

## **Protest in Italy in times of crisis: a cross-government comparison**

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*Using protest event analysis methodology and conceptual and theoretical toolkits developed in social movement studies, this article analyses protest mobilisation during the period of the height of the economic crisis in Italy (2009-14) by comparing the protest trends in diachronic and comparative perspectives over a period of four different governments. Data show that the Italian anti-austerity protest arena was dominated by 'old actors', and was not able to produce the strong social and political coalitions that emerged in other southern European countries. This was due to the specific relationship that developed between civil society and political parties which shaped the forms of anti-austerity mobilisation in this period.*

*Keywords: Italian politics; protest; political parties; trade unions; austerity*

The economic crisis that began in 2008 triggered widespread protests and dissent across Europe, especially in those countries, such as Italy, which have suffered a greater economic and social impact. In the literature on social movements economic globalization has long been considered an important source of dissent across Europe (Della Porta et al. 2006), and the recent crisis has drawn new attention to the macro-structural dimensions of protests (della Porta et al. 2017). Economic, social and political changes produce both threats and opportunities for protest mobilisation. Threats produce grievances which, in turn, can be transformed into protest mobilisation, but major protest players need to rely on organizational resources and to seize available political opportunities to mobilise for their own interests. When protest organizations perceive the political opportunity to take to the streets, they engage in intense framing activities and resource pooling to convince ordinary citizens to meet their calls for action (Tarrow 2011). Organizations may cooperate for common action or compete to secure political attention and leverage, depending on their relational assets and on the structure of political opportunities .

This article will argue that organization strategies, political opportunities and the perception of those possibilities are significant explanatory factors of the protest mobilisation Italy experienced in the period between 2009 and 2014. The primary method used is the Protest Event Analysis, which is combined with in-depth interviews with key protest actors as well as qualitative analysis of newspaper articles. The main argument articulated is that the position of the traditional allies of major protest players regarding social and economic issues, namely leftist political parties, have pushed the main protest organizations toward different patterns of collective action according to their political strategies. After outlining the thesis on which the empirical analysis is based and the methods used to gather data on protest and protest players, the article provides an overview of the economic, social and political context in which Italian anti-austerity protests emerged, followed by a summary of the most important findings of the research, while the conclusions assess the implications of the results in a comparative perspective.

### **Protest Mobilisation Theory**

Common sense about protest behaviour suggests that people get angry when they are hungry: riots, revolutions, violent protests, and rebellions of all sorts are often associated with worsening political, social and economic conditions (Hobsbawn 1962). While social movements scholars have obviously taken into serious consideration such an intuitive understanding of protest dynamics, most of them, especially those investigating protest mobilisation empirically, reached the conclusion that not all hungry people - and not always - get (politically) angry, and not all the people who get angry protest (McCarthy & Zald 1977, Tilly, Tilly et al. 1975, Tarrow 2011). At the same time many observed that protestors may actually not be angry at all (Smith & Kessler 2004)—anger seems to lead to demobilisation instead (Owens 2009)—and sometimes, especially in mature democracies, are not

hungry (Inglehart 1977).

The economic crisis that commenced in 2008, however, has re-ignited the interest of scholars in the structural dimension of protest mobilisation. For example, in their handbook on social movements in Latin America, Almeida and Cordero Ulate (2015) assert that economic threats provoked by the globalization process have triggered mass protest mobilisations in the whole region, while, according to Dodson (2016), economic threats following the recent financial crisis have fostered movement participation around the world. Moreover, a recent study has shown that protestors in southern Europe consider the financial crisis as evidence of a general failure of the neo-liberal project, and the policies of austerity undertaken to overcome the crisis are seen as a means of curing a patient with the same treatment which originally provoked the illness (della Porta, Andretta et al. 2017).

This article assesses the impact of changes in the economic conditions caused by the crisis on protest, arguing that this impact is mediated by other intervening factors. It may be true, as neo-Marxists contend, that ‘the transformations of apparently economic types of conflict into political ones, are all forms of mobilisation that can be explained just by reference to the existence of a structure that constantly reproduces conditions for conflict’ (Atzeni 2010, p. 20; see also Cohen 1988); and, as relative deprivation theory argues, that individual and collective actors protest or rebel if they feel frustrated with their current social, political and economic situation (Gurr 1970, Morrison 1973). Nevertheless, as this article will argue, even under the pressures provoked by the economic crisis, grievances are more likely to produce protest if specialized organizations mobilise resources to seize political opportunities. Organizations mobilise resources to lower the costs of participation to individuals and get them involved in protest actions (McCarthy & Zald 1977), but they do that when they strategically need protest mobilisation to see their organizational goals satisfied. Their main strategy is to put pressure on institutions and policy makers, and they recur to protest especially when other channels of negotiation are precluded. Assuming this to be correct, protest mobilisation dynamics

depend on political opportunities.

Political opportunities can be defined as ‘specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilisation, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others’ (Kitschelt 1986, p. 58). Some patterns of political opportunities, such as political regimes, the state’s level of centralization, politicised cleavages, and the state’s prevailing strategies toward challengers may be relatively stable. Though they have proved relevant in explaining protest variations across countries (Kitschelt 1986, Kriesi, Koopmans et al. 1995, Tarrow 2011), they are hardly helpful in explaining variation across time in a single country. Other, more fluid characteristics, such as power configuration and changes in the strength of challengers’ allies and opponents within the political system offer potentially greater explanatory power in the context of this study (Tarrow 1989, 2011, della Porta & Diani 1996).

The position of allies and opponents within the political system toward major protest players is deemed to be particularly relevant in that respect (della Porta & Diani 1996). Leftist parties are often regarded as allies and right-wing parties as opponents of progressive social movements and protest actors. When allies are in power, protest players perceive more opportunities to influence political outputs through direct channels of communications with the rulers. In this case, the organizations with traditional links with allies engage in intense activities of lobbying and consultation with the parties in office, and moderate their presence in the protest arena. In contrast, when allies are in opposition, organizations close to them intensify their presence in the protest arena, as institutional channels are precluded, especially if the governing parties are perceived as opponents. In the former case, however, the organizations do not disappear from the protest scene, since they need to keep it under control, and while their protest declines, they leave room for more informal and radical protestors with weak or tense relations with political parties. The very presence of political parties in the protest arena depends on their position within the political system. Moreover, in multiparty systems, like the Italian one, allies

have traditionally competed with each other to gain support from the same constituency (Tarrow 1989). However, although both threats and opportunities are somehow objective, they are in any case filtered by the perceptions which major protest players have of them. Strategic choices are sometimes based more on perceptions than on concrete threats and opportunities, and if objective opportunities are not perceived as such, any kind of causal link between them and mobilisation is difficult to reconstruct (Shriver & Adams 2013). Finally, perceptions of political opportunities are shaped by collective ideologies and identities (Dalton, Reccia & Rohrschneider 2003), and the way in which they impact on the protest arena depends on the relational dynamics between different collective actors and social movement sectors (Diani 2013).

### **Protest Events: Methods of Analysis**

The primary method of analysis used in this article is Protest Event Analysis (thereafter PEA, and PE for Protest Events). PEA is a method which makes possible for cross-time and cross-space comparison of protest mobilisation and has become widely used in social movement and protest studies (Hutter 2014). It has also provided the foundation for important research such as: the birth of contemporary social movements during the state-building process and the evolution of violence and strikes in modern states (Shorter & Tilly 1974, Tilly, Tilly et al. 1975); civil rights movements in the USA (McAdam 1982); protests in the late 1960s in Italy (Tarrow 1989); and the new European social movements (Kriesi, Koopmans et al. 1995). As the few works cited here demonstrate, PEA has proven to be central in studies focusing on the political process approach, since the dynamics and features of PE can be contrasted with changes in political opportunities and structures over time and across space (Hutter 2014).

Most researchers adopting PEA use newspapers as sources to gather information on protests,

especially when the aim is to cover a relatively long time span (Franzosi 1987). Through newspaper articles it is possible to collect useful information about PE: the organizations staging the protest, the type of social players involved, the claims and the issues surrounding the protest, the forms of action used, the targets of the protest, its scope, and other relevant information. Such information is organized following a codebook which defines the variables and labels for each protest property, and the resulting data are inserted in a matrix for statistical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth underlining at least two sorts of potential bias with regard to media and newspapers: one concerns the type of protest itself and the other the type of newspapers selected. On one hand, newspapers more often tend to report and detail large or radical protests, which deal with issues at the centre of media attention (McCarthy, McPhail et al. 1996). On the other hand, local and liberal or leftist newspapers tend to cover more PE than other newspapers (Rucht and Neidhart 1998). Yet, despite these drawbacks, a research method based on the use of newspapers is still justified. Besides the fact that any kind of source produces biases with which political and social science have to contend, the most important point about comparative and longitudinal research is to keep biases constant as much as possible. In addition, this method allows for a large amount of data collection which would otherwise be impossible or too demanding. Finally, it is only via securing media attention that protests are likely to enter the public debate, to become known by the public and, in the end, to influence the elites and decision makers (Hutter 2014).

By operatively defining a PE as *a protest episode in which five or more people mobilise through political direct and contentious actions to influence elites decisions and decision making with their claims*, this article is based on data from articles selected from the online version of the daily newspaper *La Repubblica* using the keyword ‘protest\*’. Among all the articles with ‘protest\*’ in the text or the title, only those referring to PE carried out by more than five people were selected. According to the data gathered between 2009 and 2014, *La Repubblica.it* reported on 1,140 protests

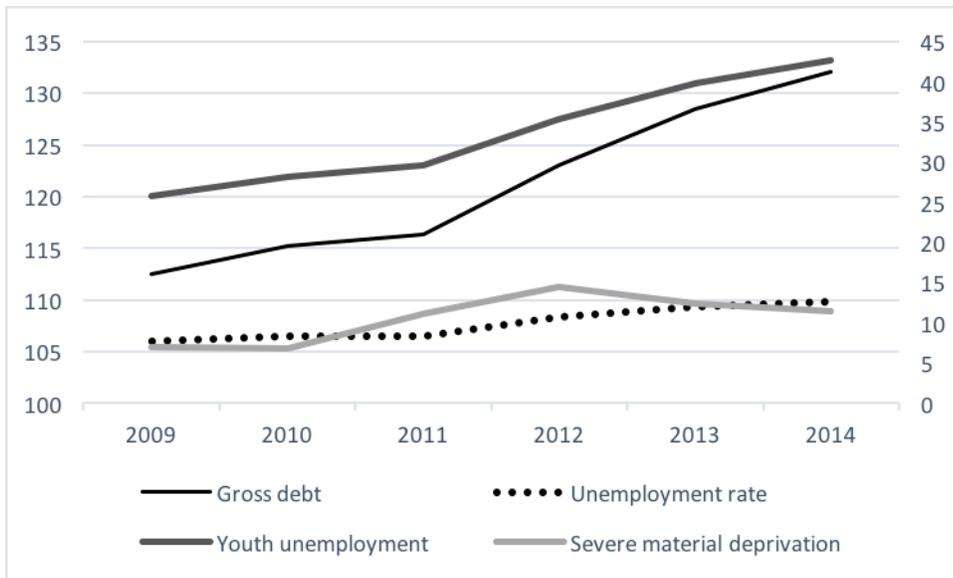
in Italy. The themes of the PE related to anti-austerity (economic crisis, budget cuts, privatization, labour issues, cuts in welfare – education, health system, culture) were present in about 70 per cent of the PE (800). This analysis will be based on anti-austerity PE only.

Protest event analysis will be combined with the results obtained from more qualitative methods, which include in-depth interviews with eight key representatives, activists and experts of the most visible organizations and social movements mobilizing against austerity (see list of interviews), all administered in 2015, in addition to qualitative use of newspaper articles. Those data have been used especially to reconstruct group and organizational perceptions, relations between protest players and authorities, and relations between players in the protest arena.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Economic Crisis in Italy: Threats, Grievances and Political Opportunities**

The economic crisis as well as the austerity measures which followed certainly represented relevant threats for the Italian population, as they increased inequality, poverty, and unemployment and thus weakened even more already powerless citizens, a part of society which is the foundation of social movement organizations and progressive protest. As it is well known, the financial crisis both in Italy and in other Southern European countries created obstacles to the refinancing plans for the growing public deficit and a spectacular increase in the differential between interest rates in Italy and Germany. Given its chronically low level of productivity, Italy has been strongly affected by the world economic crisis, induced by the financial crisis, with a drop in the GDP, which in turn impacted on the main socio-economic indicators (see Figure 1 and also Bull 2018).

**Figure 1** Main socio-economic indicators in Italy 2009-2014



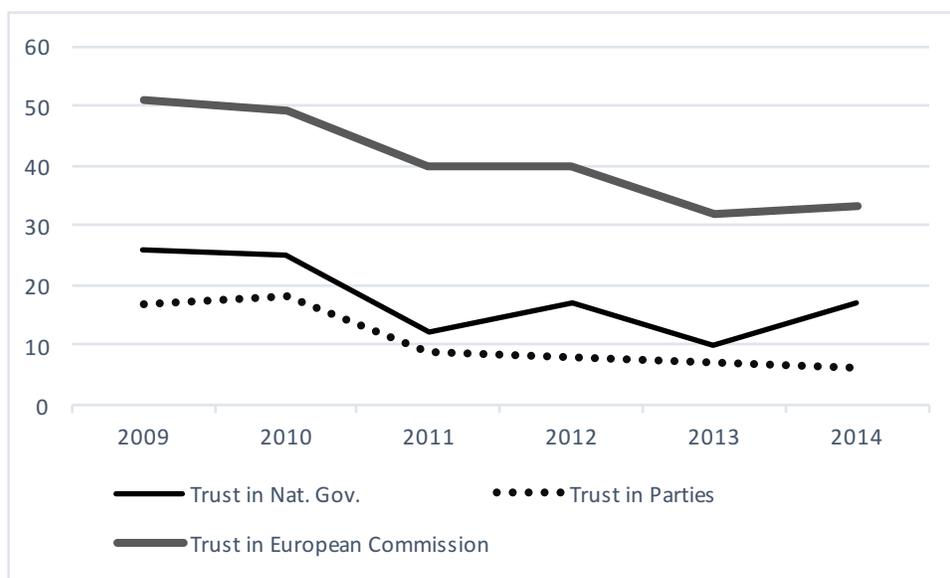
Source: Eurostat (201?)

As Figure 1 indicates, some of the most important socio-economic indicators all go in the same direction, with the Gross debt increasing from 112 per cent in 2009 to 132 per cent in 2014; the unemployment rate from 7.7 to 13 per cent, youth unemployment from 22 to 43 per cent, and severe material deprivation from 7 to 11.5 per cent. A report (Nastasi & Palmisano 2015), commissioned by the LIBE committee (Committee on Civil Rights, Justice and Home Affairs) of the European Parliament, shows how the measures of austerity undertaken by the Italian governments since 2008 had a negative impact on ‘fundamental rights’. The report underlines the main legislative interventions seriously weakening social, labour, and educational rights: cuts in the pension system and education, liberalization of the job market, constitutionalisation of the budget limits, etc. (see also Catanzaro 2018)

If both the crisis and austerity policies have exacerbated the social conditions of the Italian population, it is not surprising to see that austerity measures have been highly unpopular. According to the results of an opinion poll survey conducted by Gallup (2013), 62 per cent of Italians believe that the ‘policy of austerity in Europe’ is not working, only 3 per cent that it is working, and 28 per cent that it

is working, but it takes time. At the same time, 76 per cent said that those policies are serving the interests of only certain countries (mostly Germany), and 67 per cent believed that ‘there are alternatives’. The same survey shows that 66 per cent of Italians were rather pessimistic about the future of young people in Europe: as many as 92 per cent believes that young people will have fewer opportunities than their parents’ generation to have a secure job; 87 per cent a satisfying job; 93 per cent a secure pension; 92 per cent a high salary, and 54 per cent comfortable accommodation. It comes with no surprise, then, that Italians’ trust in the most important institutions, both national and European, drastically declined after 2009 (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Trust in institutions in Italy 2009-2014 (per cent of ‘tend to trust’)



Source: Eurobarometer (201?)

Not only did the sovereign debt crisis and the austerity measures undertaken to control it produce threats and grievances but they also had an impact on national politics. At the time of the explosion of the sovereign debt crisis, the Prime Minister was Silvio Berlusconi who was supported by a centre-right coalition hostile to protest actors<sup>3</sup>, while the Democratic Party (PD)<sup>4</sup> was in the opposition. Although other more radical leftist parties existed, they had all failed to enter the

Parliament after the 2008 national elections. In 2011, however, under pressure from both the European Union and the then President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, Berlusconi resigned and a new caretaker government under the leadership of the economist Mario Monti was formed. The Monti government represented a typical shift in a fluid situation characterised by changing political opportunities, as it was based on a large coalition which included the PD. At the same time, it was under his government that Italy received a secret letter from the ECB explicitly asking him to proceed with the necessary ‘structural reforms’, which included liberalization, job flexibility, privatization, and public sector pay cuts, all considered important measures to increase Italian growth potential (Il Sole 24 Ore 2011).

In the 2013 national elections, under an electoral law that assigned a majority premium at the national level for the Chamber of Deputies and at the regional level for the Senate, the centre-left coalition, formed by the Democratic Party and *Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà* (SEL, Left, Ecology, and Liberty)<sup>5</sup> won the majority of seats in the former but not in the latter. One of the reasons that prevented the centre-left coalition from winning a safe majority in Parliament was the spectacular electoral performance of the Five Stars Movement (M5S), which has been interpreted as the voters’ reaction to the austerity measures undertaken by mainstream left and right political parties, especially since its electoral manifesto focused on strong criticism toward European institutions and their dictates (see Tronconi 2018).

The electoral outcome resulted in the creation of a large coalition government, with the PD as the major player, led by Enrico Letta (of the PD). The new government lasted until February 2014, when Letta was replaced by the new leader of the PD, Matteo Renzi, whose government was supported by the same parliamentary majority. In both cases, the left split into a pro-government group (which included the PD) and the opposition (with SEL). Two years later, in December 2016, Matteo Renzi resigned after a referendum rejected his constitutional reforms, which was meant to ‘modernize’ the

Italian political system, and a new government was formed with the support of the same coalition, but this time with Paolo Gentiloni (of the PD) as Prime Minister.

Summarizing, the economic crisis unequivocally produced the kind of threats that may potentially lead to protest mobilisation, especially because the policies, mostly austerity-based to respond to the crisis, seem to have exacerbated the socio-economic conditions of many Italians. As a result, grievances against both political institutions and policies have increased over time. At the same time, in the period under examination (2009-2014), four successive governments shaped three different types of political opportunities for protest players: the Berlusconi government with the left in the opposition, the Monti government with the major left party included in a large coalition, and the two PD governments, the first led by Enrico Letta and the other by Matteo Renzi, with a radical-left party in the opposition (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Summarizing political opportunity configurations across governments.

Governments	Berlusconi	Monti	Letta-Renzi
Major Left Party	Opposition	Government	Government
Radical-Left Party	Extra-Parliamentary	Extra-Parliamentary	Opposition
Opponents	Government	Government	Opposition
Radical Opponents	Government	Opposition	Opposition

### **Anti-austerity Mobilisation in Italy 2009-2014: Data Analysis**

In December 2008, the largest Italian trade union, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL), called for a general strike against the newly-formed Berlusconi government, with the slogan ‘against the crisis, more salary, more pensions and more rights’. As the former CGIL leader, Guglielmo Epifani, explained at that time: ‘With our strike we ask the government to face with adequate instruments what everybody by now sees as one of the deepest crises in recent history ...

The CGIL is on the side of both temporary and guaranteed workers, and we aim at extending social rights to all workers...’ (FLC-CGIL 2008). In spite of the refusal of the other two large trade unions, the Italian Confederation of Workers’ Unions (CISL) and the Italian Labour Union (UIL), to join the CGIL, tens of thousands of workers, students and citizens participated in demonstrations in several cities. The biggest demonstration (with 200,000 participants) was in Bologna, where the CGIL leader delivered his speech.

Four years later, in 2012, a big new anti-austerity demonstration targeting the one-year-old Monti government was held in Rome. This time the promoters were mainly grassroots trade unions, student movements, extreme or radical leftist political parties, and informal social movement organizations. The leaflet calling for mobilisation read: ‘No to Monti and to his economic policies, which produce labour precariousness, layoffs, unemployment, and poverty; no to the neoliberal counter-reform; no to a stability-pact Europe, the Fiscal Compact, austerity and rigour, which have destroyed Greece for years and Italy now. Yes to a decent job, to social welfare, to an income for all, Italians and migrants’ (Confederazione USB 2012). Tens of thousands of protestors marched under different flags and banners, all criticizing austerity policies (La Repubblica.it 2012). One of the promoters of the protest, the leader of the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC), Paolo Ferrero, tellingly asked: ‘What is the CGIL waiting for? Call a general strike against this government...?’, and the leader of the grassroots trade union, the Confederation of Grass Roots Committees (COBAS), Piero Bernocchi, stated ‘It is time to stop following the centre-right and the centre-left, it is time to build an alternative politics’; and, the former president of the Chamber of Deputies and former leader of the PRC, Fausto Bertinotti, declared that, ‘It is time to re-build the left; centre-left politics amends but does not propose alternatives’ (Ancorafischia 2012). During the demonstration, joined by about 150,000 citizens, a group of hooded black youngsters daubed paint on banks and shops, one with a sentence wishing Monti and his minister of labour and social policies, Elsa Fornero, a trip to the

cemetery; others overturned lorries and were armed with sticks (Di Marzio 2012), and still others blocked the city's orbital road (Youreporter.it 2014).

In November 2014, grassroots trade unions, students, common-good and environmental organizations, temporary workers and school teachers, social centres and housing right organizations, as well as gender-equality and LGBT groups all adhered to what has been called by the promoters a widespread, decentralized and flexible 'social strike' against the labour reform, named Jobs Act, and other perceived austerity and neoliberal policies undertaken by the PD-led Renzi government (Saviano 2014). That social strike was the most remarkable innovation in the collective action repertoire of the entire anti-austerity protest mobilisation in Italy: ' . . . who cares how many workers effectively did not go to work? The production is in the city: we block the city for 24 hours. If you look at the strike [on 14 November 2014], the number of strikers is low, but the participation in the piazzas of 60 cities was a very positive thing. The social strike was effectively coordinated and nothing wrong happened [meaning violent episodes or clashes with the police]. And this made a big impression. . . . A kind of myth was created, it's like we moved an army, with full control of the piazzas, with very high levels of participation' (Interview 1).

These three big protest mobilisations illustrate very well the dynamics of the anti-austerity protest mobilisation in Italy from 2009 until the end of 2014: the involvement of different types of organizations and social movement sectors, the use of different protest tactics, ranging from strike and demonstration to more radical and disruptive forms of action, the prevalence of the national government as a target, and the transformation of the protest arena dynamics over time.

### *A Diachronic Perspective*

The number of PE related to anti-austerity issues reported by *La Repubblica* was 800, but the variation over time is relevant. PE and protest participants were significantly higher from 2009 to 2011 (Figure 3-1), then declined in the following two years and rose again in 2014. The anti-austerity protest arena was dominated by trade unions which staged about 52 per cent of PE, 34 per cent by the largest confederations, among which the most active was unsurprisingly the traditional leftist CGIL (31 per cent), and as much as 20 per cent mostly by radical leftist grassroots trade unions. Formal social movement organizations or associations were present in about 18 per cent of the cases, while informal social movement organizations, such as social centres, and groups, such as local committees, in 19 per cent; in 20 per cent no organization was present or mentioned. Figure 3-2 shows that the CGIL protest peaked first in 2009 and then in 2010, declined in 2011 and 2013, and increased a bit later. Informal social movements and groups dominated between 2011 and 2013 instead. Also the social profile of anti-austerity mobilisation was clearly defined: as much as 71 per cent were employed in both public and private sectors; only 16 per cent was composed of students, and 12 per cent of temporary workers (including unemployed). The tactical repertoire used in anti-austerity protest has been mainly characterized by strikes (33 per cent) and demonstrations (23 per cent), but also disruptive tactics such as blockages, occupations, blitzes and similar activities (21 per cent), while violent actions against objects (banks, cars, buildings, firms) or persons (clashes with the police) characterized only 6 per cent of the events.<sup>6</sup>

[**Figure 3** about here]

It is worth noting that strikes peaked in 2010 and sharply declined in the following years, though from 2013 their use increased again, reaching a lower than previous peak in 2013 and then a higher peak in 2014 (Figure 3-3). At the same time more radical forms of action, including violence,

prevailed especially between 2011 and 2012 (Figures 3-3 and 3-5). Finally, the entire protest trend was characterized by the national government being the main target (Figure 3-4). Even if the economic crisis was determined primarily by economic actors (banks) and austerity policies were promoted and, to some extent, imposed by European (the European Commission and the European Central Bank) and international (the International Monetary Fund) institutions, both of which were targeted by anti-austerity protest mobilisation in other countries such as Spain and Greece (della Porta, Andretta et al. 2017), in Italy the main target of the protest was the national government.

Figure 3-5 presents three indicators defining the relational dynamics of protest: coercion and disruptiveness, the relations between challengers and authorities, and the number of PE staged by multiple organizations, which, controlled by disruptiveness, indicates the relational dynamics between protest arena players. Unsurprisingly, the more radical the forms of action adopted in a PE, the more likely police intervention is, and vice versa (the Pearson coefficient is .46, sig. at .001 level). What is more interesting is the correlation between multiple organizational events and disruptiveness (.10, Sig. at .01 level). The former variable should indicate cooperation between different protest actors to promote mobilisation, a proxy of coalition building in the mobilisation process. On the contrary, the correlation with radical forms of action indicates competitiveness between major protest players and more formal organizations trying to control protest disruptiveness and more informal ones trying to increase the level of conflict.

Overall, this diachronic analysis demonstrates that the link between economic and policy threats and protest mobilisation is complicated by other intervening factors. Although unemployment and young unemployment rates increased over time, PE declined; trust in national government, a reversed proxy of grievance, was higher in 2009 and 2010 (Figure 2) when the anti-austerity protest reached its highest peaks. However, if we look at the level of disruptiveness, the link between economic threats and radical protest cannot be simply rejected. Moreover, while most proxies of economic threats (see

Figure 1) indicate a progressive intensification along the period under examination, both the level of conflict between authorities and challengers and the degree of disruptiveness peaked in the middle of the selected period. In any case, such a mechanistic view would weaken any understanding of the relational forces which transform threats-grievances into collective action and shape protest arena dynamics.

### *A Cross-Government Comparative Perspective*

The main theoretical argument of this study is based on the political process approach, and aims at combining political opportunities, relations, and perceptions. Table 2 summarizes the PE statistics by governments and political opportunities configurations.

Under the Berlusconi government, the PD, the largest left party and a potential key ally for protest players, was in the opposition, while all the opponents, including the National Alliance (AN, the heir of the post-fascist MSI party) and the Northern League (LN), were full members of the government coalition. In these conditions, protest actors, including the most powerful leftist trade union—the CGIL—had no opportunities to influence the government through formal and informal institutional channels, and they therefore mobilised their resources in the protest arena.

When the CGIL called for a general strike in December 2008, for instance, its leader attacked the government claiming that the organization was excluded from an informal meeting between the government, the representatives of Confindustria (the main Italian employers' federation and national chamber of commerce) and the leaders of the other two more moderate trade unions (CISL and UIL): 'President Berlusconi'—a CGIL memo reads—'shows no respect for those expressing different opinions'. At the same time the CGIL leader strongly criticized both Confindustria and the other two trade unions (La Repubblica.it 2008). However, the level of competitiveness between protest actors,

indicated by the correlation between disruptiveness and multiple organizational events, was the highest of the protest cycle.

According to a former activist of the Italian student movement, and key expert on student mobilisation, reporting on a specific PE under the Berlusconi government, there was ‘very much a conflictual dynamic, in which tensions emerged on basically anything, the grassroots unions against the FIOM (the metalworkers branch of the CGIL), and against each other, the FIOM against the CGIL, SEL against the PRC, etc. . . . Internal rivalry between different sectors, with some who want to radicalize their action and others who want to keep control over the protest’ (Interview 3). Another activist of the water campaign (‘Water, common good’), said: ‘you know it better than me, when trade unions are together in a protest mobilisation on their issues, they struggle against each other, on one side you have the CGIL and on the other the COBAS and the CUB [grassroots trade unions]’ (Interview 2).

It seems that the CGIL hegemony in the protest arena generated more competitiveness between different social movement sectors, and that the more radical of them fiercely criticized the traditional link between the CGIL and institutional allies: ‘There is an excess of “politicismo” [political, meaning electoral and institutional, orientation] in the bureaucratic parties and trade union structures; this leads them to orient any interactions with social movements toward this “politicista” view. . . . In its turn, this creates a lot of diffidence among social movements’ (Interview 5). The tension between different social movement sectors related to the presence of the CGIL is also evident in the words of the COBAS leader who, when talking about a students’ social movement sector, said: ‘They were born connected to the CGIL, they loosened this link, but they keep it. So, anytime that the CGIL apparently turns to the left, they start to collaborate with us for some form of protest mobilisation, but at the same time they get involved in CGIL PE’ (Interview 1). According to an intellectual who is an active supporter of a pro-migrant movement, ‘if we don’t break these mechanisms and we keep thinking that a political

proposal needs to be channelled by the trade unions, through the mediation of the PD... we do not go anywhere' (Interview 4, similar Interview 5).

When Berlusconi was forced to resign, and a new government was formed under the leadership of Mario Monti, things changed. The enemy was defeated, and new chances to influence the government opened up. The effective defection of the CGIL from the protest arena left room for more informal and radical organizations, with less organizational resources and more radical repertoire. This generated less protest, albeit of a more radical nature. In the words of the leader of a radical leftist grassroots trade union: 'While the 2008 strike was a big event, protest declined at the end of the Berlusconi government. During the protest on the school system in Gelmini's time [Minister of Education in the previous Berlusconi government], the PD and the CGIL used the school reform protest essentially to cause the government problems; when Berlusconi resigned, the political part of the CGIL stopped protesting. From 2011 until 2013 we had a strong de-mobilisation' [Interview 1]. A former activist of the national student movement asserted that, 'The whole political picture changed...protest mobilisation under the anti-Berlusconi framework was much easier, all movements always targeted the right-wing government as the enemy... when the Monti government was formed people told you "Why are you protesting, why are you taking to the streets? Berlusconi was defeated, there is no need to protest now". With Monti, the movements lost their institutional and media allies, and mobilisation became more complicated' (Interview 3). The change in the political situation also affected the protest behaviour of other more radical leftist parties, especially SEL. The perception of an activist and key-expert was that 'in 2011 Vendola [at that time the leader of SEL] said: "Since I will be in the centre-left electoral coalition with the PD in the next national elections, on Monti I remain silent!". And SEL disappeared from the street' (Interview 3).

**Table 2** Shift in political opportunities and protest statistics

Governments	Berlusconi	Monti	Letta-Renzi	Total	Coefficients	Sig.
Protest Events (four-month average)	50	34	43	44	ETA: .28	.001
CGIL Presence (PE means)	0,38	0,17	0,27	0,31	ETA: .17	.001
Grassroots Trade Unions Presence (PE means)	0,19	0,17	0,25	0,2	ETA: .09	.05
FSMOs Presence (PE means)	0,15	0,21	0,2	0,18	ETA: .07	N.S.
ISMOS Presence (PE means)	0,12	0,42	0,16	0,19	ETA: .29	.001
Multiple org. event (1-5)	2,1	1,9	2,7	2,2	ETA: .25	.001
Disruptiveness (1-10)	2,9	3,7	2,8	3	ETA: .18	.001
Level of Coercion	0,1	1,7	0,1	0,4	ETA: .12	.001
Level of Conflict	0,39	0,52	0,46	0,46		
Level of Competition	0,13	N.S.	N.S.	0,1	Significant Pearson Correlations	

At the same time, under the Monti government multiple organizational events were characterised by less disruptiveness, indicating more cooperation, or at least reduced aggressiveness, in the protest arena. The relative absence from the protest scene of the ‘politicized’ CGIL and the poverty of organizational resources may have forced the remaining protest actors to coordinate for fewer but more radical protest actions, which were often met by a coercive response from the police. As a consequence, the level of conflict between authorities and protest players, indicated by the correlation between radical actions and police intervention, reached its peak.

The 2013 elections produced a further shift: the centre-left coalition conducted an electoral campaign under the slogan ‘Italy. Common Good’, a frame used by many social movement campaigns, but it won the majority of seats only in the lower chamber. A new coalition was necessary to form a government, but this time the PD was the major player. Thus, an intra-parliamentary separation within the left emerged, with the PD forming the new government while SEL held seats in the opposition.

Moreover, these elections witnessed the parliamentary debut of the M5S, which put an end to the bipolar party system (Tronconi 2018)

Theoretically speaking, the new picture should have brought about even more political opportunities for resourceful protest actors to lobby for favourable policies, and consequently the level of protest mobilisation should have been low, though more radical. Yet, nothing like this happened. Protest mobilisation kept rising again, the level of disruptiveness was the lowest of the entire period, the level of organizational cooperation (indicated by a high number of multi-organizational protests and low level of competitiveness in the protest arena) was the highest, and the level of conflict between authorities and challengers remained quite high. Once again, such counterfindings would remain without answer if we did not take into account the transformations in the relationships linking allies, protest actors and social movements.

In the initial phase the Letta government proceeded with a conventional centre-left dialogue with the three confederal trade unions, but that dialogue lasted only a few months. The CGIL started to criticize the government's lack of efficient economic policies (Salvatori 2014), and a total break between the CGIL and its traditional ally subsequently occurred under the Renzi government. After a meeting between trade unions and the government to discuss the stability law in 2014, the leader of the CGIL, Susanna Camusso, affirmed: 'It is surreal that in an important meeting like this, the government did not answer the several objections we raised about the stability law. There was no discussion... The ministers had no mandate to negotiate'; the response of the Prime Minister was even more telling: 'What is surreal is that Camusso says that we need to negotiate ... it is time for each of us to do our own job... Laws are made in the parliament, not in negotiation with trade unions... If trade unions want to make laws they need to be elected to the parliament' (Il Messaggero 2014). Relations between allies and protest actors dramatically changed. A CGIL-FIOM national representative noted: 'unfortunately there is continuity between the policies of the former centre-right government and those

of the centre-left government today. Monti, Letta, and Renzi share a common feature: resources are obtained from employees and retired people because it's easier. At the same time, no redistributive policies are implemented' (Interview 6). While a CGIL member tellingly admitted that, 'The inability of the left to understand what is happening in our society and its insufficient capacity to represent societal needs are evident. I believe in an organization functioning in both social conflict and politics ... which needs to give political answers to social needs instead of riding their [the politicians'] wave' (Interview 7). Radical social movements also perceive that change: 'Today it is evident that the long history of the left—obviously pre-PD—is over; the space for this project does not exist any longer' (Interview 8).

### **Anti-austerity Protest in Italy: Conclusions in a Comparative Perspective**

In the early 2000s, Italian social movements had probably been among the most active in Europe in generating a strong, anti-neoliberal mobilisation of protest (della Porta, Andretta et al. 2006). It had been characterized by a network of different social movement traditions and organizations: along with activists of traditional leftist parties and trade unions, the mobilisation had included groups with a Catholic background, radical activists from the social centres and 'new' post-materialist social movements. It is therefore somewhat surprising to find that, a few years later, when the economic crisis revealed weaknesses in the (already contested) neoliberal globalized order, nothing similar characterized the Italian protest arena. Protest against the economic crisis and against the austerity measures undertaken by Italian governments was relatively weak, fragmented, dominated by old players, and not able to produce the strong social and political coalitions which emerged in the previous phase. As a consequence, the mobilisation did not have an impact on the political and party system that could at least have created the conditions for challenging the neoliberal, austerity-oriented responses to the economic crisis.

Under similar economic threats and citizens' grievances, other south European countries, such as Greece and Spain, experienced anti-austerity mobilisations producing strong social and political coalitions which eventually transformed the entire political and party systems (della Porta, Andretta et al. 2017). In Spain, Podemos was built upon the so called *indignados* movement, a network of young and informal organizations and students groups targeting the EU's austerity policies and strongly criticizing the Spanish Socialist and the Popular parties, eventually becoming the third force in the Spanish party system. In Greece Syriza, with extreme-leftist and small parties, capitalized its support for the radical and sometime violent anti-austerity uprising and became the ruling political party. Even in Portugal the anti-austerity mobilisation re-activated a political coalition based on the main leftist party, trade unions, and social movements.

It could be argued, of course, that the Italian party system has been transformed by the electoral rise of M5S, and especially its electoral performance in 2013, and that this new party was able to capitalize on citizens' grievances which were a product of the economic crisis. Yet, the data of this research does not support such a conclusion. The Italian protest mobilisation against austerity, rather than impacting on the political system, was in fact strongly conditioned by party strategies and positions between 2009 and the end of 2014. The alliance system had a significant effect on the protest arena, influencing the most important and visible protest actors (trade unions) to shift their protest mobilisation accordingly. The most intense anti-austerity mobilisation, with some connections among different sectors, occurred during the last Berlusconi government, when the main centre-left party (the PD), through its traditional links with the largest trade union (CGIL), supported the protest. However, when the centre-right government was replaced by a grand-coalition in support of the 'technical' government led by Mario Monti, the implementation of anti-austerity measures found weak opposition from unions and associations which had traditionally been close to the centre-left parties.

It is not by chance that the initial success of the Italian mobilisation against neoliberalism in the

early 2000s came into being when a solid centre-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi was ruling the country and the potential allies were all engaged in fierce opposition to the government (della Porta, Andretta et al. 2006). In that situation, important structures of civil society, mostly linked to leftist parties, were relatively free from party control, and their social bases could socially join organizations to participate in the protest field. Under different political conditions, the traditional tensions between Italian social movement sectors and organizations, based on different ideologies and identities, would have played a crucial role in producing fragmentation and conflict.

Perception of opportunities is a key mechanism through which political opportunities condition social movements and protest players, and it is worth noting to the extent to which the interviewed activists and privileged observers reflected, on different occasions, on political conditions, social movement traditions, and the role of parties and trade unions in Italian civil society. However, the final period examined here, characterized by two PD-led centre-left governments, seems to be incompatible with the general picture. Political opportunities should have pushed the traditional trade unions to negotiate more favourable policies through institutional channels and keep themselves out of the protest arena. Yet, data show not only an increase in the number of anti-austerity PE but also a stronger presence of the CGIL in the protest arena, associated with less competition and fragmentation. What has been argued here is that the perceived changes in the attitudes and policy agenda of the PD radically transformed the alliance system. The PD started to support or participate in governments which were perceived to be implementing a neoliberal agenda, and the former PD-centred Renzi government was perceived as pursuing very aggressive anti-union policies. However, it remains unclear to what extent the traditional link between trade unions and political parties may be definitively over, as some activists contend.

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### **List of interviews**

1. National representative of the grassroots trade union “COBAS”, 2 February 2015, Rome
2. National representative of the Italian Water Campaign, 10 February 2015, Florence
3. Key expert and former national representative of the student movement, 28 January 2015, Florence
4. Key expert and national pro-immigrant and anti-racist activist, 24 February 2015, Bologna
5. Key expert and activist of temporary employment movement, 26 February 2015, Rome
6. National representative of the metalworkers trade union, CGIL-FIOM, 6 March 2015, Rome
7. Local representative of the CGIL structure representing non-standard employees, Nidil-Cgil, 6 May 2015, Florence
8. Key activist of one of the most active social centres in Italy, 5 June 2015, Turin

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> The codebook is available upon request to the author.

<sup>2</sup> The interviewees were selected to represent the most visible organizations and social movements in the anti-austerity mobilisations. Those selected, and had a prominent position and/or were experts in the organizational sectors here analysed, were involved in 65 percent of total protest events. The in-depth interviews were guided by a common set of questions meant to capture all the dynamics of anti-austerity mobilisations. The interview guideline is available on request to the author.

<sup>3</sup> The main party of the governing coalition at that time was the centre-right *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL, People of Freedom), founded in 2009 as a merger of Silvio Berlusconi’s former Forza Italia and the heir of the post-fascist party, Alleanza Nazionale (AN, National Alliance) led by Gianfranco Fini, who had previously transformed the neo-Fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) into AN. The other opponent of progressive social movements in the coalition was the right-oriented ethno-regionalist party *Lega Nord* (LN, Northern League).

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<sup>4</sup> The PD was founded in 2007 as a merger of the *Democratici di Sinistra* (DS)—the heir of the former Italian Communist Party (PCI) —and *La Margherita* (the Daisy). The latter was born in 2002, from the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI, Italian Popular Party, founded in 1994), the leftist heir of the former Christian Democratic Party (DC).

<sup>5</sup> SEL was founded in 2009, combining several leftist and ecological groups. Most of them were part of the *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC, Communist Refoundation Party). PRC was born in 1991, when the left wing of the former Italian Communist Party (PCI) decided to create a new party after the transformation of the PCI into the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS, Democratic Party of the Left).

<sup>6</sup> In 12.5 per cent of cases conventional forms of protest were also present (leafleting, petitions, public and informative meetings, etc.)