

# Activism in an Era of Partisan Polarization

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**T**he 1960s usually are remembered as the archetypal era of social movements in the United States. Movements for civil rights, women's liberation, and peace in Vietnam were critical parts of the history and culture of the times. Although it is less widely recognized as such, the period following September 11, 2001, also is a time of highly active social movements. Recent years have witnessed mass mobilizations of people by the antiwar movement, immigrants' rights movement, Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter, as well as against the policies and presidency of Donald J. Trump.

While the differences between the 1960s and the post-September 11 period are many, one political difference that stands out relates to the nature of partisanship during these eras. Major divisions of the 1960s rested on questions of regional autonomy, race, and the war in Vietnam. Democrats and Republicans often found themselves on both sides of these issues. Some Democrats supported expanding civil rights for African Americans, others were against it. Some Republicans were in support of the war in Vietnam, others were opposed to it. The post-September 11 period, however, is a time of partisan polarization. As a result, politically active members of the same party have a strong tendency to be aligned on key issues, such as climate change, health care, reproductive choice, immigration, and the use of military force (Layman et al. 2010). This alignment extends to movements: participants in the same movement usually are like one another in their partisan sympathies. For example, climate-change opponents are Democrats, for the most part, whereas gun-rights supporters are typically Republicans (Dunlap, McCright, and Yarosh 2016; Karol 2015).

Given that the political environment in the United States has become more partisan and polarized in recent years, this article discusses what partisan polarization means for activism. Its purpose is to consider which insights political science might offer to activists, as well as how developments in activism may provide new pedagogical and research opportunities for political scientists. The article asks: How does polarization affect the ways that activists recruit supporters and organize coalitions? In what ways does partisanship shape the effects that activists have on policy and politics? Under what conditions are activists wise to continue on a partisan course? When might they benefit from finding a more bipartisan or nonpartisan path?

I argue that partisanship and partisan polarization create both opportunities and challenges for activists involved in social movements. Partisan polarization has the potential to

amplify the influence that activists have on parties, boost the number of activists that participate in a movement, and create environments in which they have strong solidarity with one another. However, partisanship may lead parties to abandon their promises to movements, contribute to the demobilization of movements, and stymie activists from building powerful coalitions. Research on these topics suggests that the risks of partisanship may be somewhat greater to Democrats than to Republicans.

## PARTISAN POLARIZATION MAY ENABLE ACTIVISTS TO STEER PARTIES

As Layman et al. (2010) explained, partisan polarization draws activists with extreme views into party politics. The nature of party nominations, therefore, leads candidates to focus more on courting the support of these activists than on pursuing more moderate party members. If activists are successful, then they may be able to influence which types of candidates their party nominates.

Activists have been especially adept in affecting party nominations in recent years. The Tea Party, for example, drew Republican candidates closer to the conservative side of the political spectrum (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011). Much of Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric in 2016 borrowed freely from the Tea Party movement of 2009–2010, such as his attacks on the Affordable Care Act (Blum 2017). Likewise, Bernie Sanders appropriated rhetoric from Occupy Wall Street (e.g., by raising concerns about the inequality of wealth) in his nearly successful effort to claim the Democratic Party's nomination in 2016 (Heaney 2016). Considering these recent campaigns, it seems reasonable for activists to believe that they may be able to promote the goals of their movement by convincing the party of their choice to nominate candidates that share their values.

At the same time, party leaders have a troublesome record of neglecting to follow through on their promises to activists. Frymer (2010) documented the myriad ways that the Democratic Party failed to keep its promises to African Americans, leaving them captured and ignored after decades of electoral loyalty. This problem may exist more in the Democratic Party than in the Republican Party. As Freeman (1986) explained, the hierarchical nature of the Republican Party makes it more easily captured by insurgent groups than is the case for the Democratic Party. Consequently, dominant movements in the Republican Party may have a greater capacity to motivate party leaders to implement their policy agenda when in power than is the case in the Democratic Party. Thus, movement

activists within the Democratic Party may face greater risks of abandonment than do Republican Party activists.

### **PARTISAN POLARIZATION MAY AMPLIFY MOBILIZATION CYCLES**

During times of high partisan polarization, causes tend to be closely aligned with their activists' party affiliations. As a result, the process of mobilizing people to support a cause can be readily linked to the process of mobilizing them to

Antiwar mobilization plummeted as readily as it had spiked, reflecting an amplified protest cycle. Likewise, Tea Party activists today may be confronting similar struggles as they seek to pressure President Trump to honor his campaign promises to dismantle the Affordable Care Act.

In an era of polarization, activists are well advised to think carefully about the long-term prospects for their cause before committing to partisan mobilizing tactics. The question for activists is whether partisan coalitions will be sustained after

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support a party. Activists for one cause can use partisan rhetoric to build coalitions including people who care primarily about other causes but who are willing to turn out on behalf of another cause with the same partisan alignment. For example, in our book (Heaney and Rojas 2015), *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11*, Fabio Rojas and I explained how peace advocates used this tactic after September 11. They drew on antipathy toward President George W. Bush and the Republican Party to convince other activists focused primarily on the environment, labor rights, reproductive choice, and other liberal/progressive issues to turn out at antiwar protests. Consequently, the movement organized numerous antiwar demonstrations of more than 100,000 participants from 2003 to early 2007 (Heaney and Rojas 2015, 66). Framing mobilization as opposing President Bush was a generally successful approach during those years.

Beginning in 2009, the Tea Party adopted tactics similar to those used by the antiwar movement earlier in the decade. The Tea Party attempted to stop and undermine the Affordable Care Act, along with other initiatives by President Obama. Since the advent of the Trump administration, activist groups also have relied heavily on partisanship to spark grassroots mobilizations. The Women's March has been one of the most successful efforts of this type. It invoked gender to frame opposition to President Trump in a way that enticed hundreds of thousands of people to march on Washington, DC, on January 21, 2017, and it inspired hundreds of solidarity marches around the world on the same weekend (Fisher 2017).

Partisan rhetoric can boost short-term mobilization; however, its efficacy is questionable in the long run. Heaney and Rojas (2015) found that partisan rhetoric worked well for antiwar activists as long as Democrats were out of power. However, as the Democrats regained control of government—winning majorities in Congress in 2006 and the presidency in 2008—Democratic activists lost interest in the antiwar agenda. Many Democratic activists who had coalesced with the antiwar movement turned their attention to health care and immigration reform, which were freshly salient with Democrats back at the helm. The party failed to deliver on its promises of peace. Once the party lost interest in the cause, so did the broad coalition behind the antiwar movement.

changes in the balance of power between the parties. If the answer is yes, then partisan mobilizing may make both short- and long-term sense for the movement. Conversely, if the answer is no, then partisan mobilizing may not be consonant with long-term goals for the movement. Instead, activists may ask whether there are ways to promote their cause with a bipartisan or nonpartisan approach. If activists can attract supporters from across the political spectrum, then they may be more likely to manage their work in a way that sustains momentum—even as the balance of power shifts. Bipartisan/nonpartisan mobilizing may be more difficult to execute, but it may have more impact over time than partisan mobilization.

### **PARTISAN POLARIZATION CREATES PRESSURES FOR PARTISAN SOLIDARITY IN ACTIVIST GROUPS**

Activists tend to prefer to work in groups composed of others who are in close agreement with them on political, social, and cultural matters. In a study of cooperation among environmental activists, Lichterman (1995) found that even when they agreed on the issue in question, two groups of activists had considerable difficulty working together when there were differences in organizing styles. In his recent book, *Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals*, Smucker (2017) explains how this tendency leads to a political-identity paradox. In this paradox, activist groups foster solidarity by choosing members who are similar to one another and by undertaking activities to reinforce that similarity. However, in doing so, they make themselves increasingly marginal to the wider world, thereby undermining the possibility that they will be able to command majorities for their positions.

In an age of partisan polarization, building solidarity within activist groups almost always requires ideological homogeneity (Blee 2012), which in practice often requires partisan homogeneity as well. If a group aspires to work within existing political alignments, these pressures do not necessarily pose a problem. However, if activists aspire to displace existing majorities with a new dominant coalition, then the tendency toward homogeneity directly undercuts this goal. If activists want to change policy, then they must convince people who are outside their social cliques to join them. They must reach out to activists who are independents, third-party supporters,

and wayward dissidents from the opposing major party. A strong partisan line by activists makes this type of outreach difficult to achieve.

Research by Ziad Muson reveals that liberal/progressive activist groups may suffer more from the political-identity paradox than conservative activist groups (Singal 2016). He found that liberal activists are more likely than conservatives to apply litmus tests to potential new allies. For example, liberal activists organizing an event to oppose US military involvement in Afghanistan may expect that their allies also oppose US support of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In contrast, conservative activists participating in a pro-life action may be less likely to expect their allies to embrace other conservative causes. Thus, by being more demanding of potential new members of their groups, liberal activists are less likely than conservatives to increase support for their causes.

#### NEXT STEPS FOR ACTIVISM, RESEARCH, AND TEACHING

The coming years—especially the first two years of the Trump administration—will likely be exceptional for organizing on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Many—if not most—activists will turn first to mobilizing in largely homogenous partisan circles. This approach makes sense in that it is likely to yield substantial crowds, enthusiasm, and donations on both sides.

Nevertheless, this article advises activists to think outside of the partisan box, however challenging this may be in times of partisan polarization. Partisan activism has risks that often are not recognized by many activists, such as the difficulties that it poses for sustaining activism over the long term. Moreover, the unconventional nature of the Trump administration may present opportunities for the Right and the Left to achieve their common goals by working together in unprecedented ways—opportunities that may be lost through a dogged partisan approach. For example, there may be a reasonable middle ground on issues of criminal justice or immigration that Right and Left activists could coalesce to exploit. If Republicans are unsuccessful in compromising with President Trump on these topics, then it is possible that some Democrats and some Republicans would attempt to find common cause—possibly yielding a majority. Reducing lengthy prison sentences for nonviolent offenders is a potential area of common ground. Policies along these lines could

partisan loyalties. Instead, refocusing on the substance of political issues is likely to move dialogue in the direction of compromise. For example, rather than declaring that “Trump’s travel ban is illegitimate,” it may be more effective to argue that refugees can have positive effects on local regions; some rural areas with declining populations may even see refugees as a way to revitalize their communities. Rather than priming attitudes toward politicians, these arguments push policy discussion toward the state of the local economy, which is a concern for people of all ideological stripes.

Other approaches to transcending partisanship include balancing rhetoric ideologically, focusing on single issues rather than multi-issue coalitions, actively searching for consensus issues, and adopting a greater willingness to work with those with whom one disagrees (Heaney 2017). Each step is likely to make individuals from different ideological persuasions more comfortable working together. For example, if activists form a single-issue coalition on immigration, they might be able to carefully broker compromises on a series of concerns that make both liberals and conservatives willing to collaborate—such as on modified provisions for guest workers. However, as coalitions grow in the number of issues that they encompass—perhaps adding health care, women’s rights, climate change, and peace to the agenda—then they reduce the chances that they will find stances that both liberals and conservatives can accept. The broader the issue focus of the coalition, the more ideologically aligned it is likely to be. Conversely, the narrower the coalition, the greater the possibility to bring “strange bedfellows” together and, therefore, the stronger the potential for policy change.

For scholars of politics, the near future promises to offer considerable opportunities for research and teaching. The 2016–2018 period well may spawn an entire new wave of organizations akin to the periodic waves of voluntary associations that have followed other major disturbances in American history (Truman 1971). Investigating these developments is an opportunity to observe patterns of political innovation, evolving organizational structures, and the consequences of online and offline social networks for political change. It is the first act of a new generation of activists who will shape our political system for the next 20 to 40 years. Scholars would be well served to treat this emerging context as a laboratory for the study of political dynamics.

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be convincing on the basis of reducing the size of government (which appeals to conservatives) and ameliorating impacts on minority communities (which appeals to liberals).

To the extent that activists want to pursue a transpartisan approach, a good place to begin is by depersonalizing their attacks on Donald Trump, Nancy Pelosi, and other political leaders. Personalized attacks are likely to stoke people’s

This laboratory is as open to students as much as it is to anyone else. The increasing centrality of online social networks to activism makes it all the more realistic for students to engage with leading activists in their choice of movements. They can join the Facebook groups and Twitter feeds in which real decision making is taking place—or they can form their own groups. They could experiment with

crossing partisan boundaries. Students could be guided to explore these spaces with assignments that require them to code and analyze activist data, interview or survey activists, and even become activists themselves. Although it is impossible to go back in time to witness the activism of the 1960s, the present day offers an opening to observe another great era of activism. ■

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