

Determinants of successful and unsuccessful protests



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What determines whether a protest is successful and what constitutes failure?

The People's Climate Movement. The March for Our Lives. The Women's March. Black Lives Matter. The powerless versus the powerful. These are some of the most powerful protests of our generation, contributing to historic turnouts from the people and transformational change. A protest is defined as a form of individual and collective action directed at influencing cultural, political, and social aspects of our society, challenging the mainstream and policies that are deemed immoral and unethical through actions such as marches, shutting down highways, petitions, boycotts, sit-ins, riots, strikes and much more. When people feel helpless – as if their voices have been stripped from them – they turn to protest. Especially for those who have been oppressed, protest is usually the only way to take that power back and influence policies and that impact themselves and the communities. A combination of social media, technology, and an increasingly polarized political climate have all contributed to some of the most powerful protests in American history and they have helped us learn how successful protests can be -- but also how they can crash and burn. Occupy Wall Street addressed increasing income inequality in America, making lots of noise but failing to make a change. The Arab Spring failed to establish peace and freedom, replacing one dictator with another. So how can protests and movements ensure that their actions truly impact our society and hold true to future generations? Looking at the Civil Rights Movement from the 1960s, their actions and sacrifices ensured equality for minority populations for centuries to come. Whether it be reversing Jim Crow segregation and

advocating for federal legislation to prohibit discrimination, the March on Washington led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that shed the light on civil rights, or the election of the first African American president back in 2008, their victories were endless and everlasting. While a movement like the Civil Rights Movement may become popular among many, what truly makes it powerful is the connection to the public, persistence, actions, and most importantly, their impact.

One of the most fundamental parts of a protest is the message. The message and goal of the protest are what gets people interested and dedicated to your cause. Without it, you've got nothing. Gandhi wanted independence from the British. Black Lives Matter wanted to expose institutionalized systems of violence targeting people of color. March for Our Lives wanted more comprehensive gun legislation to prevent the next Sandy Hook. These were all established goals that they could build a movement around. Everyone fighting for a cause should be able to know what, how, and why they're fighting. If there's no clear answer, the protest might end up confusing, irritating, or even angering those affected by the protest without accomplishing anything. The next step becomes how to increase a protest's prominence and in fact, there are several factors that are integral to influencing real political change. They include the duration of the protest (is it longer than a day?), the number of protestors (usually 100+ people), level of police presence, combined efforts from other political organizations, arrests, injuries, property damage, violence and/or death. The more prominent the protest is, the more likely Congress is to vote on bills that support the purpose of the protest. Regarding violence and harm used in

protesting, these factors often have a negative outcome. Robb Willer, a sociologist at Stanford University, wrote,

“ When the social order is being greatly disrupted, when property is being destroyed, when there’s some risk of harm to people, that leads to a dis-identification effect, where people say ‘ I’m not like those people.’

Nonviolence conveys moderation, and when things escalate to violence, that signals a radical or extreme movement. It makes the claims of the group less legitimate.”

Throughout the past few decades, researchers have found that the reason “ passionate” protesters were a turn-off is that more moderate spectators could not align with their actions. Violence can cloak the purpose, giving people an excuse to not support it. Protests are most successful when they avoid the use of violence but instead fight peacefully for change, making their demands more convincing to the people in power. For example, nonviolent protests during the 1960s uplifted the number of votes among white people for Democratic candidates (civil rights advocates) while violent protests increased support for Republicans. This goes to show that although some might argue the end justifies the means, the research tells otherwise. It is not just about the message but also how you convey it to the people.

What is not often mentioned is collaboration. Not only collaboration with those of the same cause but also other organizations. This enables those in cooperation with you to gain access to a larger platform and demand greater attention from the public and/or government. Take our current political climate, for instance. President Trump has promoted some of the most

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controversial moves of any administration: the Muslim ban, the national emergency for the border wall, the embassy in Jerusalem, the recent government shutdown, the transgender ban in the military, and many others. If people were to protest after every new executive order he signs, it would dilute their message. People would become disinterested and efforts would disintegrate. When we look at the Women's March, the causes they support are very diverse. Although their original purpose was to fight for women's rights, it slowly grew into a coalition of various progressive topics. Back in 2017 during the Women's March, in addition to advocating for women's rights, 21% of the protestors attended to fight Trump's immigration actions, 23% fought for social welfare, and 34.7% advocating for issues impacting the LGBTQ+ community.

So where to go after all of this? Movements must eventually translate their words into action. Actions motivate the audience and get them emotionally and physically attached. While passion, sentiment, and people can certainly push along social change, they have to be channeled into successful methods with results. The whole goal of a protest or movement is to create a political moment that decision-makers — our senators, congressmen and women, and the President — simply cannot brush aside. That's how the Civil Rights Movement redefined the future of America, all done through the Montgomery bus boycotts, the Freedom Riders that protested segregated bus terminals, nonviolent resistance with Martin Luther King Jr., the March on Washington advocating for the civil and economic rights of African Americans where the famous words “ I have a dream...” were first spoken. The Civil Rights Movement won many battles: judicial, legislative, and moral.

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The Supreme Court supported the integration of public schools in the infamous case of *Brown v. The Board of Education*, supported the enforcement of voting rights for African Americans in states that had historically denied them their voting rights, and defeated state laws forbidding interracial marriage. This goes to show that when done correctly and efficiently, our right to assembly and protest can be a powerful thing and should not be taken lightly.

And finally, protests must evolve from being reactive to proactive. Reactive protests are a great way to get people energized and introduced, rallying up support and developing a collective identity. If those who attend the protests simply based on intrigue and sympathy eventually move on to more unwavering action, the movement develops and change can happen. Back in 2017, President Trump signed an executive order banning immigrants from several Middle Eastern countries. In response, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit on behalf of Muslim immigrants stuck after Trump's travel ban. They later received about \$24.1 million in donations over a span of three days to employ more legal assistance, *almost six times what the ACLU usually receives in a year*. Despite this success, the model simply is not sustainable. The movement will simply play catch up in the long run, unsuccessfully changing anything to prevent the next action that will soon garner its own protest. Proactive protests where protestors are trying to prevent something from happening tend to be more effective. This is one of the lasting impacts of the Civil Rights Movement. Congress passed a series of laws forbidding any future discrimination. The Fair Housing Act forbade the segregation of neighborhoods. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade

employers from rejecting applicants because of race. The movement was also a foundational victory because it overturned negative perceptions of African-Americans. By presenting themselves as respectful, nonviolent, intelligent, and dedicated, the movement helped change harmful stereotypes so integration and equality were easier to achieve. All of this was done to not only solve racial inequality at the time but to also legally prevent future racial discrimination.

Protests are a powerful tool in a democracy, especially one as large as the United States. In fact, our Founding Fathers believed the rights to free speech and assembly were such incredibly crucial aspects of a democracy that they chose to include it in the Constitution, specifically the Bill of Rights. For anybody to truly revolutionize the mainstream and status quo, it takes more than policy implementation or a change in leadership. A movement's impact is more than just becoming popular or trending, it's how it changes people's lives through the connection with the public, how it brings out the best in people, how it helps society progress. Persistence, actions, and focus are at the core of all of this. You need to change the way society thinks and how it acts. History is defined by people that can pave new paths for others to join the journey for a new future. Like Robert Frost once said, " I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

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