interactions of the actors involved in the public conflicts over austerity and institutional reforms? Which factors drive the level and type of contestation in an episode?* At the core of our endeavor is the idea that the economic and institutional reforms proposed to cope with the Great Recession vary in the level and type of conflict they sparked. While some policy proposals made their way through the political decision-making process smoothly, others were met with strong public opposition.

Second, we move beyond the exclusive focus on (aggregates of) protest events to systematically compare conflict levels. More specifically, we innovate by developing the concept of the *contentiousness* of an episode. That is, we aim to turn the dichotomous distinction of 'routine' and 'contentious politics' – the core of the Dynamics of Contention (DOC) program by McAdam et al. (2001) – into an empirically observable matter of degrees.

Based on DOC's focus on interactions of actors in a conflict, our guiding assumption is that the contentiousness of an episode is the product of the behavior of all three stylized actor types: The more all actors (the government, challengers, and third parties) contribute to the public conflict over the policy proposal, the more contentious the episode. To construct our indicators, we combined insights from classical protest event analysis (focusing on the actions staged by the challengers) with research on agenda-setting and the politicization of issues in the public sphere (focusing on broader classes of claims-making)[2].

Note that we adopt an 'aggregative' approach in this first part of the book. Later parts consider the relational aspects of the data (for the aggregative vs. relational distinction, see Diani 2013; 2015). In our opinion, such a systematic 'lumping' of the data is essential for at least three reasons: First, it helps us answer whether and under what conditions fully-fledged contentious episodes emerge. Second, it allows identifying critical cases for more in-depth analyses. Third, it puts well-known cases, such as the briefly sketched 2011 mobilizations in Spain and Portugal, in a broader comparative perspective.

The chapter is structured in four parts. First, we introduce our new take on the concept of contentiousness. Second, we outline the full range of coded actions and the construction of our indicators. Third, we map the contentiousness of the 60 episodes before we, finally, shift to factors that might explain the uncovered variation. We follow classical approaches in social movement studies, distinguishing grievances, mobilizing structures, and political context. Still, we also take up calls to systematically distinguish general from episode-specific explanatory factors.

[2] E.g., Baumgartner et al. 2019; Baumgartner and Jones (1993); Green-Pedersen and Walgrave (2014); Hutter et al. 2016; Koopmans and Statham (1999).

Contentiousness: A multi-dimensional concept

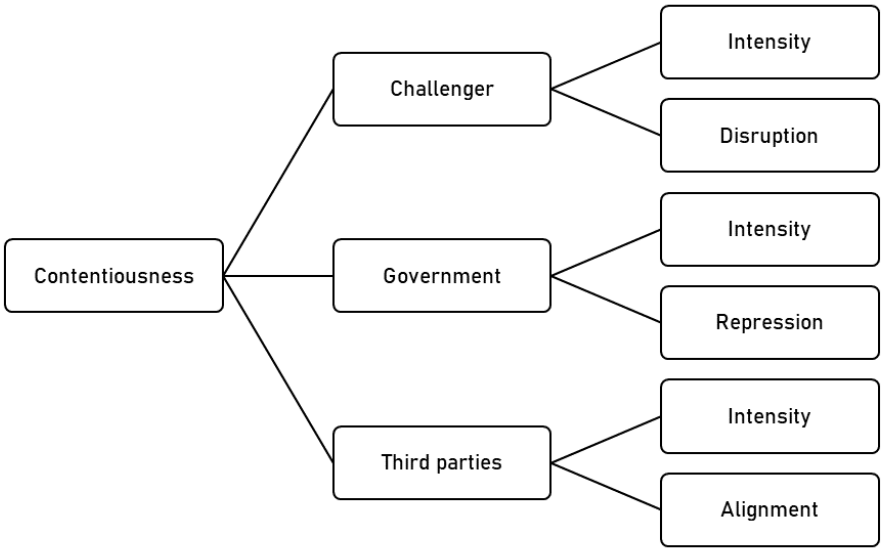
We propose to define contentiousness as a multi-dimensional concept and to take the action repertoire available to the three stylized actors as building blocks. Following Schattschneider's (1975 [1960]) understanding of politics, we are interested in who aims to increase the 'scope of conflict' and by what means. We ask how each stylized actor may reinforce the conflict over the 'proposals at risk.' In doing so, we consider both the frequency and the type of actions as crucial 'ingredients' of what makes an episode contentious. We follow Tilly and Tarrow's (2015: 39; *emphasis in the original*) approach by prioritizing "what activists *do* during major episodes of contention" as compared to "what activists say or later write about their activities." We also aim to link the DOC program with two related strands in political sociology: the scholarly literature on agenda-setting and politicization, which both build on Schattschneider's foundational work.

The core dimension for each actor type is the *intensity of adversarial actions* (see *Figure 4.1)*. Here, we take up the idea from Chapter 1 that each actor has three central options at its disposal. The government – who initiates the episode by launching the proposal – could concede to the challenger's demands, stick to its request, or repress the challenger (ordered from most to least cooperative). By contrast, the challenger is the second mover in the threat-induced conflict we study in this book. It can opt to cooperate with the government, launch a non-disruptive or disruptive action against the proposal.[3] Finally, the third parties also have three broad options: they can mediate between the government and the challenger by suggesting a compromise or offering to be brokers; alternatively, they can side with the government or side with the challenger. To assess how intensely each one fuels the conflict,

[3] To repeat, the distinction of 'non-disruptive vs. disruptive' refers to contestation by means of purely verbal opposition or fairly institutionalized actions (such as petitioning, direct-democracy or industrial conflict in the form of strikes), on the one side, and less conventional and institutionalized forms of contentious performances (including demonstrative, confrontational and violent events), on the other side.

we consider each actor's second and third options as adversarial. By contrast, we regard the first options (concession by the government, cooperation by the challenger, and mediation by the third parties) as conflict-dampening actions that are not part and parcel of contentiousness. It is an empirical question to what extent such accommodative measures co-occur with contentious interactions (Chapter 7).

Figure 4.1: Dimensions of contentiousness



The intensity of publicly visible actions mirrors the emphasis put on issue salience in the agenda-setting literature, which ultimately regards politics as a fight over attention (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2019; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Carmines and Stimson 1993; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014).[4] As the agenda-setting literature typically does not study position-taking, our emphasis on *adversarial* actions as the basic elements of contentiousness sets our approach apart. Instead, our multi-dimensional understanding of conflict comes closer

[4] It is important to note that we only consider *publicly visible actions*. To explain what we mean here, let us refer to Meguid (2005, 2008) who has aptly summarized the three strategies that mainstream parties have when faced with a challenger: ignore, attack or accommodate. We list these options here as it is important to highlight that our conceptualization of publicy visible actions does only cover strategies of ignorance by the government if they are linked to explicitly declaring to stick to the proposal. Thus, our conceptualization of contentiousness covers 'ignorance by insistence and non-recognition of the challenger as a relevant actor' but it does not cover 'ignorance by pure silence and non-atttention to a given issue/demand'.

to work on the politicization of issues in the public sphere.[5] An emerging consensus in this field conceptualizes politicization as a three-dimensional concept. Salience or visibility of an issue is combined with polarization and the range of actors involved in public contestation (e.g., de Wilde et al. 2016; Hutter et al. 2016). Ultimately, the most politicized constellation refers to a highly salient conflict in which a broad range of actors adopts strongly diverging positions.

We build on such a multi-dimensional understanding of political conflict in our attempt to conceptualize contentiousness. Furthermore, we bring in the distinct action repertoires at the core of social movement studies and the DOC program by McAdam et al. (2001). To do so, we complement the intensity dimension with a second, actor-specific dimension: *disruption, repression, and alignment* (see *Figure 4.1*). The second dimensions for each actor highlight that the interactions in a contentious episode may range from a barely visible public exchange of verbal arguments between the different actors to an intense public controversy in which a coalition of actors stages a fully-fledged contentious campaign that might be met with repression by the authorities and a clear alignment of the third parties.

On the part of the challenger, such a fully-fledged contentious campaign involves a broad range of tactics (including protest mobilization) to produce a sustained challenge to the government's proposal (Almeida 2014). As highlighted before, we define a 'disruptive' action in terms of non-institutionalized and unconventional forms of protest. In operational terms, we consider two central aspects of protest events as indicating their disruptiveness: the logics of damage and numbers (della Porta and Diani 2006: 171ff.). Similarly, the government may also further escalate the conflict by adopting a more repressive action repertoire towards the

[5] The concept of politicization has become particularly important in the study of conflicts over European integration. For the question of why EU studies have (or should) consider the phenomenon, see the programmatic article on a post-functionalist theory of integration by Hooghe and Marks (2009).

challenger and its actions, covering activities from depreciating statements about the protestors via legal acts to the use of police forces. Finally, third parties can also fuel a dispute by sending out signals supporting either the challenger or the government (this is what the 'intensity' dimension covers). Besides, we suggest that third parties render a public debate most contentious if their actions show a clear-cut alignment with one of the two contestants. In that case, they take a clear-cut position in the configuration of allies and adversaries (on the distinction, see Rucht 2004 and Chapter 5, this volume).

To sum up, episodes may be contentious due to both the intensity and the type of actions of each stylized actor. In our understanding, an episode is most contentious if all three actors get intensively involved, the challenger moves beyond verbal opposition by staging more disruptive protests, the government moves beyond verbal 'sticking to its proposal' to forms of repressive behavior, and the third parties add fuel to the fire by clearly aligning with either the challenger or the government. In the end, these actors bring together what Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 7) see as essential features of contentious politics – contention, collective action, and politics.

Also, the combination of the challenger's contentiousness and the other two types of actors can be used to construct a simple two-by-two table. As shown in *Table 4.1*, this exercise allows differentiating *types of contentious episodes*: from what we call 'low-intensity episodes,' in which all actors keep their activity to a minimum, to fully-fledged contentious episodes marked by a distinct and robust presence of all three actors. The resulting typology is a first step in moving from the quantity of contentiousness to assess its quality.

Table 4.1: Types of contentious episodes

		Contentiousness by challenger	
		Low	High
Contentiousness by government and third parties	Low	Low intensity episode	Bottom-up dominated episode
	High	Top-down dominated episode	Fully-fledged episode

Contentiousness: An action-based measure

Before we detail how we measure contentiousness, it is helpful to consider the distribution of the full set of coded actions (see Chapter 2). For this purpose, *Table 4.2* shows the frequencies of the different codes by actor type. Note that we coded a total of 6,841 distinct actions. As discussed in Chapter 2, the coders were instructed to note each action's substantive and procedural aspects. In practice, the articles often only provided information on one of the two elements, with the substantive part being more widely available and, thus, more frequently coded (N=6,293 substantive codes vs. N=3,209 procedural codes).

Starting with challengers' actions, it is readily apparent from *Table 4.2* that a considerably greater diversity characterizes their procedural repertoire than their substantive one. The substantive dimension is heavily skewed, with most challenger demands in favor of the proposal's withdrawal. Only a relatively small share corresponds to challengers accepting the policy either in the original or a modified form (less than four percent). This finding is hardly surprising. By the very definition of being challengers, their *raison d'etre* is demanding changes to the policy proposal. We can discern more variation on the procedural dimension and the form of mobilization they launch (if they decide to do so). A little less than

half of all coded procedural actions correspond to actual mobilization. In addition, a non-trivial share covers preparatory steps to mobilization (i.e., threats and announcements; around 25 percent) and verbal attacks (depreciating or demonizing governments; 16.4 percent). This highlights the added value of our coding approach, which focuses not just on actual protest events but covers a broader set of both substantive and procedural actions. Less than 10 percent of all procedural codes correspond to forms of negotiation or demobilization by challengers.

Similarly, the governments' substantive actions indicate an unwavering pursuit of the proposal, and only a relatively minor share (around 20 percent) corresponds to different forms of compromising tactics (raising doubts, granting concessions or withdrawing the proposal altogether). On the procedural dimension, the two most common government actions are verbal attacks (depreciating/demonizing the challengers) and negotiation. Outright repression and circumventing legal barriers, by contrast, were relatively rare forms of government actions during our period of observation (for a detailed assessment of when they occur, see Chapter 9).

Regarding the final actor type, third parties, the different codes indicate how they relate to the contending parties, either on the substantive domain (to the proposal/demands) or on the procedural one (their actions). On the substantive dimension, third parties tend to relate to the proposal *itself* rather than the challengers' demands. They either support or oppose the proposal in roughly equal proportions. As shown in *Table 4.2*, the corresponding shares amount to somewhat more than 40 percent. On the procedural dimension, there is a greater diversity of action forms. Attempts to mediate between the challengers make up a little less than 17 percent of third parties' procedural codes. However, most third-party actions relate to government actions rather than to challenger responses (less than 15 percent). Third parties are roughly evenly split between supporting and opposing government actions (33.8 vs. 35.4

percent). Overall, this first aggregate analysis suggests that the third parties have equally sided with the government and the challengers. At the same time, they hardly ever directly engaged with the challengers' demands or activities.

Table 4.2: Frequency of procedural and substantive actions by actor type

Actor	Action type	Action	N	Share
Challenger	Substantive	*Demands withdrawal*	*1641*	*72.2*
		Demands modification	421	18.5
		Scale shift	124	5.5
		Ready to accept the proposal	49	2.2
		Accepts modified proposal	22	1.0
		Accepts original proposal	17	0.8
	Procedural	Constitutes itself	46	2.5
		Threatens to mobilize	177	9.4
		Announces mobilization	318	16.9
		Mobilizes	*866*	*46.1*
		Deprecates government	303	16.1
		Stops mobilization	21	1.1
		Signals readiness to negotiate	80	4.3
		Negotiates	55	2.9
		Demobilizes	5	0.3
		Gives up	6	0.3
Government	Substantive	*Sticks to proposal*	*1375*	*74.9*
		Adopts proposal	105	5.7
		Raises doubts about the proposal	245	13.4
		Grants concessions to challengers	96	5.2
		Withdraws proposal	14	0.8
	Procedural	Represses challenger	43	7.2
		Deprecates challenger	*190*	*32.0*
		Fails to recognize challenger	42	7.1
		Circumvents legal barriers	31	5.2
		Signals readiness to negotiate	122	20.5
		Negotiates	166	28.0
Third parties	Substantive	*Supports proposal*	*878*	*41.2*
		Opposes challenger's demands	53	2.5
		Mediates	173	8.1
		Opposes proposal	*987*	*46.3*
		Supports challengers demands	39	1.8
	Procedural	*Supports government action*	*250*	*33.9*
		Opposes challenger actions	57	7.7
		Mediates	123	16.7
		Opposes government actions	*261*	*35.4*
		Supports challenger actions	47	6.4

Note: We ordered the coded action forms for the challenger and the government from adversarial to accommodative; action forms with a share higher than 30 percent by actor and action type highlighted in italics.

After this first look at all actions in our dataset, we now turn to how we measure the contentiousness of a given episode based on these codes. As outlined before, our guiding assumption is that contentiousness is a product of all three actors' behavior. Thus, we propose to measure the contentiousness induced by each actor and combine the three actor-specific measures into a joint one (see *Figure 4.1* for an overview of the dimensions). Next, we detail each dimension and its indicators outlined in *Table 4.3*, which also presents summary statistics.

Table 4.3: Dimensions, indicators, and descriptive statistics for contentiousness

Actor	Concept	Indicator	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Challenger	Intensity	Frequency of adversarial actions	60	0.28	0.22	0.00	1.00
	Disruption	Mean of weighted frequency of disruptive protest actions and no. of participants involved in such events	60	0.31	0.27	0.00	1.00
	Contentiousness by challenger	Sum of the above indicators	60	0.37	0.27	0.00	1.00
Government	Intensity	Frequency of adversarial actions	60	0.26	0.22	0.00	1.00
	Repression	Weighted frequency of repressive actions	60	0.17	0.21	0.00	1.00
	Contentiousness by government	Sum of the above indicators	60	0.27	0.24	0.00	1.00
Third parties	Intensity	Frequency of adversarial actions	60	0.19	0.22	0.00	1.00
	Alignment	Abs. position of adversarial codes	60	0.39	0.32	0.00	1.00
	Contentiousness by third party	Sum of the above indicators	60	0.32	0.21	0.00	1.00

Note: All frequency measures are standardized by the number of weeks that saw at least one action to account for the varying length of the episode. Moreover, all measures were standardized to range from 0 to 1 so that they can be directly combined in an additive way.

For each actor, we consider the *intensity* of the actor's involvement in the episode by measuring the absolute frequency of adversarial actions. In the case of the challenger, adversarial actions refer to launching a non-disruptive or disruptive action against the proposal (omitting cooperation). We use the following codes to operationalize the distinction between purely verbal opposition (code 1), threats (code 2), and actual mobilization (codes 3 to 5).

1 Sticking to opposition (substantive, verbal only)
2 Threats/announcements to organize actions categorized as 3 to 5
3 Non-disruptive mobilization (petitions, direct-democracy, and strikes)
4 Demonstrative protest forms
5 Confrontational or violent protest forms

For the intensity measure, we give all codes the same weight and calculate a simple sum. To operationalize disruption, we follow the general approach in protest event research and consider two features as central: the capacity to cause 'damage' and mobilize large numbers of participants. First, we calculated the weighted frequency of demonstrative and confrontational/violent protest forms (weighting codes 4 and 5 in the list above as 1=demonstrative and 2=confrontational/ violent). Second, we produced a categorical variable based on the number of participants involved in any kind of protests (codes 3 to 5).[6] We recoded both indicators to range from zero to one, and we combined them into a summary indicator for the challenger's disruptiveness. The resulting measure is then combined with the intensity: *Contentiousness by the challenger = intensity + disruption.*

For the government, adversarial actions refer to continued verbal support for the proposal (including refusal to accept the challengers' suggestions) and repressive behavior in

[6] Our variable ranges from zero to four, based on country-specific thresholds. Given that we only have data for large events, we have opted for a categorical variable. This is also a better way to address outliers with a vast number of participants. We decided for the following cut-off points (differentiating small and big countries): 0 < 10.000 (small countries) or 20,000 (big countries); 1 > 10.000 or 20.000; 2 > 50.000 or 100.000; 3 > 100.000 or 200.000; 4 > 250.000 or 500.000.

procedural terms. Thus, we include the following action forms in the intensity measure (giving the same weight to all of them).

1 Sticking to the proposal (substantive, verbal only)

2 Depreciate/denounce/demonize or explicitly refuse to recognize the challenger as a relevant interlocutor (repression 'light')

3 (Violent) repression of the challenger (repression 'heavy')

To assess how repressive the government acted, we calculated the weighted frequency of repressive actions by the government by considering only the codes 2 and 3 listed above. We assigned a weight of 1 to light repression and a weight of 2 to heavy repression. To combine intensity and repression, we again recode both indicators to the range from zero to one and add them in a simple combination, giving equal weight to both: *Contentiousness by the government = intensity + repression*

As highlighted before, the third parties may add to the conflict if they get publicly involved with statements that side with one of the two contestants (i.e., the government or the challenger). This indicator again omits neutral or mediating positions.

-1 Side with the government's proposal or actions

1 Side with challenger's proposal/and or actions

We calculated the absolute number of both codes to measure the intensity of third-party involvement. For the second dimension 'alignment,' we recoded the absolute average positions per episode into a categorical variable that ranges from 1 to 4 (from ambiguous to clear-cut, regardless of the direction).[7] We again standardized both indicators (ranging from zero to one) and combined them in a straightforward additive way: *Contentiousness by the third parties = intensity + alignment*

[7] The four categories are based on the absolute averages: <0.25=1; >0.25=2; >0.5=3; >0.75=4. We opted for this four-fold measure as extreme possitions of -1 and 1 are empirically only observable with very few observations which renders the alignment measure highly correlated with the intensity measure.

Finally, we added up the contentiousness induced by the three actor types to get a joint measure of the contentiousness of the entire episode. In the spirit of the DOC approach, we suggest that the challengers' actions are essential to speak of high(er) levels of contentiousness. Without the emergence of a challenger coalition, the government might still take its default option of sticking to its proposal. The third parties (usually institutional 'insiders') might agree or disagree. Yet, they cannot turn a routine verbal conflict into a fully-fledged contentious episode. Therefore, we give the challengers a double weight, resulting in a measure ranging from 0 (least contentious) to 4 (most contentious):

*Overall contentiousness: 2*contentiousness by the challenger + contentiousness by the government + contentiousness by the third parties*

Mapping contentiousness in the Great Recession

Having outlined how we turn the 'routine vs. contentious' distinction into a quantitative scale, we now map the extent to which the different proposals at risk have been challenged in the public sphere. Starting with the challengers' contribution to the conflict, *Table 4.4* shows that the Greek challengers were, on average, substantially more contentious than anywhere else in Europe in the period under scrutiny. Challengers in Portugal were also very contentious, followed closely by Ireland, Spain, Italy, and Romania. In contrast, challengers in Germany were the least contentious. The similarities between Portugal and Spain in *Table 4.4.* are instructive because protest event data tends to lead to a different conclusion, 'more contentious in Spain than Portugal' as remarked upon in the introductory section.

The country averages hide significant variance within countries, however. As shown in *Figure 4.2*, in some countries like Greece and Germany, the challenger's contentiousness is fairly similar across the five episodes. Countries such as Portugal, Ireland, Spain, and especially Romania and Hungary exhibit a much wider spread regarding how strong a

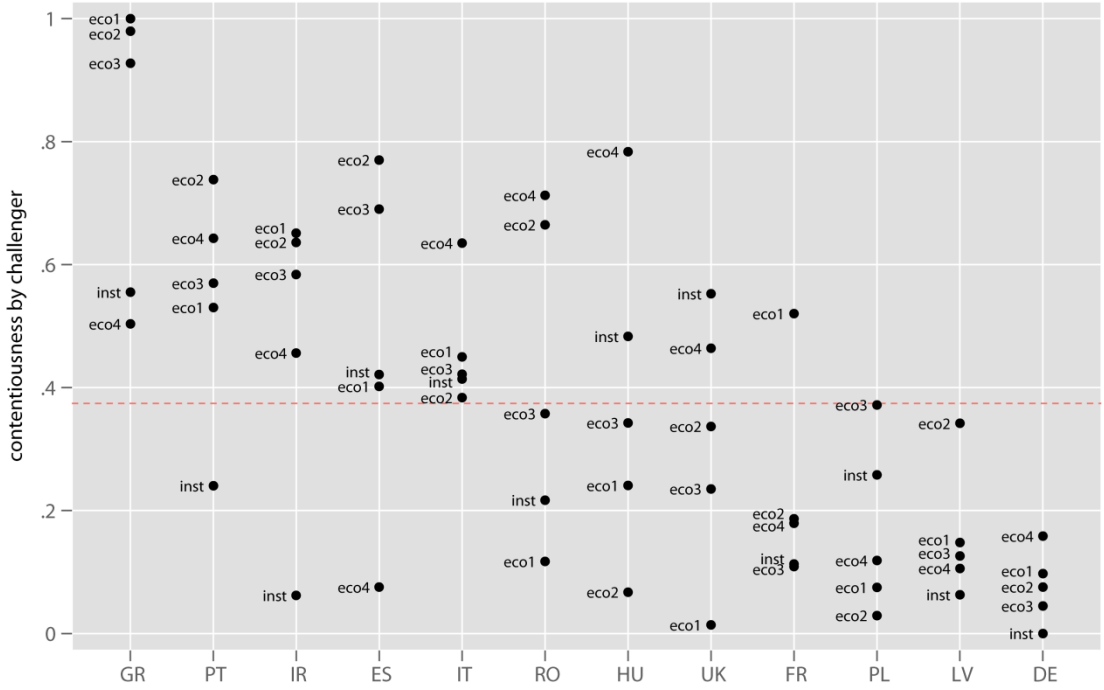
challenge materialized as a response to the proposed reforms. Though in several countries, it is the institutional episodes that are less contentious than the economic ones, this is not a general pattern (We get back to this point in the section 'Why do episodes get contentious?').

Table 4.4: Country averages for contentiousness (sorted by challenger contentiousness)

	Challenger	Government	Third parties	*Overall*
Greece	0.79	0.64	0.50	*2.72*
Portugal	0.54	0.11	0.25	*1.45*
Ireland	0.48	0.31	0.43	*1.70*
Spain	0.47	0.20	0.32	*1.46*
Italy	0.46	0.26	0.28	*1.46*
Romania	0.41	0.50	0.28	*1.61*
Hungary	0.38	0.39	0.38	*1.53*
UK	0.32	0.25	0.41	*1.31*
France	0.22	0.09	0.25	*0.79*
Poland	0.17	0.07	0.20	*0.61*
Latvia	0.16	0.14	0.21	*0.66*
Germany	0.08	0.25	0.38	*0.78*

Note: The contentiousness measures for each actor have been standardized to a range from 0 to 1. Given that the overall measure gives a double weight to the challenger's contribution, its potential range runs from 0 to 4.

Figure 4.2: Contentiousness by challenger by episode and country



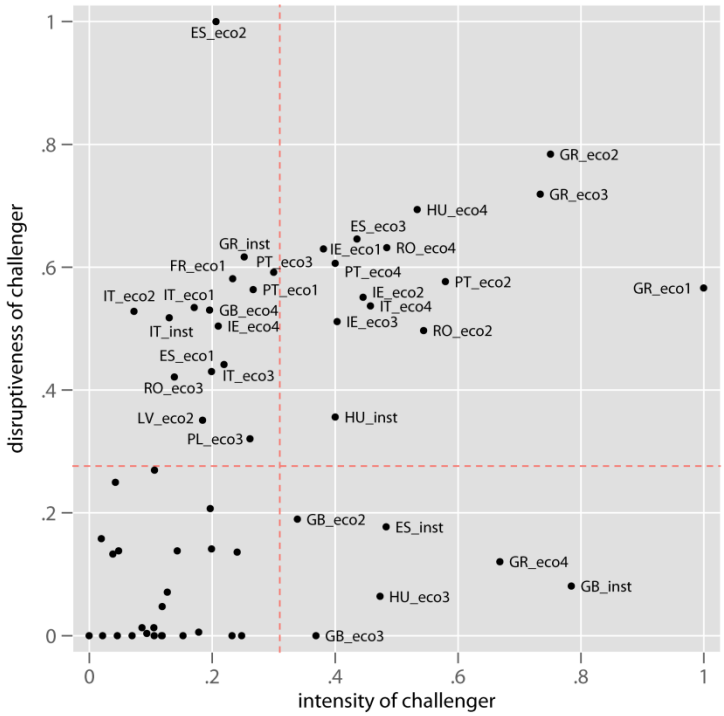
Is the challenge particularly intense or disruptive? To answer the question, *Figure 4.3* shows the two dimensions used to measure the challenger contentiousness. Overall, the figure indicates that the challengers' intensity and disruptiveness mostly align: The more frequently the challenger coalition intervenes in the conflict, the more likely it relies on disruptive actions (correlation coefficient r=0.56). There are, however, insightful deviations from that pattern. The strongest difference between intensity and disruption can be observed in the case of Zapatero's second austerity package (labeled as ES_eco2[8]). This episode, which spans the early phase of the sustained Spanish protest wave, is hugely disruptive. The Spanish challengers (including the Indignados) were able to mobilize frequently and bring masses to the streets (Portos 2019; Portos and Carvalho 2019). In comparison, the Portuguese episode from early 2011 (PT_eco2) shows a lower, although still above-average disruptiveness but a far higher intensity of challenger actions. The latter indicates a far higher share of verbal activities and engagement in a sustained public controversy beyond moments of protest mobilization. In short, our new measure of challenger contentiousness captures crucial differences between the Portuguese and Spanish cases emphasized in the chapter's introduction. It allows comparing the extent and type of protests (as in classical protest event analysis) and the broader action repertoire at the disposal of those aiming to challenge the government's austerity programs.

Outliers in the direction of relatively high involvement but low disruptiveness come mainly from the United Kingdom. The Brexit episode (GB_inst) – involving a direct-democratic campaign – is exemplary here as it involved intense struggles but neither significant mass mobilization nor disruptive action during the period we examine. At a much higher level of disruption, the first Greek IMF bailout (GR_eco1) exhibits a similar pattern of 'intensity exceeding disruptiveness.' This episode is very intense, but the challengers' actions

[8] A list of all 60 proposals and the respective abbreviations can be found in Chapter 2.

are less disruptive than throughout the second and third economic episodes in Greece (on the episodes' interrelatedness, see Chapter 12).

Figure 4.3: Intensity and disruptiveness of challenger



Contentiousness by the government and third parties

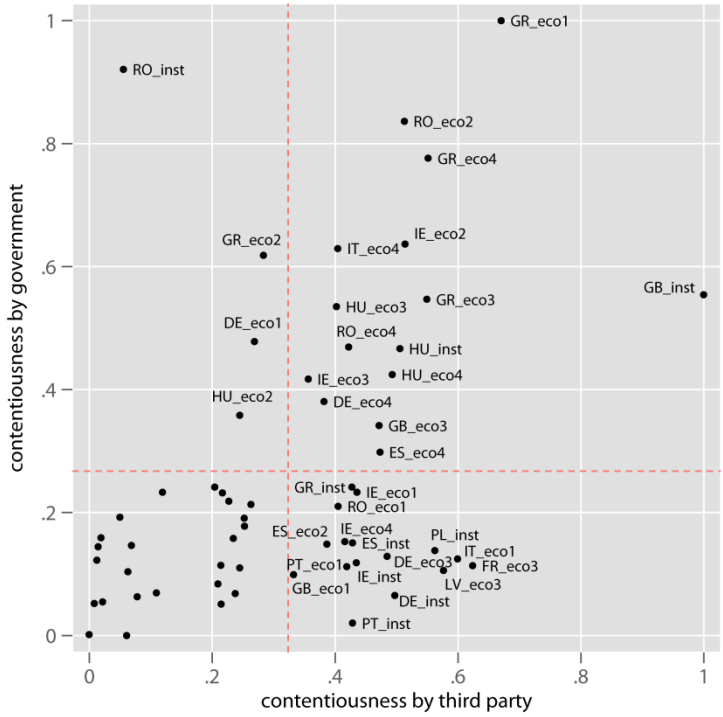
So far, we have only discussed challenger contentiousness, but the government and third parties also influence the conflict levels during an episode. *Table 4.4*, which we have presented above, already includes the summary measures for the two actor types per country. While Greece is also most contentious on these dimensions (followed by Romania), other countries' rank-ordering differs. Notably, government and third-party contentiousness in Germany are about average, although the country has seen the least bottom-up challenges to the proposed measures.

Figure 4.4 maps each episode on the two dimensions of government and third-party contentiousness. As we can see, the relationship between government and third-party

contentiousness is relatively close (r=0.41), with a few important exceptions. At one extreme, we again see the Brexit referendum where third-party contentiousness was much higher than government contentiousness. At the other extreme, we see the Romanian impeachment referendum in which the government added much more fuel to the conflict than the third parties. Both cases are symptomatic for the kind of atypical actor constellations that may alter the dynamic of an episode: In the Romanian case, the government took a legally controversial decision to impeach the sitting president Traian Basescu. In pushing the charge against Basescu, the government was much more active than average and the most repressive among all episodes we study. By contrast, third parties were more conflicted. They were very active in the episode but did not uniformly side with either the government or the challenger. We observe the opposite pattern in the case of Brexit. The government had won the 2015 general election with the promise to hold a referendum on EU membership. As the government was divided, government action was limited, and its contentiousness is only slightly above average, with the involved third parties clearly aligned with the government. Third-party actors included a range of domestic and international actors, most of whom took a strong position in favor of staying in the EU.

However, beyond these outliers, the pattern of variation shown in *Figure 4.4* suggests a systematic relation: We may suspect that the government gets involved in a contentious episode to the extent that third parties are also involved and take sides (or vice versa). This findings supports Schattschneider's (1960, 1-2) maxim, "Nothing attracts a crowd as quickly as a fight." Notably, the link between government and third-party activities is particularly strong when we look at the intensity of their actions and not so much whether the third parties get involved in opposing or supporting the government's plans.

Figure 4.4: Contentiousness by third parties and by the government



Overall contentiousness and types of contentious episodes

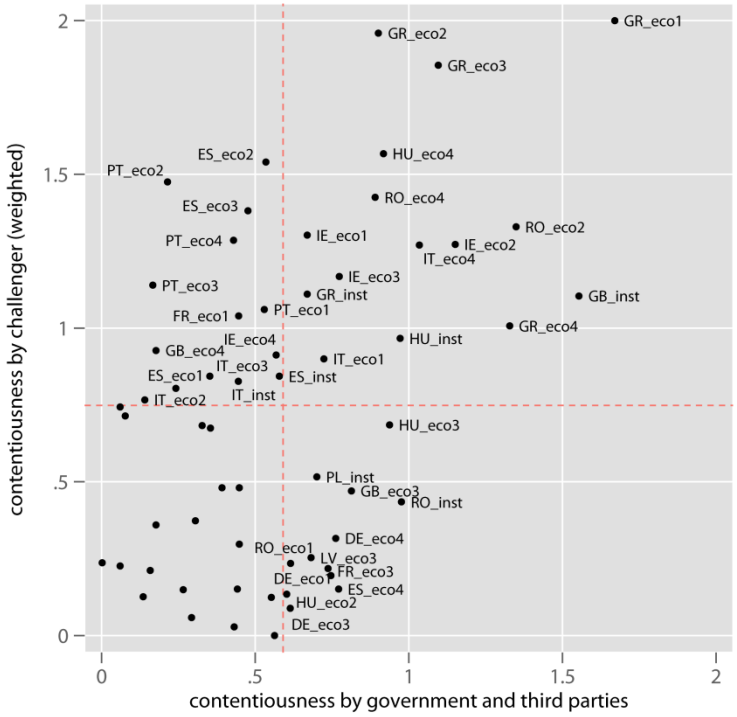
Referring to *Table 4.4*, we can see that government and third-party contentiousness matter a great deal for overall contentiousness. They explain the singular position of Greece in our study: Not only did challengers act more contentiously in the Greek episodes, government activity was also very intense and, in many cases, more repressive than the average. Third parties were also extremely active with up to 8.6 actions per week compared to an overall average of 1.7. All in all, this makes the Greek episodes by far the most contentious ones. Greece stands out with an average of 2.7 for overall contentiousness (on a range from 0 to 4), whereas the second most 'rebellious country' Ireland follows with 1.7 (see the last row in Table 4.4). Interestingly, we observe almost identical average values for Portugal and Spain – the two countries we used to introduce our approach.

Figure 4.5 shows the relationship between challenger contentiousness and third party/government contentiousness as included in our overall contentiousness measure. It is the empirical counterpart to the theoretical Table 4.1. As shown in the figure, in many episodes, we observe a systematic relation between the contentiousness of all actors (r=0.45). Thus, there are many 'full-fledged episodes,' most clearly illustrated by the Greek economic episodes 1-3 (N=15). By contrast, most episodes in which challenger contentiousness is below or close to the average also show below-average contentiousness of the government and third parties. We called them 'low-intensity episodes' with primarily standard forms of verbal claims-making (N=20).

At the same time, we also find a few of what we called 'top-down dominated episodes' (located in the bottom-right quadrant) with third-party and government activity exceeding challenger activity (N=11). Examples are the German discussions surrounding the Greek bailout, which tend to show very little challenger activity. Here, the contention was mostly introduced by the international debate on the topic and related to institutionalized conflicts and debates between the government and third parties. Finally, there are also several cases where high challenger contentiousness does not go together with high values on the third-party and government measure, leading to what we have called bottom-up dominated episodes (located in the upper-left quadrant) (N=14). Particularly in the Portuguese cases, both government and third-party contentiousness were far lower than the contentiousness by the challenger. The same holds for the Spanish episode in 2011 (ES_eco2). As indicated before, the reforms proposed by Zapatero faced one of the most forceful challengers in the street. As our data points out, this did not lead to an equally strong public engagement of other, more institutional actors. This contrasts sharply with the externally imposed IMF bailouts in Greece in which the government and third parties were involved at a comparable level to the challenger activity. Therefore, the figure visually confirms our observation that Greece has a

singular position due to the high level of contentiousness for all actor types. At this point, we may only suspect that the stake of international actors and the extraordinary pressure they exerted on the Greek government could explain the division between fully-fledged contentious episodes (as in Greece) and bottom-up dominated episodes (as in Portugal and some Spanish cases).

Figure 4.5: Contentiousness by the challenger and by government/ third parties



Note: The contentiousness by the challenger is weighted double for the overall measure of contentiousness (range 0 to 2).

Why do episodes get contentious?

In the following, we take a first step at explaining why certain episodes have seen more contentious interactions than others. While later chapters in this book will answer the question by studying the interaction dynamics at play more closely, we rely on two key insights from the classical social movement agenda. On the one hand, we have learned from the classical literature on social movements and protest that political mobilization depends on the

combination of three sets of factors: *grievances, mobilizing structures, and opportunities* (e.g., McAdam et al. 1996). Grievances constitute the starting point: a shock like the financial and economic crisis in Europe and the harsh policy measures implemented to cope with it create a tremendous amount of popular discontent. People with grievances seek to express them, and they do so by raising their voices in different political arenas or by exiting from politics (Hirschman 1970). However, as the second and third sets of factors highlight, they may only raise their voice to the extent that they have the mobilizing capacity and face a favorable political context. Without these additional factors, we can hardly expect a fully-fledged contentious episode involving a strong challenger and repeated interactions between the government and its challengers with third parties being drawn into the conflict as well.

On the other hand, later work in the political process tradition has emphasized that scholars should move beyond too general, institutional, and static political opportunities. Instead, those in the field should examine issue-specific, discursive, and more dynamic elements of the political context (e.g., Giugni 2009; Koopmans et al. 2005; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). We adopt this idea and suggest to distinguish general factors from episode- or policy-specific factors systematically. Importantly, we suggest incorporating such a differentiation not only for the political context (being the main focus of the cited literature) but also for grievances and mobilizing structures.

To operationalize the different features, we build upon Chapter 3, which introduced the episodes and embedded them in their economic and political context. We shift now from explaining the government's initial decision to launch a proposal to explaining the level of conflict sparked by it. To keep the analysis simple, we work with three measures that indicate the general and episode-specific *grievances*. First, we have combined the adjusted unemployment rate, GDP growth, and the items on respondents' satisfaction with the current and expected state of the national economy using factor analysis. Second, we also consider

that in the countries hardest hit by the Great Recession, particularly in Southern Europe, the economic problems triggered or amplified a political crisis (e.g., della Porta 2015; Kriesi 2015). We constructed a factor based on trust in the national government, trust in the national parliament, and satisfaction with national democracy (again, relying on Eurobarometer data and combining the three with factor analysis). Finally, to measure the grievances directly related to the severity of the economic and institutional reform proposals, we rely on the checklist approach introduced in Chapter 3.

Regarding general *mobilizing structures*, we expect that countries with a tradition of economic protests and resistance are more likely to see the emergence of a strong challenger to the proposed policy reforms in- and outside of the protest arena. This is because a history of contention and waves of protest typically leave behind dormant mobilizing structures and organizational capacities that may become reactivated in later phases (Taylor 1989). As Almeida (2003) highlights in the case of El Salvador, "such enduring organizations provide a fungible resource infrastructure from which protest waves may emerge in different political environments. One such political context is that of threat, whereby a set of *unfavorable* environmental conditions pushes groups into collective claim-making." All the selected policy proposals at risk constitute such negative conditions that may reactivate pre-existing mobilizing structures. To operationalize this aspect, we use the average number of days not worked due to strikes per 1000 employees in the years before the crisis (2000-2009) (Vandaele 2016). As a more episode-specific type of mobilizing structure, we consider the range of organizations that opt to get involved in the struggle over a proposal. While a broader coalition might face more challenges regarding collective identity formation, we expect that, at least in the short-run, it might be more likely to increase the contentiousness of an episode. Broad coalitions might mobilize a larger share of the population and draw on more (and more

diverse) additional resources. Moreover, the government and potential third parties might also be more likely to respond to (at least parts of) a broad challenger coalition.[9]

Finally, the general *political context* is measured by combining a state's capacity (effectiveness) and its participatory quality (for details, see Chapter 3). The two aspects resemble Kitschelts' (1986) emphasis on the input- and output-side of political systems as factors that shape the level and type of social movement actions.[10] The general thrust of Kitschelt's argument is that challengers face the worst of all constellations in states that tend to be closed on the input side and lack capacity on the output side. In addition to state structures, we rely in this chapter on Kriesi et al.'s (1995) argument about the legacy of the political left as another factor that may (still) boost present-day conflicts over economic reforms both due to pre-existing networks and historical reference points. For the episode-specific features, we rely on the electoral vulnerability and the ideological composition of the government at the launch of the proposal (for the measures, see again Chapter 3). Many of the harshest economic reforms during the Great Recession were proposed and implemented by left-wing governments. Thus, it is likely that they are met with strong resistance from their former allies in the streets, who contest the 'betrayal' and 'brand dilution' on the political left (for the case of Latin America, see Lupu 2014; Roberts 2013).[11]

Given the small number of cases (N=60 episodes) and the fact that some of our contextual variables are related, we first present simple bivariate correlations and t-tests in

[9] To measure this aspect, we rely on the breadth of the challenger coalition (for a detailed discussion of the concept and measurement, see Chapter 5).

[10] The focus on both sides of political systems is also prominent in recent studies on the quality of democracies (e.g., Dahlberg and Holmberg 2014).

[11] Importantly, such a reasoning goes against another prominent interpretation in the social movement literature which traditionally expected stronger protests in the streets when the mainstream left is in opposition as it can then act as an ally of ideologically close social movements. By contrast, it needs to respond to broader societal demands and political constraints when in government (see Kriesi 1995, Meguire 1995).

Table 4.5 before showing some regressions to assess the impact of our independent variables in a multivariate framework. We present results for both challenger contentiousness and the episode's overall contentiousness in line with our interest in the challengers and the interactions between all actor types.

As evident from the correlations in *Table 4.5*, we observe a positive relationship between the level of grievances and the contentiousness of an episode. All our general and episode-specific indicators of grievances are positively related to challenger contentiousness and overall contentiousness. This finding supports previous research highlighting that the severity and accumulation of crises go a long way in explaining the political consequences of the Great Recession in Europe (e.g., Bernburg 2015; Burden and Wichowsky 2014; Grasso and Giugni 2016; Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Hutter et al. 2018; Kriesi et al. 2020). Except for the relationship between political crisis and overall contentiousness, these relations are statistically significant. Resources or rather a history of contention also seem to matter as the level of strikes during the pre-crisis period and the breadth of the challenger coalition are both positively related to our two variables of interest. The strong correlation of pre-crisis strikes is most notable.

For the features of the political context, our results are mixed. There seems to be a strong *negative* relation between contentiousness and the quality of a democracy. Though we operationalize a democratic quality with an indicator that considers both input and output, the relation is driven primarily by the input dimension. This finding suggests that the more citizens and other actors can influence policymaking through institutional means, the less they turn to contentious actions to make their voices heard. Our measure for the overall contentiousness of an episode is also negatively related to the quality of democracy. In addition, our results indicate a statistically significant higher degree of contentiousness in countries with a traditionally split left (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain). In contrast,

the two more episode-specific political factors, i.e., electoral vulnerability and the government's ideological composition, do not seem to have a strong effect.

Table 4.5: Bivariate correlation table (N=60)

	Challenger Contentiousness	Overall Contentiousness
Economic crisis	**0.40*****	**0.27****
Political crisis	**0.33****	**0.21**
Crisis overall (economic & political)	**0.39*****	**0.27****
Severity of proposal	**0.32****	**0.28****
Level of strikes (pre-crisis)	**0.51*****	**0.53*****
Breadth of challenger coalition	**0.34*****	**0.33****
Quality of democracy[1]	**-0.34***** [2]	**-0.46***** [2]
Tradition of split left	**0.40***** [2]	**0.26**** [2]
Electoral vulnerability	0.14	0.05
Left in power	0.12	0.11

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$
[1] operationalized as a dummy (1= weak state capacity & weak participatory democracy)
[2] t-test (reported is the differences of the groups means); significant correlations highlighted in bold.

Next, we assess these variables in a multivariate framework and introduce the indicators for grievances, resources, and political context in a stepwise fashion (see *Table 4.6*). We do so to avoid introducing a high number of (often related) predictors given our small sample size. Overall, the results for challenger contentiousness (Models M1-M4) and overall contentiousness (Models M5-M8) confirm the bivariate analyses. For the challenger, the only change in the grievance model (M1) is that proposal severity is no longer a significant predictor when we control for the extent of the crises in a given country. This makes sense as proposals are frequently linked to the severity of the Great Recession in a country (as shown in Chapter 3). Notably, neither the severity of the political and economic crisis nor proposal severity are significant in the overall contentiousness models. Note that we have also tested the effects of the type of proposal. The only statistically significant impact refers to the fact that bank bailouts faced less contentiousness by the challenger (compared to the reference

category of structural reforms). In the resource model for challenger and overall contentiousness (M2 and M6), we observe a significant effect for the historical legacy of strike activities and the breadth of the challenger coalition. The model for political context for challenger contentiousness (M3) again shows a significant negative effect of democratic quality and a positive effect of a history of a split left. Both results hold for overall contentiousness (M7) as well. When introducing all previously significant variables into a joint model (M4 respectively M8), the most notable effects are that (i) a broad challenger coalition tends to correlate with more contentious conflicts and (ii) there seems to be a mobilizing effect of bad democratic quality. The effect of grievances, by contrast, appears to be entirely mediated by resources and the political context.

Table 4.6: Impact of general and episode-specific factors on challenger and overall contentiousness (OLS regressions)

	Challenger Contentiousness				Overall Contentiousness			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Extent of crises	0.06**			0.03	0.10			0.03
	(2.33)			(1.20)	(1.31)			(0.06)
Proposal severity	0.07				0.22			
	(1.50)				(1.54)			
History of strikes		0.00***		0.00		0.00***		0.00**
		(4.92)		(1.23)		(5.14)		(2.46)
Breadth challenger		0.23***		0.23**		0.65***		0.58***
		(3.32)		(3.32)		(3.22)		(2.94)
Democratic quality			-0.25***	-0.15**			-0.92***	-0.55***
			(3.50)	(2.18)			(4.45)	(2.73)
Split left (=1)			0.24***	0.16**			0.51***	0.14
			(3.82)	(2.1)			(2.85)	(0.64)
Elect. vulnerability			-0.03				-0.00	
			(-0.68)				(-0.05)	
Left in government			-0.02				-0.06	
			(-0.81)				(-0.86)	
Constant	0.19*	0.09	0.35**	0.05	0.80**	0.52***	1.16 ***	0.47**
	(1.77)	(1.44)	(2.45)	(0.83)	(2.42)	(2.87)	(2.78)	(2.50)
N	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
r^2	0.18	0.38	0.32	0.47	0.11	0.39	0.32	0.46

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Conclusions

This chapter has set out to conceptualize, measure, and map how contentious the 60 episodes covered by this book have been. The chapter's main contribution consists of developing a multi-dimensional understanding of contentiousness and introducing a way to observe it empirically. We have conceptualized contentiousness by the combined behavior of all three stylized actor types (challenger, government, and third parties). More specifically, we have outlined how the intensity and specific action repertoire of each actor may increase conflict levels in the public sphere. In a nutshell, an episode is most contentious if all three actors get intensively involved, the challenger moves beyond verbal opposition by staging more disruptive protests, the government moves beyond verbal claims-making to forms of repressive behavior, and the third parties add fuel to the fire by clearly aligning with either the challenger or the government

In discussing our empirical results, we first focused on the challenger contentiousness, which is typically the object of social movement studies. We highlighted the complex relationship between the intensity of challenger actions and their disruptiveness. Second, we highlighted the relation between the contentiousness induced by the different actor types. Strong interaction dynamics are particularly evident in the case of Greece, where all actors show elevated levels of contentiousness, leading to so-called 'fully-fledged contentious episodes.' The Greek story contrasts with the Portuguese and Spanish cases in 2011, which we introduced at the beginning of the chapter. Based on our new measure, we label these Spanish and Portuguese episodes as 'bottom up-dominated with a comparatively strong presence of the challengers. Importantly, our measure also captures differences in the form of the challenge at the time. The Spanish resistance to Zapatero's second austerity package in 2011 trumps all other episodes in terms of the challengers' capacity to mobilize massively in the streets. By contrast, the Spanish challengers have been comparatively weak regarding

representation in the public debate with less disruptive action forms. In this regard, the analogous Portuguese episode with the emergence of *Geração à Rasca* (Screwed Generation) is different, already hinting at the starkly different trajectories that the political conflict over austerity has taken in the two Iberian countries (Carvalho 2018; Portos and Carvalho 2019).

Finally, we have taken the first step to explain why some episodes have been more contentious than others. The results indicate that general and episode-specific grievances, mobilizing structures, and political contexts all affect an episode's overall contentiousness and particularly challenger contentiousness. That said, in the full model, the most substantial effects refer to the scope of the challenger coalition and the quality of democracy. We observe the most contentious struggles when the challenger coalition is broad and in contexts with lower democratic quality. The helpful distinction between general and episode-specific explanatory factors draws upon one of CEA's key contributions: its ability to draw upon time-variant context while pursuing a systematic comparative analysis.

Further chapters will move beyond our aggregative approach and account for the dynamics *within* each episode to better understand how the interactions ultimately shaped the conflict and its outcome. However, before that, we will disentangle the actors lumped together under the broad headings of governments, challengers, and third parties to uncover who has actually been engaged in contentious struggles in the age of austerity.

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