

# A Tale of Two Cities: The 2008 National Party Conventions Study and the Politics of Protest

by Dara Z. Strolovitch, Joanne Miller, Michael T. Heaney, and Seth Masket

It was a hot and humid Labor Day morning. Across the United States, people were making the most of the last days of their summer vacations by heading to the beach, grilling in their yards, and shopping for school supplies. In St. Paul, Minnesota, however, Republican Party delegates were gathering for the Republican National Convention (RNC) and to confirm Arizona Senator John McCain as their presidential candidate.

A few blocks away from the convention center, crowds gathered outside the Minnesota State Capitol, assembling for what organizers predicted would be the largest demonstration of the four-day convention. The event did not disappoint: the St. Paul police estimated that 10,000 people marched from the capitol to the convention center to express their opposition to the war in Iraq and their nonsupport for candidate John McCain.<sup>1</sup> Before the march, we sat at Key's Café, the restaurant a few blocks from the state capitol that the owners had graciously allowed us to use as the headquarters for our team of surveyors. By noon, a line of police sport-utility vehicles was idling at the blocked-off parking meters that lined the sidewalk next to the cafe. Soon after, police officers emerged from the vehicles and began to don riot gear. Although somewhat jarring, the officers' preparations were not surprising: The previous weekend, several members of the facetiously named RNC Welcoming Committee had been arrested in home raids in Minneapolis and St. Paul, and police were anticipating the possibility of violent confrontations with them.

Rewind a week, to the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Denver, Colorado, where Democratic Party delegates had gathered to confirm Illinois Senator Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate for president. The



Activists march through the streets of downtown Denver on August 24, 2008, the day before the Democratic National Convention.

opening protest was held on August 24, a day before the convention was to begin, when a small crowd of approximately 300 activists gathered outside the Colorado State Capitol for an event organized by "Recreate '68," a group that hoped to recapture the spirit of the protests that occurred outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Small protests and other events continued throughout the week, led by groups such as World Can't Wait and Students for a Democratic Society. Police maintained a constant presence, making some arrests in response to small disturbances. The largest and most well-organized protest event was organized by Iraq Veterans against the War (IVAW) and took place on Wednesday, August 27. IVAW had worked closely with the police and other activist groups as well as with the musical group Rage Against the Machine (RATM) to plan their event. Following a free concert by RATM, IVAW led a march of approximately 5,000 people to Denver's Pepsi Center. At the conclusion of the protest, several IVAW

members were granted a meeting with representatives of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama.

The preceding scenes will be familiar to anyone who has attended a political or protest event in the last several decades. Marches, rallies, and other forms of protest have become somewhat normalized since the height of the movements of the "long 1960s," as have conflicts between participants in protest activities and the police. Although such events and conflagrations are a regular feature of the American political landscape, political scientists have devoted scant attention to examining political protest in the United States or understanding the reasons why, among the many outlets available to them for political dissent and expression, some people choose to protest. To answer this question, we collected information at the 2008 national conventions in Denver and St. Paul and compared the protesters at the two events.

A confluence of factors—including low levels of presidential approval; the

<sup>1</sup> Police and organizer estimates of protest attendance are notoriously contentious, with organizations generally claiming that official counts are too low. These protests were no different; organizers estimated far larger crowds—between 20,000 and 50,000 people—participated in the march.

salience of and intraparty divisions over issues such as the war in Iraq, immigration, and the brewing financial and mortgage crises; differences in the civic and political environments of the host cities; and the dynamics of each party's nomination processes—made the 2008 conventions particularly ripe for examination and provided a unique and exciting opportunity to illuminate critical questions about political protest. In addition, the Democratic Party saw the closest presidential nomination race in modern history. Not only did the contest involve all the state primaries and caucuses as well as the superdelegates, but it was the first to feature both an African American man and a White woman as the two major contenders for a major party's presidential nomination. The 2008 Democratic primaries were also widely considered to be among the most acrimonious national nomination contests in the modern era. According to a late March 2008 Gallup poll, 28% of Hillary Clinton's backers said at that time that they would support the Republican in the general election rather than vote for Barack Obama. The Republican Party, on the other hand, experienced a far less controversial nomination process, with John McCain clinching the nomination just two months after the first contests. Although McCain's nomination was considered all but certain before the nominating convention, the Republican Party faced other challenges, including record-low approval ratings for then-President George W. Bush and growing dissatisfaction with Republican management of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the U.S. economy.

The combination of these and other factors stimulated many questions. Would significant numbers of Republicans be so frustrated with their party that they would vote for a Democrat in the general election, or perhaps sit it out? Would Clinton supporters break with their party and actively protest its nominee Barack Obama? Would excitement about the Obama nomination lead many of those who might have otherwise protested at the DNC to express their concerns about the ongoing wars and the worsening economy to instead lend their support to his campaign?

To explore the research opportunities highlighted by the foregoing questions, we designed a unique two-part study: the first component consisted of a survey of protesters at each convention, and the second component was a

survey of delegates to each convention. This article describes our findings from the protester survey. The research upon which this article is based was supported in part through a grant from CURA's New Initiative program. Additional funding was provided by the National Science Foundation.

### Study Methodology

To conduct the study, we hired two teams of student surveyors—16 in Denver and 46 in St. Paul—and trained them to use a sampling technique modeled on a procedure similar to one employed by media outlets to conduct exit polls. In brief, each surveyor looked out into the crowd at a protest event and identified a person at random without concern for age, gender, race, or other personal characteristics. The surveyor did not survey that initial person, but instead, using that person as an “anchor,” counted five persons to the right or the left of the anchor and invited this fifth person to participate in the study. The surveyor approached the potential respondent and said, “I am conducting a survey of the people participating in today's event. The survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. Would you like to fill one out?” If the respondent declined, the surveyor thanked the individual and moved on to the next potential respondent. After conducting the first survey, the surveyor then counted five people to the right of the initial respondent and invited that person to participate, repeating this process until three people had completed the survey. Then, the surveyor selected a new anchor and repeated the procedure. Surveyors noted the race and gender of each person who declined to participate on nonrespondent sheets so that we could estimate response rates for each survey. Although there may be biases in the initial selection of the anchors because of the spatial grouping of activists, selecting individuals close to the anchors rather than the anchors themselves and distributing the surveyors widely throughout the crowds substantially reduces these biases.

We spread out the surveying process over the course of each of the four-day conventions to avoid biasing our sample based on the idiosyncrasies of which protestors attended a protest on a specific day or time (we also conducted surveys on the Sunday prior to the RNC but not on the Wednesday during the RNC, when no protest events were



scheduled). We also surveyed attendees at a rally for Texas Congressman and Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul in St. Paul and at events for Independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader in both Denver and St. Paul. Both Nader and Paul are notable, in part, for being strong antiwar advocates on the left and right sides of the political spectrum, respectively. Both have cultivated a strong personal following of people dissatisfied with the Democratic and Republican parties. Nader had launched previously unsuccessful bids for president as a member of the Green Party, and Paul ran in the Republican primary in 2008 and has a strong following among self-described libertarians. As outspoken critics of the two-party system in general and the Iraq War in particular, we surmised that the Paul and Nader events would attract attendees who were also likely to be protesting at either the RNC and the DNC.

The survey instrument was five pages long, and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. It included a range of multiple choice, short answer, open-ended, and agree/disagree questions about the ways in which respondents were participating in the convention, their motives for participating, their attitudes about politics, and their demographics. We collected information from 412 respondents in Denver and from 990 in St. Paul, for a total sample of 1,402 respondents. The combined response rate for the two surveys was 73% (the individual response rates were 65% for the DNC survey and 77% for the RNC survey).



## Results: A Portrait of Two Protests

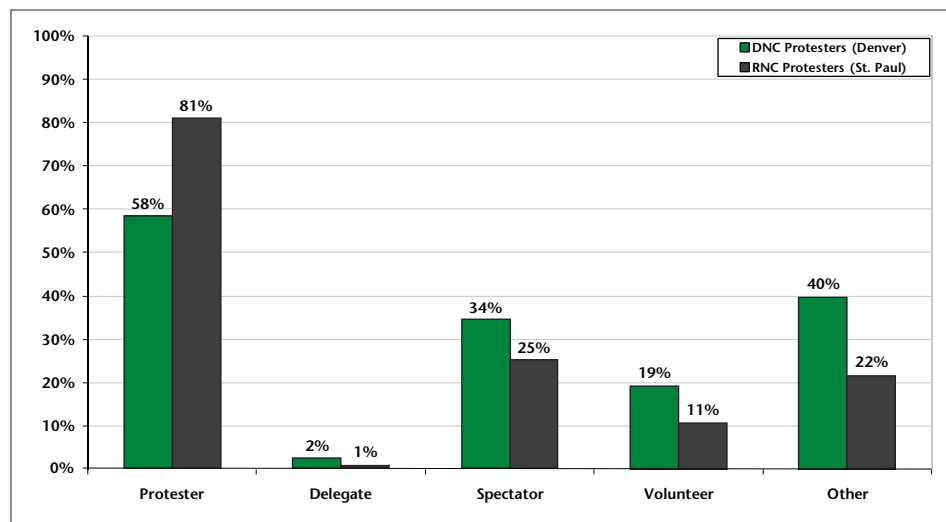
Based on survey responses, 62% of the protesters in Denver lived in the city of Denver and 75% of the protesters in St. Paul lived in the Twin Cities. The confluence of factors described earlier suggests a host of reasons why people might have participated in protests at the 2008 conventions, including support for or opposition to a range of issues associated with the war on terror, support for or opposition to immigration reform, and support for or opposition to a particular candidate. Although people turned out for these and many other political reasons, it is important to note that, even in the context of the heated environment of the 2008 election season, not all of those assembled near the convention sites intended to engage in protest behavior. Many of those assembled in the environs of the convention venues were there *not* to participate in marches and rallies but rather to gather at “observer galleries” where they could, for example, observe the scene, cheer the delegates, sell water, or listen to music. Given that the unpopular incumbent president was a Republican, however, it is not surprising that the DNC in Denver drew far smaller crowds than did the RNC in St. Paul, and that a smaller proportion of those assembled outside the DNC intended to participate in protest-related activities (Figure 1). Whereas 81% of respondents in St. Paul reported that they were at the Republican convention to protest, only 58% of those in Denver said they were there for that reason. Approximately 11% of those who said they planned to protest intended to do so at both conventions. For Denver respondents, this was aspirational, but for the 10% of protesters who gave this answer in St. Paul, it was likely true (because the DNC convention was the prior week). Our discussion below focuses on the subset of respondents who indicated that they intended to protest at one or both conventions.

**Demographic Characteristics.** In addition to differences in respondents’ reasons for assembling in each of the two cities, several demographic differences also distinguished the protesters in Denver from those in St. Paul. Some of these differences reflect the racial and ethnic compositions of these two metropolitan areas. For example, mirroring the populations of the Denver and Twin Cities regions themselves, a statistically significant larger proportion of the protesters at the DNC in Denver were Latino (10.6% at the DNC, 4.87%



**Protesters at the 2008 conventions cited a host of reasons for participating in protests, including support for or opposition to the war on terror, immigration reform, or a particular candidate. Pictured here are protesters at the RNC convention in St. Paul.**

**Figure 1. Ways in Which People Surveyed at Protest Events Said They Were Participating in the Convention**



Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive

at the RNC), whereas a statistically significant larger proportion of those at the RNC were White (83.87% at the DNC, 88.54% at the RNC) and African American (1.84% at the DNC, 5.01% at the RNC). The differences in percentage of Asian Americans (2.76% at the DNC, 1.84% at the RNC) and American Indians (2.76% at the DNC, 3.56% at the RNC) were not statistically significant between the two groups.

Protesters at both conventions were more likely to have obtained a college degree than were the residents of the two metropolitan areas. Specifically, whereas 35.6% of Denver residents 25

years of age and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, 53.52% of the protesters in that city had a bachelor's degree. Similarly, whereas 36.3% of Twin Cities residents 25 years of age and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, 60.33% of RNC protesters had college degrees.<sup>2</sup> (Note, however, that there are differences between the residents of Denver and Twin Cities and the general U.S. population, among whom only 26% over the age of 25 have bachelor's

<sup>2</sup> Compiled by Twin Cities Compass, from U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey. See <http://www.tccompass.org/index.php>.

degree or higher). In addition, RNC protesters were more likely than DNC protesters to have a bachelor's degree or higher, a difference that was statistically significant.

Median family income is somewhat lower in Denver (\$58,875) than it is in the Twin Cities (\$63,898)<sup>3</sup>—both of which are markedly higher than the United States as a whole (\$50,740). We found that RNC protesters had slightly higher incomes than DNC protesters. Of RNC protesters, 67% made less than \$50,000, and 6% made more than \$125,000; of DNC protesters, 71% made less than \$50,000, and 3% made more than \$125,000. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Other differences mirror the cities' dissimilar cultural and political environments. For example, reflecting Minnesota's relatively strong union environment, a statistically significant larger proportion of the RNC protesters were from union households (34% of RNC protesters, compared with 25% of DNC protesters). However, in light of the fact that approximately 17% of the general population was from union households (in 2004) and that only 12.4% of all wage and salaried workers were union members in 2008,<sup>4</sup> it seems clear that unions turned out members at high rates at both conventions. Similarly, reflecting the Twin Cities' status as a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) hub in the upper Midwest, protesters at the RNC were more likely to identify as gay or lesbian (17%) than were those at the DNC (10%), a difference that is statistically significant. Although estimates of the percentage of the American population that is GLBT-identified vary quite widely, gay/lesbian/bisexual-identified comprised 4.8% of American National Election Study respondents in 2008 and 2.7% of General Social Survey respondents in 2008, suggesting that, once again, the differences between the two groups of protesters are less marked than those between the protesters and the American population more generally.

The differences between the religiosity of protesters in the two cities were less straightforward (Figure 2). On one

hand, a statistically significant greater proportion of DNC protesters in Denver, 55%, said that they *never* attend religious services, compared with 47% of RNC protesters who gave this answer. However, among the DNC protesters, a statistically significant larger proportion said they attend religious services every week (14%, compared with 10% of RNC protesters). Protesters at both conventions are markedly less religious than the general population, of whom only 22.7% never attend religious services and 31.7% attend services every week or more, according to the 2006 General Social Survey.

We also observed some notable similarities in the gender, age, and employment status of the two groups. Among DNC protesters, 51% were male, compared to 47% of the RNC protesters, although this difference is not statistically significant. The median age of the RNC protesters was 35 years old and the median age of the DNC protesters was 31 years old, compared with a median age of 36.7 years for the general population, based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates from the 2006–2008 American Community Survey. Almost equivalent proportions of the RNC protesters (67%) and the DNC protesters (68%) were employed either full or part time. In both cities, their figures are higher than the 60.7% of those 16 years and older who are employed in the general population nationwide, based on data from the 2006–2008 American Community Survey.

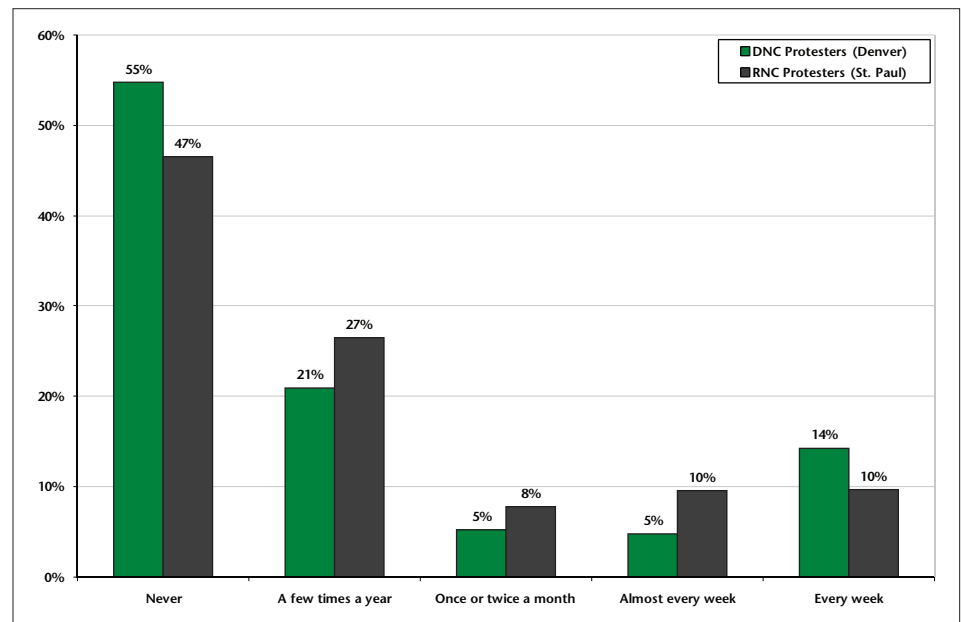
**Political Characteristics.** Our survey data also demonstrated some notable

partisan differences between the two groups of protesters. Although majorities of protesters at both conventions identified themselves as Democrats, more of the DNC protesters identified as Republicans (15%) than did the RNC protesters (2%), a difference that is statistically significant (Figure 3). Ideological differences similarly distinguished each group. Whereas majorities of protesters at both conventions identified themselves as liberal, the DNC protesters were more likely to identify themselves as conservative than were the RNC respondents (18% compared to 3%), a difference that is statistically significant (Figure 4). According to the 2008 American National Election Study, 29% of U.S. adults identified as Republicans and 51% identified as ideologically conservative.

The fact that a large majority of the protesters at the Republican convention were Democrats or liberals is not surprising. However, the fact that a majority (albeit a smaller majority) of protesters at the *Democratic* convention were also Democrats or liberals was somewhat counterintuitive. We suspect that this finding reflects a combination of four factors:

- ▶ the liberal ideology and “protest” roots/culture of several Democratic party constituencies (i.e., that outsider activities such as protesting are more typical forms of political behavior among Democrats/liberals than among Republicans/conservatives);
- ▶ the strong anti-administration and antiwar attitudes among liberals and

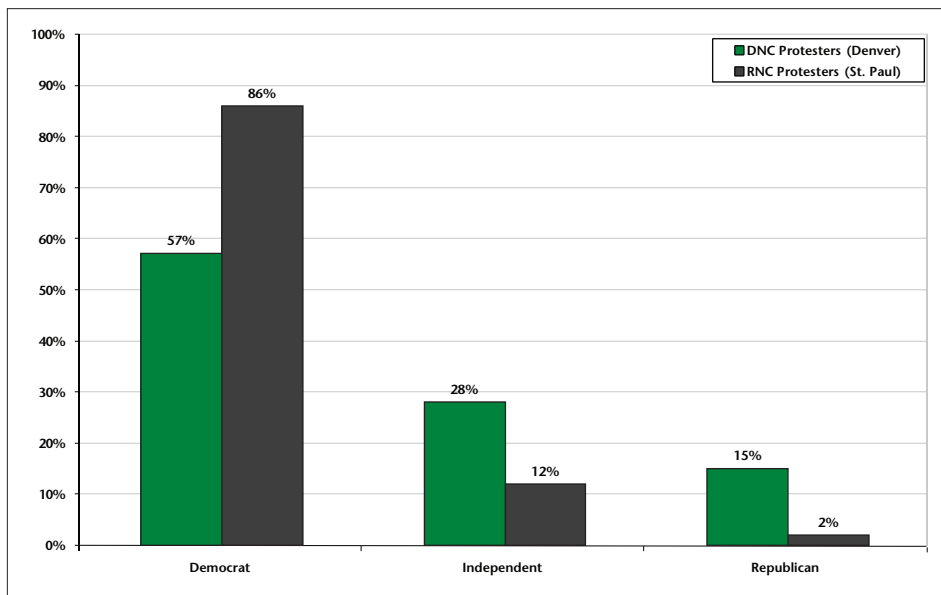
**Figure 2. Protesters' Rates of Religious Service Attendance**



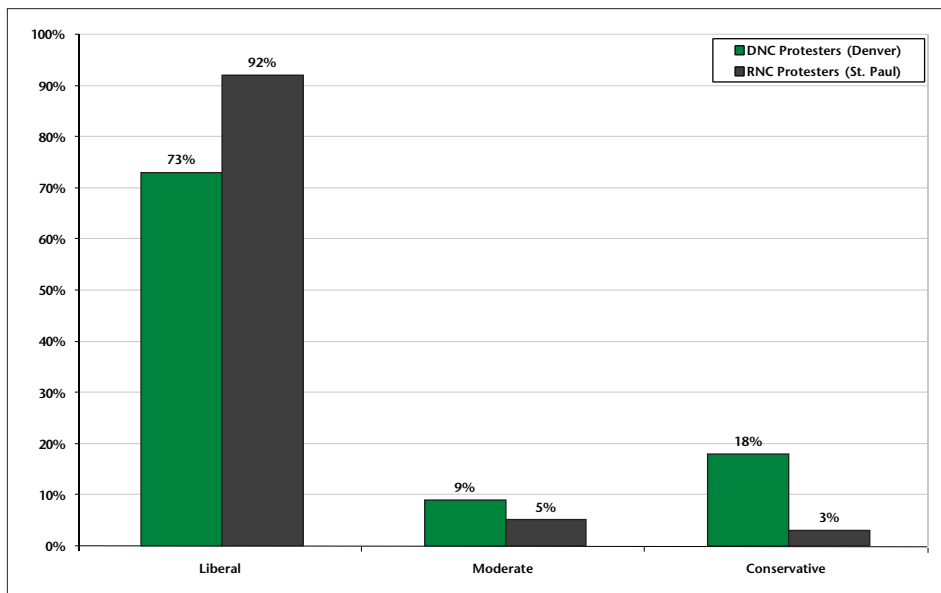
<sup>3</sup> Twin Cities data are based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey (2008) as calculated by Twin Cities Compass. See <http://www.tccompass.org/index.php>.

<sup>4</sup> C. Panagopoulos and P.L. Francia, “The Polls—Trends: Labor Unions in the United States,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72,1 (2008):134–159; U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, “Union Members in 2008,” [www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm).

**Figure 3. Protesters' Party Identification**



**Figure 4. Protesters' Ideology**



Democrats, and the consequent desire to take *any* opportunity to express those views on a national stage;

- dissatisfaction among liberal Democrats with the Democratically controlled Congress' handling of the Iraq war and the economy since it took control in 2006; and
- residual dissatisfaction among Hillary Clinton supporters with the nomination of Barack Obama.

Interestingly, DNC protesters were more likely to be members of political organizations (64%) than their RNC counterparts in St. Paul (56%), a difference that is statistically significant. This finding may reflect the fact that the

DNC protests were more centrally organized; event information was communicated to individuals largely through political organizations, and many political groups organized bus trips for their members to attend the protests. Protesters in both cities, however, were more likely to be members of political organizations than are members of the general population (48%).<sup>5</sup>

**Attitudinal Characteristics.** Given the demographic, partisan, and ideological differences between the two

<sup>5</sup> S. Verba, K.L. Schlozman, and H. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

groups of protesters, we wanted to explore if they held different political beliefs. When we asked DNC and RNC protesters about their attitudes toward government, we found that RNC protesters expressed more confidence in the U.S. system of government than did DNC protesters (i.e., they expressed higher levels of agreement with the following statements: “elections are effective at bringing about constructive policy change,” “elections are effective at holding leaders accountable for the decisions they make in office,” and “the 2008 presidential election offers a real choice among competing candidates”) (Figure 5). RNC protesters also expressed more trust in “other people” than DNC protesters, and they also agreed more strongly that women and African Americans face workplace discrimination (these differences are all statistically significant). DNC and RNC protesters did not differ in their support for third parties, their views about grassroots protests, and their views about their ability to participate in political activity. DNC and RNC protesters also expressed similarly strong levels of agreement in assessing how often politics make them feel anxious, hateful, and frustrated.

**Motivations for Protesting.** As we suggested previously, individuals had many possible motivations for protesting at each of the 2008 conventions. We asked protesters at each convention about seven possible proactive or reactive reasons for their attendance (Figure 6). Taken together, the respondents' stated reasons suggested some motivational similarities and differences between the two sets of protesters. A majority of both DNC protesters and RNC protesters said that they had attended the convention to express their “dissatisfaction with the current U.S. political system.” However, the proportion professing this “reactive” motivation was higher for the RNC protesters (74%) than it was for those at the DNC (62%). RNC protesters were twice as likely as DNC protesters to report that they came to the convention “to help prevent a candidate from winning this year's presidential election” (20% of RNC protesters, compared with 10% at the DNC). In contrast, compared with RNC protesters, DNC protesters were more likely to profess “proactive” motivations, including that they had come to the convention because it was their “responsibility as a member of a political party” (13% DNC, 7% RNC), “to hang out with friends



or make new friends" (18% DNC, 13% RNC), "to learn more about the political process" (15% DNC, 9% RNC), or "to help a candidate win this year's presidential election" (14% DNC, 10% RNC). All of these motivational differences are statistically significant.

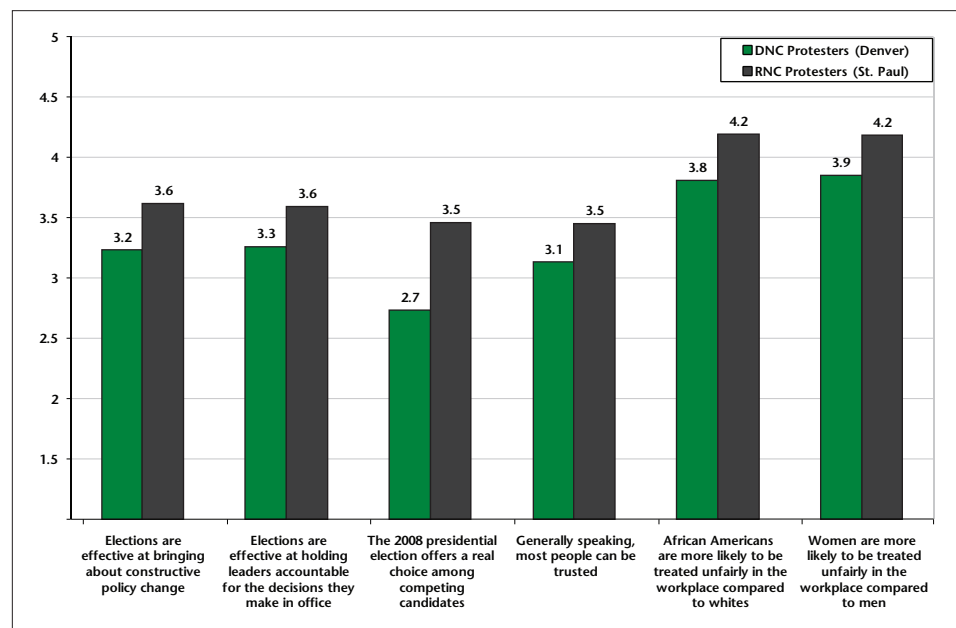
A total of 25% of RNC protesters compared to 18% of DNC protesters indicated that the most important reason they were attending the convention was to express their views on an issue or issues, although this difference is not statistically significant. Not surprisingly, a majority of those who claimed to be motivated by an issue mentioned they came to protest the war in Iraq (60% of DNC protesters and 68% of RNC protesters; this difference is statistically significant). Protesters at the DNC, however, were slightly more likely than those at the RNC to say that they came to the convention to support the troops (3% DNC, 1% RNC; this difference is not statistically significant).

Although these motivational differences are not surprising given the differences between the two major parties, examining these variations begins to illuminate the dynamics of political dissent and the ways in which protest activity can be motivated by different reasons depending on the context of the event. Specifically, the proactive nature of the motives of the (largely Democratic/liberal) protesters at the DNC reflected their desire to reinforce their party's agenda and help to ensure that their candidate would be elected. In contrast, the reactive nature of the motives of the (also largely Democratic/liberal) protesters at the RNC reflected their desire to express strong disapproval with the direction the country had taken during the eight years of a Republican administration, and to work to prevent that party's candidate from being elected.

### Future Directions

Although preliminary, the similarities and differences among the protesters at the 2008 Democratic and Republican National Conventions revealed in our analyses suggest some potentially intriguing implications for and characterizations of the contemporary politics of protest. Although people are more likely to engage in protests and rallies to express dissatisfaction, few intend their activities to be disruptive, and many participate in unconventional activities for affirmative reasons such as support for an issue or candidate. In addition, our analyses suggest some ways in

**Figure 5. Protesters' Attitudes toward Government**



Note: These data were gathered using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = disagree strongly with the statement, 2 = disagree somewhat, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree somewhat, and 5 = agree strongly.



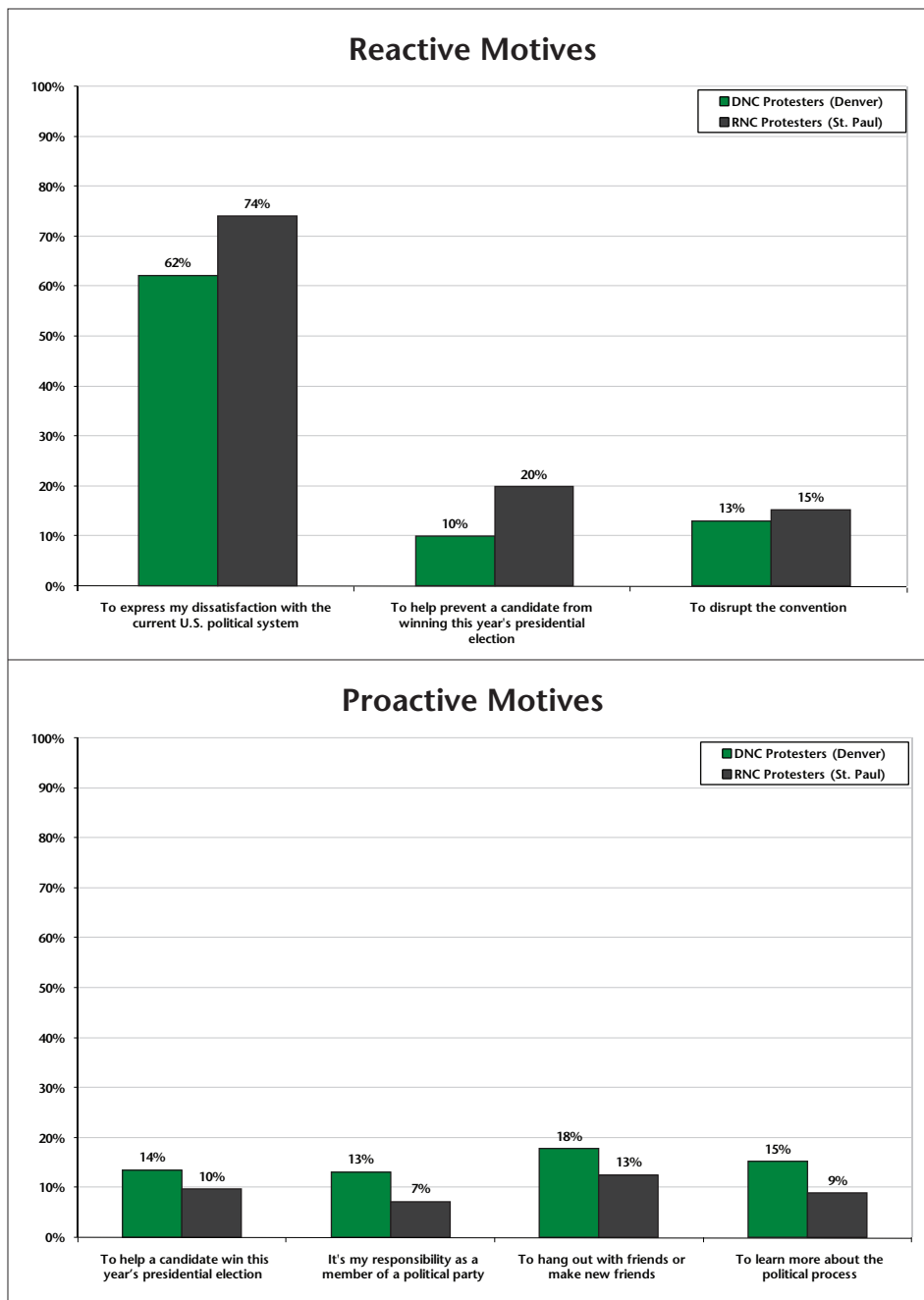
**Police in riot gear prepare for protests during the Democratic National Convention in Denver.**

which protesters are different from the general population and from those who participate in more conventional political activities. For example, protesters at both events were more likely than other Americans to identify as GLBT and to have college degrees. They were also much more likely than the general populations to be from union households and to be members of political

organizations, suggesting that political involvement begets intensive forms of political activity. That even protesters at the DNC in Denver were almost twice as likely to be from union households than members of the general population suggests that unions continue to play a unique role in mobilizing their members and sympathizers. Although protests are no longer the exclusive territory of the

Photo courtesy of the authors

**Figure 6. Protesters' Reasons for Coming to the Convention: Reactive and Proactive Motives**



Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive

left, liberals and Democrats are more likely to express their dissent through such activities than conservatives and Republicans.

Although differences between the protesters we surveyed and the general population are pronounced, our results also suggest that the local civic and political environment affects the nature of protesters, even at ostensibly national events that take place within a single month. For example, Minnesota's extraordinarily high levels of civic participation, political engagement, and

politicization are reflected in the fact that RNC protesters expressed more trust in the political system (in stark contrast to previous research that has generally found that protesters tend to be less trusting of the political system), but were also more likely to believe that women and African Americans face workplace discrimination. This combination of trust in the system in general but dissatisfaction with specific policies or outcomes is a potent force that compels some to engage in unconventional forms of participation such as protesting, but to

do so in a way that has the potential to be constructive, not violent or disruptive.

In future work, we will examine the "feedback effects" of political protest. For example, does political protest increase political knowledge, interest, and the likelihood of future activity? By comparing the data from the protester surveys with data from the survey of convention delegates that we conducted simultaneously, we will also be able to explore the relationships between social movements and party politics by examining what distinguishes "outsiders" who protest "in the streets" from "insiders" who engage in more conventional, but no less demanding, participation in partisan politics. In particular, we will examine whether liberal- and Democratic-identified protesters at the DNC were motivated in part by their belief that even the election of a Democrat would not produce significant changes.

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The research upon which this article is based was supported through a grant from CURA's New Initiative program. These grants support projects that are initiated by faculty, community organizations, government agencies, or students and that fall outside CURA's existing program areas. Additional funding was provided by the National Science Foundation, Small Grants for Exploratory Research #0842474 and #0842371.