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Street mobilisation during election campaigns in multilevel systems: a supply–demand analysis

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ABSTRACT

Election campaigns are periods of heightened political competition and opportunities for change. This research note examines whether such politicisation leads to increased street mobilisation, both in terms of who organises (supply) and who participates (demand). On the supply side, a ‘professionalisation’ of protest is expected, with more active institutional political and civil society actors. On the demand side, participation should rise. Relying on original protest event data from Germany (2000–2023), the analysis shows that campaign periods boost protest overall. Yet responses vary by election level: all groups mobilise most during first-order national elections. Regarding second-order elections, civil society actors and citizens respond more to subnational elections, suggesting localised protest dynamics, while institutional political actors focus on EU elections. This study adds to understanding how multi-level governance shapes ‘unconventional’ political behaviour and highlights the alignment and divergence between citizen activism and elite strategies during election campaigns.

KEYWORDS Protest; election campaigns; multilevel systems; citizen-elite congruence; civil society

Election campaign periods are times of heightened political conflict and intensified politicisation of issues. Campaign times represent a window of opportunity for political change, which political actors attempt to seize. Politicians rally around certain policy positions, emphasising their governing competence. Civil society becomes more involved in electoral politics (McAdam and Tarrow 2010) and the electorate participates more actively in politics by following political news (Prior and Bougher 2018) and engaging in political debates.

However, political debate during campaigns does not take place only through media appearances or private discussions around the kitchen

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table. Election periods also open a window of opportunity for political protest (McAdam and Tarrow 2010). Protest is a cue to public opinion, revealing crucial information about grievances to both the electorate and politicians (Lohmann 1994). By setting an agenda, protests can significantly affect the course of an election campaign. Politicians who aim to increase their chances of re-election should be particularly attentive to public opinion cues. But parties and politicians are not merely passive recipients of protest signals; they also engage in protest themselves to mobilise for their causes and electoral fortunes (Borbáth and Hutter 2021).

In this research note, we take the established finding of the increased mobilisation of protest during elections (Borbáth and Hutter 2021; McAdam and Tarrow 2010) and expand on it in two ways. First, we separate the supply side (who organises) and the demand side (how many participate) of street mobilisation. On the supply side we look at two groups of organisers, who, we argue, drive mobilisation during elections: institutional political actors (i.e. politicians, parties), and professional civil society actors (i.e. formal social movement organisations, labour unions, or religious groups). We ask:

RQ1: How do election campaigns affect the protest activities of institutional political or civil society actors (supply side), and individual citizens (demand side)?

Second, we contend that, especially in federal electoral systems, not all elections are created equal. In such multi-level systems, the perceived importance of different electoral levels often varies substantially (Reif *et al.* 1997), which we also expect to affect the attention that is afforded them in the protest sphere. Therefore we ask:

RQ2: Do these actors respond differently to subnational, national, and EU-level elections in their protest behaviour?

Empirically, we analyse the organisation of protest events by different types of protest organisers, as well as the number of protest participants across campaigns. The data covers protest events in Germany from 2000 to 2023 and relies on an original semi-automated collection from newspapers of protest events, combining machine learning algorithms and hand-coding, based on the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *taz-die tageszeitung*.

As hypothesised, we find crucial differences in the protest behaviour between different suppliers pertaining to their focus on different electoral levels. Both engage strongly in national elections yet diverge in second-order elections: political actors are more active in EU campaigns,

while civil society mobilises around subnational elections. Citizens follow the latter pattern, suggesting that while institutional political actors may use protest, it remains primarily a tool of civil society. This study highlights elections as key moments in the political opportunity structure for protest. It contributes the differentiation between demand and supply, and the importance of multilevel electoral systems to the protest literature.

Theoretical argument

Street mobilisation as a tool for political change during election campaigns

Elections often mark significant political transitions, such as shifts in governing parties, changes in political leadership, and sometimes even political systems. As a result, opportunities and stakes are high for everyone affected by the election. With an election being the critical moment in a democracy, the campaign becomes a crucial window of opportunity for political change (Heaney 2022).

To advocate for change, political actors can select activities for action from an extensive repertoire (Alimi 2015). Protest in the form of street mobilisation is one powerful instrument to call for political action. We define street mobilisation here as contentious but peaceful, such as demonstrations or marches that are centred around one or multiple political claims. We do not consider campaign rallies by politicians as protest events since they focus on a person or party rather than on issues.

The strength of protest lies in its capacity to change attitudes (Pop-Eleches *et al.* 2022), raise political attention (Schürmann 2024), mobilise politicians' support (Gillion 2012), and affect election results (Stephan and Schürmann 2025; Wasow 2020). This potential for inducing change leads to increased protest activity in election times (Borbáth and Hutter 2021; McAdam and Tarrow 2010)

Supply side of street mobilisation: politicians and activists

While election campaigns open-up a window of opportunity for political change, we argue that this opportunity is not seized equally by all types of organisers, or what we label the supply side of protest mobilisation. Overall, we expect a 'professionalisation' of the supply side of the protest landscape during elections. We assume a shift in the composition of organisers of street mobilisations, away from less organised ad-hoc organisers towards more professionalised actors. These professional protest suppliers come from, first, institutional political actors, i.e. elected politicians, and second, organised civil society actors, i.e. activists (Figure 1).

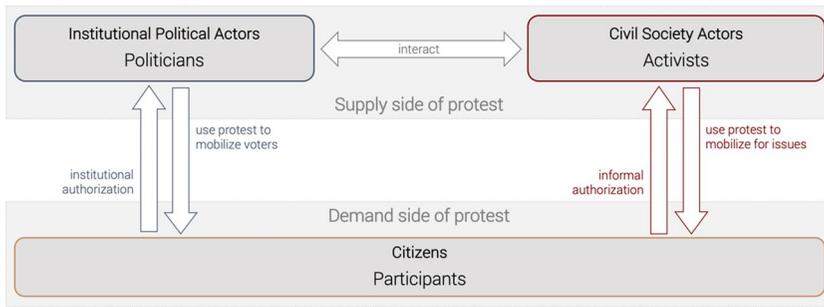


Figure 1. Supply and demand of street mobilisation: actor overview.

We examine this idea in the multilevel electoral systems in which many polities are structured. The prevailing consensus categorises national elections as first-order, deeming them more consequential, while characterising other elections as second-order (Reif *et al.* 1997). For EU member countries, second-order elections can be split further into lower-level sub-national and higher-level EU parliamentary elections. The extent to which the perceived importance of an election by different actors translates into distinct protest behaviours remains an open question.

During campaigns, politicians shift their rhetoric and actions, as they strategically emphasise their strengths and engage in political manoeuvring to gain the upper hand (Berz and Kroeber 2023). One such change is their involvement in street mobilisation (Borbáth and Hutter 2021). Politicians seeking to maximise their electoral prospects may be able to widen their electorate by speaking to political outsiders (Borbáth 2023). Protest during election times becomes another avenue of electoral mobilisation, next to more traditional and widespread practices. Organising protest may signal attentiveness to citizens' demands and a strong commitment to an issue (Lewis 2021). Through the strategic use of protests, institutional political actors can articulate their support for social groups and political positions effectively while mobilising a wider range of potential voters.

With regard to electoral levels, we expect party leaders and elected representatives to strategically prioritise first-order national elections as well as the higher-level second-order elections (i.e. EU elections). First, both election types lead to national media attention, providing party leaders and elected representatives with an amplified platform to disseminate their messages and policies. Second, success in these elections significantly elevates the prestige and legitimacy of party leaders and elected representatives (Ferreira da Silva *et al.* 2021). Third, national and EU elections offer party leaders and elected representatives a broader arena for substantial influence on policymaking.

H1a: The likelihood of street protest (co-)organisation by institutional political actors/politicians increases during campaigns.

H1b: The campaign effect on institutional political actors/politicians is particularly pronounced for national and EU elections.

In contrast to institutional political actors, civil society actors are usually focused on single issues and policy change (Hutter 2014); elections affect the political opportunity structure available to them. The political opportunity structure describes the idea that civil society's ability to mobilise support and effectuate political change is partially dependent on external factors (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Since politicians, anxious not to jeopardise their electoral prospects, are particularly attentive to public opinion cues during campaigns, civil society organisations take advantage of this increased responsiveness by increasing their mobilisation efforts (McAdam and Tarrow 2010). Hence, civil society organisations are also attentive to the electoral cycle. We argue that it is specifically those more formally structured civil society organisations that are more likely to get involved in elections. With increased professionalisation and formalisation, these organisations adapt their strategies towards increasing their institutional impact during campaigns (Staggenborg 1988). Most civil society actors are organised in small, geographically defined units focusing on regional or even local issues, which we also expect to be visible in their protest behaviour. A federal structure offers further access points to political decision-making at lower electoral levels (Kriesi 1995).

H2a: The likelihood of protest (co-)organisation by professionalised civil society actors/activists increases during campaigns.

H2b: The campaign effect on professionalised civil society actors/activists is particularly pronounced during national and subnational elections.

Demand side actors of street mobilisation: participants

Next, we shift our attention to the demand side of street mobilisation: turnout to protest events. As an election draws nearer, individuals tend to become more attentive to political matters and election-related information (Prior and Bougher 2018). We assume this politicisation increases attendance at protest events. Research from Spain provides the first evidence, that the number of protest participants increases in the response to national elections (Aguilar *et al.* 2025). Other electoral levels, however, remain understudied.

Building on the literature on first- and second-order elections (e.g. Reif *et al.* 1997; Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014), we again expect a higher turnout during national elections. However, most protests relate to issues affecting their immediate communities. This local/regional focus

underlines the close link between civic engagement and the proximity of concerns to individuals' daily lives. The role of subnational issues in the protest landscape should thus extend to lower-level elections as well.

H3a: Citizen participation in protests is higher during campaigns compared to non-campaign periods.

H3b: The campaign effect on citizens is particularly pronounced during national and subnational elections.

Research design

Case and data

In order to test the hypotheses, we study the protest landscape within the German multilevel electoral system. We argue that Germany is representative of Western European federal systems and a 'typical case' (Seawright and Gerring 2008) for understanding how elections shape protest behaviour in similar political and cultural settings. It offers a multilevel system in which elections occur not only on the national level but also on the EU level, as well as in the sixteen politically relatively strong federal states. While most other EU members do not have a federal system, we would assume that our findings also travel to different contexts in Western Europe that feature subnational elections. Furthermore, Germany has a rich history of social activism with a vibrant civil society. Investigating how elections affect protests in this context allows us to examine how social movements and activism contribute to shaping public discourse and influencing policy decisions.

Our original dataset is collected within the WZB ProtestMonitoring. Employing a semiautomated methodology, the data collection focused on systematically capturing protest events across Germany. For the years 2000–2018, the data collection covers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* following established PRODAT coding rules that focus primarily on weekend protests.¹ From 2019 onwards, the primary data sources also encompassed the national newspaper *taz-die tageszeitung*, which has extensive coverage of protest events nationwide. First, newspaper articles were filtered. A trained machine-learning classifier determined whether newspaper articles contained information about protest events. Subsequently, research assistants undertook a thorough manual coding process, extracting key variables such as location, date, organisers, participation numbers, and claims, among others.² During the coding process, protest organisers were defined as actors who were either involved in the organisation of the protest event, i.e. calling for participation before the event (which usually also indicates a presence at the event itself) or who had an active role during the event itself, e.g. by holding speeches. Since one event may have multiple organisers, we refer to our dependent variable as (co-)organisation.

Variables and modelling strategy

Our unit of observation is the protest event as such, excluding duplicate news reports of events, online protest, petitions and political violence.³ The explanatory variable is *election campaign*, which can take four different values: (1) no campaign time, (2) EU-level campaign, (3) national-level campaign and (4) state-level campaign. EU- and national-level campaigns are identical for all observations, but the state campaign time depends on the state (Bundesland) of the protest event. The three months before the actual election are defined as the campaign period in this article. This definition follows other scholarly publications (e.g. Borbáth and Hutter 2021; Castanho Silva *et al.* 2024). Some of the 16 German states had state elections at the same time as national or EU elections. We run models both with and without these simultaneous campaigns.

Our analysis focuses on three different dependent variables. First, to study the behaviour of institutional political elites, we analyse the co-organisation of protest events by parties, elected politicians or other institutional political actors. As this dependent variable is binary, we apply logistic regression models. On average, we find that 7.6% of protests are (co-)organised by institutional political actors. Parties, therefore, are involved in only a minority of protests. However, as we will show, the share varies significantly between campaign and non-campaign times.⁴ Second, we apply the same approach to organised civil society actors. These include, for example, established movements, religious organisations, labour unions, and media groups, while excluding individuals and vague social groups, such as students or pensioners. 55.6% of protests are (co-)organised by formal civil society actors. Finally, we examine the number of protest participants, which is an over-dispersed count variable, with most events having low or mid-size participation numbers and only a few very large events. Thus, we apply a negative binomial distribution. Furthermore, we control for sampling and for time-dependent developments that do not stem from election campaigns by adding year- and state-fixed effects.

Results

Election campaigns and institutional political actors' (co-)organisation of protest events

First, we analyse how the election campaign affects the (co-)organisation of protest events by institutional political actors. Table 1 presents the effects of subnational campaign periods (Model 1), national campaign periods (Model 2), and EU campaign periods (Model 3). Here, the reference category is *non-subnational*, *non-national* or *non-supranational*

campaign period, respectively. The fourth model is the full model, including all three types of campaigns. Here, the reference category of the three variables is *non-campaign period*.⁵

The single campaign models (Models 1, 2, and 3) show similar effects to the full model.⁶ Therefore, the interpretation focuses on the full model (Model 4). For easier interpretation, Figure 2 presents the predicted effect sizes, with the non-focal predictors year and state being set to their mode (Berlin 2020). The results in Table 1 show that institutional political actors

Table 1. Effect of election campaigns on (co-)sponsorship by institutional political elites | politicians (2000–2023).

	Protest sponsored by Institutional Political Elites Politicians			
	Subnational campaign	National campaign	EU campaign	Full model
Protest during subnational-level campaign	-0.04 (0.29)			0.04 (0.29)
Protest during national-level campaign		1.42 (0.29)***		1.43 (0.29)***
Protest during EU-level campaign			0.54 (0.27)	0.56 (0.28)*
Constant	-1.94 (0.39)***	-1.94 (0.39)***	-1.95 (0.39)***	-1.95 (0.39)***
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. Bundesländer (states)	16	16	16	16
AIC	2472.67	2449.47	2469.05	2449.61
BIC	2729.84	2706.64	2726.22	2719.64
Num. obs.	4579	4579	4579	4579

Note: Logistic regression models.

*** $p < 0.001$.

** $p < 0.01$.

* $p < 0.05$.

Full model is visualised in Figure 2 (upper left panel).

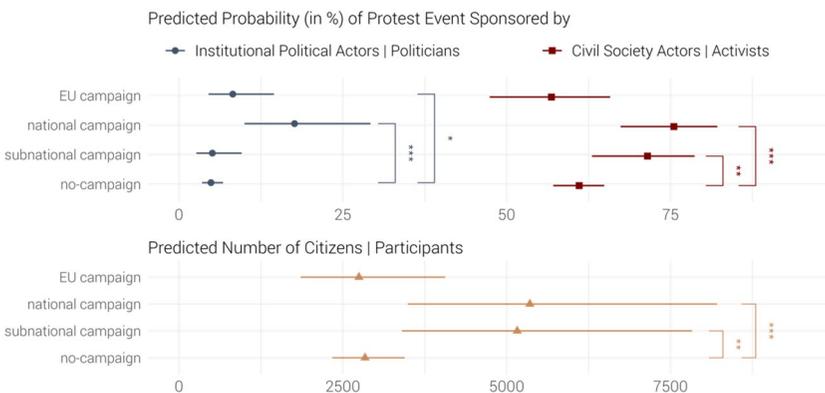


Figure 2. Election campaigns and their predicted effects on politicians, activists and participants (visualisation based on full models in Tables 1–3).

(co-)organise more protest events during campaign periods than in non-campaign periods, thereby providing evidence for *H1a*, which expects that *politicians (co-)organise more protests during campaigns compared to non-campaign periods*. However, these effects differ by campaign type. During subnational election campaigns, we see no significant effects. This is different for European and especially for national campaigns. During national and EU campaign periods, politicians are significantly more engaged in protest organisation than during non-campaign periods. During non-campaign periods, the probability of a protest being (co-)organised by a party is approximately 4.7%. This number is three times as high for protests during national and nearly two times as high for EU campaign times. These findings align with *H1b*, *the campaign effect on politicians is particularly pronounced for higher-level elections*.

Election campaigns and organised civil society's (co-)organisation of protest events

For the models on street protest (co-)organisation by civil society organisations in [Table 2](#), we find the same positive significant effect for national elections. In substantive terms, the full model estimates the probability of (co-)organisation to rise from around 60% for non-campaign times to more than 75% during national campaigns. But in contrast to institutional political actors, the effect of the higher-level

Table 2. Effect of election campaigns on (co-)sponsorship by civil society (2000–2023).

	Protest sponsored by civil society			
	Subnational campaign	National campaign	EU campaign	Full model
Protest during subnational-level campaign	0.46 (0.18)**			0.47 (0.18)**
Protest during national-level campaign		0.66 (0.18)***		0.68 (0.18)***
Protest during EU-level campaign			−0.21 (0.17)	−0.17 (0.17)
Constant	−0.27 (0.26)	−0.25 (0.26)	−0.26 (0.26)	−0.26 (0.26)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. Bundesländer (states)	16	16	16	16
AIC	5882.78	5876.45	5888.34	5871.82
BIC	6139.95	6133.62	6145.51	6141.85
Num. obs.	4579	4579	4579	4579

Note: Logistic regression models.

*** $p < 0.001$.

** $p < 0.01$.

* $p < 0.05$.

Full model is visualised in [Figure 2](#) (upper right panel).

EU elections is insignificant and even slightly negative. Instead, the lower-level subnational election campaigns significantly increase the likelihood of street mobilisation by civil society organisations. Our findings for civil society organisations align with *H2a* and *H2b*. We thus find evidence of diverging patterns of electoral street mobilisation between institutional and non-institutional political actors when it comes to different types of second-order elections.

Election campaigns and citizens' protest participation

Finally, [Table 3](#) presents the results for the effects of campaign periods on the number of protest participants. Participation numbers are available for only 55% of the protest events, due to frequent non-reporting. Therefore, our sample is smaller, and the confidence intervals are consequently larger compared to the previous analysis. The effects mirror those of the civil society organisations. Protests attract larger crowds during national and subnational campaigns than they do in non-campaign periods, almost doubling their average size, but we find no such effect during election campaigns for the EU parliament. This is evidence in support of *H3a* and *H3b*.

We conducted several robustness checks that reinforce our main findings. In addition, the results for national and EU elections appear broadly generalisable to other EU countries. Detailed analyses are provided in [Online Appendix D](#).

Table 3. Effect of election campaigns on number of protest participants (2000–2023).

	Protest participants (citizen level)			
	Subnational campaign	National campaign	EU campaign	Full model
Protest during subnational-level campaign	0.57 (0.19)**			0.60 (0.19)**
Protest during national-level campaign		0.60 (0.19)**		0.63 (0.19)***
Protest during EU-level campaign			−0.06 (0.17)	−0.03 (0.17)
Constant	8.10 (0.27)***	8.09 (0.27)***	8.09 (0.27)***	8.10 (0.27)***
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. Bundesländer (states)	16	16	16	16
AIC	44285.70	44286.40	44295.51	44279.40
BIC	44526.77	44527.46	44536.58	44532.23
Num. obs.	2643	2643	2643	2643

Note: Negative binomial regression models.

*** $p < 0.001$.

** $p < 0.01$.

* $p < 0.05$.

Full model is visualised in [Figure 2](#) (lower panel).

Conclusion

This research note shows that elections are not only moments of institutional politics but also central for street mobilisation in democracies. Campaigns heighten politicisation and create windows of opportunity that reshape both the supply and demand sides of street mobilisation. We show a process of ‘professionalisation’ of the protest sphere during elections, with both parties and politicians, as well as more formally organised civil society actors, taking a more central role as suppliers of protest. We also show rising protest attendance. Importantly, these dynamics reveal the need to study together the supply of organised protest and the demand through citizen participation.

Not all elections, however, matter equally. National elections mobilise actors across the board, while second-order elections generate divergent responses: institutional political actors orient towards the European level, whereas civil society organisations and citizens mobilise more regionally. These patterns underscore how multilevel electoral systems condition the timing and character of protest. Germany illustrates these dynamics vividly, and broader European evidence suggests they extend beyond a single case. Elections, we conclude, not only decide who governs but also shape when, how, and by whom politics is contested in the streets.

Notes

1. For a detailed description see: <https://www.wzb.eu/en/research/completed-research-programs/civil-society-and-political-mobilization/projects/prodat-dokumentation-und-analyse-von-protestereignissen-in-der-bundesrepublik>.
2. Online Appendix B describes the coding process in more detail.
3. See Online Appendix C for an overview of the protest forms and their distribution.
4. For an overview of the distribution of the dependent and independent variables as well as further information on the types of organizers and events we used for our analyses, see the section Descriptive Statistics in Online Appendix C. The remaining events were either organized by other actors that do not fall under our definition of either of these two categories or no information on the organizers was available.
5. Online Appendix D presents the tables with the fixed effects coefficients for the 16 states and 24 years.
6. In model 3, EU campaign effects are only significant at the 0.1 level due to less information included in the model.

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Data availability statement

The data and analysis scripts required to reproduce the analyses reported in this article are publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/JW9ER>

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