



Review essay: connecting elections and protests

Michael T. Heaney¹ 

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Books reviewed

- Aytaç, S. Erdem, and Susan C. Stokes. *Why Bother? Rethinking Participation in Elections and Protests*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Gillion, Daniel Q. *The Loud Minority: Why Protests Matter in American Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Elections and protests are two arenas of politics that are usually studied separately. Yet, the two books reviewed in this essay are part of a growing body of research that examines how these subfields relate to one another. They analyze the relationship between elections and protests from different directions. In *Why Bother?*, Erdem Aytaç and Susan Stokes demonstrate how emotions are a common cause of participation in elections and protests. In *The Loud Minority*, Daniel Gillion contributes to understanding how protests affect elections. The different approaches complement one another but also exhibit informative tensions.

Both books are relevant to appreciating the multi-step paths through which advocacy may affect politics and policy. For Aytaç and Stokes, advocacy may be influential if it frames elections and protests that shape peoples' attributions of blame and expectations about mobilization. For Gillion, protest is a tool for advocates to advertise their cause, thus helping fundraising and promoting voter turnout.

Why Bother?

Aytaç and Stokes astutely characterize participation in elections and protests as related forms of political involvement. This conceptual move is where they depart most clearly from the extant literature and where they contribute to it most significantly. They theorize that both forms of participation are motivated, in part, by the fact that people experience costs not only for joining in action, but also for abstaining from it. People may suffer emotionally—through guilt, shame, anger, etcetera—if

✉ Michael T. Heaney
michaelttheaney@gmail.com

¹ University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK



they fail to be a part of an election or a protest that they care about. Even if the costs of participation are *increasing*, people may nonetheless want to be more involved if they find themselves becoming emotionally engaged. For example, government repression in elections or protests may impose greater costs on participants (e.g., risks of injury, death, imprisonment) but may also stimulate emotional involvement by interested audiences (e.g., those who care about the suffering of their fellow citizens), thus leading to overall growth in participation.

Aytaç and Stokes's argument illustrates the reverse of a "free rider" problem. Rather than reducing participation when they see that others are mobilized—when the ease of free riding is most palpable—Aytaç and Stokes establish that people may participate *more* when others are also joining in. While they recognize that social pressures and a sense of civic duty may add to people's eagerness to participate under these circumstances, Aytaç and Stokes demonstrate that people are also driven by intrinsic motivations linked to emotion.

To support their claims, Aytaç and Stokes amass and integrate an impressive array of evidence using surveys, experiments, interviews, and government statistics across a variety of national contexts (including Brazil, Turkey, Sweden, Ukraine, the UK, and the USA). Their clever deployment of survey experiments is especially noteworthy. They conduct experiments that show that people tend to report a higher likelihood of voting after being exposed to a treatment that emphasizes the importance of an election; the likelihood rises even more if the treatment also points out that an election is close. Alternatively, when given hypothetical situations in which they are *prevented* from voting (i.e., forced to abstain), respondents are more likely to report experiencing negative effect.

Although protests are not "close" in the same way that elections are, Aytaç and Stokes's investigation of protests yields similar conclusions. They demonstrate that respondents are more likely to express an interest in joining a protest when they are told that there are many other participants. When given scenarios in which the government represses protesters, respondents indicate more of a desire for involvement. Interviews with actual observers of real-life repressive events (i.e., not experimental manipulations) suggest that these desires may be driven by anger and moral outrage.

These findings may be informative to governments, political challengers, and advocacy organizations. A key to provoking political participation is harnessing *approach emotions* (especially anger) by making a clear argument for who is to *blame* for a troubling situation. Anger plays a role in mediating the relationship between recognizing deplorable actions by government (such as repression) and an individual's willingness to act. This analysis helps to explain why political actors who are adept in channeling popular anger are often successful in securing positions of power. As a counterpoint to these findings, it might have been interesting to see the authors undertake related experiments to stimulate *positive* approach emotions, such as enthusiasm. That design could have helped to identify the possibilities and limits for positive uses of emotion in boosting democratic participation.

Aytaç and Stokes devote the last paragraph of their book to the conclusion that elections are more powerful than protest in institutionalizing the norm of political equality. This conclusion is disappointing if only because it is not carefully grounded in the extensive evidence that Aytaç and Stokes so painstakingly compiled. Their



research clearly demonstrates how participation in elections and protests is driven by common causes, but they do not analyze how elections and protests interact with one another. Research in this vein might have revealed, for example, ways in which protests help democracies to make corrections when they fall short in their defense of equality.

The Loud Minority

Gillion mounts convincing evidence that protests affect elections in the USA. He shows that protests can help to (1) direct electorally valuable resources through fundraising and bestowal of party support, (2) increase voter turnout by constituencies interested in a protest, and (3) stimulate greater vote shares for allies of the movement. Protests achieve these goals by serving as a kind of advertising for political causes, thus attracting people's attention. These findings contribute substantially to understanding the mechanisms through which protests and elections are connected with one another.

Gillion's work examines historical and contemporary cases, drawing on a satisfying mix of anecdotes and statistical analysis. His argument on the resource benefits of protests is supported with narrative case studies of Portland and Phoenix, as well statistical examination of the timing of campaign giving nationwide. In a novel finding, he demonstrates that liberal protests correspond with immediate increases in campaign giving to Democratic candidates. This finding is important because it broadens what is known about the value of protest and provides a reason for parties to partner with protest organizers and advocacy groups. When people protest, they prompt engagement from their fellow citizens, who may opt for other forms of involvement. This result is consistent with the spirit of Aytac and Stokes's argument—that participation by some people encourages involvement by more people—though Gillion expands this argument by showing how participation spills across different forms of participation.

In connecting protest and voter turnout, Gillion details the correspondence between voter turnout and the geographic locations of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. His data analysis shows that once the number of BLM protests in a district reaches a threshold of eight events, Black voter turnout starts to demonstrate statistically significant increases. This analysis suggests that the social groups behind mobilizing protests may gain greater voice at the ballot box.

The effects of protest on parties' votes shares appear to be stronger for Democrats than for Republicans. Using cross-sectional time-series analysis, Gillion reveals that Democratic candidates benefit at the polls when there are protests in their districts. Protest further aids in recruiting quality challengers by the Democratic Party but not by the Republican Party. These asymmetries align with recent studies that show that Democrats orient their politics around group mobilization, while Republicans are more attuned to ideological mobilization. Gillion's contribution bolsters this conclusion within the domains of protests and elections.

While the overall empirical presentation in *The Loud Minority* is compelling, I was less enamored by its theoretical argument about ideological protests. Gillion



contends that protests may be dichotomized into liberal or conservative protests and that the public draws distinctions *between* these sets but not *within* them. That is, observers in the public recognize a protest as being either liberal or conservative—and then lump all liberal protests together and all conservative protests together. There is some validity to this view, but there are also meaningful and consequential distinctions to be made within ideological groups. In fact, evidence of this nature is contained in *The Loud Minority* itself. For example, Gillion shows that Black citizens respond specifically to BLM protests when turning out to vote and do not confuse them with other liberal protests.

The Loud Minority is to be commended for deepening knowledge on how the fields of protest and elections intersect. However, it might have also benefitted from adopting Aytac and Stokes's strategy of parsing the causes of participation. For example, Gillion's ideas about ideological perceptions of protest could have been tested experimentally. The outcomes of such experiments, along with the other insights of the book, could serve to guide strategies of activist organizations in crafting their messages and determining how to work together in coalition. Like *Why Bother?*, the scholarly advances of *The Loud Minority* have the potential to constructively inform the practice of advocacy in democratic politics.

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