

Precarity and political protest

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ABSTRACT

How does precarity in the labour market affect political engagement? Considering the negative impact of unemployment and atypical employment on turnout, existing research suggests that precarity depresses political participation. However, participation through voting is dependent on supply-side factors and might be an insufficient indicator of engagement with politics. To improve our understanding of this matter, this article investigates the relationship between precarity and protest behaviour, as well as the moderating impact of individual and contextual factors on this relationship. The analysis relies on survey data from thirteen Western European democracies and on a novel operationalisation of precarity that, through the implementation of Bayesian inference techniques on EU-LFS data, allows the capturing of individuals' vulnerability in the labour market. The results reveal that precarity increases the propensity to protest, exposing the mobilisation potential of precarious workers and suggesting that the representation of this expanding social group might be beneficial for vote-maximizing parties.


KEYWORDS Precarity; political protest; political participation; political mobilisation; labour market

Across Western Europe, labour markets are undergoing profound restructuring. During the post-war era, most workers held jobs that were open-ended, full-time, and socially protected. These jobs provided them with a degree of security and income stability that reduced their vulnerability to employers and to the fluctuations of the market (Bosch 2004). Since the 1970s, however, the weakening of employment protections and the liberalisation of non-standard forms of employment have deprived growing segments of the workforce of basic security (Kalleberg 2009). As a result, precarity, a condition of insecurity and vulnerability that originates from individuals' labile ties with their occupation and with the labour market, has spread, and is on its way towards becoming the new norm.

In order to shed light on the political implications of this transformation, scholars have extensively investigated the relationship between

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precarity and participation, particularly in the form of voting. These studies reveal a negative impact of precarious employment conditions, such as unemployment and atypical employment, on turnout (for a review, see Schwander 2019), thus suggesting that precarious workers constitute a politically alienated group whose representation is scarcely beneficial for political parties. However, the decision to vote or abstain is highly dependent on supply-side factors, namely existing parties and their programmatic offerings (Kurer *et al.* 2019). It follows that, in a context where no party represents the interests of precarious workers, a higher propensity to abstain can hardly be considered a reliable indicator of disengagement from politics. Focusing on electoral participation may thus be insufficient to draw general conclusions on the effect of precarity on political engagement, and non-institutional channels of participation may be considered a better way to shed light on the propensity for political engagement of precarious workers.

When non-institutional forms of participation are taken into consideration, the conclusion of precarious workers' disengagement from politics is contradicted by the numerous instances of precarious workers' political activism that have taken place over the past decades (Bouchareb 2011; Bourdieu 1998; Graham and Papadopoulos 2021; Milkman 2014; Vieira 2023). However, a systematic and cross-sectional analysis of the relationship between precarity and non-institutional participation is still lacking. Against this background, in this article I explore the effect of precarity on the propensity to participate in political protests. Drawing on insights from the literature on the political consequences of economic disadvantage, I hypothesise that precarity increases the propensity to protest by generating grievances that motivate political engagement. I test this hypothesis by analysing survey data from thirteen Western European democracies, while also investigating the individual and contextual factors that might moderate the effect of precarity on protesting.

The first contribution of this article is both theoretical and practical. Although precarious workers' propensity to protest is not a direct indicator of their propensity to show up at the polling station, it does signal whether engaging in induction efforts targeted at the precariat might be viable and beneficial for political parties. Thus, by unveiling the relationship between precarity and protesting, this article sheds light on this group's mobilisation potential. Recognising this potential could incentivize political parties to take over its representation, thereby helping to break the vicious cycle of economic and political inequality that has long trapped those who stand at the margins of the labour market.

The second contribution is methodological and empirical. To study the effect of precarity on protesting, this article develops a novel operationalisation of precarity that measures an individual's probability (or risk) of

facing unemployment and atypical employment. This operationalisation departs from the mainstream approach in the literature on the political implications of labour market insecurity. Traditionally, occupational insecurity has been studied in the terms of a dichotomy between secure insiders and precarious outsiders, and the presence or absence of an open-ended employment contract has been regarded as a sufficient indicator of belonging to either of these two groups (Rueda 2005; Lindvall and Rueda 2012). However, the flexibilization of post-industrial labour markets has rendered formal employment status an inadequate and downward-biased indicator of belonging to the precariat: as the guarantees associated with permanent contracts decline and the ‘reserve army’ of the unemployed and atypically employed grows, we can no longer assume that permanent contracts are sufficient to insulate workers from the risk of unemployment, nor can we assume similarity in the condition of all those who hold the same kind of contracts (Lewchuk 2017; Schwander and Häusermann 2013). Relying on a probability-based approach to measuring precarity allows us to overcome these shortcomings and, by locating individuals on a continuous scale ranging from absolute security to complete precarity based on a combination of several variables, it is best suited to conduct the large-N, cross-sectional analyses that are needed to shed light on its political implications.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, I lay out the theoretical and practical importance of studying the relationship between precarity and political protests. I then develop the theoretical argument behind my research, building on the extensive body of literature that studies the impact of inequality and economic disadvantage on participation. In the third and fourth sections, I present in detail the rationale and procedure for my novel risk-based operationalisation of precarity and describe the data and operationalisation of the key variables of interests. Finally, I describe the research design for the analysis, outline the results, and discuss their implications for the emergence of the precariat as a political actor.

Why studying the relationship between precarity and protesting

Before theorising on the relationship between precarity and protesting, it is crucial to discuss the relevance of this matter. In democratic societies, political participation plays a pivotal role as it is through active engagement that citizens can exercise their influence on public policies, while holding accountable their elected representatives. However, individuals do not participate homogeneously in the political arena, as the financial, informational, and motivational resources necessary for political

engagement are not equally distributed among citizens. From a minimalist understanding of democracy (Schumpeter 2010), these differentials in participation are unproblematic as long as individuals are not actively refrained from voting. However, in political systems where the representation function is delegated to vote-maximizing parties, they can lead to differentials in representation which generate inequality in governmental responsiveness to citizens' interests and preferences (Gilens 2005; 2012). It follows that, should precarity depress political engagement, the precarization trend would unleash a vicious circle of socio-economic and political inequality.

As a matter of fact, the below-average levels of precarious workers' participation in the electoral arena have long been regarded among the causes of their systematic under-representation at the hands of political parties. Following the insider-outsider partisanship model developed by Rueda (2005), in those contexts characterised by a divide between labour market insiders and outsiders, government partisanship – the ideological position of the government in a left-right continuum – will significantly affect pro-insider policies, but not pro-outsider ones. Namely, social democratic governments will be characterised by higher employment protections than conservative ones, while neither social democratic nor conservative governments will promote pro-outsider policies. The reasons are historical and ideological – primarily the long-standing ties between social democratic parties and trade unions representing insiders – but also tied to calculations of electoral convenience: representing outsiders is considered scarcely beneficial because outsiders tend to be less politically active and electorally relevant than insiders (Rueda 2005 p. 62).

The assumption of precarious workers' below-average levels of political engagement is supported by a wealth of empirical studies that expose the negative impact of precarious employment conditions on electoral participation. Specifically, unemployment has been shown to depress political efficacy (Marx and Nguyen 2016; see also Emmenegger *et al.* 2015) and participation (Aytaç *et al.* 2020; Scott and Acock 1979; for similar results on the effect of unemployment scars, see Azzollini 2021), while atypical employment has been shown to increase the likelihood of abstaining from voting (Rovny and Rovny 2017; Tuorto 2022). This narrow focus is justified by the very structure of modern representative democracies, where voting is the most crucial and widely accessible means of participation. However, the decision to vote or abstain is highly constrained by supply-side factors, namely, existing parties and their programmatic offerings (Kurer *et al.* 2019). It follows that, in a context where no party voices the interests of precarious workers, their propensity to abstain can be hardly considered as an indicator of disengagement with politics. Rather, it may be regarded as a highly political act (Hay 2007) used to express

dissatisfaction with the system or with the absence of suitably regarded alternatives. Moreover, evidence of a negative relationship between precarity and voting can hardly be used to argue that representing precarious workers is not electorally beneficial. Drawing this conclusion would require observing a negative effect of precarity on turnout in those contexts where suitable alternatives are available. When such alternatives exist, precarity has been shown to increase, rather than decrease, the propensity to show up at the polling station (Girardi 2024), and to foster support for radical, populist, and anti-establishment parties (Antonucci *et al.* 2023; Girardi 2024; Zhirnov *et al.* 2023).

Other than voting, there exist plenty of activities *via* which citizens can engage in politics that are not related to the electoral process. However, a systematic investigation into the effect of precarity on non-electoral participation is still lacking. Hence, in what follows I theorise on, and empirically investigate, the effect of precarity on protest behaviour, a term which encompasses a multitude of collective activities that occur outside the parliamentary channel *via* which individuals can voice their demands and express their dissatisfaction towards the status quo (Chong 2015). This research effort seeks to improve our understanding of the political repercussions of precarity and precarization for our democracies. Should empirical evidence reveal a positive impact of precarity on the propensity to engage in protest activities, it may signal to political actors the political potential of precarious workers, thereby providing them with an incentive to take over their representation.

Theoretical considerations on the relationship between precarity and protesting

When theorising on the relationship between precarity and protesting, useful insights can be gathered from the extensive body of literature that studies the relationship between socio-economic status and political engagement. In this strand of literature, two competing approaches have emerged that formulate diametrically opposite expectations.

According to the proponents of the ‘withdrawal hypothesis’ (Rosenstone 1982) or ‘civic voluntarism model’ (Verba *et al.* 1995), economic disadvantage depresses participation by reducing the availability of the resources – such as time, information, financial means, and civic skills – required for political engagement. A variant of this theory also emphasises the crucial role of political competence and efficacy, which are important prerequisites for participation but are negatively associated with economic disadvantage (Laurison 2015; see also Hooghe and Marien 2013; Magni 2017). This argument is supported by a wealth of studies that find a negative impact of economic inequality, poor personal and family background, and

acute financial hardship on electoral participation (Jungkunz and Marx 2023; Schäfer and Schwander 2019; Schaub 2021; Solt 2008), as well as a negative impact of structural economic disadvantage on the propensity to engage in protest behaviour (Kurer *et al.* 2019). Conversely, the proponents of the ‘mobilisation hypothesis’ (Schlozman and Verba 1979) or ‘grievance model’ (Gamson 1968) posit that economic disadvantage mobilises individuals by raising the stakes of participation while also generating anger and frustration that stimulate political engagement. Evidence in support of the grievance model has been predominantly collected at the country level, by studies showing that times of poor economic performance are characterised by rising levels of political participation (Funke *et al.* 2016; Genovese *et al.* 2016; Kern *et al.* 2015).

The conflicting expectations of these two models have been partially reconciled by distinguishing between absolute and relative deprivation, since studies that find a demobilising effect of economic hardship on participation tend to focus on the former, while studies that find a mobilising effect tend to focus on the latter. Absolute deprivation refers to individuals facing a situation of need that hinders their ability to sustain themselves or actively participate in society (Ladin 2014), and it is directly tied to the lack of resources which underlie the withdrawal hypothesis. Relative deprivation indicates the perceived discrepancy between one’s personal status and the status of relevant others (Schulze and Krätschmer-Hahn 2014) that arises when individuals rate their condition poorly compared to that of their fellow citizens, or compared to what their own situation used to be, what they would have expected it to be, or what they believe they deserve it to be. Relative deprivation thus generates the perceived dissatisfaction which underlies the mobilisation hypothesis, while it is not necessarily nor directly related to the lack of resources that underlie the withdrawal hypothesis.

The rationale that underlies the withdrawal and mobilisation hypotheses can reasonably be applied to the study of the relationship between precarity and political participation. On the one hand, the fierce competition that precarious workers face, alongside the awareness that they can be at any time replaced by others who are more productive, younger, or simply more desperate and thus open to accept poorer working conditions, hinders their ability to disconnect from work and dedicate time and energy to political and social activities. Additionally, the individualisation of labour relations associated with precarity reduces the opportunities for political activation (Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou 2014), being the workplace a crucial setting of political socialisation where individuals acquire political skills (Sobel 1993) and the sense of political efficacy necessary to engage in political activities (Pateman 1970). Finally, precarity undermines social ties (Lewchuk 2017) that, by providing important cues for making

voting decisions, reduce the resources required for participation (Armingeon and Schädel 2015) and facilitate political engagement. Precarity may thus be expected to undermine the propensity to participate in political protests, which constitute a relatively resource-demanding means of participation.

On the other hand, the condition of precarity is well suited to trigger the sense of relative deprivation that underlies the civic voluntarism model. In societies characterised by a strong dualism in employment protections and opportunities (e.g. between private and public employees, or between workers in offshorable and non-offshorable sectors), precarious workers are likely to feel relatively deprived compared to their better sheltered counterparts (Marx 2016). Furthermore, they are especially likely to suffer from relative deprivation when comparing their current situation to their past experiences or future expectations. For older members of the precariat, witnessing the erosion of employment protections and opportunities might result in actual and perceived status decline. For younger generations, precarious and uncertain career prospects may be compared to the relative security that previous generations enjoyed, which allowed for independence, early home ownership, and family building. Additionally, the precarious youth is often university educated, which can generate the status frustration that results from the gap between the promise of high income and security and the reality of being stuck in under-qualified and precarious jobs. Together, these factors make a positive relationship between precarity and participation plausible, especially in a context of generalised precarization where vulnerability is no longer the prerogative of workers in marginalised sectors.

In the light of these considerations, competing expectations can be formulated on the relationship between precarity and political protests. Namely, the relationship can be expected to be negative or positive based on whether the demobilising effect of scarce resources or the mobilising effect of grievances is considered. Plausibly, both mechanisms are in place; unveiling the effect of precarity on protesting requires understanding of which one is most likely to prevail.

Precarity and protesting: mobilisation or withdrawal?

The available evidence seemingly supports the mobilisation hypothesis. Starting from the early 2000s, movements tailored towards constructing a common awareness and subjectivity among the members of the emerging precariat flourished. The most renowned example are the Mayday Parades (MP) against precarity. The parade was first organised in Milan on the symbolic date of 1 May 2001, by a network of Italian activists. Joined by 5,000 protesters, it constituted an attempt to construct and give political

meaning to the very concept of precarity, around which precarious workers living heterogeneous lives could identify and form a cohesive and aware political subject (Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou 2014). In the following years, participation in the MPs grew exponentially – by 2005, the protesters had become 120,000 – and the movement expanded to become a European phenomenon (renamed the EuroMayDay Parades, EP). The magnitude and geographical coverage of the event make this an iconic example of the early mobilisation of precarious workers, but movements with similar objectives proliferated all over Europe (Graham and Papadopoulos 2021; Mattoni 2012; see also Arribas Lozano 2012 and Precarias A la Deriva 2004 for the case of Spain).

Over the past decade, several studies have been conducted to analyse the mobilisation strategies and the demands advanced by groups of precarious workers (among others, see Andretta and della Porta 2015; della Porta *et al.* 2015; Politi *et al.* 2022; Vieira 2023; Zamponi 2020). These studies reveal that, notwithstanding the potential for blackmail by their employers, the indignation and the feeling of having nothing to lose that accompany the precarious condition have contributed to mobilising precarious workers (Bouchareb 2011). Interestingly, at the forefront of precarious workers' struggles are platform workers, whose employment conditions bring the experience of precarity to the extreme. Platform workers are dependent employees in that they must respect shifts, wear uniforms, sign non-competition agreements, and can be unilaterally dismissed. However, they are formally contracted as self-employed, deprived of the guarantees associated with dependent employment while having to bear the entirety of the risks and costs of doing business (Hayns 2016). The extreme vulnerability and isolation that this situation carries could reasonably be expected to exacerbate the negative impact of precarity on the resources necessary for political engagement, thereby hampering workers' propensity for political activism. Nonetheless, platforms' attempts to further undermine these workers' rights have been met with fierce resistance. In 2015, Deliveroo drivers in the UK set up a strike and awareness campaign in reaction to an attempt from the platform to move them from hourly wages to a piecework system with no base rate whatsoever, which would further exacerbate the precarity of their condition (Braithwaite 2017; Hayns 2016). In Italy, Foodora's assault on its couriers' rights was met with similar resistance (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017).

Although the lack of a stable organisation and the availability of a large reserve army did undermine platform workers' capacity to sustain mobilisation over time, these cases powerfully suggest that mobilisation is possible even within a highly individualised and vulnerable workforce. Moreover, the non-institutional forms of participation through which this mobilisation took place are highly demanding in the resources they

require, which suggests that the grievance-driven positive effect of precarity on participation outweighs the resource-driven negative effect. However, the evidence supporting this conclusion is anecdotal, and needs to be complemented with quantitative evidence from a broader sample of cases. Hence, I formulate the hypothesis that, net of economic hardship, precarity has a positive effect on protesting, and submit it to empirical testing.

Hypothesis 1: Net of economic hardship, precarity has a positive effect on the propensity to participate in political protests.

Testing the effect of precarity on protesting net of economic hardship allows us to isolate the effect of precarity from the effect of economic disadvantage. However, economic hardship can be expected to moderate the relationship between these two variables *via* its effect on both the grievances and the resources required for participating. The combination of precarious employment with a disadvantaged economic situation might magnify the grievances associated with the precarious condition, but also reduce the resources that can be devoted to political activities. The opposite is true when precarity is accompanied by a relative level of financial security, that might mitigate grievances while increasing resources. In the light of these considerations, I expect a moderating effect of economic hardship on the relationship between precarity and protesting, although I am agnostic concerning the direction of this effect.

Hypothesis 2: The effect of precarity on the propensity to participate in political protests is moderated by economic hardship.

Contextual factors moderating the impact of precarity on protest behaviour

The mechanisms linking precarity and protesting are plausibly universal across all Western European democracies. However, their effect might not be uniform across countries. Based on the comparative welfare regimes literature (see Esping-Andersen 1990; Ferrera 1996), Western European welfare states vary greatly in their de-commodifying effects, i.e. the extent to which they empower citizens away from market dependency by providing alternative means of welfare that are not directly tied to successful market participation. In the most de-commodifying regimes, generally found in Nordic countries, welfare institutions grant a relatively equitable distribution of welfare rights, income, and employment prospects among all citizens irrespective of their working status (Barbieri 2007; Häusermann and Schwander 2012). In these countries, coordinated wage bargain, high levels of public employment, and a high demand for low-skilled workers in the public sector result in low levels of pre-government inequality (Häusermann and Schwander 2012; Nickell and Layard 1999), which is

further reduced by the generosity of unemployment benefits, a fairly redistributive tax system, and by the comprehensive public provision of social security pensions (Kammer *et al.* 2012). As a result, welfare institutions shelter citizens from the negative externalities of precarious employment, plausibly increasing the capability of precarious workers to devote time and energy to political activities and thus strengthening the positive effect of precarity on protesting. At the same time, the universal character of these systems lowers the stigma associated with accessing welfare state benefits and increases citizens' expectations about the role of the state in ensuring them a reasonable standard of living and protecting them from labour market risks. In a recent study of the impact of unemployment on political trust, Giustozzi and Gangl (2021) formulate and empirically corroborate the hypothesis that generous welfare institutions, by giving rise to high expectations towards the state, amplify the negative effect of unemployment on political trust. This mechanism, defined by the authors as status deprivation, can reasonably be applied to the relationship between precarity and protesting. Namely, highly de-commodifying welfare states, characterised by a more generous government intervention to shelter citizens from labour market risks, may generate a stronger perception of state responsibility for mitigating the detrimental impact of precarious employment, which may in turn strengthen the grievances associated with precarity and reinforce its positive effect on participation through protesting. In the light of these considerations, I expect the positive effect of precarity on participation to increase along with a country's effort to reduce its citizens' vulnerability to the labour market.

Hypothesis 3: The effect of precarity on the propensity to participate in political protests increases together with the generosity of welfare provisions targeted at the unemployed.

Beyond the welfare regime type, the extent to which precarious employment affects political participation may also be moderated by a country's overall incidence of precarity. Widespread unemployment and atypical employment provide precarious workers with signals about the structural causes of their condition, fostering external attributions of responsibility that increase the propensity to blame the government for one's disadvantage and to express dissatisfaction. Conversely, low precarity rates foster internal attributions of blame, that are less likely to generate behavioural responses (Marx 2016). It follows that a higher incidence of precarity should strengthen the positive effect of precarity on participation by exacerbating the mobilising effect of grievances. This argument is consistent with studies showing that high and rising unemployment rates increase turnout (Burden and Wichowsky 2014; Cebula 2017), most markedly among the unemployed (Burden and Wichowsky 2014; see also

Aytaç *et al.* 2020 for similar findings on the interaction between unemployment rates and personal experiences with unemployment). In the light of these considerations, I expect the positive effect of precarity on participation to be larger where precarity is most widespread.

Hypothesis 4: The effect of precarity on the propensity to participate in political protests is larger where precarity is more widespread.

Measuring precarity: a risk-based approach

Investigating the relationship between precarity and protesting requires a quantitative measurement of the latent concept of precarity. In this section, I briefly discuss the challenges that such a measurement entails and develop a novel operationalisation that, I contend, allows us to overcome them.

The concept of precarity refers to the condition of insecurity and vulnerability that originates from individuals' labile ties with their occupation with the labour market. In this and other definitions, the key element is the instability of one's employment, or unemployment vulnerability. This conceptualisation underlies most studies that investigate the political implications of labour market insecurity: in the insider-outsider literature, it is explicitly acknowledged that it is the different vulnerability to unemployment that lays the potential for conflicting interests between insiders and outsiders (see Lindvall and Rueda 2012; Rueda 2005). Accordingly, existing studies focus on formal employment status because they regard it as a good proxy for vulnerability. Simply put, unemployed and atypically employed individuals are assumed to be exposed to risks from which permanent employees are sheltered.

This assumption was reasonably sound in the context of stable and highly unionised labour markets, where little mobility existed between insiders and outsiders and permanent contracts reasonably insulated workers from the risk of unemployment. However, its validity is challenged in the present era of increasingly flexible labour markets: when the guarantees associated with permanent contracts decline and the reserve army of the unemployed and atypically employed grows, holders of permanent contracts are no longer automatically insulated from the risk of unemployment, and the condition of precarity ceases to be the prerogative of workers in formally atypical employment. As a result, the risk of unemployment varies widely across individuals who formally share the same employment status, and it is shaped by several individual and contextual factors. These factors concern the characteristics of the employee, that determine her or his 'employability'; the characteristics of the job performed, that determine the extent to which individuals can be easily replaced by their employer; and the characteristics of the firm and sector

of employment, that determine the level of employment protections individuals are entitled to (see Schwander and Häusermann 2013). It follows that operationalizations of precarity based solely on formal employment status are bound to suffer a severe validity bias, especially when used by scholars interested in the impact of precarity on political behaviour, which is driven not only by the current employment situation, but also and especially by expectations of future labour market risk (Schwander and Häusermann 2013; for an empirical test of the unsuitability of solely relying on formal employment status to capture precarity, see Lewchuk 2017).

Within the insider-outsider literature, a measurement approach that overcomes the narrow focus on formal employment status to distinguish labour market outsiders from insiders has already been developed by Schwander and Häusermann (2013). The authors classify individuals as insiders or outsiders based on the rate of atypical employment and unemployment in their occupational category relative to the country's average. Compared to the traditional operationalisation based on formal employment status, this approach allows for the capture of an individual's vulnerability in the labour market and is therefore better suited to measure precarity. Hence, I follow the authors in relying on a risk-based operationalisation of precarity, while developing an alternative strategy for the measurement of such risk. This measurement strategy allows for a more precise estimation of risk by avoiding comparisons with the country average and by calculating individual-specific risks of unemployment and atypical employment based on a wider array of socio-demographic and employment-related factors. Specifically, I implement binomial logistic regression models to estimate the probability that an individual i is precarious ($y_i = 1$ if y_i is unemployed, involuntarily inactive, or involuntarily employed with a part-time, temporary, or otherwise atypical contract) as opposed to not precarious ($y_i = 0$ if y_i is permanently employed) based on their age, gender, educational background, migrant status, occupation type, sector of employment, and establishment size. Formally, for any individual i resident in country c ,

$$\Pr(y_{ic} = 1) = \text{logit}(\beta_{0c} + \beta_{1c} \cdot \text{age}_i + \beta_{2c} \cdot \text{gender}_i + \beta_{3c} \cdot \text{education}_i + \beta_{4c} \cdot \text{migrant status}_i + \beta_{5c} \cdot \text{occupation}_i + \beta_{6c} \cdot \text{sector}_i + \beta_{7c} \cdot \text{establishment size}_i) \quad (1)$$

I implement the regression models on data from the 2016 wave of the European Labour Force Survey (LFS), which, being the largest comparative survey of European income and labour conditions, provides sufficient statistical power to obtain reliable probability estimates (regression results are presented in the Online Appendix, Tables A1 and A2). I conduct the analysis following a Bayesian approach: using the R interface of Stan (Carpenter *et al.* 2017), I run the model in 1,000 iterations in 4 chains. Discarding the

first 750 iterations, this procedure yields a distribution of 1,000 estimates for each parameter. Since I use default non-informative priors ($\beta_k \sim Normal(0, 2.5)$), the posterior distribution closely approximates the results obtained from a maximum likelihood estimation. However, the Bayesian approach offers the advantage that, based on the estimated coefficients $\hat{\beta}$, I can generate a distribution of 1000 posterior predicted probabilities of precarity that can be assigned to any individual for which the basic socio-demographic information used to estimate the model is available.

In order to validate this novel measurement strategy, I assess whether the predicted probabilities of precarity are empirically associated with the scores for other variables that can be considered direct measures of an individual's vulnerability in the labour market. I conduct this test by relying on survey data from the thirteen Western European countries included in the eighth wave of the European Social Survey, namely Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In this survey wave, respondents were asked questions concerning their current employment status and expectations for future employment. Based on these survey items, I construct two binary variables scoring 1 if (a) the respondent is unemployed or employed with a contract of limited duration at the time of the survey, and (b) if the respondent believes that unemployment in the upcoming 12 months is likely. I use these variables as dependent variables in logistic regression models (Models 1 and 2) having the probability of precarity as the explanatory variable.

The results of the analysis are displayed in [Table 1](#) and support the validity of the measurement strategy. Consistently across the two models, the predicted probabilities of precarity are positively and significantly correlated with current and expected experiences with unemployment and atypical employment. Notably, the size of the correlation is substantial: the predicted probability of being unemployed or precariously employed for an average individual facing a mean risk of precarity is approximately 25%; when this risk increases by one standard deviation, the probability raises to approximately 37%, indicating a 48.7% increase. Similarly, the predicted probability of expecting unemployment increases from 20% to approximately 27% (i.e. a 34.6% increase). To further clarify the magnitude of this effect, [Figure 1](#) illustrates how current and expected vulnerability changes for an average individual that shifts from absolute security to absolute precarity.

Investigating the relationship between precarity and protesting: data and measurement

In order to unveil the relationship between precarity and protest behaviour, I rely on survey data from 13 Western European countries, namely

Table 1. Models of current and expected vulnerability.

	Dependent variable	
	Current vulnerability	Expected vulnerability
	(1)	(2)
Precarity	3.825*** (0.158)	2.507*** (0.125)
Constant	-2.402*** (0.100)	-2.071*** (0.083)
Country	Fixed effects	Fixed effects
Observations	11,422	15,099
Log Likelihood	-5,897.407	-7,199.300
Akaike Inf. Crit.	11,822.810	14,426.600

Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

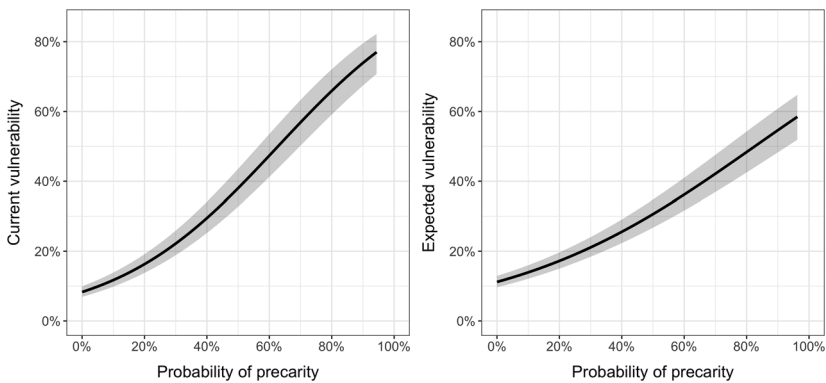


Figure 1. Probability of precarity and labour market vulnerability: current vulnerability (left panel) and expected vulnerability (right panel).

Austria, Belgium, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The data are retrieved from the eighth ESS wave, conducted between 2016 and 2017. Limiting the analysis to one survey wave constitutes a limitation, but it is necessary due to the restricted availability of 2016 LFS survey data to calculate respondents' exposure to precarity.

Regarding the operationalisation of the dependent variable, in the eighth wave of the ESS respondents were asked whether, in the 12 months preceding the survey, they had taken part in a lawful public demonstration. Based on respondents' answers to this question, I construct the dependent variable 'protesting' as a dummy, taking a value of 1 if the respondent participated in a demonstration over the year preceding the survey, 0 otherwise.

Following the definition and operationalisation of precarity outlined in the previous section, I assign to each ESS respondent a distribution of 1,000 probabilities of precarity calculated based on the regression coefficients

obtained from Bayesian regression models implemented on LFS survey data. I then average these probabilities to obtain one measure of precarity for each respondent, which I use as explanatory variable in the analysis.

Regarding the moderators, economic hardship is a numeric variable measured on a 4-point scale where higher values indicate greater hardship. Information is retrieved from a question asking respondents how they felt about their household income, with available responses ranging from 'living comfortably on present income' to 'very difficult on present income'. The overall incidence of precarity in a country is calculated as the average probability of precarity of its LFS respondents. Finally, the decommodifying effect of a country's welfare system is measured *via* the unemployment generosity index of the Comparative Welfare Entitlements Project (CWEP). The project provides detailed information about the structure and generosity of unemployment, sick pay, and pension insurance systems in 33 countries (Scruggs 2022). Specifically, the unemployment generosity index is calculated based on the duration, qualification period, coverage, and replacement rates of a country's unemployment benefits. This index is well suited to capturing the decommodification function of the welfare state: the higher its value, the lower the individuals' dependency on successful participation in the labour market for their well-being.

I also account for a set of variables that might confound the relationship between precarity and protesting. First, I control for respondents' gender, age, education level, economic hardship, urbanisation of the place of residence, and partnership status. Urbanisation is a numeric variable measured on a 4-point scale that ranges from 'rural area or village' to 'large town or city'. Partnership status is operationalised as a dummy variable, scoring 1 if the respondent lives with a partner and 0 otherwise. Second, I control for respondents' level of social integration by including two dummy variables measuring respondents' church attendance and social ties. The two variables take the value of 1 if respondents participate in religious functions or meet with family and friends at least once a month, and 0 if they do not. Third, I control for respondents' interest in politics and trust in political institutions. Interest in politics is measured on a 4-point scale where higher values indicate greater interest. Trust in political institutions is an index constructed by averaging three survey items that measure, on a scale from 0 to 10, respondents' trust in political parties, parliaments, and politicians (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.884$). These variables are included due to their impact on the overall propensity and incentive of citizens to participate in politics and manifest discontent. However, their inclusion may also introduce an over-control bias; therefore, I replicate the regression models excluding both variables and report the results in the Online Appendix (Table A3). Finally, I control for country-level confounders by including country dummies. In the

regression models testing the moderating impact of contextual factors random effects are used, which allow for control of country-specific confounders while also estimating the effect of variables that vary at the country level.

Methodology and results

As a first step in the analysis, I implement a binomial logistic regression model with country fixed effects (Model 3) explaining protest behaviour and having precarity as key explanatory variable. Formally:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot X_i + \beta_1 \cdot Z_{1i} + \dots + \beta_{n+1} \cdot Z_{ni} + C_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where y_i is the probability of voting for individual i , β_0 is the general intercept representing the baseline probability of participation, β_1 is the coefficient for the key explanatory variable X_i (probability of precarity), Z_1 to Z_n are the remaining explanatory variables, β_2 to β_{n+1} their slopes, C_i the country fixed effects, and ϵ_i the random error.

The results are displayed in the third column of [Table 2](#). In the second column, I report the results of an identical model (Model 3) with a dependent variable that is a dummy taking value of 1 if individual i voted, 0 otherwise. In line with the results from previous studies, Model 3 shows a negative and significant effect of precarity on the propensity to vote. Conversely, and in line with the expectation formulated in hypothesis 1, Model 4 reveals a positive and significant effect of precarity on the propensity to protest, which suggests that the mobilising effect of the grievances associated with precarity outweighs the demobilising effect of scarce resources. In both cases, the effect is substantial: when all other variables in the model are held constant at average values, the probability to vote decreases by 24% as precarity increases from 0 (absolute security) to 1 (absolute precarity), while the probability to protest increases by 84%. Regarding the control variables, most coefficients point in the expected directions: being highly educated, socially integrated, and interested in politics are all positively and significantly associated with participation *via* protesting, while the effect of living with a partner and trusting political institutions is negative. Interestingly, economic hardship has a negative effect on the propensity to vote, but its effect on the propensity to protest is positive and significant. When interest in politics and trust in political institutions are removed from the analysis, the direction and significance of the main results do not change ([Online Appendix, Table A3](#)).

The remaining columns of [Table 2](#) present the results from three additional models. The fourth column replicates Model 4 with the inclusion of an interaction term between precarity and economic hardship (Model 5).

Table 2. Models of participation.

	Dependent variable				
	Voting	Protesting			
	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Precarity	-0.301* (0.179)	0.616*** (0.210)	1.560*** (0.437)	0.01 (0.09)	0.25*** (0.05)
Welfare generosity	-	-	-	-0.00 (0.01)	-
Precarity incidence	-	-	-	-	0.45** (0.15)
Gender	0.143*** (0.048)	-0.032 (0.057)	-0.033 (0.057)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Age	0.032*** (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Education	0.375*** (0.040)	0.184*** (0.046)	0.185*** (0.046)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Eco. hardship	-0.197*** (0.031)	0.103*** (0.037)	0.181*** (0.049)	0.01** (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)
Partner	0.220*** (0.048)	-0.244*** (0.059)	-0.231*** (0.059)	-0.02*** (0.01)	-0.02*** (0.01)
Urbanisation	-0.112*** (0.022)	0.210*** (0.025)	0.210*** (0.025)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Church attendance	0.258*** (0.065)	-0.120 (0.074)	-0.123* (0.074)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Social ties	0.188*** (0.065)	0.410*** (0.093)	0.414*** (0.093)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Trust	0.087*** (0.012)	-0.043*** (0.014)	-0.042*** (0.014)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)
Interest	0.629*** (0.029)	0.677*** (0.034)	0.677*** (0.034)	0.06*** (0.00)	0.06*** (0.00)
Precarity×Economic hardship	-	-	-0.464*** (0.191)	-	-
Precarity×Welfare generosity	-	-	-	0.00 (0.01)	-
Precarity×Precarity Incidence	-	-	-	-	-0.68*** (0.18)
Constant	-2.145*** (0.205)	-5.345*** (0.264)	-5.542*** (0.276)	-0.10 (0.08)	-0.23*** (0.04)
Country	Fixed effects	Fixed effects	Fixed effects	Random effects	Random effects
Observations	14,891	15,902	15,902	15,902	14,567
Log Likelihood	-6,174.991	-4,737.121	-4,734.119	-	-
Akaike Inf. Crit.	12,397.980	9,522.242	9,518.238	-	-
σ^2	-	-	-	0.09	0.09
T_{00} country	-	-	-	0.00	0.00
ICC	-	-	-	0.03	0.02
Marginal R ²	-	-	-	0.044	0.053
Conditional R ²	-	-	-	0.077	0.076

Significance level: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

The fifth and sixth columns display the results from two multilevel models with country random effects that allow for the estimation of the moderating effect of contextual factors, namely welfare generosity (Model 6) and precarity incidence (Model 7), on the relationship between precarity and protesting while also controlling for country-specific heterogeneity.

Starting with model 5, the coefficient of the interaction term is negative and significant, indicating that the positive effect of precarity on

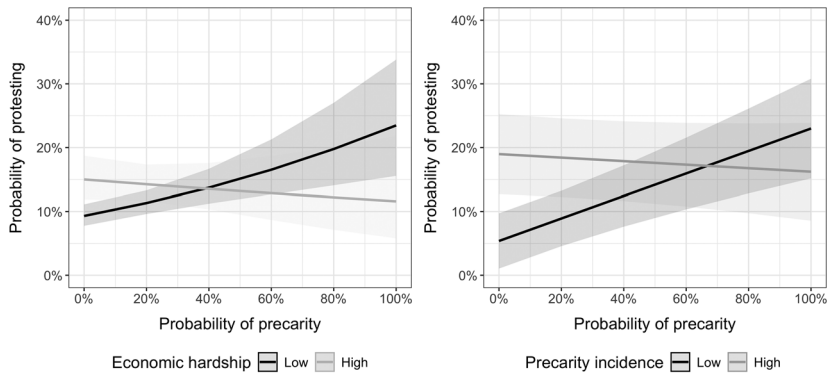


Figure 2. Effect of precarity on protesting, conditional on economic hardship (left panel) and precarity incidence (right panel).

protesting decreases as economic hardship increases. To ease interpretation, the left panel of Figure 2 shows the change in the predicted probability of protesting for an individual facing and not facing economic hardship, while holding all other variables constant at mean levels. From this plot, a positive, significant, and substantive effect of precarity emerges among individuals in conditions of financial security only, which suggests that, although the grievances associated with precarity foster political engagement, a minimum level of financial security is necessary for this effect to occur.

Turning to Model 6, the results fail to corroborate hypothesis 3. The generosity of a country's unemployment benefits does not significantly moderate the relationship between precarity and participation, nor does the overall generosity of the welfare state (Online Appendix, Table A4). This unexpected result may be explained by the fact that welfare state generosity, while increasing the means and incentive for political activism, also reduces the grievances associated with precarity, thus weakening the perception of insecurity associated with labour market vulnerability and the discontent that motivates participation in political protests.

Finally, in Model 7 the interaction term between precarity and precarity incidence is negative and significant. This result contradicts hypothesis 4: it reveals that the positive effect of precarity on protesting is lower, rather than higher, where precarity is more widespread. To ease interpretation of this unexpected result, in the right panel of Figure 2 I show the change in the predicted probability of protesting for an average individual in contexts of both high and low incidence of precarity. These predictions reveal that, regardless of an individual's risk exposure, the inclination to participate is considerably higher in contexts where precarity is more prevalent. In such contexts, precarious workers are more likely to engage in political activities

as compared to both their secure and precarious counterparts living in a context of low incidence of precarity. In contrast, where precarity is less widespread, it does play a significant mobilising role.

Conclusion

In the literature on the political implications of employment insecurity, workers in conditions of occupational precarity have traditionally been considered a group systematically under-represented in the political arena. This under-representation was attributed to the limited electoral benefits entailed in their representation, resulting from their small numbers and, crucially, from their below-average levels of political engagement. As stated by Rueda (2005) in his seminal contribution, while conservative parties tend to represent the interests of upscale groups,

social democratic parties have strong incentives to consider insiders their core constituency. There are historical and ideological reasons for this but there is also the fact that the other group within labour, outsiders, tends to be less politically active and electorally relevant (as well as less economically independent) than insiders (p. 62).

However, as time goes by and employment insecurity shifts from being a ‘minority condition’ to a ‘majority experience’ (Doogan 2015), the first obstacle is lifted. What remains to be investigated is whether the members of the growing precariat are still characterised by below-average participation rates. Shedding light on this issue is normatively important, as unveiling the mobilisation potential of this group could incentivize political parties to take up its representation and thus break a vicious cycle of economic and political inequality. Considering the societal relevance of this matter, in this article I address this issue by investigating the effect of precarity, operationalised as the probability of finding one-self in a condition of unemployment or atypical employment, on protesting, also exploring the factors that might moderate this relationship.

The results of the analysis reveal a positive effect of precarity on protesting, although this effect emerges as conditional on a relative degree of financial security. This effect does not seem to be significantly influenced by a country’s generosity towards the unemployed, while it is stronger in countries where the incidence of precarity is less widespread. Taken together, these results suggest that the mobilising effect of grievances outweighs the demobilising effect of scarce resources, and contradict widespread assumptions about the limited electoral benefits of representing precarious workers. By doing so, they expose the mobilisation potential of the precariat: even though a high(er) propensity to participate in politics *via* non-institutional channels does not necessarily translate into an above-average propensity to

show up at the polling station, it is a strong indicator of this group's political potential. It suggests the precariat should not be disregarded as a politically alienated, and thus irrelevant, group, and that its representation might be electorally beneficial for political parties.

The evidence presented in this article corroborates the findings from qualitative analyses of specific instances of precarious workers' activism (Bassoli and Monticelli 2018; Cini *et al.* 2022; Doerr and Mattoni 2014; Mattoni 2012; Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou 2014; Monticelli and Bassoli 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2017; 2020; Zamponi 2020) and contributes to the literature that investigates the impact of socio-economic and occupational status on the propensity to engage in politics (Kurer *et al.* 2019; Marx and Nguyen 2016; Schäfer and Schwander 2019). It also adds to the long-standing 'greed versus grievances' debate, which contrasts evidence of a dampening effect of economic disadvantage on political engagement to the evidence of a mobilising effect. To the best of my knowledge, this study represents the first cross-country, large-N investigation on the effect of precarity on protesting. Additionally, by testing the effect of precarity on political engagement and policy preferences while controlling for socio-economic status, it isolates the effect of precarity from the effect of financial hardship, hence improving our understanding of the political implications of labour market vulnerability.

As mentioned earlier, the results from this study are practically important because, by shedding light on the political potential of precarious workers, they might provide an incentive for political actors to represent them. However, further research is needed to understand whether this potential is being exploited by political parties. Addressing these issues requires investigating whether, which, and how political parties are mobilising precarious workers, as well as the effectiveness of these efforts in constructing precarity as a social identity.

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