

3 Methodological pluralism in the study of political participation

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This volume deals with protests and democracy (“ProDem”). In our research, we claim that the enduring crises that surround us have also had an impact on protests and democracy as the two key phenomena under study and on the relation between them. However, it is commonplace that the ongoing crises did have their effects not only on abstract concepts, such as protest activities and democracy, but also on many other aspects, among them obviously people’s concrete lives, but also on the way how science is perceived and, subsequently, how we conduct science. On the one hand, scientific results are increasingly quoted when it comes to political action, be it in the institutional or the protest arena. A first famous recent example is the climate crisis for which protesters very often underline that one main goal of their protests would be to make political decision-makers listen to and follow the climate protection advice given by scientists. Another recent example is the COVID pandemic during which scientists were frequently called upon in order to justify lockdown measures or to promote vaccination campaigns. On the other hand, this inclusion of scientists in public policymaking also resulted in scientists becoming targets of political protests, organized by those who felt their basic rights were being endangered through COVID measures. The same holds for some of the populist propaganda against climate protection who question the scientists’ political neutrality or even their expertise. This public importance of scientists and science is partially new. It also means that scientific production cannot be primarily oriented toward an inward perspective, following which scientific results are mainly relevant for other scientists. Science increasingly has to consider a broader audience, and the reception of science can even become a political issue when people start to ask how far political decisions are taken by elected and accountable political decision-makers, or whether scientific experts directly or indirectly exert (too) much influence in political decision-making processes. While some Ancient Greek thinkers had much sympathy for such a “noocracy” (or, in Plato’s terms, “sophocracy”), and also, citizens in some countries welcome “expert” or “technocratic” governments as a desired alternative to conventional governments which do not seem to work well, this is obviously a challenge for

modern democracy. Scientific advice and findings have to be built into societal and political procedures with care.

Apart from the necessity of the development of appropriate skills for “going public”, this increasing connection between science and society requires science to be of “high quality”. Only such high-quality science has the chance to have a credible effect on transformation processes and to be a legitimate part of public discourse. Many aspects can be considered when thinking of high-quality science (such as transparency or replicability), but an appropriate use of methods is certainly also part of such an agenda. What is more, next to the reliance on established (and often challenged) theories, the application of scientific methods can even be considered a core aspect of scientific work, differentiating the academic profession from adjacent fields that also deal with society and politics, such as journalism, belletristic literature, movies or artwork (see also Ragin, 1994). The appropriate application of scientific methods can be claimed to be central in order to render science “scientific”.

While certainly some scientists might already disagree with this central role attributed to methods, the real quarrels start when it comes to the appropriateness of the application of methods. Rigid walls seem to exist between methodological camps and paradigms which were called “separate tables” or “sects” already early (Almond, 1988). However, also within the various methodological paradigms, such a myriad of methods has started to exist which requires an ever more specialized technical knowledge. As a consequence, the necessary overview to judge the appropriateness of the use of methods easily goes lost. On the other side, however, we witness a certain enthusiasm about “mixed methods” approaches, which seems to be the solution for all methodological problems and the new gold standard of doing research, thereby risking to overshadow important ontological and epistemological foundations (Beach and Kaas, 2020).

This chapter discusses these views with regard to our research in the ProDem project. We proceed in three steps. First, we elaborate on the topic of the appropriateness of methods from an abstract point of view. The overview which we give might sound well-known to those of our readers who are familiar with the debate, but rather new to novices who care more about substance than methods – which is pretty acceptable in a pluralistic world of science. Second, we refer to what this means for the study of protests, social movements and movement parties, which are the main research objects of this book. And, third, this chapter explicitly shows for the ProDem project how it was (hopefully successfully) tried to work with a multi-method approach in order to do justice to such a multifaceted research topic as protest and democracy.

The debate

The importance, but also the development of methods, not only is inevitably linked to the pursuit of the scientific discipline itself, but also relies on

the outside world which surrounds scientific activity. This latter point refers to those technical advances which can be considered watersheds in human development as well as in terms of scientific potential, such as the introduction of powerful computers half a century ago, or the availability of large amounts of data through the expansion of the internet a couple of years ago, or the victory of AI-governed procedures which becomes visible at the horizon in our times. The former point – the history of the discipline – is instead more complicated to address. First of all, topics are often, but not always, tied to one specific discipline. While our project title “Protests and Democracy” (ProDem) clearly suggests an important role for political science (democracy is one of *the* central terms of the discipline), it has nevertheless interdisciplinary characteristics. Protests as well as social movements are indeed political science categories, but have also been intensively studied by sociologists. Not least, the “merger” sub-discipline of political sociology exists. The importance which we assign to the study of traditional and social media (see Chapter 2) points to communication science as a further (young) discipline which has to be considered. Because of the increasing importance of algorithms and IT aspects in communication, communication science cannot be thought of anymore without reference to more technically oriented disciplines. Finally, there are good reasons to look at our topics under research from a linguistic perspective (e.g., considering the role of propaganda in protest mobilization) or from a historical one (since citizen grievances, political opportunity structures, protest modes or mobilization patterns might have historical roots).

Therefore, an interdisciplinary topic – and most social science topics carry interdisciplinary aspects – also relies on methods which have been developed in the different disciplinary communities. And since disciplinary boundaries themselves are fuzzy, not only the disciplines quoted earlier play a role when researching political science topics, but also neighboring ones, such as economics or philosophy.

This means that there cannot be *the* method for a social science project, since the disciplinary sources of the social sciences are so multifaceted. What is more, scientific disciplines do not develop at the same speed. Modern political science, for instance, can only be thought of when we assume a democratic environment where it can develop. Ultimately, political science means democracy science. As we all know, European democracy is a rather recent thing, and so is European political science. The various waves of democratization (Huntington, 1997) were also waves of the proliferation of political science. For example, political science in Central and Eastern Europe certainly has to be differentiated between its pre-1990 and its post-1990 variants. This, however, also means that professional, modern and democratic political science (in Europe, but also elsewhere) is *younger* than many other disciplines such as economics, sociology or ethnography, not to mention the ancient disciplines of philosophy and history. Indeed, most political science methods are borrowed from somewhere, be it from history, sociology or economics. Political science has only recently started to develop its own

methods, mainly for comparisons at the macro (country) level which do not have an easy equivalent in other disciplines.

As a consequence, political and social science scholars find themselves in a jungle of methodological opportunities. This renders their life particularly complicated since there is no single method which lends itself for ready and automatic usage. It might be an oversimplification to state that the natural sciences can rely on experiments as a characterizing standard method,¹ but such a ready-to-use answer does not exist in the social sciences.

It is therefore no surprise that the maturation of the discipline of political science (and other social sciences), which becomes manifest in the foundation of own professional associations (the European Political Science Association ECPR was founded in 1970) or the creation of political science chairs or even institutes at universities, also led to an increasing awareness on the use of methods. This professionalization of political science in Europe coincided with the era when the first powerful calculators (forerunners of our computers) were ready to be used to process huge amounts of data, but also when European and US-American political science developed different research interests, based on the fact that the (rather young) European branch detected the beauty of the variety of European political systems and engaged more in macro comparison and less in survey research at the individual level (Munck, 2007). In other words: at a certain point, political science had become so well-profiled and professionalized, and technicalities had developed in such a way, that the question of the *How* of research gained in importance.

Indeed, the fights over the appropriate approach already started in that era. Lijphart's (1971) seminal article on comparative politics and the comparative method testifies this. Although it is usually quoted as an incentive to use comparative methods, a careful reading creates some skepticism about Lijphart's enthusiasm regarding comparative methods. Very much to most scholars' surprise, Lijphart calls the comparative method "a very imperfect substitute" (Lijphart, 1971, p. 685). In fact, he makes up a rank order which places experiments at the top position of methodological choices. Being aware of the (at least at the time) impossibility to use the experimental logic of the natural sciences for the social sciences, Lijphart accepts the statistical method as his number two of the rank list which at least shares the central element of randomization with experiments. The comparative method (which we would call a small-N comparison today) then comes into play as the number three. Considering that Lijphart's rank list only comprises three options, this is no good news for small-N designs. Indeed, it is the "N" – the number of cases – which Lijphart considers as a defining element for research practice. In his view, there is large-N research which can use statistical methods and comes close to the advantages of experiments; and then there is small-N to which researchers are forced when they compare countries and which, in his view, is methodologically clearly subordinate.

Apart from the funny insight that those many quotations which use Lijphart (1971) as a justification for or a defense of small-N methods

overlook Lijphart's central and very critical message, this is an early account of the skepticism toward certain types of political science methods.

Certainly, the critique of the large-N community on other approaches was no one-way street. Nevertheless, the large-N community was in a more advantageous position. The fact that this approach used numerical information rendered it clearer. The advent of modern computers made huge portions of data processable. And mathematics provided a complex toolset of procedures and techniques which made it possible to establish easily communicable and widely accepted parameters on the basis of which the quality of the findings could be judged. Compared to this, traditional macro-comparison which relied on thick descriptions and finally arrived at conclusions on many variables after studying only a few cases necessarily had to receive inferior recognition. This is even more the case for so-called interpretative approaches which are based on a different, usually non-positivist epistemology. Their view on the social world being (partially) constructed and their emphasis on the importance of the subjective attribution of meaning gave them the position at the other end of the spectrum, always under the threat of being regarded as non-scientific and greatly dependent on individual researchers' viewpoints.

This acute discussion certainly underwent an important moment when King et al. (1994) published their book on "Designing Social Inquiry", with the somewhat provocative sub-title "Scientific inference in qualitative research". The more senior author of this chapter was a political science student at the time and remembers the publication of "KKV" (using the initials of the three authors' surnames) as path-breaking, since many younger scholars in those days considered KKV to offer a possibility to overcome the accusation of being not scientific brought forward to qualitative research. Qualitative research in this sense can be understood as both the small-N comparative positivist approach in Lijphart's sense and the interpretative variant, although there is no real and broadly accepted definition of what qualitative research is.

The disappointment regarding KKV followed soon, namely when small-N scholars started to read the book. Not only was the book full of mathematical formula, but its bottom line was that qualitative research can develop a potential for scientific inference as more similar it becomes to quantitative research (most visibly in the sixth chapter which is full of recommendations on how to increase the number of cases under research). However, this disappointment with the hopes initially created by KKV triggered an impressive wave of reactions which can be seen as the start of an increased self-confidence of qualitative researchers (at least of those of the positivist small-N comparative camp) who used this window of opportunity to further develop and promote their methodological position. Although it took a decade, Brady and Collier (2010 [2004]) edited a volume with a potential response. Quite some other alternative proposals to a purely large-N perspective were made in other contributions (reviewed in Mahoney, 2010),

some of which – such as process tracing (Bennett and Checkel, 2015; Beach and Pedersen, 2016) or qualitative comparative analysis (QCA; Ragin, 2008; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012) – survived this discussion as case study designs of their own right.

After this more historical account, let us look at the current state of affairs.

There cannot be any doubt about the existence of a plentitude of available methods today, at the level of both concrete techniques (even leading to a problematic need for a specialization in terms of technical competencies) and designs. With regard to the latter, various proposals for a differentiation exist. The dichotomy of quantitative and qualitative methods is only one of them and certainly prevails, despite all lack of concreteness with regard to what “qualitative” is. Goertz and Mahoney (2012) give a number of (certainly debatable) criteria with the help of which qualitative and quantitative approaches can be differentiated. Recent empirical research by Kühn and Rohlfing (2022) suggests that it is difficult to find publications which are univocal applications of these criteria, so that Goertz’ and Mahoney’s (2012) proposal rather has to be seen as the formulation of ideal types and less as a recipe. However, Ragin (1994) also acknowledges that the “qualitative quantitative” dichotomy is not differentiated enough and adds “comparative” as a third category, referring to those approaches applying the “comparative method” in Lijphart’s (1971) and later also Ragin’s (1987) sense. Della Porta and Keating (2008) try yet another typology for methodological approaches and distinguish positivist, post-positivist, interpretative and humanistic methods. A more recent and currently not widely shared proposal is brought forward by Thelen and Mahoney (2015), who propose to differentiate between experimental methods on the one hand and quantitative or comparative case studies on the other.

Lieberman (2015, p. 243) even represents the available designs and methods in a three-dimensional cube and locates numerous different designs in the corners of the cube, on one of the plains or somewhere in the space of the cube. While Lieberman’s representation seems very complex to the beginner, and not even methodological experts might know about all of the designs represented, his model is quite interesting for our purpose. As mentioned, his cube is (of course) made up of three dimensions. One is fairly well-known and has also been mentioned in this chapter, namely ranging from large-N (which Lieberman calls “quantitative”) to small-N (“qualitative”). Being a continuum, this dimension also allows for intermediate situations of mid-sized-N (famously discussed in Ragin, 2000; therefore, it does not take any wonder that QCA is the only typical method for this scenario in Lieberman’s representation). The second dimension is made up of micro and macro research, certainly also highly relevant for research at the crossroads of political science and sociology. Finally, experiments – Lijphart’s (1971) gold standard – are taken up in the third dimension which differentiates between observational data/methods and experimental ones. These three dimensions can be combined in all possible ways. Just to give a couple of examples: standard surveys

represent the combination large-N * micro * observational; small sample experiments with aggregate subjects represent the combination small-N * macro * experimental; and comparative-historical case studies occupy the position of small-N * macro * observational, etc. Such a representation of methodological options is certainly useful, since it draws our attention to two facts: first, the number of cases (“N”) is not the only criterion. There are more. Second, there is no natural and deterministic connection between the dimensions, such as large-N always looking at the micro level and small-N at the macro level, but all combinations of the dimensions are possible, even enriched through those methods which take an intermediate position with regard to one or several of the dimensions.

This is already a useful account when we want to speak about methodological appropriateness. Certainly, we might wonder whether these dimensions are already sufficient to describe the methodological world. We are convinced that, for example, ontological and epistemological perspectives are also important (Hall, 2003; Blatter et al., 2018). Furthermore, methodological appropriateness also depends on research questions, research interests and research goals. We follow Shapiro’s (2002) plea following which the research question (he calls it the “problem”) comes first, and only then methodological (and theoretical) decisions should be taken. For example, if interpretations of political phenomena are being researched, then a method (and a theory) which is powerful in dealing with them should be applied, most probably stemming from the interpretative, constructivist and discourse-oriented realm. If, however, protest frequency has to be assessed, then surveys or even observational techniques, looking at a large N, seem to be appropriate.

Next to this predominance of the research interest and the precise research question, we also adhere to a view which, despite all acknowledged importance of methodological rigor, design clarity and transparency, respects the needs of research pragmatism. On the one hand, this refers to research constraints. Although textbooks often tell us a different (and incorrect) story, research heavily depends on money and time constraints. Armchair research which does not have to respect the amount of available funds or submission deadlines is a nice but unrealistic illusion. Therefore, a mass survey might well be the best way to approach a research question, but if the researcher lacks the appropriate technical equipment or cannot financially afford to send out huge amounts of questionnaires by post services, then s*he has to look for a methodological alternative – or alter the research question (at least in part).

Finally, it is often overlooked that *all* research is prone to errors. It is an illusion to think that researchers are able to fully and completely correctly represent complex social processes in their results. If we just think of a rally as a form of protest, no research in the world is able to represent the complex and manifold actions connected to the rally, not to mention the participants’ motivations, ideology, readiness to engage in a variety of

tactics, biographies, etc. Therefore, research is always approximative. The world will always look (much!) simpler in research than it actually is. Therefore, the appropriateness of methods is also determined through their limitations which are never zero. For instance, the search of quantitative methods of common patterns across research units that are rarely identical forces researchers to develop “thin concepts” (Coppedge, 1999) that simplify the dynamics they study even prior to data collection and processing. Thin concepts seek to provide a basic framework that can be applied across various contexts with little additional specification. They tend to simplify reality into more unidimensional and easily adaptable constructs that provide the space for measurements that can include non-identical units in the same analytical group. This simplification unavoidably leads to noise and errors generated by the differences across cases and deviations in the representation of a complex pattern into a single measurement. Statistical methods have found a useful way to deal with their limitations through standardized and widely known parameters, such as goodness-of-fit parameters (most prominently R-square measures or significance levels), although statisticians have warned against an excessive focus on these measures (see, for instance, Cumming, 2014; Gigerenzer, 2004; Wasserstein and Lazar, 2016). Rather than being used in order to underline the reliability of a result, they are above all indications of “errors” which can occur in the process of simplifying complex political dynamics into operationalizable research questions and hypotheses. For example, standard statistical methods only claim to be “estimations”, and this is indeed what they are able to achieve.

Qualitative research is not free from problems of approximation, either. The small-N nature common to this scholarship allows researchers to develop “thick concepts” (Coppedge, 1999), which integrate a broader array of multifaceted attributes and contextual details, of the dynamics they study. However, qualitative research is also approximative as it derives from the co-construction of the reality of the researcher with the subjects under study (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001), above all in its interpretive variant. Instead of using quantifiable measurements of error, qualitative scholars make their research accountable by carefully disclosing their relationship with their field of study, their research process and their background.

So, the history of social and political science methods is a history of rising differentiation, with most variants being characterized by their approximative nature. To acknowledge such limits is an important aspect of a high-quality application of methods. Thus, whichever approach we use, the quest for transparency unites all approaches.

This is also the basis of the use of methods in our research. There are many options. Our ambition is to choose a method which is (1) appropriate in terms of the specific constellation of Lieberman’s (2015) dimensions, but also with regard to the research question, (2) applicable to real-world research and (3) transparently informs us about its possibilities and limits. This is how we intend to produce a high-quality application of methods.

Protest, democracy and methods

(Edited) volumes on the use of methods do not only exist at the disciplinary level but also with regard to specific topics. The rationale behind this is two-fold: from a more pragmatic point of view, this helps to attract the attention of more substantially interested scholars who would never open a volume on methods in general, but are more willing when this directly speaks to their research. From a more substantial perspective, if we follow Shapiro's (2002) advice (see above), then the topic is the departure point for the discovery of the method, and thus any methodological decision must be based on substance.

The study of citizens' protests, social movements and movement parties, with the goal of making a contribution to the discussion of democratic quality, requires such a specific approach. Thoughts on the use of methods in social movement studies have already been brought forward by other authors (Cox et al., 2024; della Porta, 2014; Jenkins, 2022; Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002), although the number of available publications on the intersection of methods and social movements/protest is surprisingly low.

Let us re-consider the dimensions discussed earlier with regard to Lieberman (2015) and apply them to studies like ours, on electoral politics, protest, social movements and democratic quality.

With regard to the difference between small-N and large-N research, this field of research faces both situations (and situations in between): for example, small-N research can refer to a single or a low number of events of political violence which is so difficult to study that no huge case numbers can be covered. Another "classic" application refers to in-depth studies on democratic quality at the country level.² However, small-N research also occurs when biographical studies on the motivation of single activists are conducted. Small-N research is also applied when protest cultures of two or some more countries are compared.

The idea of large-N research can instead first and foremost be connected to surveys, either of the whole population or about large numbers of demonstrators. But such a strategy can also be imagined in cases when the unit of analysis is not an individual person, but the protest itself. A longitudinal analysis of the (development of the) number of participants in climate protests is an example for this. Furthermore, considering the big data discussion which often refers to text data available through the internet, huge amounts of text usually imply a subsequent large-N analysis. However, while the availability of data may encourage researchers to assume the validity of this type of approach, scholars should be aware of the limitations of these analyses, including the quality of the available data, the challenges of processing it, as well as the reliability of the analyses performed (Hoffmann et al., 2022). The dichotomy of small-N and large-N can also be understood as a continuum. When comparison is expanded to numbers of cases which go beyond the usual choice of between two and four but do not arrive at

a statistical analysis yet, we reach the fuzzy world of mid-sized N. Examples can include studies on the consolidation and regression of democracies (Tomini and Wagemann, 2018) comparisons of the success and outcomes of a diversity of social movements (Berker and Pollex, 2023; Giugni and Yamasaki, 2009; Guzman-Concha, 2015), and a variety of party strategies of different sorts (Kurz and Ettensperger, 2023).

In part, this continuum overlaps with Lieberman's (2015) second dimension, namely the macro and micro perspectives. Protests are predominantly seen as micro-level phenomena when it comes to the study of motivations, forms of behavior, etc., which are then studied for single activists. The macro perspective is more oriented toward social movement studies (Minkoff, 2002), considering the movement or one of the social movement organizations by which it is composed as a "macro" unit, but we can also imagine a macro analysis at the country or society (or continent) level. The small/large-N and the micro-macro dimensions are often linked, with small-N * macro and large-N * micro being the most conventional variants. However, more combinations can be imagined. This is easier for small-N * micro, which is common in social movement studies and consists of interviewing activists (e.g., Mercea, 2012; Santos, 2024) or social movement targets (e.g., Santos and Geva, 2022). Examples of large-N * macro consist of surveys of a large number of civic organizations (Han, 2014), applying network analysis to study relations among social movement organizations (e.g., Diani, 2015; Saunders, 2007), and studying cycles of mobilization using protest event analysis datasets (e.g., Carvalho, 2022; Portos, 2021; Portos and Carvalho, 2022). The discussion on the micro-macro dimension also raises the question about an intermediate variant, that is, a kind of meso-dimension. Indeed, the organizational or group level is often considered to be neither micro nor macro, but meso. Therefore, an analysis like ours which explicitly expands the micro view on citizens through a focus on social movements (or social movement organizations) and movement parties is a good candidate for such a meso perspective. The usefulness of such intermediate positions (and even a continuum can be imagined) heavily depends on the additional value, which is offered by adding such a category to the micro-macro dichotomy. If group dynamics are studied, then the consideration of a meso-level seems rational. This seems justified, since, in the end, this would also require the use of specific methods, such as focus groups or participant observation in order to study group processes. However, if the social movement organization or the movement party is regarded as a corporate actor, then the question becomes important whether this does not follow the logic of the macro analysis. As is often the case with regard to methods: it depends.

Concerning Lieberman's third dimension, namely the continuum between observational and experimental data, we first have to acknowledge that the object of study of the social sciences in general complicates the use of experimental research. This is not different for protest and social movement studies. While there are attempts to use experiments in social movement research, for

example relying on formal models of action (Oliver and Myers, 2002), there is an obvious limit: “while we can boil water as often as we want, we cannot produce riots on order” (Della Porta, 2002, p. 289). However, there cannot be any doubt that experimental methods have started to shape quite a notable portion of social science research; in 2014, for example, Cambridge University Press started the publication of *Journal of Experimental Political Science*. Furthermore, there are several introductory books (Druckman et al., 2011; Kittel et al., 2012; John, 2017, and of course, others). Indeed, there is potential for an application of the experimental logic in protest research, although we see more limits for such research in which social movements, social movement organizations, or movement parties are being researched, since their “behavior” is not only difficult to manipulate, but even to conceptualize. Experiments can also be imagined when it comes to democratic quality or at least its perception. Nevertheless, however, we do not expect experiments to be very influential as a method in protest or social movement research, with the exception of experiments administered through surveys.

When it comes to the pragmatic dimension in the use of methods in protest and social movement studies, of course, the question of pragmatism occurs. There are (at least) three dimensions to this point with regard to this particular field. One dimension refers to the researchers’ biographies. If we consider that at least a part of protest and social movement studies has a connection to rather critical forms of theorizing or doing research which should also give “voice” to the underprivileged people and to topics which are under-represented in societal discourses (Martínez, 2023), then this might create opportunities for such methodological options which are considered to be more open or appropriate for participatory research. Advocates of participatory approaches underline that individuals are not only “objects” of research, but should actively be involved in research processes and count with the entirety of their personality. If we translate the dichotomy of qualitative and quantitative research as case-oriented *versus* variable-oriented approaches (Della Porta and Keating, 2008; Ragin, 1999), then participatory research clearly tends toward the case-oriented side where individuals are not (only) understood as data rows in a spreadsheet which adds information on the variables under research. As a consequence, case-oriented methods will be used, or those methods which underline case particularities more than average findings across cases. Nearly necessarily, a political ambition of this type of protest and social movement research will tend to lean toward qualitative approaches. If we furthermore consider that many social movement researchers also agree with much of the content they study, or are even activists themselves, then this centrality of the case as such becomes even more evident. Furthermore, activist or engaged research may be the only way to access certain types of knowledge. Not only activist experience provides a unique type of understanding of the details around any case study, but criticisms from many social movement groups about “academic extractivism” – referring to a common practice in which

researchers engage with social movement organizations exclusively for the purpose of their fieldwork to then produce knowledge that is often not relevant or accessible to activists themselves – may mean that researchers may have to reconsider their ways in which we engage with social movements.

The second pragmatic dimension refers to the question of the availability of information. Political actors tend to see university researchers in general, and those who study protests and social movements in particular, as adhering to a progressive, or even radical left, ideology (e.g., Cottom, 2024; Noonan, 2023). This perception may often complicate entering in contact with key agents, particularly from rightwing groups, most commonly because these actors refuse to be interviewed by academics, turning a research project impossible or forcing researchers to triangulate data points from other sources (e.g., Santos and Geva, 2022) or to limit their research to the use of secondary data.

There is a final pragmatic dimension, closely connected to this question of data availability, namely concerning ethical questions. Since the study of protests and social movements often (although certainly not always) concerns individual people who cannot be counted as the elites, researchers also have a special ethical responsibility toward them. With regard to protest research, it must be especially carefully observed whether individuals involved in the research project risk being harmed in any way. The political dimension also plays a role. Through their analyses, researchers might be involved in the diffusion of political messages, and this might or might not be the researchers' intention. Furthermore, if political science is a democratic science, as mentioned earlier, then political science is not entirely politically neutral. Political science rather constitutes one of those societal sub-systems which are actively involved in the promotion and safeguarding of democracy. Therefore, with regard to its methods and designs, political scientists always have to wonder how to present extremist actors and views in a way that does not undermine their democratic mission. While researchers should always strive to provide truthful information and balanced analyses, students of democracy should not be neutral when it comes to the defense of democratic values. This is not only a substantial or theoretical question; it is also a methodological question. This chapter started with considerations on the appropriateness of the use of methods, and, somewhat pathetically, it can be stated that one of the furthest-going ideas on such appropriateness concerns the political and democratic mission of social research. This is important for any kind of political and social science topic. However, this is even more important, if the topic itself concentrates on protests, social movements and movement parties (some of which are not fully democratic) and, ultimately, democratic quality. Such topics require special care. With regard to these topics, researchers acquire political responsibility. As a consequence, the final research object of our research, therefore, becomes our motivation for research and should consequently also guide our hand when choosing the appropriate methodology: democratic quality.

The methods used in ProDem

As mentioned, our research combines different research objects which have often been studied separately, namely, citizen protests, social movements, movement parties, institutional(ized) political systems and democratic quality. Since all these topics are shaped differently by the analytical dimensions discussed hitherto, and thus require different methodological choices, a project ranging from protest to democracy (“ProDem”) also has to give an answer to the multitude of available methods, without risking to confuse a welcome eclecticism with arbitrariness. Our response to this challenge is again given via appropriateness. Our project targets various elements of the realm of protest and democracy, and while there cannot be a one-fits-all methodological strategy for such a multifaceted set of research questions, methods have to be appropriate with regard to the single perspectives ProDem takes.

Chapter 4 focuses on exploring the characteristics of voters of movement parties, comparing their commonalities that set them apart from the rest of the population, as well as how voters of different movement parties diverge from each other. The interest of this chapter requires finding patterns that repeat often enough in certain subgroups (i.e., movement party voters overall and voters of specific types of movement parties) to be of statistical interest and that are not as common in the comparator category. Santos and Mercea use nationally representative survey data to quantify attitudes of interest in the population and analyze it through a series of regression analyses that provide strong evidence of which characteristics are common to these voters, as well as those that set them apart.

Chapter 5 delves into the discursive strategies used by progressive movement parties. This research approach requires a nuanced understanding of the narratives used by a small number of actors (three progressive movement parties, in this case). Therefore, this study is interested in how subtle frames and understandings within a handful of documents create a discourse that seeks to (re-)frame certain concepts such as the European Union and democratic principles and co-produce a political reality, in competition with the narratives of other political actors. Consequently, Trif, Mărgărit and Burean use discourse analysis methods to disclose details that may not be evident in a straightforward manner, as well as the inconsistencies of these frames.

Chapter 6 discusses the relation between movement parties and the media, and how these have evolved. This approach requires knowing hidden details about the interactions between relevant party representatives and journalists, as well as how each interprets the reasons for their actions and those of the other side. Mosca and Paxton utilize interviews with both party and media representatives and qualitatively analyze the perspective of each actor, triangulating the information provided by each group about themselves and others to build a coherent narrative of their relations and how they have evolved over time.

Chapter 7 studies how movement parties communicatively position and re-position themselves vis-à-vis the institutional and protest arenas, over time. The interest in this interactive presentation in relation to different areas requires relatively constant data about movement parties' communications that allows to pinpoint patterns and moments of change. Hoffmann and Neumayer collect traditional and movement parties' messages on social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) and explore how movement parties present themselves in relation to the protest and institutional arenas, over time, using both their textual and visual communication, across platforms. Using a combination of network analysis of movement parties' mentions of traditional party families, and a qualitative exploration of the images they post on social media, the authors are able to provide a longitudinal study of how movement parties evolve in their relations with the institutional and protest arenas.

Finally, Chapter 8 explores the conditions that facilitate that movement parties adopt social movement demands into their political agendas and, thereafter, into policies. Understanding the different pathways in which social demands enter institutional politics and policies requires identifying cases of success and failure in order to later identify logical patterns that lead to each outcome. Wagemann, Glukhova and Geyer collect this data from a variety of sources, including social movements' online communications and press releases, party programs, coalition agreements and draft legislation, as well as secondary sources. Their comparison explores the variety of pathways through which movements can translate their policy demands into institutions.

Each chapter in this book, we believe, provides good examples of how the same object of study, movement parties, can be approached through a variety of methods and epistemologies. Overall, the data and analytical approaches of these studies demonstrate how the research interest and question should precede decisions related to data collection and methodology. Moreover, moving away from old debates related to competitive comparisons, this volume ultimately shows that, if done correctly, different epistemologies and methodologies can provide equally interesting studies of comparable quality.

Notes

- 1 As mentioned, this is an oversimplification, since natural sciences use of course many more methods than just experiments.
- 2 There is certainly also a notable number of quantitative attempts which correlate numerical measures of democratic quality with other concepts.

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