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**Explaining the Belated Emergence of Social Protest in Ireland Between
2009 and 2014**

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2009, Ireland was the first European country to officially enter recession following the fiscal crisis which had enveloped the international banking system following the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September 2008. Unemployment, which had been increasing for over a year by that point from a low of under 4.6% in early 2007 went on to peak at over 15% in 2012. This contributed, in part, to the widespread fall in income (the median household income fell by 12.7% between 2009 and 2013) and increase in household deprivation experienced in Ireland where the household deprivation rate increased from 17% in 2009 to over 30% by 2013. The squeeze on household incomes was accompanied by severe cuts in public services across areas such as health, education and social services, all of which were more likely to be visited upon more vulnerable members of Irish society.

Whilst these hardships certainly had an impact of subsequent political events in Ireland, levels of social unrest and public protest were actually relatively muted. Despite the deep cuts in public services and social protection, a consensus soon emerged that Ireland would not experience the same level of civic unrest and public protest as other countries in Europe which had experienced deep economic recession (c.f. Power and Nussbaum 2015). This was summed up well by (Kirby and Murphy, 2011):

“...when compared to Iceland’s ‘Saturday Protests’, Spain’s ‘Indignados’ movement and Portugal’s ‘Desperate Generation’ protests, a sense persists of a relative lack of overt Irish protest. This sense was captured in a 2010 Greek protest chant ‘this is Greece, not Ireland, we the workers will resist’” (Kirby and Murphy 2011, p175).

Although trade unions organized several large public rallies in 2009, street protest was small scale and orderly and certainly of a different character to the violent street battles which broke out in the capitals of Greece and Spain. However, this changed quite dramatically in the autumn of 2014 when widespread social protest erupted across Ireland. Yet, by 2014 unemployment had been continuously falling for two years and GNP had returned to levels not seen since the end of 2007. How can we explain this pattern of muted protest during the depths of Ireland’s fiscal crisis followed by mass demonstration and social protest just as all the indicators suggest that the economy was returning to some semblance of normality?

Sociological explanations for why improving economic conditions are associated with social protest often invoke ‘relative deprivation’ Coleman 1990 (Coleman, 1990) as the underlying process. According to this approach, rising living standards overall lead to social unrest and political action when the gains of one group outpace those of another leading to the perception of relative deprivation among the disadvantaged group. We examine this mechanism but find it wanting. Instead, we suggest that the temporal pattern of social protest in Ireland actually reflects two interlinked social processes: first, we give a primary explanatory role to the sense of grievance that had built up in Ireland after 2009 as a function of the falls in living standards and cuts in public services. However, to account for the temporal structure of protest, we differentiate between ‘structural’ and ‘incidental’ grievances and the role the latter play in creating an ‘injustice frame’ which focuses the ‘structural’ grievances brought on by the fiscal crisis and the retrenchment of Irish Government policy. We identify these ‘incidental grievances’ and show how they play a role in ‘igniting’ the structural grievances that had been smoldering since 2009.

However, whilst the incidental grievance process is necessary to explain the pattern of protest, we also argue that it is not sufficient. Instead, we argue that the absence of structured opposition groups in Ireland following an extended period of social partnership was replaced by the development of numerous opposition groups in the period after 2009 facilitated by social network processes and trade union coordination. This development was further aided by the effective ‘strategies of contention’ that protestors could wield against the Government’s setting up of Irish Water and the policy requirement to install water meters in domestic homes.

In the next section we consider a number of theories of social protest that have emerged in the literature before setting out the data used in this paper in section three. Examining the complex factors associated with the pattern of social protest in Ireland requires both qualitative and quantitative data and we set out our methodological approaches in section three. In sections four and five we detail the findings from our empirical analyses before coming to some overall conclusions in section six.

2. TWO THEORIES OF SOCIAL PROTEST AND REBELLION

The explanation of how discontent is transformed into collective social action and rebellion has been central to social science for two centuries and literature has dealt extensively with the issue of how the probability of collective protest and rebellion are influenced by social conditions.

Grievance Based Theories of Social Protest

Until the 1970s much of the literature prioritized the role of grievances in driving participation in social protest and rebellion. According to the prevailing logic individuals who perceived themselves to be disadvantaged relative to a reference group were motivated to protest so as to relieve the ensuing psychological tension and frustration leading to an increased likelihood of protest and collective action.

This framework has also been used to account for the tendency of social protest to occur in periods of improvement and growth rather than during the period with the worst economic conditions. Brinton (Brinton, 1965) for example, has argued that revolutions are more likely to occur when circumstances are improving because this creates the conditions under which people come to expect to be better off in the future. However, Brinton (1965) argues that expectations often run ahead of objective conditions leading to the growth of frustration, grievance and subsequent social protest.

Variations on the grievance mechanism used by Brinton have been put forward by others to explain the tendency for protest and rebellion to happen when conditions are improving. For example, Davies (1962) put forward the theory of short-term setbacks. Here frustration arises during a period of improving circumstances if, for some reason, there is a short term set-back. This leads to a gap emerging between expectations and objective conditions leading to protest and rebellion.

Perhaps the most famous sub-type of frustration theory is that used by Merton and Rossi (1950) to explain Stouffer et al’s (Stouffer et al., 1949) finding that Air Force officers in the US military had greater levels of dissatisfaction compared to military policemen. Objectively, conditions in the US air force were significantly better than in the military police, particularly in terms of the speed of promotion. We would expect that the Air Force officers would be far more satisfied than the Military Police men should level of satisfaction be determined solely by absolute level of living conditions and future prospects. Stouffer and colleagues actually found the opposite but Merton and Rossi (Merton and Rossi, 1950) argued that it was precisely the greater frequency of advancement among air force officers that led to dissatisfaction because it meant that individuals were more often faced with an example of someone doing better than they were, leading to a heightened sense of relative deprivation.

Hechter et al (Hechter et al., 2016) also focuses on grievances but uses them in a slightly different way by differentiating between structural and incidental grievances. Hechter et al argue that individuals are often resigned to poor living conditions because these are associated with a given role with concomitant expectations. Their paper uses the example of sailors in the British Navy during the 18th and 19th centuries to show how poor, seemingly intolerable living conditions do not result in mutiny because these were the accepted norm. However, sailors only accepted their poor living standards because the captain had reciprocal obligations of their own such as providing the customary rations and good ships order. Hechter et al show using a statistical analysis of Royal Navy records that if a captain broke these obligations, say through the excessive use of flogging or the outbreak of disease through mismanagement, this could form the basis for an incidental grievance and so precipitate mutiny. Hechter et al’s distinction between structural and incidental grievances has much in common with the work of Gurr (Gurr, 1970) who argued that structural grievances had to be perceived relative to what an individual feels entitled to rather than in any sense, absolutely.

An approach based on grievances offers a number of useful theoretical mechanisms to explain the emergence of social protest. Protest does flow from structural conditions but the timing of protest can result from beliefs about the relative positions of different groups and be ignited by ‘incidental’ grievances rather than the accumulation of frustration. At root though, grievance theory is essentially a theory about the cognitions and emotions of individuals rather than a theory of how social protest emerges as a group or coordinated activity (Benford and Snow, 2000, Walder, 2009). In contrast, other theories have focused on the balance of power, resources and political opportunities that shape whether and when protest will occur.

Power, Resource and Opportunity Theories of Social Protest

In recent decades social movement theory has swung decisively away from grievance based theories toward some version of the political process approach within which social movements are seen to form in the nexus between political opportunities and constraints, the framing of political issues as unjust and networks and organisations (Tarrow, 2011): 121). For instance, Political Process Theory (PPT) focuses on the resources external to social movements that lead to success such as electoral instability, presence of allies and so on, while Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) examines those resources that the movement itself can mobilise.

These approaches emphasise the immediate contingency of political protest and social movements, as well as the centrality of strategic thinking on the part of movement actors in determining the course of the movement. Within the ‘power/resources framework, movement actors are not responding blindly and emotionally to structural conditions or political forces, but rather as rational beings responding to external opportunities and threats, and seeking to achieve - and build up the preconditions for - successful movement outcomes. This has led some of criticise the approach as being unduly rationalistic and ignoring the culturally embedded nature of political action. For instance, Barker (2002) argue that:

“...we should not conceptualise strategizing activity solely in terms of some narrow, economic weighing of risks, costs and benefits or following a purely instrumental model of human action.”
(Barker and Lavalette, 2002)

However, it is perfectly possible to examine how movement actors exploit perceived political opportunities without following a reductive model of human interaction. Paradoxically, A second charge levelled at PPT is that it is overly deterministic in the sense that social movements are seen to emerge mechanistically when objective political conditions are right. In the real world however, opportunities and constraints are constructed by people’s reasoning and beliefs. Actors do not respond to ‘objective’ opportunities as much as to the perceived opportunities – often the two things do not coincide. Thus, the subjectivist understanding of opportunities examines the cognitive understanding on the part of movement actors that the opportunity to effect change exists.

3. UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROTEST AND FISCAL CRISIS IN IRELAND

The question of why social protest in Ireland was so muted compared to other states in Europe such as Greece and Spain has been the subject of two recent papers, both of which rely on a theory of grievances, broadly conceived. Pappas and O’Malley (Pappas and O’Malley, 2014) examine the theory that the relative lack of protest in Ireland compared to Greece reflects the fact that the Irish state continued to provide basic social services whereas the extent of cuts in expenditure in Greece fundamentally undermined Greece’s capacity to deliver services in areas important to the population. They start from the premise that states are stable precisely because they provide their citizens with basic goods and services such as security, justice and welfare with the consequence that citizens don’t question their legitimacy or threaten their integrity. However, where the state can no longer provide such normalcy its legitimacy is undermined. This primary process was augmented in the case of Greece, Pappas and O’Malley (2014) argue, by what they call ‘political Luddism’. This refers to the long running strategy among Greek political parties of gaining support through the use of public resources to maintain sheltered and privileged positions for many in the population. Such ‘auction’ politics meant that “when the economic rents could no longer be paid, those who had previously benefited had little reason to maintain loyalty to the state. It was different in Ireland, where the state was able to manage declining incomes by continuing to provide services, thus helping keep the Irish, to a large degree, acquiescent.” (Pappas and O’Malley 2014, p1595).

Cannon and Murphy (2014) use the work of Eduardo Silva on social protest in Latin America. Though using different terms to describe them, Silva (2009) uses the dual theoretical approach outlined in the previous section when arguing that populations need to be motivated to undertake protest (i.e. there needs to be adequate grievances) and secondly, they must believe that they have the capacity to succeed, either because of internal resources or the external weakness of the state, or neo-liberal forces in this case. Cannon and Murphy (Cannon and Murphy, 2014) conclude that both motivation and capacity in Ireland have been lacking to date with the consequence that large scale social protest has not emerged:

“...the crisis simply has not been grave enough to cause a....change of course. [T]his article has identified a number of larger....and countless smaller, more localised protests. Yet these have not demonstrated the necessary capacity, alliance building and narrative framing potential to create the conditions for a double movement.” Cannon and Murphy (2014, p17).

Both Cannon and Murphy (2014) and Pappas and O’Malley (2014) were written before the upsurge in social protest which occurred in the autumn of 2014 and so were unaware of the intriguing temporal pattern that protest took in Ireland. Before we turn to the empirical analysis, we briefly set out an explanation for the temporal pattern of protest which draws on both the frustration and power/resource theories outlined above.

An Incidental Grievance – The Establishment of Irish Water

Our hypothesis is that mass protest against the programme of reform and austerity undertaken by the Irish Government only emerged once adequate grounds were available around which protest could take place allied with the development of the necessary infrastructure to organise protest. The incidental grievance around which protest could take place came in the form of the establishment of Irish Water (or Bord Uisce in Irish), a public utility company which was established in July 2013 in the Water Services Act to charge for water and oversee the development of Ireland’s ageing water supply system. Prior to this, households in urban areas had paid indirectly for water through taxation and subvention from central government to local authorities. Water charges have always been a contentious political issue in Ireland and the new utility attracted a great deal of critical media comment. Throughout 2014, negative stories about Irish Water appeared in the mainstream media and a narrative of Irish Water as mismanaged, possibly corrupt and entangled with private business interests emerged. Though wholly publicly owned, the new utility was also widely seen as preparing the water system for privatisation evoking further popular and media outrage. We propose that the establishment of Irish Water acted as an incidental grievance Hechter et al (2016) which focused the considerable existing grievances associated with the various privations wrought by the fiscal crisis and subsequent recession.

Repertoires of Contention and Oppositional Networks

The public reaction to the establishment of Irish Water is a necessary but not sufficient part of the explanation for the temporal pattern of protest in Ireland. In addition, we also hypothesise that the rise in protest occurred because of a change in the opportunities open to oppose the government’s austerity agenda which was occasioned by the specificities of Irish Water and the growth of oppositional networks. This has two dimensions. The first relates to the opportunity which Irish Water offered protestors to effectively protest against austerity through ‘disruptive repertoires of contention’. However, activists could only take advantage of these changing opportunities because of the second dimension: the growth of oppositional network during the previous five years.

When in July 2013 the government passed the Water Services Act which established Irish Water as a semi-state body, few expected that the small numbers of anti-austerity campaigners would be able to mount a serious campaign. This scepticism was well founded because of the failure earlier of the campaign against the ‘household charge’. This was a tax on property which was introduced in the budget of October 2012. There was extensive mobilisation by left wing groups against this tax, and it received a certain amount of traction. The campaign was successful at organising nationwide non-compliance and by September 2012 there was a 40% non-payment rate. However, the government responded firmly, replacing the Household Charges with a Local Property Tax which they were empowered to take out of people’s wages and social welfare. The campaign group - Campaign Against Home and Water Taxes (CAHWT) failed to respond to the government’s new tactic and the boycott of the tax collapsed with mutual recriminations from those involved.

The repertoires of contention wielded against ‘water taxes’ needed to be different and public opposition to the Water Taxes were not the traditional marches through Dublin city centre or nationwide petitions. Instead, opposition took the form of a series of local actions in early 2014 in working class suburbs of Cork and North Dublin to stop the installation of water meters. A central plank of water policy was charging for water usage and without meters this would not be possible. Political activists realised early that stopping the installation of meters would make this policy unworkable.

Social movement theorists have long recognised the importance of social networks to ‘create opportunities for transforming predispositions into action’. Della Porta & Diani, 2006: 119 (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Indeed it has been argued that the networked element of social movements is what distinguishes them from more formal political groups (Diani, 2003), with the development of network ties seen as not only a requisite but a willed outcome of social movement organising.

In September 2014, the umbrella group, 'Right to Water' was founded by two trade unions as well as left-wing political parties in order to coordinate a national demonstration against Irish Water. The demonstration was planned for the 11th of October 2014, and although organisers hoped for an attendance of 10,000, in fact about 80-100,000 turned up in a chaotic demonstration which immobilised Dublin city centre and inspired attendees to organise their own local campaign group. In the next demonstration on November 1st, an estimated 150,000 people took part in hundreds of local actions and marches around the country. In response, the government issued a raft of concessions on the issue, the most important being a cap on water charges of €260 for families and €160 on individuals, with an initial 'water conservation grant' of €100 to all who registered. However, this did not blunt the campaign, with tens of thousands marching against Water Charges on December 10th (65-80,000), January 31st, March 21st. and April 18th as well as a smaller march on June 20th, and a demonstration of 8,000 who marched on the 21st February 2015 to protest the arrest of water charges demonstrators. To prove the continued salience of the issue, 50-80,000 attended a demonstration on August 29th 2015, where the organisers announced their intention to turn the Right to Water campaign into a broader 'Right to Change' anti-austerity campaign.

It would be wrong to speak of one campaign against Irish Water; rather there are hundreds of local campaigns - some operating in the same area - which are loosely interlocked with each other. What has enabled these groups to organise horizontally is the use of social media, which enables sharing of information and ideas without the need to direct through established organisations. This was essential to the campaign's success.

Overall then there are three interlinked hypotheses about the processes that led to the temporal pattern of protest witnessed in Ireland from 2008 to 2014. The first involves the relative deprivation hypothesis of Merton and Rossi (1950): protest occurred when it did because improvement in the economy was differentially distributed. The second involves the incidental grievance hypothesis of Hechter and Pfaff (2016): the campaign against Irish Water focused provided an incidental grievance that focused existing structural grievances. The third involves the role of political coordination and opportunities: the campaign against Irish Water provided united a broad swath of groups and provided them with a practical mode of contention at a time of government weakness. We adopt a mixed methods approach to examining these two hypotheses as outlined in the next section.

4. DATA AND METHODS

The European Social Survey 2002-2014

We draw upon two sources of data to understand the pattern of social protest in Ireland between 2008 and 2014. To answer the question of whether social protest was higher as the economy was improving after 2010 and if protest was less prevalent in Ireland compared to other European countries severely impact by the fiscal crisis we use data from seven waves of the European Social Survey (ESS): 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014. The ESS is an input harmonised international social survey which collects information on a large range of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours as well as detailed information on social demographic status (e.g. gender, age, and marital status), employment, education and income.

Achieved sample size varies across years and within countries but all of the samples used in this paper are larger than 1500 observations rising to 2700 in some years. Survey methodology for ESS is set and monitored centrally and a minimum effective response rate of 70% in each country is specified in the study protocols although actual response rate varies by country and year. In the countries used here, response rates tend to be lowest in Ireland, averaging 55% and highest in Portugal and Greece at 76% on average. Response enhancing measures are specified across countries quality control back-checks are used in each country.

Crucially, the ESS instruments contained questions on political activity in each year including an item on public demonstrations:

"There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you taken part in a lawful public demonstration?" (Response: yes/no/don't know).

The ESS questionnaires also contain items which can be used to measure sense of grievance experienced by individuals. As argued above, sense of grievance has its roots in the experience of deprivation or hardship at the individual level, be this absolute or relative deprivation. But deprivation is not enough to create a sense of grievance if it is perceived as just or deserved. Deprivation needs to be accompanied by the perception that the situation is unjust, that is, be framed as an injustice in the mind of the individual (Hechter et al 2016). ESS contains information on the perceived financial strain of the individual: "*Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?*". Answer codes are 'living comfortably', 'coping', 'finding it difficult' and 'finding it very difficult'. To examine the effect of perceiving this deprivation as 'unjust' on the probability of attending a demonstration or protest, we use an item which asks respondents about their extent of agreement with the statement: "*The government should take measures to reduce differences*

in income levels". By interacting the perceived injustice of the distribution of income with year it is possible to examine whether we can explain the temporal pattern of protest between 2008 and 2014.

Throughout the period the trade union movement organised demonstrations around Ireland's main cities against the cuts in public sector workers pay and conditions. We would expect that trade union members would be more likely to protest because of this. To prevent any possible confounding of the relationship between grievance and protest, we adjust for trade union membership.

Qualitative Interviews

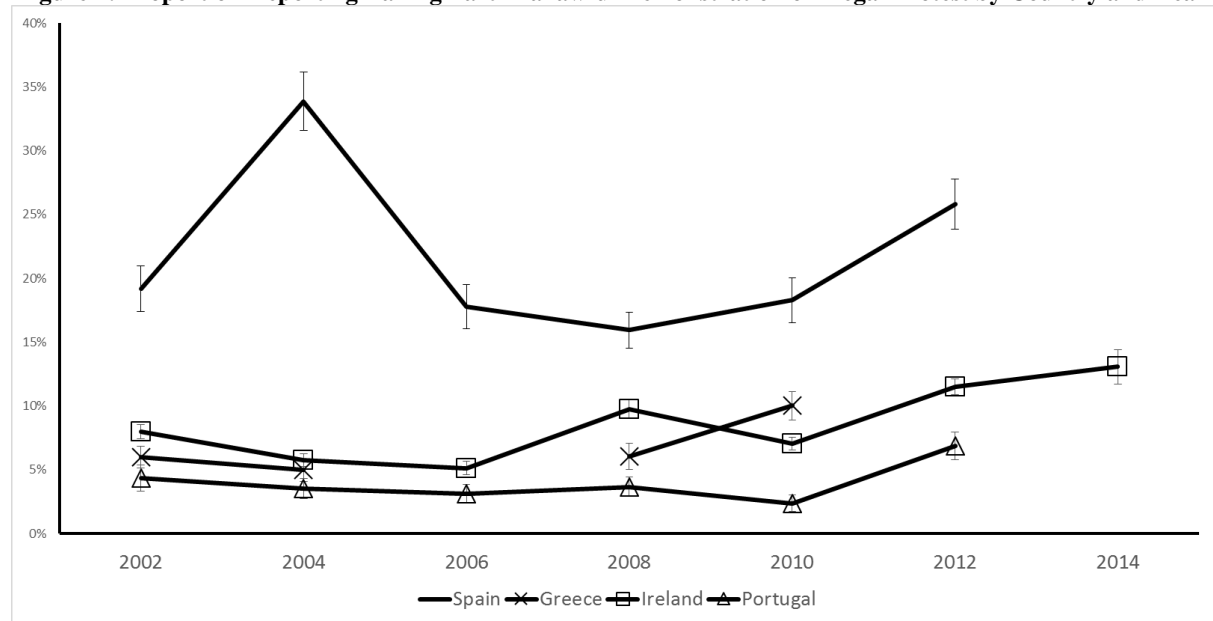
The quantitative data from the ESS provide representative information on the pattern of protest and the drivers of this at the individual level in Ireland. These data allow us to examine our theoretical model of the role of grievances as a driver of protest. However, these data cannot provide insight into the rationalisations of political activists and the role that these played in structuring the extent and timing of protest in Ireland. To get insights into these processes we draw upon qualitative research carried out with thirteen leading activists in the Water Charges campaign from across Ireland. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the rationale that those involved gave for their participation in the campaign – in particular their attribution of threat and opportunity – as well as to capture the internal dynamics of the campaign. The interviews discussed a wide range of activities that the movement was engaged in, from local civil disobedience and street protests to coalition building and strategizing. The sample was selected using stratified purposeful sampling (Pidgeon and Henwood, 2004). interviewees included trade union officials, members of political parties as well as those primarily involved in community campaigning. This enabled us to examine the meso-level mechanisms of the campaign, our focus being on how repertoires of contention, attribution of threats and opportunity, and resource mobilisation have affected the form and intensity of the protests (McAdam et al., 2001).

5. RESULTS

Was There Less Protest in Ireland After 2008?

Figure 2 gives the proportion of respondents reporting that they had taken part in a demonstration or illegal protest in the preceding 12 months by year and residence in Spain, Greece, Ireland and Portugal. This shows that social protest was most prevalent among the Spanish sample where between 16% and 33% report taking part in a protest in the preceding 12 months compared to between 5 and 12% in Ireland and Greece and 2 and 7% in Portugal. The Portuguese prevalence of protest is consistently below that of Ireland and Greece (as shown by the 95% error bars) which themselves are consistently below that of Spain. ESS was not collected in Greece in 2006 or 2012. Assuming the national samples from the ESS are representative and that this didn't change across the period from 2002 to 2012, Figure 2 would suggest that, contrary to anecdotal evidence, levels of social protest in Ireland were actually higher than in Portugal and around the same level as Greece until 2010, although the absence of data from 2012 makes it difficult to assess whether the level of protest in Greece continued to rise into 2012.

Figure 2: Proportion Reporting Taking Part in a lawful Demonstration or illegal Protest by Country and Year

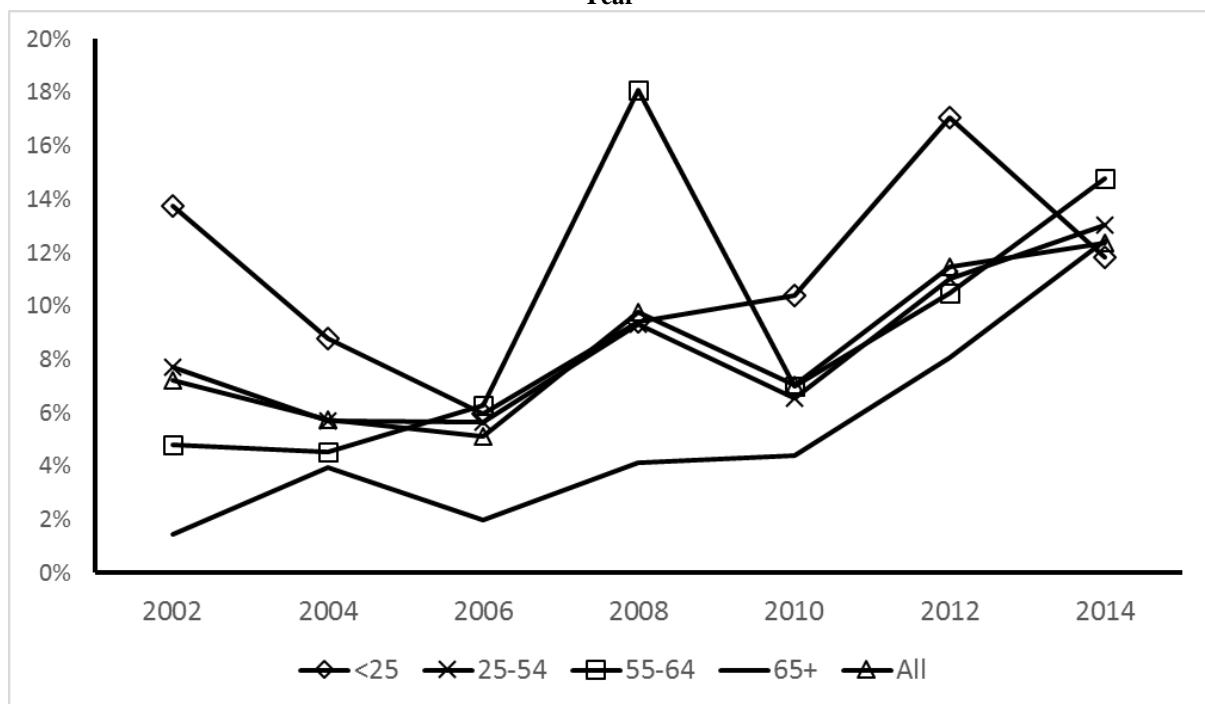


Source: European Social Survey, Ireland 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 & 2014.
Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals

Figure 2 shows that after an initial increase in 2008, the level of protest in then fell in 2010 before rising in 2012 and again in 2014. An age breakdown of this pattern (Figure 3) shows that there was a rise in all age groups in 2008, but that the trend was particularly strong among those aged 55 to 64. The fieldwork for the ESS in Ireland was carried out between September and November in 2008. In the October budget of 2008, the Government had introduced changes to eligibility to free healthcare in response to the growing economic problems and this led to large-scale street protests among older people in Ireland. The Government were forced to reconsider their position and diluted the changes that were finally introduced.

Figure 3 also shows that the fall in the level of protest between 2008 and 2010 was not common to all groups with the proportion continuing to rise among the youngest age group. This group had had higher levels of protest in 2002 and 2004, largely as a result of student protests against an increase in university fees (or registration charges as they are known in Ireland). After 2010, the proportion protesting increases among all age groups in 2012 and rises again in 2014 in all except the youngest age group.

Figure 3: Proportion Reporting Taking Part in a lawful Demonstration or illegal Protest by Age Group and Year

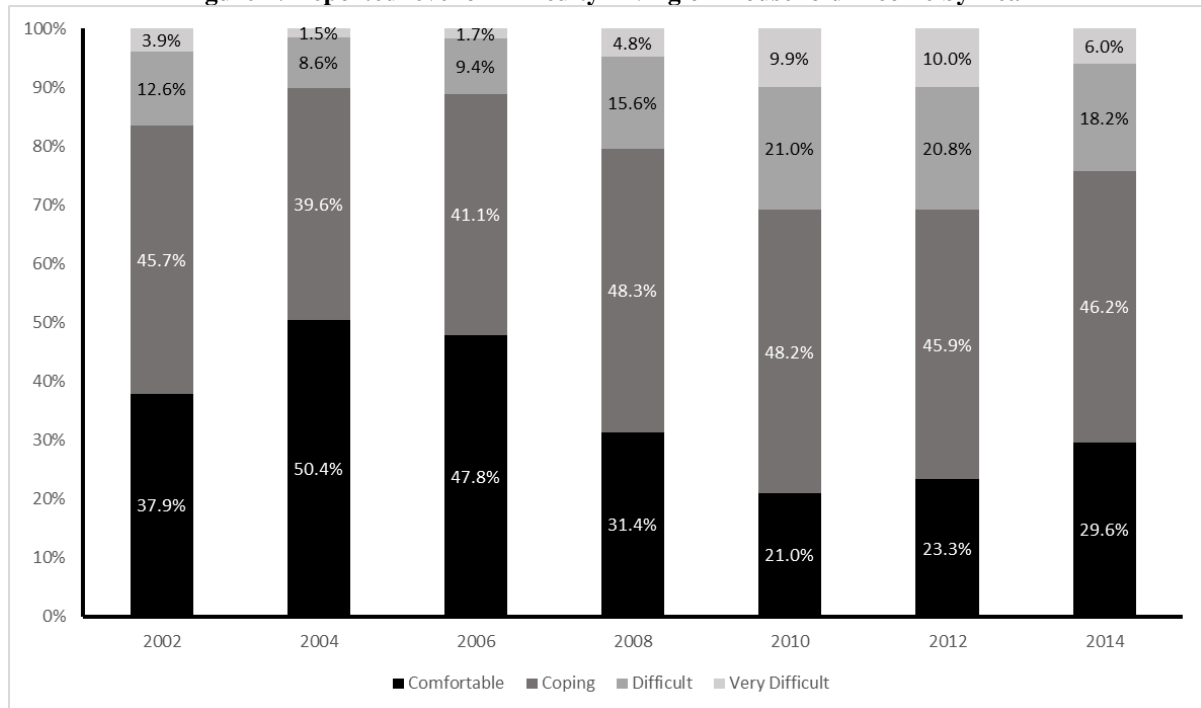


Source: European Social Survey, Ireland 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 & 2014.

These patterns show that there was an increase in social protest in 2008 with the onset of austerity followed by a fall in 2010 and subsequent rise in 2012 and 2014. This pattern tracks our expectations given the discussion above of the political timeline with initial austerity leading to the defeat of the incumbent political party at the general election of 2010 followed by a renewal of political protest later general economic conditions improved but incidental grievances arose. Our primary question is whether this pattern of protest supports a theoretical model based on grievances?

Figure 4 shows the pattern of economic strain from 2002 to 2014. This shows almost a tripling of the proportion of respondents who report that they are finding it ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ living on their households level of income between 2004 and 2010 with, as we would expect, the largest changes occurring between 2006 and 2008 and again between 2008 and 2010. As suggested earlier though, the proportion finding it ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ then falls by a fifth between 2012 and 2014 as the economy began to recover. There clearly was an increase in perceived economic stress but the subsequent drop would suggest a fall in the severity of the conditions that could lead to grievance overall.

Figure 4: Reported level of Difficulty Living on Household Income by Year



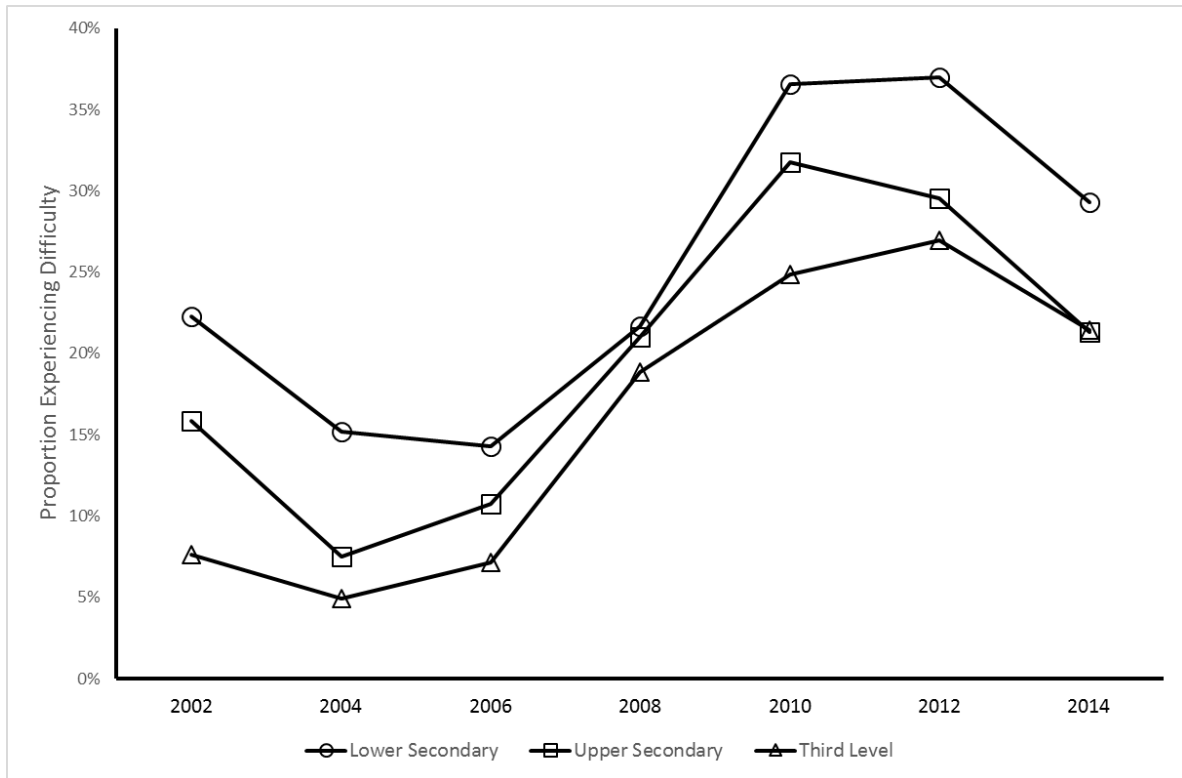
Source: European Social Survey, Ireland 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 & 2014.

The Relative Deprivation Hypothesis

The relative deprivation hypothesis would suggest that the reason for the surge in protest in 2014, in spite of the fact that economic conditions were improving overall, was the perception among those under the most economic strain that conditions were improving for others but not for themselves. We can examine this in part by looking at the pattern of economic strain experienced by groups at different social and economic positions. One measure of position is the person's educational level and we show the relationship between this and the experience of economic difficulty by year in Figure 5.

Figure 5 shows that the proportion of respondent's reporting 'difficulty' or 'great difficulty' in living on their household's income by level of education across the period from 2002 to 2014. This shows that whilst the experience of economic difficulty was always higher for individuals with lower levels of education, all groups experienced an increase in the proportion experiencing difficulty between 2006 and 2012, but, importantly, all experienced a significant fall thereafter in 2014. These patterns would suggest that, although differentials were preserved, the position of the more advantaged group did not improve faster than that for the less advantaged. If so, these patterns would tend to militate against an explanation for the surge in social protest being due to the relative position of those in more vulnerable social and economic positions.

Figure 5: Proportion Experiencing Difficulty Living on Household Income by Level of Education and Year



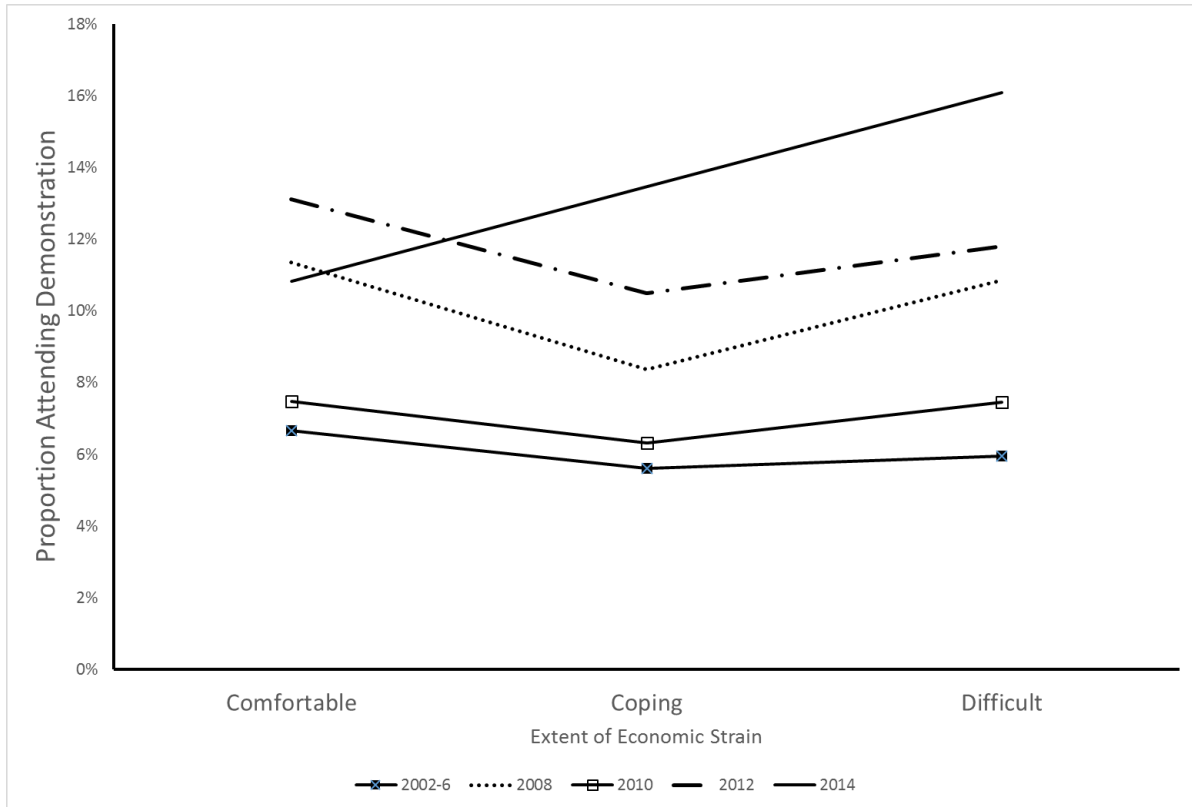
Source: European Social Survey, Ireland 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 & 2014.

The Changing Relationship Between Economic Strain and Social Protest

So far, we have looked at evidence of the development of economic strain in the population after 2008 and we have seen the overall pattern of social protest. We have not examined the relationship between the experience of economic strain or difficulty and the individual propensity to become involved in social protest. This relationship is central to any explanation for the temporal pattern of protest based on a theory of ‘structural’ grievances. To put it bluntly, higher levels of economic strain and great difficulties making ends meet should be accompanied by a greater propensity to protest.

We can examine this relationship in Figure 6 where the year in which the data were collected is now represented by a different line and the horizontal axis measures the extent of difficulty making ends meet on current income. This shows that as we move in time from 2002-6 to 2014, the mean level of protest increases, but importantly, the relationship between economic strain and protest changes. Prior to 2014, the probability of protest was largely the same across groups at different levels of economic strain, whereas in 2014, those who are experiencing difficulty or great difficulty living on their household income are significantly more likely to protest. This would suggest that the relationship between economic difficulty and protest experienced something of a structural change after 2012. We posit that this structural change was a consequence of the ‘incidental’ grievance of the establishment of Irish Water plus the development of opposition groups in the population after 2009.

Figure 6: Proportion Attending a Protest by Perceived Economic Strain and Year



Source: European Social Survey, Ireland 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 & 2014.

Testing the Relationship Between Economic Strain and Protest

Before developing our explanation further, it is first important to test whether the conclusions that we have drawn so far are sustained when we adjust for other characteristics that may confound the relationship between economic grievances and social protest. In this section, we estimate a series of logit regression models to examine whether the relationship between economic difficulty and protest did indeed change in 2014.

Table 1 gives the results for three models: a base model (Model 1) which adjusts for the year of the survey plus confounding characteristics; Model 2 which introduces the individual’s experience of economic strain; lastly, model 3 which introduces the interaction of year with the individual’s experience of economic strain. The latter term measures the structural change which occurs in the relationship between the experience of economic strain, year and the odds of protesting. All three models adjust for the age, sex and educational qualifications of the individual and whether they are a member of a trade union. The latter term is important since much protest in Ireland during this period was organised among trade union members who are thus more likely to attend protest irrespective of their economic position.

Table 1: Odds Ratios and Significance for a Logit Model of Social Protest in Ireland

	Model 1 odds ratio	Model 2 odds ratio	Model 3 odds ratio
Year			
<2008	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
2008	1.30*	1.25	1.41
2010	1.17	1.11	1.13
2012	2.03***	1.93***	2.16***
2014	2.49***	2.41***	1.76***
Sex			
Male	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Female	0.84*	0.84**	0.83**
Age Group			
<25	2.53***	2.45***	2.49***
25-34	1.33*	1.26	1.27
35-44	1.15	1.09	1.10
45-54	1.45**	1.38**	1.40**
55-64	1.31*	1.28	1.30*
65+	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Age 55-64 & Year 2008	2.80***	2.82***	2.91***
Highest Level of Education			
ISCED 0-1	0.50***	0.47***	0.45***
ISCED 2	0.55***	0.54***	0.51***
ISCED 3	0.75***	0.74***	0.72***
ISCED 4	0.71*	0.66**	0.65**
ISCED 5	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Trade Union Member			
No	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Yes	1.85***	1.87***	1.87***
Feeling About Household's Income			
Living comfortably on income		Ref.	Ref.
Coping on present income		0.99	0.96
Difficult or V. Difficult on present income		1.31*	1.20
Year x Feeling About Household's Income			
2008* Coping on present income			0.83
2008* Difficult or V. Difficult on present income			0.92
2010* Coping on present income			0.96
2010* Difficult or V. Difficult on present income			1.07
2012* Coping on present income			0.89
2012* Difficult or V. Difficult on present income			0.87
2014*A Coping on present income			1.53#
2014* Difficult or V. Difficult on present income			1.68#
Constant	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***
Log-Likelihood	-4168.32	-4161.37	-4155.38
N	14,676	14,676	14,676

Significant Key: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, # P<0.1

The results for Model 1 confirm the descriptive pattern found for year with an initial increase in protest in 2008 (relative to 2002-6) followed by a fall in 2010 just prior to the election in Ireland leading to a steep increase in the odds of protest in 2012 and 2014. Across all years the odds of trade union members protesting are around 1.85 times higher than non-trade union members. Higher levels of education and being male are also associated with a higher odds of attending protest.

Model 2 introduces the variable representing the individual's level of economic strain, our indirect measure of grievance. Those who report that it is 'difficult' or 'very difficult' coping on their present income are 31% more likely to attend a protest. However, as we would expect from the descriptive analyses, the introduction of these variables in Model 2 reduces the coefficients for the effects of year but does not remove them. The odds of protest are still 93% and 241% more likely in 2012 and 2014 respectively than prior to 2008.

Model 3 introduces the interaction between level of economic strain with year to examine whether the relationship between extent of economic strain and attending a protest changes in 2014. This shows that it does, albeit with marginal significance with those report 'difficulty' or 'great difficulty' on their present income where the odds of attending a protest in 2014 are 1.68 times those prior to 2008.

The multivariate models suggest that a grievance based explanation has some traction in explaining the pattern of protest but clearly there was a structural change in the relationship between grievance and protest that occurs in 2014 which vastly increased the overall propensity to attend a demonstration, particularly among those whose perceived economic strain was the most severe. It may be that the incidental grievance of the establishment of the Irish water utility, 'Bord Uisce' was sufficient to bring about this structural change in behaviours. On the other hand it may also be that what was also crucial was the role which the establishment of Bord Uisce played in spurring on the oppositional activities of political activists. This grievance was not only likely to gain support among the population but offered protestors the perceived opportunity to effectively protest austerity through engagement in 'disruptive repertoires of contention' such as blocking the installation of water metres in homes. Here the Irish Government was in a weak political and logistical position. The next section provides evidence of how this happened using evidence from qualitative interviews with activists.

Qualitative Findings

Water was, in the words of several interviewees, "the straw that broke the camel's back", that is, the incidental grievance that provided the spark for people to protest against the structural grievances of austerity. It did so, firstly by providing an issue that could be framed to appeal to a wider populace, and secondly by enabling protestors to develop effective action repertoires. Whilst other changes in taxes and charges during the recession impacted on one sector of society and not others, water charges were levied on all householders and so offered a broad base for support. This meant that campaigners could, from the beginning, use the resonant human rights frame in their campaign - successfully framing water as a universal human right which everyone was entitled to. This framing was consistent across interviewees whether from unions, community groups or political parties and constantly present in campaign literature.¹ In addition, the grievance was framed not only as an unjust imposition, but as something that people *should* mobilise around. As campaigners themselves recognised, for this to happen there had to be a successful adversarial framing of the issue (Hunt and Benford 2004). The demonization of Denis O'Brien, a wealthy Irish businessman, one of whose companies was given the contract to install water meters, enabled campaigners to successfully frame the campaign as one of the 'ordinary people' against the 'rich elites' and to personalise the technical arguments around water privatisation. As one campaigner, seeking to explain the popularity of the campaign stated, "I think that's one line I throw out at every meeting. 'Lads, sooner or later Denis O'Brien is going to end up owning your water supply'. And that always gets a reaction."

As well as attribution of threat, there also has to be attribution of opportunity. Water charges were considered to be an issue that both threatened participants and which they could win. The consistent framing of the campaign can be contrasted with the constantly shifting narrative coming from the government. Water charges were originally 'the last austerity tax', then a means of conserving resources and finally simply a service which people needed to pay for. This shifting narrative was referred to by several interviewees as 'proof' that they were winning and that the government was vulnerable. The perception of government weakness, fuelled by concessions made after the initial demonstrations added to the belief among activists that they were going to win this campaign, providing an incentive to continued campaigning.

Irish Water also provided protestors the opportunity to engage in disruptive repertoires of contention, which also served to develop group identity and broaden opposition to austerity (Tarrow 2011). Before Irish Water, the only opportunity people had to protest austerity was through the use of contained repertoires such as protest marches or petitions, seen as ineffective and unmotivating. In contrast public opposition to the Water Taxes took the form of a series of local actions in early 2014 in working class suburbs of Cork and North Dublin to stop the installation of water meters. A central plank of water policy was charging for water usage and without meters this would not be possible. Political activists realised early that stopping the installation of meters would make this policy unworkable, and more, that the act of resisting water meters made the campaign visible and relatable to people in the locality.

¹ For instance, it is the main plank in the Right2Water campaign page. <http://www.right2water.ie/about>

As one interviewee said.

“Now probably one of the reasons why this did take off as opposed to any other campaign around austerity is that there was something physical in your community that people could organise around. Household tax, there was no physical thing you could organise around. There was 'don't pay the bill' and then they obviously bypassed that. In this case you had vans driving into people's estates, outside people's doors, installing austerity effectively into your footpath. To put it crudely that there was something there that people could physically organise around.”

The tactic of blockading meter installation also spread due to its perceived effectiveness. Water meters, referred to by one interviewee as ‘an ATM for those who wanted to privatise water’ appeared to be a perfect target for the campaign – a concrete way to attack austerity. In addition, the local nature of these actions enabled those involved in blocking the installation of water meters to regard themselves as defending their community from invasion by meter installers, police and private security guards. The trope of defending the community remains the most resonant in Irish political campaigning (Naughton 2015). Thus the form of campaigning allowed the water protests to engage people on a local, communal basis in between mass demonstrations and to build up a network of neighbours who could be activated when the campaign moved onto the phase of non-payment of Irish Water bills. For one interviewee, this was the main result of the campaign; he now knew people on every street in his area who he could call on to mobilise on other issues. The ability of the campaign to engage in ongoing and extremely local campaigning helps explain why the mobilisation over Irish Water did not fade but remained at a high level, as evinced by seven major demonstrations over the course of a year.

Resources for Protest and Government Weakness

The belief that the campaign was winnable was enhanced by the emergence of resources that the campaign could bring to bear on the issue. Under the previous government administration which came into power in 1997, the Irish state negotiated its relations with trade unions and then community groups through what were known as ‘national partnership agreements’, a type of corporatism through which social partners negotiated with government. In return for national wage agreements, falling taxes on incomes and a consultative role, the trade unions maintained industrial peace. Community groups were also bought in under the partnership umbrella, where in return for generous government funding, they were turned from claimants on power to providers of services for the state (Cullen, 2009; Larragy, 2006). It could be argued that one of the primary explanations for the lack of protest in Ireland following the advent of fiscal crisis was this co-option of civil society organisations and trade unions by state governance structures. At the beginning of the recessionary period oppositional social networks simply did not exist but instead had to be developed over the course of the recession. A good example of this can be found in the qualitative fieldwork with a group which emerged in a small Irish town just outside of Dublin. Here, a group had originally come together to campaign against the Household Tax. Subsequently, they campaigned successfully to get a member elected to the county council and it was thus almost inevitable they would get involved in the water charges campaign.

However it is not only the nucleus of local campaigning groups which the water charges campaign could call on. A crucial element explaining the growth of contentious politics was the enhanced role of the unions who had not become seriously involved in previous anti-austerity campaigns. The shift of some unions from a partnership to oppositional position was crucial as they provided brokerage, certification, and resources to the campaign (McAdam et al. 2001).

Turning first to ‘brokerage’ or the mediated linking of previously unconnected social sites (McAdam et al. 2001), on June 2nd 2014, representatives of two Irish trade unions met with political parties to talk about what to do about the upcoming water charges. Disagreements at the meeting among the politicians meant that they allowed the unions to take key decisions concerning the ‘Right to Water’ campaign and engage in a crucial brokerage role between elements of the campaign. As one interviewee from a trade union remarked:

“The people involved in the unions are not in parties...so there’s a bit of trust from the political element, to a point that we’re not going to turn this into a Shinner gig or an AAA gig or a People before Profit gig. ² The smaller parties, they’re happy to let us run it. I think it’s been successful because we’ve got the whole lot of them working together, to a point”

² The interviewee is referring to the left-republican party Sinn Fein, and two contending Trotskyist groups - the Anti-Austerity Alliance and People before Profit – who were involved in the campaign.

The decision, made by the unions, that only local groups which included more than one political party would be promoted by the national Right to Water campaign was of some importance in ensuring a degree of unity between otherwise squabbling political groups. The level of trust in the unions was attested to be several of my interviewees and indicated the success of their role as political brokers.

The role that unions had in linking activists with prior involvement was crucial, but so was the role that trade unions played in providing ‘certification’ or legitimation to the campaign among a wider cross-section of civil society. Certification by an institutionalised body enables contentious politics to move beyond radical circles, broadening the campaign’s appeal. Being institutionalised civil society organisations with greater reach, unions could engage in this certification process, with the decisions they took serving to broaden the campaign’s appeal. These decisions include deciding that the November 2014 demonstration would consist of a series of local demonstrations, framing the campaign in terms of water as a human right rather than as the narrower, ‘fight austerity’ campaign, and thus ensuring that the campaign would remain open to a multiplicity of campaigning tools rather than simply concentrating on boycotting or meter blockading which some of the more radical left-wing groups advocated. This all helped maximise numbers and keep the campaign mainstream.

Finally, the unions directly provided resources to the campaign. They spent tens of thousands of euro promoting demonstrations as well as providing other indirect resources such as the time and effort of trade union officials. They organised and publicised the demonstrations, handed money to local groups and so on. One answer to the question of why the first demonstration on Irish Water was so big lies in the half a million flyers printed by the unions to advertise it.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The temporal patterning of protest in Ireland between 2008 and 2014 offers something of a paradox to sociologists. Common sense would suggest that the desire to protest would be a function of the underlying social and economic conditions and the population’s sense of grievance with these. Yet the level of protest was at its lowest in 2010 when all of our indicators suggest economic strain was at its highest and reached its peak in 2014 when conditions had improved considerably, even among the most vulnerable. Indeed, there appears to have been a ‘structural change’ in the relationship between economic strain and protest between 2010 and 2014 whereby all groups became more likely to protest, but particularly those experiencing the most difficult economic conditions. We argue that this the change in the probability of protest should be traced to a change in the ‘injustice framing’ of the situation associated with the incidental grievance of Irish Water in combination with the coordinating activities of political activists and the Irish trades unions.

The situation in Ireland between 2008 and 2014 underlines certain important features of all mass movements. Large scale socio-political and economic processes can, to some extent, explain the reasons and the form of contentious politics for protests: there needs to be a constant background of grievance and the political system needs to be perceived as unresponsive, incompetent and weak. Giugni and Grasso (Giugni and Grasso, 2016) have argued as much when they say that social protest is dependent on the interaction between material deprivation with the perception of political opportunity. But equally, this paper has also shown that these elements were necessary but not sufficient. We would caution against seeing a direct correlation between material deprivation and social protest as some have done, and argue for the importance of contingent events or incidental grievances, as well as the importance of the development of political skills and networks in explaining the incidence of protest. What explains the forms and intensity of contention were the meso-level mechanisms which were simply not present in the early days of the recession: networks established over the course of the recession and able to draw on new and important allies. These networks could take advantage of an incidental grievance which aroused deep anger across many groups in Irish society. These networks were able to engage in innovative repertoires of contention, which had the double benefit of both targeting and disrupting the activities of the opposition and mobilising their own supporters. In so doing they changed the balance of power in the dispute and provided themselves with the all-important sense that they might just win. Following the general election of February 2016 water charges were postponed indefinitely.

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DISCUSSION

Christopher Whelan: I note that notwithstanding improved trends in GDP and unemployment levels evidence from EU-SILC indicates that basic deprivation levels continued to increase in the “early recovery” period indicating that we should be cautious in concluding that social protest increased while the material circumstances of individuals and households improved. The evidence from EU-SILC also suggests that deterioration in material circumstances and economic strain was relatively uniform across social classes and this is consistent with Layte’s failure to find any support for a relative deprivation interpretation of trends in social protest.

I suggest that a broader interpretation of the relationship between deteriorating material circumstances and social protest should take into account the dramatic changes in traditional levels of party political support and the context this provided both for mobilization of protest and political responses to such mobilization. I agree that factors such as the manner of collection of water charges and the need for metering were crucial factors in enabling local mobilization. However, I suggest that if the particular manner in which the water issue was framed and opposition was mobilized is to provide the basis for a broader explanatory framework it would be necessary to account for the fact that efforts to mobilize similar forms of protest relating to the banking collapse and fiscal austerity, which had pervasive and significantly more profound impacts were largely unsuccessful.

Ian Hughes: I have a comment and a question. My comment is that while debates on populism fail to come up with a single agreed definition, the fact that populism has emerged so strongly points to the fact that the consensus upon which democratic societies have been operating is breaking down. As a result of this breakdown many things

that have been unacceptable - like overt racism and sectarianism, authoritarianism, and attacks on institutions such as the courts and the press - are being made acceptable, and leaders espousing these positions are winning the votes of many citizens. That to me is the most worrying aspect of populism.

My question is in relation to the causes of inequality, and its link to populism. The role of financial capitalism in particular has not been mentioned, nor has the impact that bailing out financial institutions and allowing those at the helm of the financial institutions which caused the crisis to walk away with their bonuses intact, have had on the public mood and the rise of this dangerous form of populism that we are seeing.

Austin Hughes: Both the Reidy and Layte papers appear to draw heavily if understandably on the assumption that improvements in real GDP and employment that began in 2013 should be regarded as marking the beginning of a widely felt recovery in the Irish economy from the crisis. The reality is that, in contrast to these conventional metrics, conditions for many if not most consumers were still deteriorating until relatively recently because of Government austerity measures, a lack of broadly based income gains and, in important instances, significant debt burdens. As a result, there has been a strong and increasing disenchantment with what was seen as an upturn from which they were excluded.

Consumer sentiment surveys show a marked divergence from 2012 between a 'macro' recovery that Irish consumers were reading or hearing about and their own still significantly pressured financial circumstances. Indeed, even a more recent improvement in survey responses on household finances has largely come from a drop in numbers reporting a further deterioration rather than any marked increase in numbers signalling an improvement in their personal circumstances.

A large and growing disconnect between reports of a dramatic 'macro' Irish economic recovery and the strained reality of many consumers' own circumstances amplified and aggravated an understandable element of adjustment fatigue. This divergence fuelled a sense of exclusion that made some expression of populist protest almost inevitable.

Denis Murphy: Brian Nolan charted rising income inequality as per changes in the Gini Coefficient from 1980 to 2007 and from 2007 to 2013. The latter period has the most relevance to the current perceived rise of populism. Countries which showed rising income inequality in this period included: US, Italy, Spain, Greece, Hungary. Each of these have shown a rise in populist politics. The contribution of globalisation is not always clear. Other underlying factors may have also contributed to the rise of populism. Proper public administration and bank regulation either in the US or EU would tend to favour equality. "Light touch" regulation by the Fed led to the bailout of politically favoured entities. It allowed the corruption of the US banking system through subprime loans and led to the collapse or bailout of banks across the US and Europe. The European Central Bank also failed to ensure that the Eurozone bank regulatory systems were fit for purpose and functioning. In Ireland the failure of the regulator to alert the government to major bank problems led to the bailout of the Irish banking system and implosion of the main party of government.

Patrick Honohan: It was de Tocqueville who said: "It happens most often that a people, which has supported without complaint, as if they were not felt, the most oppressive laws, violently throws them off as soon as their weight is lightened." From this perspective it is perhaps not so surprising that visible political discontent with Irish fiscal austerity came late and crystallized around the quantitatively relatively minor issue of water charges.

My own suspicion is that the water charges issue should not be over-emphasized as causal. Instead, I favour the hypothesis that much of the government's electoral and polling results can be attributed to the failure to define and communicate clearly an overall strategy for achieving the needed fiscal adjustment. The sting or perceived unfairness of specific measures could have been countered by an explanation of where each one fits with an overall strategy. That said, it has to be acknowledged that the slight degree of progressivity in the first years of the adjustment were subsequently reversed, making it more difficult to defend the overall balance of policy design.

Mary Doyle: In terms of political protesting, has the national temperament anything to do with the level of dissent? Mediterranean countries tend to be more excitable and so public protesting and demonstrations come more naturally to some such countries. Meanwhile the Irish have tended to 'solve' many such problems through more excited social discussion. Does that explain Ireland's past lower level of public protest? Secondly, is there now a growing international tendency towards both extremes - both populism as discussed today but also increasing authoritarianism, where many such political regimes are also tending to extend their power long term.

Frances Ruane: I enjoyed the three presentations very much and I have a question for each author: (Theresa Reidy) Would you like to comment on the impact that having proportional representation and multi-seat constituencies would have on the growth of populist parties in Ireland?; (Brian Nolan) I noticed in your presentation you identified "reduced redistributive capacity/effort" among the inequality drivers. Would you comment on what you see as behind that - in terms of economics and politics?; (Richard Layte) Your paper focused strongly on the water protests in recent times as evidence of growing populism. Looking across the policy spectrum, what would you see as possible future areas where populist protests may appear in Ireland?