

THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH

How Social Scientists Answer
Their Questions

Shamus Khan
Columbia University

Dana R. Fisher
University of Maryland–College Park

Copyright 2014

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Our research establishes that the intersection between parties and social movements is a significant space, which we have labeled the party in the street. Future research might fruitfully address several additional questions about this phenomenon. First, is the party in the street limited to the Democratic Party, or is it also an important part of Republican politics?

Although there are significant cultural and organizational differences between the formal and informal structures of the two major parties (J. Freeman, 1986), we believe that the party in the street matters to the Republican Party too. The activities of the Christian Right movement may provide at least one significant example of a party in the street within the Republican Party, even if its organizational processes and tactics differ from those of the antiwar movement. Second, how does the party in the street grow and shrink over time? What are the mechanisms that select some movement partisans as party leaders—like John F. Kerry from the anti-Vietnam-War movement or Ralph Reed from the Christian Right movement—while rejecting others? Third, is the development of the social movement advanced or stymied by its intersection with the party? What factors explain whether movements tend to be co-opted quickly or whether they substantially promote their objectives through the party? Further research along these lines would go a long way toward deepening our understanding of the dynamic intersection between political parties and social movements.

REFLECTION

Finding the Party in the Street

By Michael T. Heaney

Social networks have captured the world's imagination in recent years with the emergence of online social networks such as MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google+. These days, ordinary people think about and talk about how to "build their social network." One potential downside of this craze is that it may lead us to believe that online social networks are the only important social networks and, thus, distract us from the myriad other ways in which the social world is connected through networks. Networks have been a vital part of human existence since the beginning of time. Families are the world's most basic social network, with networks emerging in all other dimensions of our lives through work, professions, hobbies, and more. Networks are everywhere. An important question for social scientists to ask is whether, when, and how these networks influence human behavior and shape social outcomes.

This reflection is a story of how my research partner, Fabio Rojas, and I sought to understand the structure and consequences of social networks for the antiwar movement within the United States. We found that a seemingly amorphous blob of protesters is connected through networks in ways that help to explain its place in the political world. Specifically, we examined how grassroots organizational networks intersected with political party loyalties to influence the behavior of activists. However, this story is also—if not more so—the tale of the beginnings and evolution of a research project. Research ideas and projects sometimes come from unlikely places. They have a self-reinforcing logic that can lead researchers in unexpected directions. Part of the craft of research is knowing when and how to recognize and embrace serendipity when it presents itself.

PROJECT ORIGINS

The germ of the idea for this project was born in the fall of 2002, while I was working on my dissertation in Washington, DC. Unrelated to my dissertation, I attended a few protests that were held downtown, including protests against International Monetary Fund and the Iraq War. What struck me about these events was that they were not composed of a homogenous group of people that all wanted the same thing. Rather, the crowds appeared to be carefully differentiated into well organized subgroups: anarchists, union members, Catholics, Episcopalians, women, Democrats, environmentalists, socialists, Palestinian rights activists, and so on. Some people were not explicitly affiliated with any group, of course, but the ones that were conveyed a common ethos indicated by dress (e.g., black bandannas, green T-shirts), signs, and chants. I suspected that something interesting was going on here. My first thought was that I should start conducting surveys of the people attending these rallies. My second thought was that I should probably, instead, focus on completing my PhD dissertation; otherwise I was going to find myself unemployed and without a place to live.

Having passed upon the impulse to begin studying protest, I returned to writing my PhD dissertation, which examined the social networks of interest groups working on health policy in the United States. Through this project, I identified the leading interest groups in health policy and conducted interviews with their lobbyists to assess the nature of the networks that connected them. As part of this research, I observed that these networks had a partisan dimension that had not been explored closely by previous scholars (Heaney 2006).

It occurred to me that a logical next step for the research—after completing the dissertation—would be to look more closely at how interest groups networked with political parties. One possible research design

for this study would be to attend both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions to see how interest groups participated in these conventions. For example, which interest groups sponsored receptions? Which groups gave money? Which delegates were affiliated with interest groups? As the opportunity to conduct a comparative study of interest groups at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions drew near in 2004, I found that I still had to put the final touches on my PhD dissertation. By the time I finished that, it was August 4. I had missed the Democratic National Convention entirely. And there was no time to obtain the credentials needed to get inside the Republican National Convention. It seemed that I had blown my chance, for this election cycle at least.

As I was planning to start a postdoctoral fellowship that fall at Yale University, I heard that a coalition of organizations was planning a series of protests outside the Republican National Convention in New York City, only two hours away, by train. Then I got a crazy idea: perhaps the Republican National Convention protests would be an opportunity to seize upon my interest in studying protests while unifying it with my insight that the relationship between parties and groups deserved greater attention. I decided to call Fabio Rojas, my graduate school colleague from the University of Chicago, who had recently joined the faculty of Indiana University, Bloomington, as assistant professor of sociology. Fabio and I had worked together in developing a survey of African studies professors for his book *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Rojas 2007). Since we had previously collaborated, it seemed natural that we would try another project together. So we agreed that we would jointly conduct a survey of protesters outside the convention.

DEVELOPING THE RESEARCH

Fabio and I began the research with a loosely defined research question: What is the relationship between social networks, social movement organizations, and political parties in mobilizing protests? We did not have a clear hypothesis or mechanism in mind when we began the research. What we did have was confidence in a research method. We designed a one-page survey that elicited network data by asking people about their memberships in organizations and which organizations contacted them to attend the protest. We also requested information on party identification, reasons for attending the protest, and basic demographic information. Fabio suggested that we adapt the method of sampling using in exit polling, which required the selection of every *n*th person coming out of a polling station. Because the crowd that we wished to survey was mobile, we devised a method of selecting "anchors," which allowed us to draw a sample as we moved through the crowd.

The protests at the Republican National Convention were organized by different groups on different days. We conducted surveys at an antiwar protest that was held on August 29, two poor people's marches on August 30, and a labor rally that was held on September 1. At the labor rally, I noticed how the setup of the event—with large-screen television and people standing, not marching—resembled a political convention only outside the convention hall rather than inside it. I noted that the scene seemed like a political "party in the street." Fabio seized upon the idea and suggested that we make "the party in the street" a theme in the research.

After collecting and coding over five hundred surveys from the week of the convention, Fabio and I began our efforts to write a paper based on the research. We were able to derive networks from the data by looking at which protesters had organizational memberships in common with one another. If two protesters were members of the same organization, then we considered them to have a common link in their social network. Likewise, if two organizations had a protester in common (e.g., a single protester was a member of United for Peace and Justice, as well as Coc Pink: Women for Peace), then we considered the organizations to have a common link in their social network.

We titled our manuscript "The Party in the Street," presented it at two conferences, and submitted it to two journals. Readers liked the essence of what we were up to but were uncomfortable with our party in the street idea. We seemed to be suggesting that the protests were merely an arm of the Democratic Party, which was in tension with the finding that many of the protesters did not ally with any political party, even though Democratic Party membership was the overwhelming choice of those who did identify with a political party. To our frustration, our manuscript was rejected sequentially by the two journals to which we submitted it.

Fabio and I were convinced that we were on to something interesting, even though our work was not receiving the reception that we had hoped. Fabio was adamant that if we would just keep at it—keep collecting data—then we would eventually solve the problem that we were having. We corralled a team of our friends in Washington, DC to conduct surveys at the 2005 presidential inauguration protests. When nationwide protests were scheduled for the second anniversary of the Iraq War in March, we decided to narrow our focus from "protest in general" to the antiwar movement in particular. This narrowing made sense, since both the Republican National Convention and inauguration protests had included marches with an antiwar focus. We conducted surveys in seven different cities on the weekend of the second anniversary protests. We kept going with surveys at a May Day rally in New York City and a massive antiwar rally in Washington, DC, in September 2005. Before we knew it, we had systematically conducted surveys of demonstrators at all the major antiwar rallies in the United States for

a one-year period. We were able to graph an organizational network of the antiwar movement.

Despite having conducted over 2,000 surveys, our work was still lacking the focus that we needed to say something definitive. Luckily, we were aided by the institutional development of the antiwar movement itself. As the antiwar movement grew, its leaders became more ambitious with their hope for political influence. In conjunction with the massive protest planned for Saturday, September 24, in Washington, DC, organizers decided to hold a lobby day on Capitol Hill on Monday, September 26. To prepare citizen lobbyists for the lobby day, a training session was held on Sunday, September 25. These events helped us to meet many of the leading organizers and activists in the antiwar movement. We became a part of their dialogue. After contributing some of our time to the movement's work, Fabio and I were soon trusted activists within the movement.

Through our conversations with movement leaders, we gained a greater understanding of what was motivating the behavior of the activists in our data and why some of the reviewers were unpersuaded by the manuscripts that we had written to date. We came to discover that many of the activists who had indicated that they had no party affiliation in response to our surveys were not simply passively avoiding party membership. Instead, they were actively antagonistic to parties. In fact, we learned that there was a huge divide within the antiwar movement between those that thought that the Democratic Party could advance the antiwar cause and those who thought that the Democrats were just as bad as the Republicans. Our simple observation about a party in the street had overlooked what proved to be one of the central conflicts within the movement.

After participating in these conversations, we returned to our data. We determined the partisan bias of every organization that contacted protesters in our sample and then graphed these biases in our network. Sure enough, the Democratic-leaning organizations clustered together. One part of the network was definitively Democratic. The party in the street *was* a part of the antiwar movement, but it was only a *part*. We realized that we could gain leverage from looking at how partisans and nonpartisans acted differently within the movement, as well as how they were positioned differently within the movement's networks. Ultimately, we were able to transform the central criticism of our work into its central point.

LESSONS LEARNED

The experience of studying networks of activists in the antiwar movement has transformed the way that I think about research. The following lessons are among the most important ones that I learned.

First, it is not always possible to have a clear research question, hypothesis, or research design at the beginning of a project. Sometimes

it is possible to know these key elements in advance. But sometimes the phenomenon you are observing is too new or fluid to devise a sufficient plan based on reading the previous literature alone. Fabio and I found ourselves in the midst of an emerging antiwar movement. In August 2004, we could not possibly have known that we would be conducting antiwar surveys in March 2005. Indeed, it seemed possible that John Kerry would be elected president in November 2004, that he would change the direction of the war in Iraq, and that antiwar protests would then dissipate. In order to understand what was going on, we had to go with the flow of events. Our questions, hypotheses, and research design evolved with the movement. For example, we could not have planned to study the people who showed up at a grassroots lobby day until movement leaders decided that they needed to hold a lobby day in the first place.

Second, a great amount of time at universities is devoted to teaching students how to perform statistical methods correctly. However, in an actual research project, the process of collecting, cleaning, and coding the data is much more time intensive than is the process of analyzing them. It is essential to think systematically about methods for recording data, not just methods for analyzing them. The network data that we collected, for example—the names of organizations that contacted people to attend a protest—contained a substantial amount of ambiguity. We needed to develop a good system for resolving that ambiguity. Overall, the amount of effort that we spent managing the data far outstripped the amount of effort that we spent collecting it in the field or analyzing it on the computer.

Third, if you collaborate with others, whom you choose as your collaborators is critical. A good collaborator is more than just someone with whom you have common intellectual interests. A good collaborator is someone who has skills that complement yours, who shares your vision of the project, and with whom you can get along well during the months or years that it will take to complete the research. I am lucky to have had Fabio to work with. The research would have been different in innumerable ways if I had worked with someone else.

Fourth, good research usually motivates more research. Indeed, one of the most satisfying parts of looking back on the "Partisans, Nonpartisans" article is to see how it led to a larger, long-term project. Fabio and I did not envision a long-term project at the start. We thought, perhaps, we would publish one or two journal articles. As of this writing, however, Fabio and I have authored seven different articles on the antiwar movement. We currently have several more articles and a book manuscript in progress. Ironically, if our first manuscript had been quickly accepted, we might have quit working on the project. Rejection seemed to motivate us to keep deepening and extending the research.

Each piece we write raises new questions for us. For example, "Partisans, Nonpartisans" looked at the party in the street at one point in time. But

is it possible that the party expands and contracts in size? To answer this question, we followed the antiwar movement for three more years, from 2007 to 2009 (Heaney and Rojas 2011). We found that participation of Democrats in the movement plummeted in conjunction with Democratic electoral success. Without the threat of Republican government, it became difficult for the antiwar movement to achieve critical mass.

Finally, this research project testifies both to the power of research methods to help us understand the world and to the insufficiency of quantitative methods alone in this quest. The mass of protesters that we observed were connected by social network ties that would have been invisible to us without survey methods. The survey data would have made little sense without network analysis to help us visualize the connections among organizations created by the protesters' organizational comemberships. However, the ultimate insight of our research—about the critical division between partisans and nonpartisans—came through ethnography. Qualitative research guided our quantitative analysis. Unless we had spent some time talking to antiwar activists and becoming a part of their community, we never would have understood what to look for in the network analysis. We had to combine quantitative and qualitative methods to find our answer.

Our approach to studying social networks in the antiwar movement differed considerably from studies of social networks in other areas. Networks based on friendship, alumni connections, or interlocking corporate board memberships, for example, must be approached in a different fashion. We determined our approach based on the nature of the phenomena at hand—dynamic protests flowing through the streets—and adapted our research design along with the evolution of the movement. Even though we did not really know what we were getting into at the inception of the project, we developed a fruitful line of research that continues to keep us busy today.

NOTES

1. Individuals who were not contacted by a specific organization may have learned about the protest through friends, the mass media, flyers, the Internet, or another source. In these cases, the organizational sponsors of the protest are the ultimate sources of information, although it is communicated through a multistep chain, rather than directly through organizational contact.
2. The Democratic Party did not undertake any official effort to mobilize participants for the antiwar movement. We believe that the cases in which we observe the Democratic Party listed as a contacting organization are the result of informal efforts by individual party officials and activists, rather than a campaign by the formal party apparatus.
3. Billionaires for Bush contacted 7 respondents in our sample and ranked 19th for frequency of contact. However, the Billionaires did not contact any individuals who also reported a contact from another organization, so they had

zero co-contacts. As a result, they are an isolated group and are not connected within the network in Figure 3.1. We deleted all isolates from the diagram, including Billionaires for Bush.

REFERENCES

- Blee, K. M., and Currier, A. 2006. "How Local Social Movement Groups Handle a Presidential Election." *Qualitative Sociology* 29: 261–80.
- Craig, T., and Shear, M. D. 2006. "Webb May Be Senate Maverick: Newest Member Expected to Take Antiwar Lead." *Washington Post*, November 12, C1.
- Dvorak, P. 2005. "Antiwar Fervor Fills the Streets; Demonstration Is Largest in Capital since U.S. Military Invaded Iraq." *Washington Post*, September 25, A1.
- Freeman, J. 1986. "The Political Culture of the Democratic and Republican Parties." *Political Science Quarterly* 101: 327–56.
- Greenstone, J. D. 1969. *Labor in American Politics*. New York: Knopf.
- Grunwald, M. 2006. "Opposition to War Buys Democrats." *Washington Post*, November 8, A31.
- Heaney, Michael T. 2006. "Brokering Health Policy: Coalitions, Parties, and Interest Group Influence." *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 31, no. 5 (October): 887–944.
- Heaney, Michael T., and Fabio Rojas. 2011. "The Partisan Dynamics of Contention: Demobilization of the Antiwar Movement in the United States, 2007–2009." *Mobilization: An International Journal* 16, no. 1 (March): 45–64.
- Key, V. O. 1964. *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*. 5th ed. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Levey, N. N. 2007. "Democrats No Longer Fearful of Anti-war Reputation." *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, A1.
- McAdam, D. 1986. "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer." *American Journal of Sociology*, 92, 64–90.
- Monroe, J. P. 2001. *The Political Party Matrix: The Persistence of Organization*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- MoveOn.org. 2007. "Current Campaigns." Retrieved January 4, 2007, <http://moveon.org/campaigns.html>.
- Progressive Democrats of America (PDA). 2007. "A Progressive Plan to Change America." Retrieved January 2, 2007, <http://pdamerica.org/org/plan.php>.
- Rojas, Fabio. 2007. *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schwartz, M. A. 1990. *The Party Network: The Robust Organization of Illinois Republicans*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Sorauf, F. J. 1968. *Party Politics in America*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Wiseman, J. 2006. "In Backing Murtha, Pelosi Draws Fire." *Washington Post* November 14, A1.