**Scientific Abstract:** Meanings of protest in an era of democratic erosion

Protests are usually perceived as playing a key role in democratic societies, providing a space for ordinary people to make their voices heard beyond the ballot box. However, in recent years, rising levels of protest in many countries have coincided with concerns about democratic backsliding. Although some scholars have theorized that protest protects against democratic erosion, it remains unclear whether citizens perceive contemporary protest in the same way. Scholars and commentators often assume that everyone views protest as a cornerstone of democracy, but is this assumption accurate? In light of these trends, researchers must urgently investigate how citizens perceive the role of protest in current political climates. While there is extensive scholarship on why protests erupt and how they succeed or fail, far less attention has been given to understanding what protest actually *means* for ordinary citizens, or how different meanings of protest impact on political participation.

To investigate these concerns, this project is guided by three main research questions. First, it seeks to determine what types of meanings of protest exist in academic literature (RQ1: Meanings of protest in scholarship). Addressing this question will produce a typology of scholarly meanings, which is essential for comparing scholarly and popular meanings of protest. The second research question asks what types of meanings of protest are held by ordinary citizens (RQ2: Citizens’ meanings of protest). By addressing this question, we will develop a categorization of citizens’ meanings of protest, and highlight potential gaps in the literature. The third research question investigates how ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest shape their political participation (RQ3: Implications for political participation).

The proposed project combines three empirical studies that address these research questions. First, a comprehensive literature mapping (Study #1) will produce an authoritative typology of scholarly meanings of protest. This study will employ data-driven bibliometric tools to produce a comprehensive analytic mapping of the extant literature on protest. Second, an interview-based study (Study #2) will produce a typology of ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest. It will include 90 semi-structured interviews conducted in three countries to discover a wide array of meanings among ordinary citizens. It will also include an analytic comparison between the types of meanings identified in the academic literature and those expressed by ordinary citizens. Finally, a cross-national survey (Study #3) will investigate how ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest relate to types of political behavior and key individual-level socio-demographic characteristics. Study #3 will build on a tested survey instrument and will use a combination of manual and AI coding to analyze the data. The integration stage of the work plan will leverage the findings from all three studies to design next-step collaborative research. This will compare meanings of protest with meanings of other key concepts in democratic theory, including voting and representation. In doing so, the proposed project will break new ground in understanding the meanings of protest in the context of democratic erosion, while deepening our knowledge of the political implications of rising protest participation among ordinary citizens in contemporary democracies.

**A. Scientific Background**

How do people understand the role of protest in current political climates, and how does this understanding inform their political participation? This question is critically important, especially in light of evidence that contemporary liberal democracies are facing threats of erosion (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Some scholars view protests as liberal reactions against democratic backsliding (Claassen et al., 2024; Druckman, 2024), while others argue that protests may undermine trust in institutions and weaken support for democracy (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021; Uscinski et al., 2021). However, there is still a significant gap in understanding how ordinary citizens perceive the relationship between protest and democracy.

This question is increasingly urgent, as research shows a shift in political participation towards lower voter turnout and higher rates of nonelectoral participation, including protest (Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Dalton, 2017, 2022; Kostelka et al., 2023; Kostelka & Blais, 2021; Oser, 2022b, 2022c). Given evidence that protest is on the rise, it is critical to understand what protest actually *means* for ordinary citizens. This project aims to integrate the two strands of the literature reviewed below – collective and individual perspectives on protest – to investigate meanings of protest for ordinary citizens.

**A.1. Analysis of protest at the collective level.** Early scholarly accounts of protest, focusing on the collective or group level, often treated it as an eruption of *destructive emotion* (Kornhauser, 1959; Smelser, 1962). Many scholars later rejected this view, conceptualizing protest as *rational action* by social groups aimed at disrupting oppressive power structures (Piven & Cloward, 1977), or obtaining concrete benefits (McAdam, 1982; Meyer & Tarrow, 1997). This rational perception focuses on identifying effective movement strategies (Bosi et al., 2016; Chenoweth, 2023; Soule, 2009; Uba, 2009), and analyzing the opportunities created by external conditions (Hutter, 2014; Meyer, 2004; Shultziner, 2013; Waismel-Manor, 2005).

A different group of studies has theorized protest as a *cultural process* (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; McAdam, 2000). This perspective posits that the grievances, identities, objectives, strategies, and outcomes of protests are culturally and discursively constructed (Benford & Snow, 2000; Bennett et al., 2018; Melucci, 1995; Meyer, 2006). Viewing protest as a cultural process provides an understanding of the dynamic, open-ended, and contested process of meaning construction in collective action.

Both rational and cultural perceptions of protest have evolved significantly with the rise of digital communications. Scholars have highlighted how online networks have transformed protest strategies and opportunities, while creating new spaces for contesting meaning (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Lavi, 2020; Meyer, 2024; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). However, since these perspectives focus on group actors – such as movements, social groups, or organizations – they offer only limited insights into the individual meanings of protest.

**A.2. Analysis of protest at the individual level.** Studies of protest at an individual level investigate people’s motivations, attitudes, and behaviors. A key question in these analyses concerns individual incentives to participate in protest, especially in light of the free rider problem (Olson, 1965). In their theoretical synthesis of the social psychology of protest, van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2023) identify three types of motivations for participating in protests: instrumental, expressive, and identity driven. *Instrumental* motivations involve viewing protest as a means to obtain solutions to grievances. A key factor influencing the participation of those with instrumental motivations is political efficacy, which refers to the belief that engaging in politics can have an influence on political outcomes (Boulianne et al., 2023; Oser et al., 2022; Oser, Feitosa, et al., 2023). Another key motivator for these individuals is the cost of abstention, which can be an important driver when the stakes are considered to be high (Aytaç & Stokes, 2019).

*Expressive* motivations relate to people’s desire to express their views and values through protest, regardless of the political outcomes. A pivotal factor studied in relation to expressive motivations are people’s normative attitudes (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2021; Oser, 2022a; Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023). Finally, *identity*-driven motivations highlight how social identity (Tajfel, 2010) can motivate protest through the strength of an individual’s identification with a group (Arikan & Bloom, 2019; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2018). An important related concept is affective polarization, which refers to the strength of positive feelings towards ingroup members and negative feelings towards outgroup members. While this concept has been widely used to study electoral behavior, it has only recently been applied to the study of protest behavior (Borbáth et al., 2023).

Recent studies indicate that all three types of motivations – instrumental, expressive, and identity driven – are influenced by the use of online social networks. Most studies have found an overall positive correlation between social media use and protest participation (Oser, 2022a; Valenzuela, 2013). While individual level studies provide an understanding of people’s motivations, attitudes, and behaviors, they often rely on a static understanding of meaning based on predefined, closed questions (Plescia, in press; Suchman & Jordan, 1992).

This overview of research on protest at both the *collective* and *individual* levels underscores the importance of integrating studies across these levels to fully capture the breadth of citizens’ meanings of protest within contemporary democracies.

**A.3. Integration: Ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest.** Informed by this literature, the proposed project builds on recent related work on the “meanings of voting” (Plescia, in press) to investigate ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest. By adapting Plescia’s approach, we aim to investigate the meanings of protest – an increasingly urgent topic of inquiry given the unresolved questions regarding the motivations for and implications of shifting protest trends. Our study focuses on individual perspectives by applying open-ended methods to inductively identify peoples’ meanings of protest. Since non-participation is a common yet understudied phenomenon, this study will also examine the meanings of protest for both participants and non-participants.

To identify a wide range of meanings of protest, we follow Plescia’s (in press) approach, which distinguishes between a word or concept having no meaning, one or more meanings, or even “anti-meanings.” People may assign no meaning to protest if the concept is completely unrelated to their life experience. Alternatively, if protest has a meaning for them, it indicates that they can articulate what it signifies in their lives. People may assign a variety of meanings to protest, including multiple, or even contradictory meanings. Finally, some individuals may assign an “anti-meaning” to the term (Campbell & Nyholm, 2015). Unlike having no meaning, anti-meaning represents not a absence or void, but rather a set of normatively negative perceptions relating to a term. Plescia (in press) uses the term “anti-meaning” to describe how some people hold meanings of voting that consider this act ineffective, unethical, or a waste of time. In this study, we adapt the concept of “anti-meaning” to protest and apply it to strongly negative perceptions of protest, such as beliefs that it is ineffective, unethical, harmful, or unfulfilling. In doing so, we draw on Plescia’s (in press) argument about the importance of investigating no meaning and anti-meaning in our focus on protest, with the aim of advancing research on non-participation in nonelectoral activities (Oser, 2022a, 2022b). Most research exploring non-participation in protests has focused on the failure to mobilize potential sympathizers (McAdam, 1986; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). However, little is known about why most ordinary citizens do not participate in protests. By exploring variations of no meaning and anti-meaning, the proposed study will contribute to our understanding of non-participation in protest.

The proposed study will also explore aspects of protest that are intrinsically different from voting. We will examine how individuals perceive conflict with law enforcement, transgressions of the law, and violence within the context of protest. Exploring these themes is crucial because the use of violent tactics can have a decisive impact on protest outcomes (Fachter et al., 2024). However, the perception of a particular tactic as “violent” is itself a subject of meaning interpretation (Manekin et al., 2024; Manekin & Mitts, 2022). By analyzing perceptions of violence and conflict in protest and their relationship to individuals’ political behavior, this study will help address unresolved questions regarding the seemingly contradictory trends in electoral and nonelectoral participation in recent years.

The following description of the proposed project’s research design builds on this scientific background. The project will be conducted in collaboration with Prof. Carolina Plescia (please refer to the submitted two-page letter of collaboration for further details).

**B. Research Questions and Expected Significance**

**B.1. Research questions.** Three main research questions guide this project. First, the project seeks to determine what types of meanings of protest exist in the academic literature (RQ1: Meanings of protest in scholarship). Second, it seeks to determine what types of meanings of protest exist for ordinary citizens (RQ2: Meanings of protest of citizens). As many studies have revealed discrepancies between scholarly and citizens’ definitions and assessments of key political concepts (Blais et al., 2023; Canache, 2012; Dalton et al., 2007; Hernández, 2016, 2019; Lavi et al., 2024), we will compare scholarly and citizens’ understandings of the meanings of protest to identify any potential gaps. The third research question asks how ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest relate to political participation (RQ3: Implications for political participation). Addressing this question will identify associations between types of protest meanings and types of political behavior in an era of shifting participation patterns, while taking into account key individual-level socio-demographic characteristics.

**B.2. Expected significance.**  Some scholars view protests as liberal responses to democratic backsliding, while others argue that protests can undermine institutional trust and democracy itself. Exploring the questions posed by the proposed project will enhance our understanding of how citizens view protest as a meaningful venue for making their voices heard at a time of democratic erosion.

Further, given that many scholars have argued that protests are a crucial element of democracy, this project will contribute to our understanding of why the majority of people *do not participate* in protests. This will be achieved through the project’s unique focus on *anti-meanings* and *no meanings* of protest. Assessing the various meanings that citizens attribute to protest will help identify specific reasons why protest may appeal to *distinctive socio-demographic groups*, and to assess the covariates that the existing literature uses to explain *political participation*. Finally, the project will establish a foundation for next-step research aimed at identifying key differences in how individuals understand protest relative to voting. This will contribute to ongoing scholarly debates about the relationships between *conventional* and *nonconventional* forms of political participation.

**C. Research Design Description, Preliminary Findings and Expected Outcomes**

The multi-method research design builds on my ISF-funded research on political efficacy in the digital era (Boulianne et al., 2023; Hooghe et al., 2024; Oser, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Oser, Feitosa, et al., 2023; Oser & Boulianne, 2020)[[1]](#footnote-1) and on my ERC Starting Grant project on participation and representation in the digital age (Han et al., 2024; Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023).[[2]](#footnote-2) A core outcome of these projects to date is the identification of contradictory trends in people’s attitudes towards political participation.

Evidence suggests a growing importance of engaged citizenship norms and nonelectoral participation (Boulianne et al., 2023; Oser, 2022c; Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023). However, traditional citizenship norms and electoral participation continue to play a central role in shaping people’s perceptions of democracy (Oser, Feitosa, et al., 2023). Specifically, we observed a decline in the significance of protest within young people’s perceptions of good citizenship norms (Oser, Hooghe, et al., 2023).

 These findings underscore the importance of understanding people’s meanings of protest, since different meanings may have different implications for political behavior. The following description of the proposed project’s empirical studies builds on this prior research to investigate ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest and their connection to political behavior. Information about the empirical studies is provided in the integrated work plan (Table 1), where all manuscripts noted as research outcomes are intended for submission to high-impact peer reviewed academic journals.

**C.1. Study #1, Literature mapping.** The first planned outcome (Table 1, Outcome 1.1) is a literature mapping study aimed at creating an authoritative typology of meanings of protest within academic research. Given the extensive number of studies on protest, and to reduce subjective bias in selecting studies for review, the proposed study will employ data-driven bibliometric methods. This approach will enable a comprehensive mapping and analysis of the literature on protest to be produced through a methodological approach that has been applied in prominent literature mapping studies (Fils & van Eck, 2018; Walter & Ophir, 2024). To achieve this, I will build on my prior collaborative work that analyzed the scholarly landscape of the term “organizing” in the context of politics and democracy (Han et al., 2024; Shoshan & Oser, in press). The questions that motivate the literature mapping in this project are:

RQ1a: What types of meanings of protest are found in scholarly research? (*RQ1a: Literature meanings*)

RQ1b: Have these meanings changed over time? *(RQ1b: Over time)*

RQ1c: What are the most prominent studies that form the theoretical foundation for the types of meanings of protest found in the broad scholarly literature? *(RQ1c: Prominent studies)*

Study #1 will answer these research questions using literature mapping methods of bibliometric analysis and visual mapping techniques. These methods enable scholars to create images of networks that effectively communicate complex information while providing comprehensive coverage of research fields. This methodology reduces the level of subjective judgment often present in traditional literature reviews (Wagner et al., 2022). Article searches will be conducted in recognized scholarly databases using semi-automated statistical methods that ensure both broad recall and high precision (Huang et al., 2015). The resulting dataset will be analyzed using the bibliometric visualization tool VOSViewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010, 2014), alongside standard statistical analyses using tools like the bibliometrix package in R. I have already begun collaborating with research team members to develop the search terms for the proposed study and to test preliminary results. A preliminary search in the Web of Science, a leading scholarly database in terms of scope and accuracy, yielded 39,607 results.[[3]](#footnote-3) While this magnitude of studies cannot be analyzed using traditional literature review methods, literature mapping is ideally suited to analyze such large datasets (Fils & van Eck, 2018).

To investigate *RQ1a: Literature meanings*, we will produce a map that identifies the main themes within the academic literature on protest and the relationship between these themes, specifically regarding the extent to which they are studied together in academic research. To achieve this, we will generate a “co-occurrence” map, which visualizes the relationships between keywords of studies related to protest. Co-occurrence maps have been successfully applied in previous studies to identify research themes and the relationship between them in various fields, including political science (Han et al., 2024; Shoshan & Oser, in press).

To investigate *RQ1b*: *Over time*, we will use a standard methodology used in prior studies in this field (Fils & van Eck, 2018; Shoshan & Oser, 2024; Walter & Ophir, 2024), by dividing the comprehensive dataset of studies on protest into relevant historical periods. For each period, we will create a co-occurrence map and compare the main themes and types of meanings they represent. This analysis will reveal whether significant changes have occurred in the types of meanings assigned to protest in academic literature over different historical periods.

To investigate *RQ1c: Prominent studies*, we will create a literature map that identifies groups of canonical studies that are frequently cited together by records in the comprehensive dataset of studies on protest. This type of map, known as a “co-citation map,” is used to identify the canonical studies of a research field, the areas of research within the canonical literature, and the relationship between these areas based on their citation frequency (Shoshan & Oser, in press; Walter & Ophir, 2024). By answering these three research questions through literature mapping, we can develop an empirically-grounded and comprehensive overview of the types of meanings of protest in scholarly literature, the evolution of these meanings over time, and the most prominent studies that inform each type of meaning.

Preliminary findings: we tested the capabilities of literature mapping by creating a preliminary co-occurrence map of keywords of records on protest published in the first half of 2024 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Main themes in scholarship on protest published January 1 – June 30, 2024, co-occurrence map.



Notes: Analysis of publication data downloaded from the Web of Science using the VOSviewer software. n=196 keywords out of N=4,045.

The map identifies five clusters representing five themes of research. A preliminary analysis of the clusters identified in the map suggests that they focus on the following main themes:

1. Social media and politics (red)
2. Political behavior and participation (yellow)
3. Resistance and repression (green)
4. Public opinion (purple)
5. Power structures (blue)

These are early-stage preliminary findings of the co-occurrence map due to the time-limited nature of the dataset that we have developed thus far. To validate and elaborate on these findings to obtain conclusive answers to our research questions, we will need to undertake a series of systematic and skilled research steps. Following the literature mapping approach that we developed in a previous study (Shoshan & Oser, in press), these next steps include: 1. Expanding the search term; 2. Retrieving all available records going back to the earliest study on record; 3. Eliminating duplicates and spelling variations; 4. Creating a comprehensive co-occurrence map; 4. Analyzing the clusters to establish the theme associated with each; 5. Analyzing the type of meanings of protest associated with each theme identified in the map; 6. Dividing the dataset into relevant historical periods, creating and comparing the themes and meanings identified in each period; 7. Creating a co-citation map that identifies canonical research areas.

The expected output for this analysis (Outcome 1.1) is a manuscript featuring a comprehensive bibliometric analysis that will include the creation of an authoritative typology of meanings of protest in academic literature.

**C.2. Study #2, Semi-structured interviews of ordinary citizens.** The second study uses semi-structured interviews to investigate the following research questions:

RQ2a: What types of meanings do ordinary citizens have of protest? *(RQ2a: Citizen meanings)*

RQ2b: How does people’s lived experience of protest, whether mediated or unmediated, shape their broader meanings of protest? *(RQ2b:Protest experience)*

RQ2c: How do ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest compare with meanings identified in the literature? *(RQ2c: Citizens versus scholars)*

The study’s methodology draws upon previous interview work with activists participating in the 2011 protest cycles in Israel and Spain (Shoshan, 2018; Shoshan & Oser, 2023). To answer the research questions, we will conduct semi-structured interviews with 90 individuals from three countries: Israel, Spain, and the United States. These countries provide useful contexts for the proposed study, as they are all democratic environments that have experienced high levels of protest alongside challenges to democratic stability and rising levels of democratic backsliding in recent years. This makes them fertile empirical grounds for this research project (Gessler & Hutter, 2021; Meyer & Tarrow, 2018; Romanos et al., 2023; Shultziner, 2023). The three countries also differ from one another in important ways, enabling the project to triangulate findings from nations experiencing different types of democratic backsliding and instability. This diversity will help identify a wide array of meanings of protest among ordinary citizens (see Table 2 for comparison of relevant macro-level country indicators and contexts).

Respondents’ selection: To cover a wide range of possible meanings of protest, we aim to recruit and select a diverse set of respondents. We will employ a stratified convenience sample approach that starts with several different and unrelated individuals, to avoid studying a homogeneous social network (Milliff, 2023). To ensure diversity within the sample, our sampling strategy will deliberately seek variance in key socio-demographic characteristics known to be systematically associated with protest, such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status. Additionally, we will consider variance in respondents’ experiences as participants and non-participants in protests, using a pre-interview screening questionnaire. In accordance with qualitative research standards, these selection mechanisms are not designed to obtain a representative sample of the population, but to map and analyze a wide array of meanings of protest held by ordinary citizens.

Interview instrument: The interview instrument will consist of three parts: 1) a pre-interview screening questionnaire 2) a semi-structured interview guide soliciting the respondent’s meanings of protest 3) a post-interview questionnaire that provides more context about the respondent’s political and social attitudes. The preliminary draft of the semi-structured interview guide is provided in Table 3. It draws on two interview instruments that have been used to elicit diverse, detailed, and meaningful responses concerning people’s perceptions and narratives. The first was used to study ordinary citizens’ meanings of voting (Plescia, in press). The primary insight informing this instrument is that open-ended questions regarding the meanings of abstract concepts, provided with minimal direction from the researcher, can help to overcome the limitations of closed standardized questionnaires (Plescia, in press, Chapter 2). The second insight is that respondents may not provide a full answer when asked a question only once. Follow-up questions that ask: “What else?” are therefore important to obtain a fuller range of meanings from the same respondent (Haddock & Zanna, 1998). Building on these insights, the first part of the interview guide will include the question: “What does protest mean to you?” and two follow-up questions that ask respondents about other meanings they may hold.

The second instrument we draw upon is designed to gather narratives about lived experiences. These narratives play an integral role in how people construct meanings around terms and concepts but are often unexpressed in response to direct questions about attitudes and perceptions. To address this, we use a tool specifically designed to elicit narratives about lived experiences: the life history interview. This method has been widely used to study questions related to individuals’ participation in collective action (Bosi, 2022; Della Porta, 2014).

We specifically use the Life Story Interview II, developed by Dan P. McAdams (2007) from Northwestern University. This has been used to provide meaningful findings in relation to people’s broad understandings of collective action (see Gade, 2020). It prompts respondents to focus on specific moments in their lives when they experienced a certain emotion and to describe these moments in detail. Our pilot interview instrument adapts several relevant questions from McAdams (2007) to explore specific protest-related moments in respondents’ lives. To obtain meaningful answers from respondents who have never participated in protests, we include questions about times when they engaged with mediated content about protests that evoked certain emotions or attitudes. For both groups, we will also ask respondents about their thoughts regarding whether and why they intend to participate in protests in the future.

Data analysis: The data analysis will follow a deductive approach, which is widely used in the social sciences to discover meanings through semi-structured interviews (see Boczkowski et al., 2022; Gur-Ze’ev et al., 2024). The coding process will follow the guidelines stipulated in Saldaña (2021), which include several cycles of line-by-line coding. Initially, we will conduct open-ended coding of the entire transcript to identify possible recurring concepts. This will be followed by specialized coding methods for each interview section, and second cycle methods to organize thematic categories and sub-categories and describe their properties and relationships. This process will include the creation of a codebook that will inform the design of questions regarding the meanings of protest in the cross-national survey included in Study #3 (Cross-national survey).

Outcomes: This study has two planned outcomes, both of which will be presented as manuscripts for submission to high-impact, peer-reviewed journals. The first will report on an empirically grounded typology of ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest, based on respondents’ statements in the interviews (Table 1, Outcome 2.1). The second (Table 1, Outcome 2.2) will focus on theoretical insights gained by comparing the typologies produced in Study #1 (Literature mapping) and Study #2 (Interview-based). This comparison is necessary to highlight meaningful gaps in the literature that can be addressed in future theoretical and empirical research.

Preliminary findings: We conducted four preliminary interviews in Israel to test and adapt the preliminary interview instrument (Table 3). The interviews took place from July 15 through 28, 2024. All respondents had participated in protests in the past, although some have disengaged within the last 5-10 years. In the context of these interviews, we experimented with question types and question order. The preliminary interviews indicate that the interview protocol provides data that is meaningful and relevant for this study’s research questions. Specifically, we obtained indications that responses to direct questions about the meanings of protest tend to generate abstract answers, while responses to questions about lived experiences prompt more detailed and personal recollections. The interview instrument therefore allows us to gather two types of meanings –- in the abstract, and as interpretations of past moments in people’s lives. Additional protocol development will be required during the project to adapt the questions for the contexts of Spain and the United States, to test the questions designed for individuals who have never participated in protests, and to test for the effects of switching question order, similar to the approach taken by Plescia [in press).

In these preliminary interviews, respondents shared insights on the expected meanings of protest discussed above, such as instrumental, expressive, and identity-driven meanings. Additionally, novel meanings of protest emerged that are not prominently discussed in the literature. For example, in the life story section of the interviews, two unrelated respondents drew parallels between a clash with the police and family and child-parent relationships. One respondent said:

I saw a woman kicking a police officer… I was jealous, I said, what, you can do that?... It stuck in my head because I understood that you can be in all sorts of roles… you can feel like you're on the margins trying to scream at your parents to pay attention to you, [or] you can feel that you own the place.

The second respondent said:

When you meet violence from those for whom violence is really in their hands [laughter]… it’s funny, because sometimes I confuse [this with] my educational approach [as a mother], I feel that I am the [source of] power, and my son is like a protester, who wants to clash with me… I know that I have the power, and how easily I can exercise this power, and if he does something that crosses the line, I will exercise this power to the fullest, so… when [protest] gets violent…the state has a lot of violent power that it can exercise, and I don’t want to meet this power face to face.

Both respondents interpreted their experiences by likening them to a child clashing with their parents. The first respondent experienced the situation as disempowering, but felt he was exposed to a behavior that represented the possibility of reversing the power dynamics. The second respondent felt that as a protestor, she was confronting the overwhelming power of the state. These interpretations inform different practical conclusions: that clashing with the police can be a form of self-assertion and ownership of a space; or that it should be avoided because of the potential for extreme state violence.

**C.3. Study #3, Cross-national survey.** The third study is a cross-national survey of 10 countries focused on open-ended questions about the meanings of protest, and a battery of closed-ended questions about the meanings of voting and of protest. The open-ended questions will be analyzed using manual coding and AI coding techniques, including topic modeling. This study investigates the following research questions:

RQ3a: How do the meanings of protest identified in the large-n cross-national survey compare to the meanings obtained in the interview fieldwork? (*RQ3a: Interview vs. large-n survey)*

RQ3b: How do distinctive meanings of protest and voting correlate with key individual-level characteristics, including socio-demographic characteristics and political behavior? *(RQ3b: Individual-level correlates)*

RQ3c: What are the mechanisms that explain the identified associations between individuals’ *meanings of protest* and their *protest behavior*? *(RQ3c: Meaning-behavior mechanisms)*

Our investigation of the first research question (*RQ3a: Interview vs. large-n survey)* is straightforward, drawing insights on how interview-based responses differ from large-n survey data. We will follow Plescia’s (in press) approach to develop closed-ended questions in the large-n survey instrument based on the codebook developed from our analysis of the interview data, which includes relevant meaning categories. We will then analyze the large-n survey data on both the closed-ended and open-ended questions about the meanings of protest. This will involve a systematic investigation of variations in the meanings of protest that are identified. We expect our findings on protest to align with Plescia’s (in press) work on voting, which found meaningful overlap in the interpretation of results from the open-ended and closed-ended questions. Additionally, the open-ended responses were more strongly correlated with individual-level characteristics which will be investigated in *RQ3c (Individual-level correlates).*

To answer the second research question of Study #3, we will conduct multivariate analyses of the survey data to assess how distinctive meanings of protest correlate with key individual-level characteristics, including socio-demographic characteristics and political behavior *(RQ3b: Individual-level correlates)*. We will examine how individual-level socio-demographic characteristics that are theoretically meaningful for this field of research – such as age and left-right ideology (see Kostelka & Rovny, 2019; Uba & Bosi, 2022) – correlate with distinctive meanings of protest. For political behavior, we will build on Plescia’s (in press) work and existing literature on the topic (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Marien et al., 2010). We aim to distinguish between conventional forms of participation – such as voting, campaigning, communal activity, and contacting officials – and unconventional forms of participation, which includes writing to newspapers, signing petitions, joining demonstrations, and online engagement.

A central tension identified in Plescia’s research is that one group of theories *on voting* suggests that some key mechanisms, such as political knowledge and efficacy, underlie all types of political behavior, including conventional and unconventional forms of participation (Borbáth & Hutter, 2022; Hutter & Kriesi, 2013; Lee & Valenzuela, 2024; Scheufele et al., 2006). Another set of theories, which focus on *political participation more broadly,* argues that conventional and unconventional participation are driven by different mechanisms. These theories suggest that having any meaning of voting should correlate with higher overall levels of conventional participation. Conversely, having an anti-meaning of voting should correlate with higher overall levels of unconventional participation. Plescia’s findings on voting provide support for both sets of theories. Having a meaning for voting correlates with higher levels of voting, but not with other conventional forms of participation. It is also associated with higher levels of unconventional participation, supporting the argument that similar underlying mechanisms drive both behaviors. In contrast, having an anti-meaning of voting correlates with lower levels of voting but higher involvement in unconventional participation, supporting the argument that different mechanisms drive these behaviors. In exploring the relationships between meanings of protest and political behavior, Study #3 aims to shed new light on the meanings citizens attach to political behaviors that have shifted in prevalence in recent years, particularly amid declining voting rates and a concurrent rise in protest activities.

To answer the final research question of Study #3, we will draw on the findings from Studies #1 and #2 to design experimental components for the cross-national survey, aimed at identifying the mechanisms that connect people’s *protest meanings* with their *protest behavior* *(RQ3c: Meaning-behavior mechanisms)*. We cannot determine the precise design for these experimental components in advance, since the inductive identification of citizens’ meanings of protest will form a major contribution to the research design. Similar to Plescia’s (in press) approach, the broad descriptive findings on meanings of protest will inform subsequent experimental design.

As noted in Table 1, we intend for research on each of the three research questions in Study #3 to produce a stand-alone manuscript for submission to high-impact, peer-reviewed journals. We are also considering publishing some findings as a concise book, potentially in the *Cambridge Elements* series.

**C.4. Project integration, potential pitfalls, and strategies to address them.** We will promote the visibility of the proposed project’s findings in academia and among the general public (Table 1, Outcome 4.1), and establish a foundation for the design of future multi-national collaborative research (Table 1, Outcome 4.3). Our next-step research design will focus on comparing ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest with those of other political participation terms, including voting, representation, and corruption (Breitenstein & Hernández, 2024; Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2022; Plescia, in press). The international collaboration with Prof. Carolina Plescia provides a useful foundation for future comparisons between her findings on ordinary citizens’ meanings of voting and those of this project. Additionally, the work plan includes an international workshop to take place in years 3-4 (Table 1, Outcome 4.2) to present the project’s outcomes and gather input from international experts on potential broader research collaborations, such as a European Research Council Synergy project, a Horizon 2020 Consortium group, the U.S.-Israel Binational Science Foundation, or a German DFG or GIF project.

The main *theoretical challenge* of the proposed project is to synthesize studies of protest to develop a theory-informed typology of meanings of protest in academic literature for Study #1, while integrating insights from this typology into Study #2’s interview fieldwork, and Study #3’s cross-national survey. Although different theoretical approaches to studying protest have engaged in some dialogue, conversations across multiple lines of research have been limited, with few exceptions (Meyer et al., 2002; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). My academic record reflects my capacity to meet this challenge by using multiple methods to synthesize scholarship on political concepts across different levels of analysis (Han et al., 2024; Shoshan & Oser, in press).

A potential pitfall is that the work plan requires a relatively *large and skilled research team*. As highlighted in the summary of my ISF grant achievements (1246/20), I proactively addressed this challenge by collaborating with colleagues at BGU to strengthen student recruitment and training, and by actively participating in leadership roles in national and international associations, conferences, and research workshops. These efforts have helped me identify several highly qualified potential research team members for all the studies in the proposed project. These include two team members from my current ERC project, whose funding on that project will conclude before the expected start of the proposed ISF project. Aya Shoshan (Shoshan, 2018; Shultziner & Shoshan, 2018), currently a postdoctoral researcher at BGU, has the expertise to take a leading role in Studies #1 and #2. Barak Zur, a PhD student at Tel Aviv University, brings expertise in theory and methodologies central to Study #3. The main challenge at this stage is securing sufficient resources to launch the project’s work plan.

**Tables**

**Table 1.** Integrated work plan *(MA = MA student; PhD = PhD student; PD = postdoctoral researcher)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Outcomes** | **Yrs**a | **Task description & research team members responsible for tasks**b |
| **Study #1.** **Literature mapping** | *1-2* | *Research team members:* MA1 (Y1-2); PD1 (Y1-2) |
| *1.1, Manuscript:* *Typology of scholarly meanings of protest* | 1112 | Design literature search and retrieve dataset (MA1, PD1)Create co-occurrence and co-citation maps (MA1, PD1)Analyze maps (MA1, PD1) Draft manuscript, present at conferences, submit for publication (MA1, PD1) |
| **Study #2. Semi-structured interviews**  | *1-2* | *Research team members:* PhD1 (Y1-2); PD1 (Y1-2) |
| *2.1, Manuscript:* *Typology of ordinary citizens’ meanings of protest* | 112222 | Complete instrument development for three selected countries (PhD1, PD1)Recruit and conduct interviews in Israel and Spain (PhD1, PD1)Recruit and conduct interviews in the U.S. (PhD1, PD1)Transcribe interviews (PhD1, PD1)Interview coding (PhD1, PD1)Draft manuscript, present at conferences, submit for publication (PhD1, PD1) |
| *2.2, Manuscript:**Comparison of scholarly and citizens’ meanings of protest* | 22 | Draft peer-reviewed article based on outcomes 1.1 and 2.1 (PhD1, PD1)Finalize manuscript, present, submit for publication (PhD1, PD1)  |
| **Study #3. Cross-national survey** | 3-4 | *Research team members:* PhD1, PD2 |
| *Manuscripts;* *3.1, Answering RQ3a**3.2, Answering RQ3b**3.3, Answering RQ3c*  | 33-43-4 | Analyze interview vs. large-n survey data on protest meanings (PhD1, PD2)Analyzing individual-level correlates of meanings of protest (PhD1, PD2)Assessing mechanisms that connect protest meaning and behavior (PhD1, PD2) |
| **Project integration and next-step plan**  | *2-4* | *Research team members:* All |
| *Outcome 4.1:**Public scholarship, meanings of protest* | 2-42-4 | Create public-facing summaries of research outcomes (All)Create broad distribution plan of outcomes to advance visibility (All) |
| *Outcome 4.2: International workshop for next-step research* | 3-444 | Submit funding applications: ISF workshop, Rothschild, BGU (PD2)Plan and conduct international workshop (PhD1, PD2)Consult workshop colleagues to specify next-step research (PhD1, PD2) |
| *Outcome 4.3:**Next-step grant app* *[PhD1, PD2]* | 44 | Assess Israeli & international next-step grant applications (PhD1, PD2)Prepare and submit grant applications for next-step research (PhD1, PD2) |

a The timeline is strategically budgeted to the PI to supervise and mentor research team members to be credited as authors and co-authors on the published outcomes of the project. Each outcome will be accompanied by the development and implementation of a distribution strategy, led by the relevant researchers.

bSummary of personnel timing:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Team members** | **Year 1** | **Year 2** | **Year 3** | **Year 4** |
| MA#1 |  |  |  |  |
| PhD#1 |  |  |  |  |
| PD#1 |  |  |  |  |
| PD#2 |  |  |  |  |

**Table 2.** Comparison of relevant country indicators and contexts, 2023.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Israel | Spain | U.S. |
| Population sizea | 9.76M | 48.38M | 334.91M |
| GDP per capita, PPPa | $53,434 | $52,779 | $81,695 |
| Democracy indexb | 7.8 | 8.1 | 7.8 |
| Major protest cycles, last 15 years | Against judicial overhaul (2023)Social justice (2011) | Catalan independence (2020)Anti-austerity (2011) | Capitol riots (2021)Racial justice (2020)Women’s rights (2017-18)Occupy (2011) |
| Democratic backsliding context | Judicial overhaul: set of bills to limit Supreme Court competencies (Gidron, 2023) | Rise of far-right party Vox (Rama et al., 2021)Decline in Freedom House Index score (Gidengil et al., 2022)  | Rise of authoritarian populism: Trump (Kaufman & Haggard, 2019) |

Sources: a World Bank; b Economist Democracy Index.

**Table 3.** Preliminary interview instrument – part 2: semi-structured interview (under development)

Sources (adapted): **ORG**: author’s original question; **DeVOTE**: Plescia (in press). **LSto**: The Life Story Interview II, by McAdams (2007).

This instrument is intended for respondents who have prior experience as participants in protest. We have also developed pre- and post-interview questionnaires (Parts 1 and 3 of the survey instrument), and a preliminary interview instrument for non-participants. These are available upon request.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Part 2: Interview Questions** | Source |
| I would like to start the conversation by asking you if protests are something that interests you. Are you interested in protests that are happening in this country or in other parts of the world? To what extent are protests something that is important to you? | DeVOTE |
| People have different reasons for participating or not participating in protests. Have you been involved in protests in the last 10 years? If so, in what ways? | ORG |
| What does protest mean to you?*Follow-up question (only if answer is given to previous question):* Does protest mean anything else to you? *Follow-up question (only if answer is given to previous question):*Do any additional meanings come to mind when you think about protest? | DeVOTE |
| Generally speaking, why do you/don’t you participate in protest? | DeVOTE |
| **High point.** Please describe a scene, episode, or moment related to your participation in protests that stands out as an especially positive experience. This might be *the* high point of your experience, or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story. Please describe this high point in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling at the time? Also, please say a few words about why you think this particular moment was so positive. | LSto |
| **Low point.** The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back on your protest participation, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not *the* low point in your story. Even though this event was unpleasant, I would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. What happened during the event, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling at the time? Also, please say a few words about why you think this particular moment was so bad. | LSto |
| **Vivid memory.** Please identify one scene related to your participation in protest that you have not already described in this section (in other words, please do not repeat your high point, low point, or turning point scenes) that stands out as especially vivid or meaningful. This would be an especially memorable, vivid, or important scene. Please describe this scene in detail, describe what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling at the time. Also, please say a few words about why you think this particular moment was meaningful. | LSto |
| Do you think you will participate in protests in the next 10 years? Why? Please elaborate as much as possible. There are no right or wrong answers.  | DeVOTE |

1. ISF grant no. 1246/20; for details on the achievements of that project, see submitted two-page report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://www.prd-erc.eu/publications> for an updated list of publications from the ERC project. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Search conducted on July 18, 2024. The Boolean search term for this preliminary search was: "protest\*" NOT "protestant\*" (Topic). In subsequent stages, this term will be refined to include related terms that meet established relevance thresholds confirmed through automatic and semi-automatic methods (Huang et al., 2015), as in Shoshan and Oser (in press). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)