
COLLECTIVE ACTION, EXPRESIVENESS AND SOCIAL PREFERENCES

THE CASE OF ROMANIAN PROTESTS OF 2012

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Abstract

Large scale social movements received the attention of researchers across disciplines for decades. They provided a gamut of theoretical perspectives from which to tackle the many questions social scientists have posed on this subject. This paper deals with a special case of social movements: the case of small scale political protests (hence SSPPs). The aim of our endeavour is to produce a theory capable to accommodate rational participation in SSPPs. This theory will be derived from two classes of large scale phenomena theories, revolution theories and electoral behaviour theories. Our strategy goes in three steps: first, we review the literature on revolutions; second we deal with the literature on turnout; third we derive a theory capable of explaining the general class of occupy movements and in particular, the Romanian protests from University Square January – February 2012. Our central argument is that SSPPs are compatible with rational expressive behaviour and rational socially oriented preferences.

Keywords: protests, voting, revolutions, collective action, public goods

1. Introduction

Social scientists have usually been focused on large scale social phenomena. They have tried to explain the state, massive immigrations, revolutions, party politics, price formation, market competition, turnout, starvation, war and so on. To have an example of this practice, the usual question regarding social movements was: “*why would so many people voluntary participate in violent or peaceful revolution?*” Few scholars of social movements (to remain in the same area) focused on small scale phenomena and on a different kind of question: “*Why would a small number of people ever participate in a violent or peaceful protest?*” Our paper poses this general question. The answer, though, will be applied to a very specific case, the Romanian protests from University Square January – February 2012 (hence USQ’12). These protests are a case of a larger class of small scale social movements, the Occupy (Wall Street and the like) movements. Other than being

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small scale, the Occupy movements have the particularity of being medium term protests and of being in a ridiculously disproportionate relation of power with the government. So, why would a rational individual ever take repeatedly costly action against the *undefeated heavy weight champion of the world*, the government? Why protest month after month, in the middle of a harsh winter, knowing that given the small number of your co-protesters, you probably don't stand a chance?

Answering these questions does not imply the necessity of a new theory of social action. We will actually derive our theoretical framework from two classes of theories about large scale phenomena, revolutions theories and voter turnout theories. The theories we'll use here are of economic origin. This is because the questions raised above are especially puzzling for methodological individualistic and instrumental-rationality theories. It is by now a classic move, in these theories, to predict undersupply in cases such the one we have mentioned. For these theories the usual question is *why bother to participate* not *when, how* or *which are the causes of participation*. We argue that rationality and participation to protests are compatible.

2. Collective action and revolutions

2.1. Competing views in revolutions' studies

Given the social and political nature and impact, revolutions represent one of the most important subjects in Social sciences. To begin with the classic view, we cite Marx's theory. Marx [1] identified two classes in opposition; a minority of propertied non-workers, the capitalists, and a majority of property-less workers, the proletarians. The first class accumulates all the wealth by taking the added value of proletarian's labour. Once the proletarian become aware of the class struggle, the revolution begins. These are, shortly stated, the early stages of revolutions' studies [2].

The follow up (of revolutions studies) exhibit a high level of diversity. From Marx till now many different theories were developed. To put some order in this diversity, we cite several classifications of revolutions studies. Goldstone [3] identifies three generations of authors: the first generation, (1900-1940) includes the work of LeBon, Ellwood, Sorokin, Edwards, Lederer, Pettee, and Brinton. These authors „*carefully investigated the pattern of events found in revolutions, but lacked a broad theoretical perspective*” [3]. The second generation (1940-1975) includes Davies, Gurr, Johnson, Smelser, Huntington, and Tilly. They „*drew heavily on broad theories from psychology (cognitive psychology and frustration-aggression theory), sociology (structural-functional theory), and political science (the pluralist theory of interest-group competition)*” [3]. The third generation (1975-present) includes authors like Paige, Trimberger, Skocpol, and Eisenstadt. Their approach is „*far better grounded historically*” and „*more holistic*”, „*seeking not only to explain why revolutions occur, but also to account for their diverse outcome*” [3, p.426].

Another classification belongs to Kuran [4]. He identifies three groups of theories: the structuralist theory, the relative deprivation approach and the rational choice approach. The first class of theories views revolutions as the product of structural and situational conditions; the second class treats revolutions as being produced by economic disappointments which are sufficiently widespread. The third class of theories explains the absence of revolutions starting from individual rationality. In what follows we will review the rational choice approach to revolutions.

2.2. *The rational actor view*

Despite receiving different labels (the ‘by-product theory of revolution’, ‘the private interest theory of revolution’ or ‘the rational actor program’), the rational choice approach to revolutions designates a group of theories originated in the neoclassical economics research tradition, the public choice of revolutions [5-7]. Their common characteristics are methodological individualism, deductive reasoning and the use of the utility maximization postulate with its usually employed operationalization, the self-interest actor assumption.

The history of the public choice of revolutions begins with Tullock [5] but there is a prehistory represented by Samuelson’s [8] collective goods theory and Olson’s [9] logic of collective action. In [8] Samuelson defined a collective consumption good as a good “*which all enjoy in common in the sense that each individual’s consumption of such good leads to no subtraction from any other individual’s consumption of that good.*” [8] The antecedent property was later labelled as non-rivalry in consumption. Adding the non-excludability property results in what we now refer to as a public good. The distinctive characteristic of any public good is the presence, for any rational actor, of a strong incentive for free-riding. From this, the theory predicts undersupply. Building on this prediction Olson [9, p. 48] developed a group behaviour theory which shaken the foundations of traditional group action theories. Shortly put, Olson’s model predicts that in large groups, public goods will be undersupplied. This result is implied by three ‘*cumulative factors*’: first, the larger the group, the smaller the fraction of the total group benefits each person receives; second, the larger the group, the smaller the likelihood of oligopolistic interaction that might help in obtaining the good; third, the larger the number, the greater the organization costs. So, in the case of voluntary contribution, consumer’s lobbying is likely to be undersupplied, taxes are likely to be sub-optimally provided, and so on. To show how large groups could (and did) in rare occasions overcome this problem, Olson conceived the “*byproduct theory*”: “*the main types of large economic lobbies [...] obtain their support mainly because they perform some function besides lobbying*” [9, p.135]. In [9] Olson didn’t make any direct allegation about the impossibility of revolutions or about the by-product theory of revolutions, but this was a straightforward step. The step was made later, by Tullock [5] and even later [10] by Olson himself. In [10] Olson argued about the improbability of revolutions that “It is a logical mistake to suppose that because

the subjects of an autocrat suffer from his exactions, they will overthrow him” [10, p. 573].

Building on Olson’s [9] theory, Tullock [5] argued that even though revolutions are public goods, the reasons for participating or abstaining resides purely in the private interest of the rational agents. This idea was built in an equation of revolutionary supply:

$$G_r = R_i \times L_v - P_i(1 - L_v) - L_w \times I_r + E \quad (1)$$

where G_r is the net gain (or loss) of the individual from participation rather than remaining neutral, R_i is the private reward of the individual for his participation if the revolution succeeds, L_v is the likelihood of revolutionary victory assuming the subject is neutral, P_i is the private penalty if the revolution fails, L_w is the likelihood of injury during the revolution, I_r is injury suffered in action and E is the entertainment income. The E factor is later reconstructed by Silver [6] as psychological income from participation. The same author subtracts a V term (standing for the value of the participant’s time and other resources) from the E factor. Yet, the conclusion in Silver’s version of the equation is not the same (despite the fact that the authors mention the same conclusion).

First, even though Tullock’s equation has a positive result, there is no rational-instrumental incentive to contribute to the public good (the revolution, in this case). Olson’s case about large groups and his by-product theory makes sense only if monitoring is possible. In the case of revolutionary activities, people are anonymous. This means that the by-product theory of revolution should predict undersupply of the public good. Second, revolutionary activities are a lot more risky than lobbying. It is less likely that Tullock’s equation would be positive in the case of revolutions than the same equation in the case of a lobby. This weakens even further the application of a by-product theory of revolutions. When the equation is negative (and this will be the case in most of the time) there will be undersupply of the public good. Turning back to Silver’s equation, the E factor has a different content which can be decisive. Tullock thought that E (entertainment) is not likely to be an active factor in real revolutionary situations. This is because people don’t usually entertain themselves by getting involved in risky and potentially bloody activities. In Silver’s case though, E has a rather different content. It “*includes the individual’s sense of duty to class, country, democratic institutions, the law, race, humanity, the rulers, God, or a revolutionary brotherhood as well as his taste for conspiracy, violence, and adventure*” [6, p.64-65]. If E stands for all these possible human motives, then we could predict even an oversupply of the public good.

If Olson’s and Tullock’s theories represent the classic rational choice approach to revolutions, we will mention a new wave of rational choice theories. In this so-called new wave, we could mention Kuran’s [4] unexpected revolution theory, Ginkel and Smith’s [11] government-protesters game, Lichbach’s [7] rational actor and mixed deprived-rational actor models, Lohman’s [12] cascade theory, Karklins and Petersen’s [13] assurance games, Hardin’s [14] theory of

ethnic conflict, Apolte's [15] North Korea study. We now turn to the voting behaviour studies.

3. Collective action and voter turnout

3.1. Competing views in voting behaviour studies

As Matsusaka and Palda noted: "*The traditional approach to the study of voting has been to identify personal characteristics which distinguish voters from abstainers; well-known examples are Merriam and Gosnell (1924)*" [16]. This approach was dominant until the apparition of Downs' [17] and Tullock's [18] books, which represented the emergence of the public choice (rational choice) approach to voting. Until the publication of these two books, there were no puzzles regarding voting. But the puzzle appeared. It seemed that there was an incompatibility between rationality and voting. This result was problematic because it undermined the democratic theory of voting and the public choice approach (since in reality people actually vote). There were at least three escape routes from this result. First, modifying the operationalization of the maximization assumption; this was an intra-public choice solution taken by many public choice scholars from whom we mention Brennan and Buchanan [19], Brennan and Lomasky [20], Goodin and Roberts [21], Edlin et al [22], Caplan [23], Ferejohn and Fiorina [24]. Second, by modifying the rationality as maximization: we mention here the behavioral model of reinforcement learning of Bendor, Diermeier and Thing [25]. This model discards the maximization assumption and adopts a model of satisficient individuals. Once a satisfactory level of well-being is achieved the turnout choice of an individual is reinforced and becomes more likely in the next elections. The third possible strategy is to discard completely the rationality assumption. We cite here the miracle of aggregation of Page and Shapiro [26]. This theory distinguishes between two classes of voters: rational voters (1-2%) and random (irrational) voters (98-99% of the electorate). Since our goal here is to focus on the public choice view, we will not deal with the details of the concurrent theories.

3.2. The rational approach to voting behaviour

When referring to public choice approaches to voting behaviour we have in mind a group of theories which share the core of neoclassical economics methodology. Like in the revolutions studies case, this means a commitment to methodological individualism, deductive reasoning and the use of the utility maximization postulate. We distinguish between two generations of public choice theories of voting. The criteria of this distinction focus on the type of operationalization of the maximization principle. The first generation of public choice studies employ the *homo economicus* assumption. We label this '*the pure rational choice approach*' to voting. The second generation works with different (compatible) operationalizations.

The first generation of public choice of voting starts with Downs [17] and continues with Tullock [18]. Downs [17] assumed that a person will vote if the benefits of his action exceed the costs, given the probability of being decisive. The consequences of these assumptions are that a maximizer will rarely vote. The conclusion is clearly derived by Tullock [18] from its calculus of voting formula:

$$R = BP - C \quad (2)$$

Here R stands for the reward that an individual voter receives for his act of voting, B is the differential benefit that an individual voter receives from the success of his preferred candidate, P is the probability that the individual, by voting, brings about the benefit B ($0 \leq P \leq 1$) and C is the cost of voting. If $R > 0$ then it is rational to vote. The argument goes like this: since in most representative democracies the number of voters is large, P is a very small number; since it is reasonable to think of a positive C term, B must be a very large number in order to have a positive R . But for the typical voter B cannot be that large. This means that people will usually abstain. This conclusion is puzzling because it is clear that many people actually vote. Are they irrational?

A response for the above question came from Riker and Ordeshook [27], and this is how the second wave of public choice voting theories began. They introduced in the equation another term:

$$R = BP - C + D \quad (3)$$

The D term stands for several different things: the satisfaction of fulfilling one's duty by voting, the satisfaction from affirming allegiance to the political system, the satisfaction of standing up and be counted for the candidate he/she supports, the satisfaction derived from the act of voting in itself, the satisfaction of affirming one's efficiency in the political system [27]. This new term allows the model to predict that if $D > C$ then people will vote. The new equation is therefore more consistent with people's observed behaviour. This, though, came with a cost. With the introduction of the D factor, *homo economicus* gives way to new alternative operationalizations.

Riker & Ordeshook's D term (in its meaning of 'stand up and be counted') is actually a good approximation of one of the biggest concurrent operationalization of the maximization principle, the expressive actor. Brennan and Buchanan [19], Brennan and Lomasky [20] developed the expressive voter theory as an alternative to the pure rational choice approach to voting behaviour. The theory starts with Buchanan's [28] argument that voting is not instrumental in the same way market choices are. Actually, in the expressive account, voters might be seen as booing and cheering spectators at a sports event. They are not supporting their teams because they will, in doing so, affect the outcome of the game. They support them because they wish to [19]. These expressions of support or lack of support for a sports team or for political candidates are not instrumental but they are rational. Going further, in [20] Brennan and Lomasky argued that voting is an opportunity to express moral views that otherwise would be costly to express. Talking about charity is cheap, but voting about it is also

cheap [20]. The two key points of the expressive account of voting behaviour are that voters have true knowledge about the P term and that they will choose to express otherwise costly views by talking and voting about them. If voting is cheap then people will buy it. The conclusion is that rational expressive people will vote.

Another family of operationalizations is the ethical (altruistic) voter theory and the social preference theory of voting. Building on Harsanyi [29] Goodin and Roberts [21] assumed that „*individuals have both egoistic and ethical preferences*” [21, p. 927] so an ethical voter will vote his ethical preferences once at the polling booth. This form of the theory does not explain, though, why going to the polling booth but how you will vote „*once there*” [21, p.927]. What is not clear in [21] is why vote even if you are an altruist? This problem persisted even in the later [30] Hudson and Jones’ paper. A solution for this problem came from a related theory of voting which assumed that voters have social preferences. In [22] Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan explained not only how but why people vote. They assumed that people have social preferences. This move implied the construction of a social utility function, i.e. a function which contains the benefits of all of the group’s members. So this step implies the modification of the B term:

$$B = B_{\text{self}} + \alpha NB_{\text{soc}} \quad (4)$$

Here, B_{soc} “represents the benefit to others as perceived by the person making the decision whether to vote” [22], N stands for the number of individuals in society, and α “represents a discounting factor to reflect that benefits to others are less important than benefits to self”. If $\alpha = 0$ then the voter is selfish. If $\alpha > 0$ then the voter has social preferences. The authors argued that for most voters $\alpha > 0$ and this implies a positive equation of voting. In this key, rational people will vote. Since there is no space for a complete review of the public choice literature on voting, we stop here. We mention, though, Caplan’s [23] rational irrational voter’s theory and Ferejohn and Fiorina’s [24] minimax regret theory of voting. In the following section we deal with the problem of small scale protests (as a form of collective action) in relation with voting and revolutions.

4. Rational participation in SSPP: University square 2012 (USQ’12)

In the above sections we presented two classes of theories developed by public choice theory scholars, revolutions theories and voting behaviour theories. The reason for choosing this approach was that we aimed to use these theories to derive a theory of small scale political protest. This is the objective we set for the present section. We will identify several classes of similarity and differences.

4.1. Distinctive characteristics of SSPP

4.1.1. Collective action and public goods

Small scale political protests (SSPP) are a form of collective action. Like revolution and voting there is a public good involved. In the case of revolutions it is the success of the revolution (which is good for any revolutionary). If no one rebels then there is no revolution. In the case of voting it is the health of democracy. If no one votes there is no democracy. Likewise, if no one protests, then there is zero chance to attain a shared goal. The problem is that revolutions, voting and protests, once produced, present the characteristics of a public good: non-rivalry and non-excludability. Unlike revolutions and voting, though, in the case of SSPP monitoring is possible (See anonymity below).

4.1.2. The number of participants

Unlike revolutions and mass voting, in the case of SSPP the number of participants is quite low. In the case of a large scale social movement the individual participant can have reasonable hopes for success. In the case of SSPP the small number usually generates certitude of failure, at least in the case of high stake demands. For example, a group of several hundred people who protests against the government and asks for the resignation of the president and of the prime minister can't really hope for receiving what it was asking for. They can't win and, if rational, they know that. This is how our original question appeared in the first place: why bother to participate?

4.1.3. Costs and benefits

Unlike revolutions, in the case of SSPP the costs of participation are substantially lower. You don't usually expect to die in a SSPP, at least not in a democracy. Unlike voting, though, in the case of SSPP the costs of participation are substantially higher. The protests involve lot more time and effort than the usual half an hour spent in case of elections. If benefits are seen in a pure instrumental fashion, then (see the point made above) you can't expect any in the case of SSPP.

4.1.4. Anonymity

One of the most important differences between SSPPs and voting is that in the case of a SSPP the individual participant is not anonymous. This is true in two different ways: first once in the pooling booth you cannot express qualitative information. Your vote will be registered and after the elections aggregated quantitative information will be published. Your voice is not distinguished by the voices of million others. Nobody will know that your voice is there; second, your message is filtered by the agenda. If you are very lucky

maybe your ideal point is already on the agenda. If not (and we believe this is usually the case) you will have to compromise and send an already configured message (voting for a candidate). In the case of SSPPs, the individual participant is known, he/she has an identity. Her/his message is not predetermined. He/she can configure almost any message and express it publicly. Unlike revolutions, the lack of anonymity is not risky in the case of a SSPP which takes place in a relatively democratic state.

4.2. Observed behaviour and compatible theories in the case of USQ'12

From the list of characteristics given above, we can derive a theory which is suitable for explaining the observed behaviour. SSPPs can be observed. They are not just possible, they are manifest. The '*Occupy*' (Wall Street and so on) movements like Romanian University Square protests from 2012 are clear instances of SSPP. They all have the same attributes: they have few participants (between several hundred and 2-3 thousand people), they last several months, they are non-violent, they seem rather non-organized, they are territorial and they have quite a creative and unfocused message. But they have public good properties. Are the participants irrational? We will give three different answers to this question.

4.2.1. The by-product theory of protest

At a first glance, SSPPs are not compatible with the instrumental maximization assumption. What reasons could a selfish maximizer have to pay the cost of enduring a harsh winter, day after day, knowing that there is no chance of changing the government, the president and the like? As we argued, in the case of revolutions the by-product theory cannot be the answer. The same goes for voting. Yet, SSPPs have a characteristic which can give the individuals instrumental reasons to participate. This is possible because the small scale groups are not homogenous. For example, in the case of USQ'12, there were many different subgroups: different groups of student (the NSPSA students, the architecture students, the theatre students and so on) the football galleries, the feminists, the extreme right wing group and so on. Of course there were '*independent*' protesters also, but the movement survived on medium time because of some of these subgroups. These subgroups have some shared attributes: they are very small and their members have deep social connections with each other. From these two characteristics we can derive that monitoring and social sanctions are possible. If they are possible then turnout is explainable in terms of a by-product theory. Protesters can be conceived as selfish maximizers of social validation. Even though it might be possible, this explanation is not the one we consider to likely be the correct one. We explore two additional theories.

4.2.2. *The ethical protester theory*

In the previous section of this paper we reviewed the ethical voter theory. This theory introduced B_{soc} which “represents the benefit to others as perceived by the person making the decision whether to vote” [22]. Applying this idea to SSPPs results in the explanation that protesters have utility functions which include the welfare of others. If we review the messages from USQ’12 or other occupy movements we shall find a social reform constant. The protesters requested general reforms which could benefit the entire (or almost entire) society. If we add B_{soc} to protesters’ utility functions, then we can explain their presence in terms of instrumental altruistic rationality. We now turn to the last and to what we believe is most likely to be the best explanation of SSPPs derived from these three theories.

4.2.3. *The expressive protester account*

In the 4.1 section we argued that in the case of SSPPs individuals are not as anonymous as they are when voting (and even in the case of revolutions). Actually as we have already mentioned, SSPPs provide the opportunity of expressing personalized messages which can be received, through mass-media by almost all citizens in a country. A characteristic of the occupy movements and in particular of the USQ’12 was an almost permanent media coverage. Protesters’ messages were seen and heard and some of them were repeatedly invited to TV talk-shows. This gave birth to a large class of creative messages: (unfortunately the English translation loses the creative part of some of them): “*we want research not churches*”, “*please excuse us, we don’t produce as much as you can steal*”, “*Chuck Norris, help!*”, “*Now is the winter of our discontent*”, “*Count us, Roberta! We are five millions*”. All these messages and their abroad cousins were seen and everybody had the opportunity to express almost any message. This is why, we believe, that the expressive account of SSPPs is a promising route of salvaging both rationality and participation.

5. Conclusions

Resuming the argument given here, the observed behaviour in the case of SSPPs is consistent with at least three public choice theories. That is to say that rationality is consistent with collective action in this case. We derived this conclusion using theories about voting and revolutions. We suspect that, in the eventuality of testing, we should find two things: first, that the expressive motives will be dominant, second, that the agents have mixed motives for action. The later means that we could find different people with different motives (selfish instrumental, instrumental altruistic, expressive) and the same people with different motives. This would indicate that the use of behavioural uniformity assumptions specific to public choice research strategy is not a good

way of solving social puzzles. Giving up to this strategy would mean a loss in generality but a gain in the explanatory power of the approach.

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