

Why Do People Engage in Unlawful Political Protest? Examining the Role of Authoritarianism in Illegal Protest Behavior

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Abstract

Prior research on individual-level drivers of protest has primarily focused on legal protest. However, less is known about what makes people engage in unlawful protest activities. Building upon previous literature on the collective action dilemma, socialization on violent and high-risk social movements, and political psychology, we expect that illegal protest frequency varies at different levels of authoritarianism. We explore the relationship between authoritarian values and illegal protest by analyzing a two-wave panel survey data gathered in the US. The results of cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models show that when controlling for legal protest and other relevant variables in protest behavior, authoritarianism predicts illegal protest following an inverted U-shaped relationship. In other words, average levels of authoritarianism predict more frequent engagement in illegal protest, while this frequency decreases as approaching the poles of the authoritarianism scale.

Keywords

Illegal protest, authoritarianism, unconventional participation, political values, protestors

On January 6th, 2021, thousands of Trump supporters from different parts of the country attended a rally in Washington DC where he asked them to march toward the US Capitol. While most Trump protestors did just that, some of them went beyond the Capitol doors entering the building violently, engaging in illegal protest activities. During the last few years, US society has witnessed increasing numbers of unauthorized protests and how some initially legal protests turned violent, such as Charlottesville clashes between protesters in 2017 or the 2020 attack on the Minneapolis third precinct in the context of a wider Black Lives Matter peaceful protest. However, individuals who engage in unlawful behavior seem to be the exception while politicians, the media, and scholars wonder who these people are and what motivates them to engage in illicit political activities. For example, during the second impeachment trial in 2021, House managers tried to answer this question by showing evidence supporting the idea that most of the illegal protestors of the Capitol Riot had previously engaged in violent and unlawful acts; there are theoretical reasons to believe that this pattern of protest behavior also holds true for other political groups (Della Porta, 2018). This leads us to the following question: *which antecedents predict illegal protest engagement over time?*

To answer this question, we rely on three different strains of research: the collective action dilemma, socialization on violent and high-risk social movements, and political

psychology. We argue that research on individual predictors of illegal protest could benefit from closely connecting these sets of literature since it helps understanding how in specifically high-risk protests authoritarianism can influence the rational calculus behind the collective action dilemma.

In doing so, we argue that illegal protest frequency varies at different levels of authoritarianism. More specifically, we contend that authoritarianism predicts illegal protest participation in a pattern that has not been explored so far: an inverted U-shape relation. Perceived threats to social order and established authorities can more often activate moderate or mildly authoritarian people to carry out unlawful or undemocratic acts to defend the social status quo (Barker et al., 2021; Glas & Taylor, 2018; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011;

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Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). Individuals with extremely low levels of authoritarianism, while more likely to participate in legal protests, usually reject violence and actions that are potentially harmful to other human beings (Welzel & Deutsch, 2012) and have fewer incentives to engage in illegal protests. On the opposite pole, individuals with extremely high authoritarian values are particularly submissive to authority (Duckitt et al., 2010), and while many of them might support unlawful protest (Gutting, 2020), they will very rarely engage in illegal acts of social disruption themselves, mostly remaining behind the scenes (Passini, 2017).

We explore the causal relationship between authoritarian values and illegal protest participation relying on two waves of panel survey data from the US. Illegal protest relates to any form of political protest that breaks the law. Following Finkel et al. (1989) it includes unauthorized forms of unconventional participation such as unauthorized demonstrations or strikes; acts of civil disobedience (i.e., sittings and roadblocks); seizing of public or private buildings; confronting with different actors, either the police or opposed civil groups; and any act of political violence against either people or private or public property. We performed various types of OLS regression (cross-sectional, lagged and autoregressive) to test the robustness of this relationship. We also carry out additional robustness checks, bootstrapping the results with 3000 simulations. Throughout the three models, we found that individuals with average levels of authoritarianism are the ones who engage in illegal protest most frequently. Our findings shed light on the unsolved mystery of mixed results between authoritarianism and illegal protest. Further implications for the field are later discussed.

Literature Review

Our contribution to the literature on illegal protest is two-fold. First, we show how any analysis of the antecedents of illegal protest could benefit from including prior engagement in legal and illegal protests. Second, we contend that authoritarianism is related to illegal protest following an inverted U-shape curvilinear pattern. To do so, we rely on three strains of research: 1) collective action dilemma, 2) protest socialization, and 3) political psychology. These theories acknowledge that there are positive and negative incentives associated with high-risk protest participation. However, some of the negative incentives could be overcome in the presence of certain individual resources and motivations, fostered by prior experiences of protest, and certain political values.

The Collective Action Dilemma

Protest is a way of influencing political outcomes that entails more costs for participants than other forms of political participation. As a result, it is acknowledged as a relatively infrequent political behavior. Most citizens in post-industrialized societies usually prefer to engage in more

institutionalized forms of participation, such as voting, while only sporadically joining protest activities. This uneven political involvement is well explained by the collective action dilemma (Olson, 2009). Before engaging in any form of political participation, individuals will perform a cost-benefit calculation in relation to the desired political outcomes. Coherently, the average citizen is more likely to vote than to legally protest and to protest through lawful means rather than through unlawful means; this is because at every stage, the potential costs and risks of participating are higher, while the outcomes of engaging in such activity are more uncertain (Finkel et al., 1989).

However, the perceived risks and chances of success of protest are not identical across people. There are specific sociodemographic characteristics and motivations that can alter this assessment, thus lowering the barriers to protest. For instance, research has shown that young people who usually have a higher risk tolerance are more likely to protest both legally (Renström et al., 2020) and illegally (Gavray et al., 2012). The same holds true for men as opposed to women since the latter are more risk averted (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010) and have to face more structural barriers with regard to political engagement (Schussman & Soule, 2005). In addition, perceived protesting costs decline with educational attainment (Dalton et al., 2010) and income (Leighley & Nagler, 2013).

An additional factor lowering the barriers of protest emerged with the advent of the internet, social media and digital technologies. Indeed, social media users who engage in different online political discussions are more likely to engage in protests (Valenzuela et al., 2018). Using these platforms lower the costs of recruitment and increase citizens' social and political resources, including information and contacts. (Pickard, 2019). Additionally, frequent internet users are more likely to be exposed to information that challenges the political status quo, and as a result, unconventional forms of protest—both legal and illegal—are more pervasive among high internet users (Gainous et al., 2015), thus affecting the perceived benefits of collective action concerning their desired outcomes.

Besides all these different resources at hand, certain individuals are more willing to overcome the costs of unconventional participation due to their political motivations, which can refer to instrumentality, ideology, and identity (B. Klandermans, 2004; P. G. Klandermans, 2014). Regarding instrumentality, previous research has pointed out that people with higher levels of political interest and political efficacy are more likely to protest (Finkel et al., 1989). Regarding ideology, others have found that in the US, individuals who engage in unconventional high-risk protests tend to be more ideologically extreme on the left-right scale (DiGrazia, 2014). Yet, in terms of identity, research related to social identification theory has tracked down compelling evidence suggesting that group identity, social capital, and social networks are key predictors of protest (van Stekelenburg &

Klandermans, 2013). These group identity motivations seem to be of particular relevance for violent social movements and clandestine groups since group belonging and cohesion is one important outcome—if not the most—of protest itself (Della Porta, 2013). All in all, these political antecedents can increase their perceived chances of success, alter the priority of outcomes, or simply convince certain citizens that the end justifies some disruptive means.

Still, the direction of the relationship between these political motivations and political participation is contested. For example, Quintelier and Van Deth (2014) have found that while political interest, efficacy, confidence, and norms of citizenship might play a role in fostering political participation, the inverse relationship is much stronger, and in fact, political participation strengthens all these attitudes. Similarly, others have suggested that by reinforcing certain group identities, protest itself increases ideological polarization more than the other way around (P. G. Klandermans, 2014). Furthermore, when related to illegal protests, whether intended or not, group cohesion is a common consequence of political violence and confrontation with state authorities (Della Porta, 2018). Therefore, there is a dire need to better explore the causal relationships between motivations and political protest.

The present longitudinal study introduces a temporal sequence and explores a causal direction between attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, it allows us to include a key predictor of illegal protest that has usually been overlooked. This predictor is prior protest activity. Thus, the second wave of data enables us to control for previous legal and illegal protest engagement. The following section explains the theoretical reasons that endorse including prior protest as a predictor of illegal protest.

The Incremental Nature of Protest

As it happens with most political activities and behaviors, prior protest experiences shape future ones. According to Verhulst and Walgrave, protest participation “can be considered as a habit, as a practice one should be socialized into” (2009, p. 458). Indeed, it is well known that high-risk activism fosters “activists careers,” by which first-time protesters stay connected with politicized organizations and networks, thus enhancing further mobilization in the future (Mcadam, 1989). Similarly, with the advent of new social movements that tap into a significant number of cross-cutting issues, most activists belong to more than one advocacy network (Diani, 2000). As a result, people who are highly mobilized for one issue do also tend to be mobilized for others. Then, protesters engaged in multi-issue activism contribute to the diffusion of new frames, tactics, and repertoires across different social movements (Andersen & Jennings, 2010). Protest participation is, therefore, a cumulative process.

Likewise, illegal protest does not emerge in a vacuum. Most illegal protesters have prior experience in more conventional forms of protest. Indeed, some social movements engage in processes of adaptation and innovation of their collective action repertoires. In this regard, illegal protest is the result of a relational process of escalation from disruptive but peaceful forms of protest to increasingly violent repertoires of collective action (Della Porta, 2018; Tilly, 1978). The most violent ones emerge as the result of continuous interactions between increasingly radical social movements and state authorities or opposed groups, thus leading to spirals of action and reaction (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Della Porta, 1995). Moreover, in some cases, violence increases along the cycle of protest. At the beginning, it is more sporadic and defensive but later becomes ritualized and normalized among some actors (Della Porta & Tarrow, 1986).

While this research suggests that protest, and specifically illegal protest, is an incremental and cumulative political behavior, most of the literature that surveys individual predictors of illegal protest fails to control for prior protest participation. Among the very scarce studies that aim at understanding the individual antecedents of specifically illegal protest, most works just run different cross-sectional regressions for legal and illegal protest and compare the results, as if participants in those groups were different sets of people (see, for example, Dahl & Stattin, 2014; and Finkel et al., 1989). However, a study that surveyed legal and illegal protest in 17 Western democracies found that on average, 87.5% of illegal protesters had also engaged in legal protest, and for the US that percentage was 100% (Roller & Weßels, 1996). Even in that study, the authors just compared both groups when it came to finding the predictors of protest.

One worth-mentioning exception to this trend in the literature is Gavray et al. (2012), who include conventional political and civil participation as an antecedent of illegal repertoires of collective action among the youth. In their study, conventional participation was positively and significantly associated with engagement in illegal political activities. Another relevant exception is Benson and Rochon (2004), who make dyadic comparisons of different forms of protest controlling for prior behavior, but in their case, they do not include the most intense forms of illegal protest, such as getting involved in political violence and confrontations with police, or other groups. It is, therefore, crucial to realize that the risk of not including prior protest (legal and illegal) as an antecedent of illegal protest at a particular point in time is that findings might be prone to showcase spurious relationships since what these models would actually predict is protest in general, but not specifically illegal protest. As a result, our first hypothesis reads:

H1a: Legal protest is positively associated with illegal protest over time.

H1b: Prior involvement in illegal protest (Wave 1) increases illegal protest in the future (Wave 2).

As stated above, legal and illegal protest are related activities, but they are substantially different. What defines a political repertoire as illegal is that it violates existing laws and existing social norms, and therefore, it might be motivated by different drivers than those of legal and legitimate protest (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). It is then unsurprising that the Roller and Weßels (1996) study found that among the 17 Western democracies, on average, 87.5% of all protestors engaged in *legal* protest only. For the United States, this percentage was 93.2%.

Therefore, not every legal protestor will make the step toward illegal protest. In fact, most of them will never make it—only a few. Illegal protest relates to any form of political protest that breaks the law. It, therefore, includes unauthorized forms of unconventional participation; acts of civil disobedience; seizing of public or private buildings; participating in confrontations with different the police or other civil groups; and other acts of political violence against private or public property or against people (Finkel et al., 1989). What defines these types of acts is that they defy established authority (Barker et al., 2021) and violate existing laws and existing social norms (Wright & Citrin, 2011). Hence, to uncover who is more likely to be engaged in spiral processes of illegal protest and violence escalation, we suggest focusing on the political values that are specifically related to law, order, and authority, which are the principles related to the core definition of illegal protest itself.

Political psychology and, more specifically, the literature on political values has extensively considered how individuals perceive authority and its effects on political behavior. According to this scholarship, authoritarianism praises obedience, social order, and deference to authorities perceived as legitimate (Glas & Taylor, 2018). The key concept here is legitimacy since some authoritarians defending cultural and social order might well justify disruptive or even undemocratic means (Barker et al., 2021). In an era of multi-issue activism (Andersen & Jennings, 2010), those issues framed as cultural threats to national or society unity (Wright & Citrin, 2011) might activate some authoritarian people into illegal protest networks. The following section will untangle the connection between authoritarianism, and unlawful and undemocratic means.

Authoritarianism and Illegal Protest Repertoires

The literature on political values has for a long time differentiated between people who value individual autonomy—holding emancipative values—and those who value order, obedience, and authority—thus holding authoritarian values (Inglehart & Flanagan, 1987; Welzel et al., 2003). According to this literature, the dimension of “emancipative versus authoritarian values” is orthogonal to traditional left-right conceptions of ideology; individuals from both poles of the emancipative-authoritarian values dimension can be found in both democratic and autocratic regimes (Kirsch & Welzel,

2019). However, throughout all these different settings, previous research has found a consistent relationship between emancipative values and *legal forms* of protest (Benson & Rochon, 2004; Grasso & Giugni, 2016; Welzel & Deutsch, 2012; Zavadskaya & Welzel, 2015). For instance, Welzel and Deutsch contend that “emancipative values encourage only *non-violent* protest because these values involve humanitarian ideals that reject violence against people” (2012, p. 407 emphasis in the original). Similarly, activists of new emancipative social movements enhance deliberation, tolerance, and consensus as the best possible ways of reaching collective decisions in the context of protesting (Della Porta, 2005).

As a result, those individuals with extremely low levels of authoritarianism (or extremely high levels of emancipative values) would more frequently opt for non-violent and legal repertoires of protest. Hence, we should see that individuals with extremely low levels of authoritarianism are very active in peaceful and legal protest activities and still engage less frequently in illegal protest. However, what happens with illegal and violent repertoires when we move on the ladder of authoritarianism is less clear.

Individuals with a higher level of authoritarianism usually prefer the existence of leaders who “get things done,” as opposed to following the regular democratic or deliberative channels. In this respect, authoritarian values might contribute to a certain degree to increase the perception of personal influence and chances of group success when performing unlawful acts, as opposed to established democratic procedures, which are perceived as ineffective. For example, some studies have found that some people resort to disruptive forms of participation—such as political violence—when regular channels seem inefficacious (Dyrstad & Hillesund, 2020; Gavray et al., 2012). Hence, we contend that these mildly authoritarian people would be more likely to engage in non-established unlawful acts as a more efficacious way of influencing politics and circumventing the—otherwise slow, parsimonious, and cacophonous—democratic process. However, this positive association between authoritarianism and participation in illegal protest might hold up just to a certain tipping point since strong authoritarians also deplore disorder (Weiner & Federico, 2017).

Overall, the very scarce literature on the opposite authoritarian pole has pointed at mixed results. On the one hand, in their seminal work on the authoritarian personality, Adorno et al. (2019) found that authoritarian attitudes correlated with authoritarian aggression, thus leading us to expect that authoritarian values are correlated with political violence and, therefore, with illegal protest. On the other hand, it has also been found that extremely authoritarian individuals (as opposed to those with emancipative values) are less likely to be interested in national or international politics or to participate in action-oriented political groups (Flanagan & Lee, 2003). Finally, other studies have found that while holding emancipative values is positively related to participation in legal protest, the relationship seems to gradually fade away

regarding illegal protest (Opp, 1990), even when controlling for past political behavior (Benson & Rochon, 2004). To sum up, all these studies focused on a linear relationship between authoritarianism and extreme forms of participation, with a limited set of political protest controls, and, in general, have offered mixed results.

However, more recent and nuanced works have shed some additional light on the complex relationship between authoritarianism and protest. A recent experimental study on the support of contentious protest has shown that individuals with authoritarian values still support mobilization even if a disruptive protest turns violent; however, they stop supporting it when this protest is directed against authorities (Gutting, 2020). Nonetheless, Gutting's research refers to the authoritarian and non-authoritarian audiences of protests, but not to actual protestors. This distinction might be critical since research on political psychology has shown that submission to authority does not explain open violence but rather support for it (Passini, 2017). According to his work, authoritarian submission explains latent aggression by which people who praise obedience prefer to stay in the backdrop and are not directly involved in violence against groups that threaten society cohesion, although they support those who do it.

Moreover, previous research has shown how distinguishing between different levels of authoritarianism can provide more nuanced information about who exactly changes their preferences on political actions in the face of a social threat (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). These authors found that in such a circumstance, ordinary people are very much likely to endorse undemocratic preferences, policies, or political activities. Therefore, we argue that individuals with extremely high levels of authoritarianism will engage relatively less frequently in illegal protests, but instead will favor harsh and coercive social control (Duckitt et al., 2010) or stay in the background and let others do the dirty job (Passini, 2017).

In a nutshell, we cannot expect a clear linear relationship between authoritarianism and engagement in illegal activities. As noted earlier, there is evidence for authoritarianism fostering engagement in unlawful protest and preventing this type of participation. The literature suggests that, on the one hand, individuals with extremely low levels of authoritarianism will avoid unlawful and violent means of protest that would potentially harm other people. On the other hand, individuals with extremely high levels of authoritarianism will equally avoid illegal protests because they deplore social disorder and attacks on authority.

However, the scholarship is mostly silent on whether individuals with average levels of authoritarianism will be involved in such acts. These theoretical underpinnings lend support to ask: what if this relationship is, in fact, curvilinear? To the authors' knowledge, this has not been tested by the literature so far. So, we build upon all this previous research to uncover whether authoritarianism 1) is related to illegal protest once we control for legal protest involvement and 2)

whether this relationship between authoritarianism and participation in illegal protest follows a curvilinear pattern. As a result, we expect that

H2: Individuals with average levels of authoritarianism will participate in illegal protest more frequently than those with extremely low (H2a) or extremely high levels (H2b) of authoritarianism.

Methods

To explore *which political antecedents predict illegal protest engagement*, we used panel survey data from a larger research project on political attitudinal and behavioral outcomes in the United States. The survey was fielded at University of Vienna and drew on a national online panel sample which seeks to be representative of the US population. A detailed socio-demographic composition of our sample can be found on (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2021). The panel of subjects was contracted to IPSOS Austria, and the fieldwork was conducted via Qualtrics through the PI's Research Unit in June 2019, with 1338 respondents (COOP2 = 45.5%), of whom 511 repeated in the second wave, in October 2019 (COOP2 = 40.9%). The study used an opt-in panel with quotas based on the US census (i.e., age, education, gender, race, and income). Self-administered questionnaires such as online surveys are proven to be particularly efficacious for research on topics that might suffer from social desirability bias, like illegal behavior (Krumpal, 2013). Furthermore, the two-wave data collection strategy ensures a more accurate identification of the causal relationships between our variables of interest, connecting them in a causal order at two different points in time. This longitudinal strategy enabled us to control for previous levels of protest while exploring a causal, temporal sequence between potential political antecedents, legal protest activities, and illegal protest. The questionnaire included items that allow measuring the key variables and controls.

Measurements

Dependent variable: Our dependent variable is *Frequency of illegal protest*. We chose to measure frequency of protest because, according to Grasso and Giugni (2019), it is important to understand what distinguishes the occasional protester from the habitual protester. In order to do so we follow the measure used by Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes (2021) which is based in turn on Finkel et al (1989). Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes (2021) have proved through a Confirmatory Factor Analysis that legal and illegal protest were empirically different constructs. For the latter, they added up four indicators in an index summarizing how frequently citizens engaged in four different forms of illegal protest. The items were "Participating in political rallies or protest that break the law.," "Seizing buildings such as factories, government buildings, university offices, etc.," "Participating in confrontation with police or other governmental authorities.,"

“Being part of political activities that may result in public or private property damage (e.g., breaking windows, vehicles, street signs, etc.)” (1: never; 10: all the time). The items were strongly correlated, which supported the creation of an index. Table 1 shows the descriptive and reliability measures for illegal protest and the rest of the constructs. Since illegal protest was clearly skewed toward “never participated in illegal protest,” we standardized the index of illegal protest before including it in the regression. Time specifications for protest related items in wave 1 and wave 2 can be found on section A of the Supplemental Material

Variables of Interest

Frequency of legal protest: Our main goal was to find out which antecedents predicted frequent engagement in illegal activities. To the extent that theory suggests that protest is an incremental process, our first variable of interest was participation in legal protest. To measure legal protest, the survey asked respondents how frequently they participated in “permitted demonstrations and political rallies,” “peaceful protests,” and “legal protests for political reasons.” The three items were averaged, and the index was checked for reliability (1: never to 10: All the time). Like illegal protest, legal protest was skewed toward 1. As a result, the index was also standardized.

Polarized position on authoritarianism: To measure authoritarianism, we rely on a short version of Altemeyer (1998)’s scale that has also been used and validated across diverse cultural contexts in more recent studies (see Vargas-Salfate et al., 2020). Accordingly, we first constructed an additive index summarizing respondents’ agreement with the following items: “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.”, “Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral elements in society today.”, “In these troubled times, laws have to be enforced without mercy, especially when dealing with the agitators and revolutionaries who

are “stirring things up.” (1: strongly disagree; 10: strongly agree).

For the creation of the index, the three items were averaged. Since we are interested in the distinction between people with average levels of authoritarianism and people on the extremes of the authoritarianism scale, we constructed a new variable by using the absolute values of the centered index on authoritarianism. Therefore, individuals with average levels of authoritarianism get a 0 on the scale, with values increasing as individuals approach the authoritarian/ emancipative poles.

Control variables

Media news: With an exhaustive number of items, we controlled for three different types of media use. *Cable news:* This construct averages responses indicating how often (1: never; 10: all the time) they get the news from a) MSNBC, b) CNN, and c) Fox news. *Social media news:* Respondents were asked to indicate how often (1: never to 10: All the time) in the past month they did get news from 13 different sources.¹ Items were also averaged in an index. Finally, *other media news* averaged responses to items indicating how often (1: never to 10: All the time) in the past month they did get news from different media sources.²

Political attitudes: We used three variables tapping into the three motivations that have been previously identified to influence the collective action dilemma calculus between risks and outcomes (B. Klandermans, 2004): ideological extremism (ideology), political efficacy (instrumentality), and collective rationality (identity). *Ideological extremism* was measured in two steps. First, we constructed a variable of ideology averaging responses to three questions: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else? Please rate yourself on a scale where 1: Strong Democrat, 6: Independent, and 11: Strong Republican”; “On political issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 1–11, where 11 is

Table 1. Reliability Analysis Measures for all Constructs from Wave 1 and Wave 2.

	Wave 1				Wave 2			
	M	SD	Cronbach’s α	N	M	SD	Cronbach’s α	N
Illegal protest	2.30	2.35	.98	1288	1.98	2.22	.98	488
Legal protest	2.87	2.59	.96	1290	2.50	2.39	.97	492
Authoritarianism	5.83	2.38	.82	1278	5.87	2.52	.86	498
Cable news	3.68	2.54	.73	1296	3.52	2.46	.68	488
Social media news	3.60	2.07	.91	1258	3.22	2.06	.92	483
Other types of news	4.73	1.92	.84	1250	4.87	1.88	.84	475
Ideology	6.30	2.67	.90	1262	6.63	2.79	.93	494
Political efficacy*	6.05	2.47	.75	1259	5.54	1.85	.76	475
Collective rationality	6.36	2.06	.84	1290	6.47	2.18	.88	496

Note: (*) Since this is a 2-item construct in this case we use Spearman–Brown instead of Cronbach’s alphas.

strong conservative and 1 is strong liberal?"; "On economic issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 1–11, where 11 is strong conservative and 1 is strong liberal." Later, we constructed ideological extremism by using the absolute values of the centered index on ideology. *External Political efficacy* was measured following Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) through the aggregation of two reversed items that measure how much respondents agree: "People like me don't have any say in what the government does," "No matter whom I vote for, it won't make a difference." Finally, *Collective rationality*: This variable was an index based on Finkel et al. (1989), who advocated for bringing together indicators of group unity and civic duty. The survey asked how much respondents agreed (1: Strongly disagree, and 10: Strongly agree) with the four statements: "For political groups to have a reasonable chance of success in their actions, everyone must contribute a small part.", "Every individual member is necessary for the success of a political group, no matter how large it is.", "If a citizen is discontented with the policies of the government, he/she has a duty to do something about it.", "If the government fails with a particular policy, it is a citizen's responsibility to take action." A factor analysis showing these items belong to three different variables is available in Section B of the Supplemental Material.

Demographic variables: We also controlled for age, gender (female as reference), race (white as reference), education, and income.³

Analytical Strategy and Robustness Checks

To evaluate the effect of authoritarian values and the control variables on illegal protest, we used three ordinary least squares (OLS) models: cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive. The cross-sectional used only Wave 1 data; the lagged model predicted the frequency of illegal protest on Wave 2 with the predictors on Wave 1. Finally, the autoregressive model did the same as the lagged model but incorporating prior levels of illegal protest in Wave 1 as a predictor. Since the survival rate in the second wave was 40%, and legal and illegal protest did not follow a normal distribution, we performed bootstrapping analyses with 3000 replicates for every model to confirm the robustness of the relationships, thus well beyond the agreed standards of bootstrapping (Efron & Tibshirani, 1994; Wilcox, 2010). Replication materials are available upon request.

Results

Preliminary tests hint that *only legal* protestors are different from those who also engage in illegal protest in their level of authoritarianism. Through an ANOVA analysis, we can see how *only legal* protestors are significantly less authoritarian than both illegal protestors and non-protestors (Bonferroni test $F(2) = 11.4, p < .001$). However, according to the literature, we expect a more specific pattern: an inverted U-

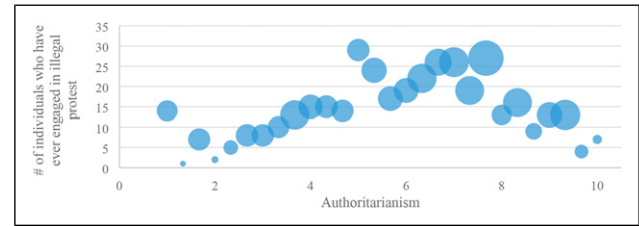


Figure 1. Bivariate relationship between authoritarianism and participation in illegal protests.

shaped relationship between authoritarianism and participation in illegal protests. Figure 1 displays the first approach to that relationship. The size of the bubbles represents the share of individuals who have illegally protested related to all individuals within that authoritarian position.

Figure 1 shows how those individuals who hold an intermediate position on authoritarianism, between 5 and 8, are more likely to have engaged at least once in illegal protest. Furthermore, it seems there is a positive association between authoritarianism and illegal protest but only up to a tipping point—around position 7 of authoritarianism—where illegal protestors seem to withdraw.

To the extent that the initial descriptive results seem to fit our theoretical expectations, we expect this pattern to remain significant once several controls are included in the analyses and robustness checks are applied through 3000 sample bootstrapping. Table 2 shows the results for three different regression models (cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive).

Our first hypothesis lies in the idea that protest is a cumulative process. Under the first two models, previous participation in legal protest predicts a great share of the variance of illegal protest. In the cross-sectional model, participation in legal protest predicts up almost 60% of the variance in illegal protest ($\beta = .604, p\text{-value} \leq .001$). In the lagged model, it is still a strong predictor of illegal protest ($\beta = .289, p\text{-value} \leq .001$); however, the statistical significance totally fades away once participation in illegal protest in Wave 1 is included as a predictor of illegal protest in Wave 2 (Model 3, $\beta = .025, p\text{-value} = .588$). These findings offer nuanced support for H1a and strong support for hypothesis H1b. Prior frequent engagement in legal protest seems to predict higher participation in illegal protest; however, the causal effect of legal protest disappears once we introduce prior engagement in illegal protest. These findings uphold the thesis of the cumulative and incremental nature of protest and reinforce the need to include different forms of prior protest engagement in any study that aims at exploring the predictors of specifically illegal protest. Hence, when stricter analyses are applied in order to find temporal causality between variables (see Model 2 and specifically Model 3 in Table 2), the influence of prior involvement in legal protest decreases, and only three antecedents remain consistently significant:

Table 2. Cross-sectional, Lagged, and Autoregressive Models of the Effect of Polarized Position on Authoritarianism on Illegal Protest.

	Illegal Protest		
	Model 1 Cross-sectional W1	Model 2 Lagged W2	Model 3 Autoregressive W2
<i>Block 1: Autoregressive Term</i>			
Illegal protest W1			.493*** (.079)
ΔR^2 (%)			50.1
<i>Block 2: Legal Protest</i>			
Legal protest W1	.604*** (.035)	.289*** (.059)	.025 (.046)
ΔR^2 (%)	59.4	26.6	0.0
<i>Block 3: Demographics</i>			
Gender (female)	-.114*** (.036)	-.213* (.081)	-.139 (.076)
Race (white)	.065 (.049)	-.004 (.120)	-.007 (.105)
Age	-.035 (.026)	-.137* (.053)	-.117* (.045)
Education	-.010 (.011)	.042 (.021)	.037 (.021)
Income	-.002 (.014)	-.070 (.035)	-.064 (.035)
ΔR^2 (%)	1.8	7.1	3.0
<i>Block 4: News Use</i>			
Cable news	.036*** (.011)	.072** (.021)	.038 (.020)
Social media news	.108*** (.014)	.172*** (.028)	.100*** (.026)
Other media news	-.023 (.013)	-.070* (.027)	-.045 (.024)
ΔR^2 (%)	4.5	10.6	2.8
<i>Block 5: Political Attitudes</i>			
Ideological extremism (ideology)	-.022 (.012)	.011 (.025)	.031 (.023)
Political efficacy (instrumentality)	-.034*** (.008)	-.033 (.017)	-.023 (.017)
Collective rationality (identity)	-.046*** (.008)	-.048* (.018)	-.021 (.016)
ΔR^2 (%)	2.0	2.0	0.6
<i>Block 6: Polarized Positions on Authoritarianism</i>			
Polarized position on authoritarianism	-.031* (.014)	-.068* (.026)	-.048* (.024)
ΔR^2 (%)	0.2	0.9	0.5
Total R^2 (%)	67.6	47.2	57.0

Note: Sample size = 1082 (Model 1); Sample size = 407 (Model 2); Sample size = 403 (Model 3). * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$. Cell entries are final-entry standardized Beta (β) coefficients which account for robust standard errors test based on bootstrapping to 3000 resamples with biased corrected confidence to assess statistical significance. Standard errors in brackets.

prior involvement in illegal protest, higher social media news use, and average levels of authoritarianism.

In agreement with our second hypothesis, individuals ranking extremely high and extremely low on authoritarianism participate less frequently in illegal protest compared to people holding average levels of authoritarianism ($\beta = -.031$ p -value $\leq .05$; $\beta = -.06$ p -value $\leq .05$; $\beta = -.048$ p -value $\leq .05$ for cross-sectional, lagged and autoregressive, respectively). The negative coefficient on polarized levels of authoritarianism suggests that the likelihood of an individual frequently engaging in illegal protest is higher for average levels of authoritarianism but declines when approaching both poles of the authoritarianism scale. This relationship holds true even when controlling for prior protest participation.⁴ The following figure represents the estimated values under the different models for various levels of authoritarianism. Figure 2 depicts the curvilinear relationship between authoritarianism and illegal protest, which becomes clearer in

longitudinal analyses (Models 2 and 3) in which we are able to control for prior protest involvement.

Finally, regarding other controls, it is worth mentioning that social media news use remains statistically significant across all models, indicating that consumers of social media news are also more likely to engage in this type of political behavior. Consuming other media news, though, seem to play no role in explaining illegal protest once stricter models are applied. All in all, these results confirm two distinct patterns in illegal protest: First, the pattern of incremental nature of protest and second, the curvilinear relationship between authoritarianism and illegal protest.

Discussion

While most research has largely analyzed the antecedents of legal protest, comparatively less work delved into individual predictors of illegal protest. In an age of rising

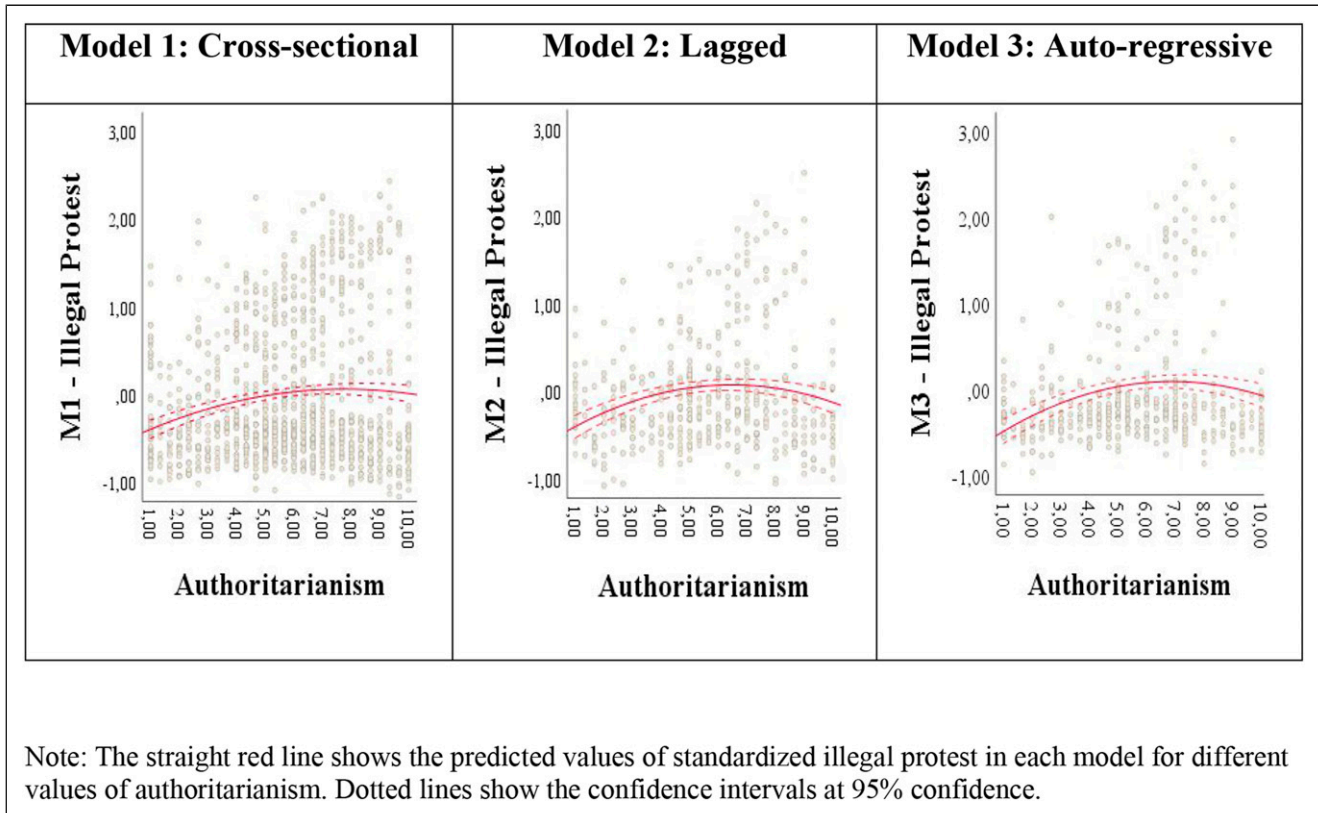


Figure 2. Predicted values under cross-sectional (M1), lagged (M2), and autoregressive (M3) models for levels of authoritarianism. Note: The straight red line shows the predicted values of standardized illegal protest in each model for different values of authoritarianism. Dotted lines show the confidence intervals at 95% confidence.

authoritarianism and populism (Norris & Inglehart, 2018), these unbalances in the literature needs to be redressed, even more, because the scant studies existing have often overlooked legal protest participation as a key predictor of illegal protest. Not controlling for legal protest engagement might have led to an incomplete estimation or to spurious conclusions in previous models of illegal protest. This study seeks to address this gap by testing whether, and if so, how authoritarian values can predict illegal protest once prior important theoretical variables such as previous frequency of legal and illegal protest participation, media use, and political attitudes have all been considered.

Our results offer support for including legal protest participation in any analysis of illegal protest. As a starting point, almost 95% of individuals who have ever participated in illegal protests in our sample have also engaged in legal ones. This would indicate that illegal protesters seem to be involved in legitimate ways of influencing the government as well.

Most studies on illegal protest participation delved into the relevance of political attitudes, such as ideological motivations, political interest, political efficacy, or collective rationality, that in general lines helped to overcome the classic collective action dilemma (DiGrazia, 2014; Finkel et al., 1989; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). However,

we have found no support for these theories in our data over time. Our data and models instead point at a certain instability over time of some attitudinal items and specifically at the relevance of different levels of authoritarian values in triggering illegal protest.

When different antecedents are explored across a longitudinal analysis, we found that individuals with extremely low levels of authoritarianism or extremely high levels of authoritarianism engage less frequently in illegal protest. Moreover, ideological extremism seems to play no role in illegal protest. These findings combined go against the often portrayed image pictured on media and academia, depicting illegal protestors as radicals, at least when it comes to authoritarian attitudes (Della Porta, 2018). According to our data, illegal protestors are not significantly more ideologically extreme than other citizens, and in fact, the most frequent illegal protestor has fairly average levels of authoritarian values.

Authoritarianism is a strong predictor of illegal protest across all different models tested. This finding is not trivial. Political values matter and should be included in explanatory models of illegal protest. First and foremost, those who engage in illicit protest activities are subjects who reported average levels of authoritarian attitudes, excluding both extremes of the spectrum. Individuals with average levels of

authoritarianism are more frequently involved in illegal protest as compared to individuals with extremely low levels of authoritarians in that the latter tend to praise tolerance, consensus, and deliberation to a greater extent (Della Porta, 2005), and in that they specifically avoid actions that are potentially harmful to others (Welzel & Deutsch, 2012). For different reasons, they are also more frequently involved in illegal protests than individuals with extremely high authoritarianism values because the former have a greater tolerance to disorder and are less submissive to authority (Gutting, 2020; Passini, 2017).

In that sense, we can expect, according to our data, more illegal protests in the years to come since this type of authoritarian individual is all but rare in US society (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). And, although more research would be needed to explicitly confirm the background and antecedents of protest processes such as that perpetrated by rioters on January 6th, the results of the current paper suggest these people may not be more authoritarians than the average American citizen. In fact, it is likely that even more authoritarians' individuals have supported, but only watched, from the outside what happened in the Capitol. We expect future research to further determine these theoretical premises.

However, while authoritarian values are significantly related to illegal protest, they only explain a limited share of the variance. Prior protest participation and social media news use are stronger predictors of illegal protest. Although not the core of our research, we contend that the potential relationship between social media news, authoritarian values, and illegal protest are worthy of greater consideration since the "virtuous circle" between media and citizen engagement (Norris, 2000) might now become unvirtuous in the era of social media news, at least for certain people. For instance, social media news might have an activating effect on latent authoritarians (Glas & Taylor, 2018) due to the increasing presence of fake news on social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) that might enhance the perception of threat to society, thus triggering illegal protest among authoritarians. Some authors even suggest that authoritarian movements and parties resort to the rhetoric of the supposed "horizontalism" of social media to mask vertical relationships and authoritarian techniques (Rensmann, 2017). Further research on these connections would be certainly welcome.

These results contribute to a better understanding of illegal protestors in democratic political systems, connecting legal protest with illegal protest and drawing a thinner line between the classical typology of citizen's conventional and unconventional political participation. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature of high-risk activists careers (Verhulst & Walgrave, 2009) by focusing on illegal protest, a form of political behavior that has received far less attention than other forms of participation. It also contributes to the literature on political values since it uncovers the so far hidden curvilinear effect of authoritarianism on illegal protest. Overall, this paper highlights the likelihood of an individual

engaging in illegal protest increases, hand by hand, as his level of authoritarianism may also increase. But only up to a certain tipping point, beyond which the extreme authoritarian prefers letting others do the "harsh dirty job." In the end, this points at future lines of research in the intersection between political values, protest, and social media.

Finally, our methodological strategy (online opt-in panel survey) is increasingly used in social research (Callegaro et al., 2014; Lehdonvirta et al., 2021), in particular with regard to controversial political topics (Nai & Maier, 2021; Williamson, 2019). Since the present research taps into an illicit behavior, this survey strategy is particularly suited to it because the evidence consistently shows that internet self-administered surveys are less susceptible to social desirability response bias with regard to political behaviors (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010; Persson & Solevid, 2014). As a result, in the present study, we found a higher number of protesters than expected according to previous studies (DiGrazia, 2014). While this gives us, in principle, more information about the protestor profile, it can also be a sign of certain shortcomings of this type of survey: problems of coverage and self-selection biases that are sometimes also present in probabilistic methods (Baker et al., 2010) and problems of measurement accuracy and estimate error that are consistently bigger than in probabilistic surveys (Macinnis et al., 2018). Therefore, the results of the present study should be taken with caution, and we invite scholars in the field to confirm these findings with other probabilistic designs.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Local news on social media, National news on social media, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Use WhatsApp to stay informed about current events and public affairs,

Use WhatsApp to get additional information about what is going on in politics and public affairs, Instagram.

2. Network TV news, Local television news, Television, National newspapers, Local newspapers, Printed, Online news sites, Citizen journalism sites, Local news online sites, Radio news, Radio.
3. The distribution for the sociodemographic controls can be found in online appendix [section A](#).
4. Theoretically, a plausible effect on illegal protest may be mediated, rather than direct. That is, legal protest may influence illegal protest through polarized positions on authoritarianism, or conversely, polarized positions may be indirectly related to illegal protest via legal protest behavior. To shed light on this quandary, a follow up mediating analysis showed that was not the case ($\beta = -.001$, $se = .002$, 95% CI = $[-.005, .003]$; and ($\beta = .007$, $se = .016$, 95% CI = $[-.026, .038]$, respectively).

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