Activism in an Era of Partisan Polarization

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The 1960s is usually 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 the culture of the times. While it is less widely recognized as such, the period following September 11, 2001 (9/11) is also a time of highly active social movements. Recent years have witnessed mass mobilizations of people by the antiwar movement, the immigrants’ rights movement, the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and against the policies and presidency of Donald J. Trump.

While the differences between the 1960s and the post-9/11 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 were for expanding civil rights for African Americans, while others were against. Some Republicans might have been in support of the war in Vietnam, while others were opposed to it. The post-9/11 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, Carsey, Green, Herrera, and Cooperman 2010). This alignment extends to movements: participants in the same movement are usually like one another in their partisan sympathies. For example, climate change opponents are Democrats, for the most part, while gun rights supporters are usually 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. The purpose of the essay is to consider what insights political science might offer to activists, as well as how developments in activism may present new pedagogical and research opportunities to political scientists. To these ends it asks, how does polarization affect the ways activists recruit supporters and organize coalitions? In what ways does partisanship shape the impact 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 impact that activists have on parties, boost the number of activists that participate in a movement, and create environments where activists have strong solidarity with one another. However, at times, 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 they are to Republicans.

**Partisan Polarization May Enable Activists to Steer Parties**

As Geoffrey Layman and his colleagues (2010) explain, partisan polarization draws activists with extreme views into party politics. The nature of party nominations, then, leads candidates to place a greater focus on courting the support of these activists than on pursuing
more moderate members of the party. If activists are successful, then they may be able to influence what 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 movements 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. Paul Frymer (2010) documents the myriad ways that the Democratic Party has 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 Jo Freeman (1986) explains, the hierarchical nature of the Republican Party makes it much 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

Partisan polarization means, among other things, that the causes of activists tend to be closely aligned with 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 support a party. Activists for one cause can use partisan rhetoric to build coalitions including people who primarily care about other causes, but who are willing to turn out on behalf of another cause with the same partisanship alignment. For example, in our book *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11*, Fabio Rojas and I (Heaney and Rojas 2015) explain how peace advocates used this tactic after 9/11. 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 was able to organize numerous antiwar demonstrations of more than 100,000 participants from 2003 to early 2007 (Heaney and Rojas 2015, p. 66). Framing mobilization as opposing President Bush was a generally successful approach during these years.

Starting 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 have also relied heavily on partisanship to spark grassroots mobilizations. The Women’s March has been the most successful effort of this type (as of this writing in April 2017). 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 inspired hundreds of solidarity marches around the world on the same weekend (Fisher 2017).

While there is no doubt that partisan rhetoric can boost short-term mobilization, its efficacy is questionable in the long run. Rojas and I 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 – they lost interest in the antiwar agenda. 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. Antiwar mobilization plummeted just as readily as it 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 to ask is whether partisan coalitions will be sustained after 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. But, 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 are able to 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 harder to execute, but it may have more impact over time.

**Partisan Polarization Creates Pressures for Partisan Solidarity in Activist Groups**

Activists tend to prefer to work in groups of others that agree closely with themselves on political, social, and cultural matters. In a study of cooperation among environmental activists, Paul Lichterman (1995) found that even when they agreed on the issue in question, two groups of activists had considerable trouble working together when there were differences between them in styles of organizing. In his recent book, *Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals*, Jonathan Matthew Smucker (2017) explains how this tendency leads to a *political identity paradox*. In this paradox, activist groups foster solidarity by choosing members that 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, thus undermining the possibility that they will be able to command majorities for their positions.

In an age of partisan polarization, forming solidary 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 to join them who are outside activists’ social cliques. They must reach out to activists that are
independents, third-party supporters, and wayward dissidents from the opposing major party. A strong partisan line by activists makes this type of outreach very difficult to achieve.

Research by Ziad Muson reveals that liberal/progressive activist groups may suffer more from the political identity paradox than do conservative activist groups (Singal 2016). He finds that liberal activists are more likely to apply litmus tests to potential new allies than are conservatives. For example, liberal activists organizing an event to oppose U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan may be prone to expect that their allies also oppose U.S. 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 grow support for their causes.

Next Steps for Activism, Research, and Teaching

The coming years – especially the first two years of the Trump Administration – will very likely be exceptional years for organizing on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. There is little doubt that many – if not most – activists will turn first to mobilizing in largely homogenous partisan circles. This approach does make some sense in that it is likely to yield substantial crowds, enthusiasm, and donations on both sides.

Still, this article advises activists to think outside the partisan box, however challenging this may be in times of partisan polarization. Partisan activism has risks that are often not recognized by many activists, such as the difficulties that it poses for sustaining activism over the long term (as explained above). Moreover, the unconventional nature of the Trump Administration may present opportunities for the right and 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 could be a reasonable middle ground on issues of criminal justice or immigration that right and left activists may be able to coalesce to exploit. If Republicans are unsuccessful in compromising with President Trump on these topics, then there is a possibility that some Democrats and some Republicans could attempt to find common cause – possibly yielding a majority. Reducing lengthy prison sentences for nonviolent offenders is one potential area of common ground. Policies along these lines could be sold 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 wish to pursue a trans-partisan 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 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 even look to refugees as a way to revitalize their communities. Rather than priming attitudes toward politicians, such arguments push policy discussion toward the state of the local economy, which people of all ideological stripes care about.

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 of these steps 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 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. The narrower the coalition, the greater the possibility to bring “strange bedfellows” together and, thus, the stronger the potential for policy change.

For scholars of politics, the near future promises to offer considerable to opportunities for research and teaching. The 2016-2018 period may well 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 1951). Investigating these developments is a chance 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 twenty to forty years. Scholars would be well served to treat this emerging context as a laboratory for the study of political dynamics.

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 where real decision-making is taking place. Or, they can form their own
groups. They could experiment with crossing partisan boundaries themselves. Students could be guided to explore these spaces with assignments that ask them to code and analyze activist data, interview or survey activists, or even become activists themselves. While it is impossible to go back in time to witness the activism of the 1960s, the present day offers an opening to observe a great era of activism.

References


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