



**Crossing Channels**

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by **Rory Cellan-Jones**

Presented by

 **Bennett Institute  
for Public Policy**  
Cambridge

 **Institute for  
Advanced  
Study in  
Toulouse**

With support from

  

Season 3 - Episode 8

# WHAT'S THE POINT OF A PROTEST?

With

Felix Dwinger (IAST)  
Giacomo Lemoli (IAST)  
Lauren Wilcox (University of Cambridge)

  

## S3E8: What's the point of a protest?

### HOST

Rory Cellan-Jones (former BBC correspondent)

### SPEAKERS

Felix Dwinger (IAST), Giacomo Lemoli (IAST) and Lauren Wilcox (University of Cambridge)

#### **Rory Cellan-Jones** 00:07

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones. What's the point of a protest? That's the subject of the latest in our podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. As ever we're going to use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex challenge. Why is the world protesting so much? How has protesting changed over the years? And what impact are mass protest movements having on policymaking? To explore these issues today, we have Lauren Wilcox from the University of Cambridge. Lauren, start us off, what does your research focus on?

#### **Lauren Wilcox** 00:55

Thanks, Rory. My research is on gender and race and sexuality and politics. Particularly it involves questions of bodies and embodiment in the political sphere and questions of violence surrounding that as well.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 01:06

And joining us from the IAST we have Felix Dwinger and Giacomo Lemoli. Felix, could you share with us your primary research interests?

**Felix Dwinger** 01:14

Yes, hello, Rory. And thank you for having us. My research is in the realm of comparative politics and political economy with a particular focus on autocratic politics and democratic backsliding.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 01:26

Giacomo, what are your main research interests?

**Giacomo Lemoli** 01:29

Thanks, Rory. I research the formation and changes of social cleavages and political identities. And I'm also interested in why events of the past do or do not have such historically persistent effects.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 01:42

Excellent. Well, we will be looking at the past, present and future of protests over the next half hour or so. Those of us who can at least remember the 60s and 70s may find this surprising, but it seems we are protesting like never before. [A recent study by Isabel Ortiz and others found that the number of protests around the world has tripled between 2006 and 2020.](#) So, what's going on? Why is the world protesting so much? Where and what about? Lauren, why don't you start us off?

**Lauren Wilcox** 02:12

I think it has to do with, you know, a growing disconnect between what our governments are doing and what our political parties can deliver for us in liberal democracies, and what the needs and interests of the people are. I think that has to do with a kind of growing disengagement with electoral politics, as well as some of the more material supports that exist in terms of things like social media and the availability for networking and finding people and organising and that as well. That's just a couple of initial thoughts.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 02:45

Come in on that, Giacomo. How do you see it? I mean, first of all, do you agree with the premise that we're seeing a sort of new wave of protests?

**Giacomo Lemoli** 02:54

I would say we are certainly experiencing some global trends, such as globalisation trends, and big migration waves, and recently, climate change. So these are all changes that bring some cases deterioration in the quality of life of many people, which also leads to higher social demands, and somehow dissatisfaction with political leaders. And protests are just the way that people has always had to communicate to their leaders that some change needs to be implemented. Now, to be sure, these are not things that are unique to this current period. What is perhaps unique to this period, is that there is perhaps more awareness about some of the most pressing problems that our societies face. And also the informational environment is very different. So it's much easier to learn about other protests that are happening somewhere else in the word which gives an opportunity to follow the example of others and also perhaps more confidence in the transformative capacity of protests.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 04:05

And Felix, Lauren talked about this growing disconnect between people and their leaders. Do you agree with that, can that really explain a tripling of protests as that study showed?

**Felix Dwinger** 04:17

There is definitely what I would have called a lack of political representation that is perceived by ordinary people. If we go back to that one [piece of scholarship that you mentioned at the beginning by Ortiz et al](#), they would actually come up with like three additional reasons for people to protest, which are the economic uncertainties and insecurities of our times.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 04:44

Because it's interesting, isn't it that the period covered almost exactly mirrors the beginning of the global financial crisis and how that's played out over the last 15 years.

**Felix Dwinger** 04:54

Yes, we are living through times of crises and it's like the sequence of different crises. As you said, it started off with the financial crisis in 2008. The Arab Spring, which was a huge mass protests, and what came with it was a refugee crisis that hit the European continent as well, which led to additional fears and perceived grievances, at least among European citizens. And in addition to that, we have climate change, which is putting pressure on our political systems. And very recent, I must say, concerning trends in international relations with like international conflicts, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but also the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. These are also matters for concern for people, which make them turn out and mobilise.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 06:04

Lauren, has the nature of protest changed?

**Lauren Wilcox** 06:08

You certainly see some of them. If you're talking about say, you know, the United States, in the UK, and in Europe, drawing on some of the memory of these movements from the 60s or drawing on some of these traditions for inspiration, certainly. You know, for the ways in which Black Lives Matter movements draw upon the civil rights movements, and that they're all kind of cross pollinating, from the women's movement. But you also see different forms about this or different ways in which they're mobilised, and social media as part of that, I think. Again, the ability to videotape and broadcast live from what you're doing to kind of make there to be a global audience for your movement in real time in ways that can often get around the ways in which they are either censored by the media or there might be a kind of, you know, lack of coverage in the media from.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 07:00

People are instantly aware in a way that even in the 1960s, you know, the television era, instantly aware of, of protests, the other side of the world.

**Lauren Wilcox** 07:11

Certainly, and even some of the protest movements that might not get as much coverage. The ongoing, you know, marches for Palestine or movements for trans rights, for example, that are a little less frequently covered often on social media are quite well covered, as well. And so it's a kind of a way of being more instantly aware of these. And I think one of the things that's happening is that more and more people are seeing the connections between different kinds of movements as well, that they're not necessarily single issue movements, also that they're much broader. And because, you know, people don't live single issue lives.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 07:50

Giacomo, how do you see that? How do you see the changing nature of protests?

**Giacomo Lemoli** 07:54

To some extent, the nature of protest changes all the time because they reflect the forms of political socialisation and relevant political conflicts of the era that protesters live. What has not changed are protests themselves. So the phenomenon of protests themselves seems to be pretty much constant.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 08:18

Felix, how do you see the nature of protest changing? I mean, as Giacomo says, there is a constant, you know, people on the street in 2024 look much like people on the street in the 1960s.

**Felix Dwinger** 08:31

I agree and disagree with what has been said. A point Lauren made, that I really liked, was the protests of today build up on protests in the past, the achievements we've made in the past allow us or potentially allow us to protest even more and try to get away with even more social injustice that we're still facing

these days today. And what I wanted to mention as well, in addition to all of this is that, from my particular focus as a scholar who is very interested in autocratic politics, there has been, let's say, a shift in how authoritarian/autocratic regimes seem to function. So modern autocratic regimes are much more willing to actually allow protests. And one reason why this might be is that they want to give the semblance of democracy to begin with. And in addition to that, they have become much better in managing protests.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 09:34

And harnessing protests on their own behalf?

**Felix Dwinger** 09:37

To some extent on their own behalf, but also even managing protests by opponents of that very regime. And so, for that reason, in authoritarian contexts, protests are more allowed. That's just one reason why we might actually see more protests in those areas of the world these days.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 09:56

Lauren, I want to look at your interest in historic protests from a feminist point of view. Feminist movements have played a fundamental role in securing women's voting rights, advocating for reproductive rights, fighting violence against women. What are the lessons of past feminist movements, what makes those kinds of protests successful?

**Lauren Wilcox** 10:16

Protest movements are never just that. They are always been a parts of broader campaigns or forms of a variety of methods of strikes, and protests and demonstrations and boycotts and other tactics, right, to kind of achieve certain societal aims and transformations. Things we've learned from feminist movements, or we've learned from movements for LGBTQ rights, was that it's about the importance of being very broad based in this. So we've seen, for example, in the Stonewall movement, which was of course started by runaways by people living on the street, people engaged in sex work, by black and brown people who weren't just working on behalf of a narrow definition of gay rights, but a really broad definition of kind of liberation across a number of different areas. And it's from say, black women who are dissatisfied of the whiteness of feminist movements and the masculine as politics of Black Power movements of the time in the 60s and 70s that created the Combahee River Collective, which gave us one of the first articulations of interlocking oppressions, or intersectionality. And so these are just, you know, some really well known movements that are about thinking about a really broad base of this, and the political science literature bears this out too that the kind of more broad based your movement, the broader it is as a mass movement that can bring in many people, the more likely you are to be successful.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 11:48

Felix and Giacomo, I want to bring you in there. When you look back at the history, are there specific types of actions, strategies that are more effective than others in changing public opinion and, you know, changing policy? Felix?

**Felix Dwinger** 12:00

I haven't looked too much at the history and historical record of protests. But what I know from more recent research on protests, then the first thing that comes to my mind about what makes protests successful is that protesters should coordinate on a single issue. If the protest movement is very diverse, and there's a plethora of issues that are being raised by those protesters and this movement in general, then they are much more likely to fail overall as opposed to them coordinating on one single issue. Because for the regime or for the government, it is more difficult to divide and rule them if they coordinate on the single issue because otherwise, the government might basically split different groups of protesters apart from one another, and try to co-opt some but not others, and then protests are likely to fail.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 13:12

Giacomo, what's your feeling about what works and what does not work in terms of protesters getting something done?

**Giacomo Lemoli** 13:22

Yes. So I agree with Felix, that having to borrow diversity of issues in protest can be detrimental to the success of protests. I would like to qualify this a bit. For political change to be successful, ultimately, what you need is a broad coalition of social groups, perhaps a majoritarian coalition, who's able to back the demand for change. So in case of parliamentary democracies, in the end, you need a support of a majority of people's representatives to actually have change implemented. And so in this sense, it's important for protest movements, to not alienate social groups whose interests may be aligned with those of the protesters. Another thing that I would also say is that it's important for the success of protests not to alienate social groups who do not participate in the protest but whose support is needed at the level of in the political sphere.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 14:32

We're seeing some radical forms of protest now particularly about climate change, damaging artworks disrupting daily life, which cause a lot of annoyance to a lot of citizens. Are they worthwhile? Lauren, what's your view on this?

**Lauren Wilcox** 14:45

Well, if I were advising them I advise them to do different things, sometimes. However, I do think there's something to be said about questioning the right to public space, the ways in which the rights or the, you know, absolute sanctity of public property above all else, and things like that, that do kind of get brought

into the conversation with such movements also. I guess I wouldn't necessarily make a moral case against it, but maybe a strategic case against it is what I'm saying.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 15:14

Right. Isn't there something, and this is for all of you, something in a democracy that's actually profoundly undemocratic about protests. It inevitably involves a small minority, often from the left, but also increasingly from the right, trying to tell the majority what to do. Giacomo?

**Giacomo Lemoli** 15:31

In general, I would tend to disagree in the sense that protests are an expression of political views, similar as other forms of political behaviour, such as voting or lobbying or contributing to a party. And so in this sense, I think they are in general, a good thing for democracy. So the reason why this debate about anti-democratic protest practices arises, is because protests typically entails imposing costs to other sectors of societies in order to have the voice of some groups to be heard. The fact that institutions can grant the same rights of expression in public spaces to everyone and the limit to which costs can be imposed on others is a symptom of a healthy democracy. But actually, there are some types of protests that may be argued are more problematic, in a democratic sense. So protests that have the goal of advocating for the exclusion of some social groups, from collective institutions and from social rights, those can be more problematic. But in general, I would say this is a debate that has to do more with the forms and goals of protests than with the practice of protest by itself.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 16:58

Felix, we're seeing, for instance, growing numbers of protests, are those healthy protests or unhealthy protests?

**Felix Dwinger** 17:08

So the first response to your question is, in principle, protests are never bad news for democracy. Second, there is a real battle for democracy in our times. Third, what I would like to point out as a last point with regards to this question is that, yes there are far right protests, far right demonstrations and all this. But what we also know, and there is research on this, is that mobilisation for democracy works as well, since we are in this battle for democracy. What is important is that all those who are pro-democracy should take a stance and also consider turning out for pro-democracy protests as well. Because what we know from research is that, especially when turnout and pro-democracy demonstrations, mass demonstrations, is large, as we've seen recently, in Germany, when there were protests against the so-called Alternative for Germany, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), due to some ideas among those peoples about re-immigration of people who have come to Germany. Then what we've seen there is that in surveys the number of people who expressed that they would still vote for the Alternative for Germany were going down immediately after those protests. And these effects are phasing out quickly, unfortunately. But if protests can be maintained, then this can help democracy as well.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 18:57

Let's draw this together and work out where protest is going next, if it's going anywhere. Giacomo, you start us off.

**Giacomo Lemoli** 19:03

From what we are seeing in recent years, at least in western societies, one trend that we are observing is that more and more young people are being involved in protest. So in some sense, the demographic profile of protest is changing. So more young people and more people from backgrounds that were not used to protests before seems to be more and more engaged. So we are seeing this with the rise of the social movements for advocating for climate policy.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 19:44

Lauren, how would you sum up where we got to with protests at the moment and potentially how it might develop?

**Lauren Wilcox** 19:50

I think we've got to really emphasise how important it is for our democracies that our rights to protest are protected, and that the protest is not becoming criminalised. And that's something that's really core in terms of how we're thinking about protecting and strengthening democracies.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 20:08

And Felix, what about you? Do you maintain your belief in the importance of protesters as a viable tool for changing the world?

**Felix Dwinger** 20:17

Yes, I do. I do uphold this position. What I would like to add is, if you ask about where the future of protests is going, then I think we can definitely say one or two things. About authoritarian contexts of protests, namely, we will continue observing more protests in modern autocratic regimes just because they want to give the semblance of democracy and because they have managed to exploit protests, even anti-regime protests in their favour. So by them, I mean, authoritarian governments. Because the conventional wisdom we have is that protests destabilises autocracies, and we might think of the Monday Demonstrations in the former German Democratic Republic that brought down the Berlin Wall. Here we had a cascade effect, where more and more people were drawn into these protests and eventually the regime fell. Modern autocracies are very much more about information manipulation, to basically signal to potential opponents of the regime that the regime is popular, and is capable of running government. And for that reason, to some extent, counterintuitively, in order to make those claims credible, the claim that they are some sort of democracy, even though it has some flaws, it's actually good news for them if there is some protests every now and then because it shows them, given that protests are a feature of democracy, a way of making



credible their claim that they are democracy themselves. So for that reason, if there's one trend that I can point out in future, we would also see more protests in autocracies as well.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 22:12

Well, that's all we have time for on this episode. Thanks to Lauren Wilcox from the University of Cambridge and Felix Dwinger and Giacomo Lemoli from the IAST. Let us know what you think of his latest episode of season three of Crossing Channels. You can contact us via Twitter, as I still insist on calling it. The Bennett Institute is [@BennettInst](#), the Institute for Advanced Study is [@IASToulouse](#) and I am [@ruskin147](#). If you enjoyed this episode, then do listen to our other Crossing Channels editions. If you enjoyed this episode, then do listen to our other Crossing Channels editions and notably our latest on the impact of AI regulation on innovation. And please join us next month for the next edition where we'll be looking at the role of colonialism today.