A Presidency Marked by Protest:
Donald J. Trump and a New Era of Contentious Politics

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The presidency of Donald J. Trump is boldly marked by protest. To start, Trump’s entry into national politics was greatly facilitated by his agitation of the “birther” movement, which claimed that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. By stoking the birther theory, Trump helped to bring himself into alignment with the Tea Party movement, whose support he would later draw on to claim the presidency. Trump effectively took the energy of Tea Party protests during the Obama presidency, combined it with the politics of rural resentment, and channeled it into a winning 2016 presidential campaign.

Upon taking office, Trump faced protests from the other side the fence. The Women’s March on Washington – held on the day after Trump’s Inauguration – was one of the largest protest events in American history. Its crowd dwarfed the size of the Inauguration itself. Since then, Trump has been dogged by an onslaught of protests. Some of these events have been formally planned and professionally organized, such as the March for Science (pictured in Figure 1) and the March for Racial Justice. Other events have occurred more spontaneously, such as airport protests against Trump’s Muslim Ban and #takeaknee, a challenge to police killings of unarmed African Americans.

Trump’s presidency is not entirely distinct in being marked by protest. His predecessor, Barack Obama, similarly came into office by riding wave of protest – in his case, against the war in Iraq. Likewise, he was met with opposition through Tea Party protests only a few months into his new administration. Before Obama, President George W. Bush and others presidents also faced their share of protest.
Still, opposition through protest seems to more sharply define Trump than has been the case for any of his predecessors. Massive protests against Trump commenced more immediately than against others, offering Trump little more than a few hours of a honeymoon period. It has come from more varied sectors of society than has been the case in prior years – including immigrants, refugees, women, scientists, environmentalists, people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, and more. Indeed, if one were to summarize public reaction to Trump’s first year in office, the best synopsis might be stated in one word: protest.

In light of this focus, it behooves us to think critically about protests, protesters, and what they mean to contemporary politics. To do so, I discuss planned marches and informal protests that have taken place in the United States during the Trump presidency, the people who participated in them, and the likely political consequences. I draw upon surveys that I conducted of 11 national protests held on the Washington Mall, as well as observations of ancillary contemporaneous events.
Protests during Trump’s First Year

A first observation about protests during the Trump Era, already given above, is that they have been both numerous and varied. There is no one reason that people have protested. Protests have been more prevalent on the liberal side of the political spectrum, but they have also come from the conservative side the spectrum.

In Figure 2 below, I report the order of magnitude of crowd size at 11 liberal and conservative protests where I conducted surveys. The estimates of crowd size are based on newspaper estimates, as well as observations by my survey teams. I use order of magnitude (i.e., 1s, 10s, 100s, 1000s, 10000s, or 100000s) because obtaining precise estimates of crowd size is too difficult. Yet, comparing the magnitude of events is still meaningful.

**Figure 2. Crowd Size at 11 Protests in Washington, DC in 2017**
Figure 2 reveals that liberal events were, on the whole, much larger than the conservative events. The liberal Women’s March surpassed all other events, with hundreds of thousands in attendance. Following the Women’s March, there was the March for Science and the People’s Climate March, both of which had tens of thousands of participants. There were also several other liberal events in the thousands, including the counter-Inaugural protests, the Tax March, and the March for Racial Justice. Among conservative events, only the March for Life reached this order of magnitude. The remaining events were much smaller, including the liberal Equality March for Unity and Price, the conservative Mother of All Rallies, and the conservative Keep Your Promises Rally (a Tea Party event). The conservative March for America was essentially cancelled when only 17 people showed up. They decided to go to lunch at the Trump Hotel rather than stand around in the rain.

While it is tempting to focus on the fact that liberal protests were larger than the conservative protests, it is worth considering that it is puzzling that the conservative protests took place at all. The March for Life is an annual event, so its occurrence was unsurprising. Yet the other events were all one-time protests. Given that Republicans currently control all three branches of the U.S. national government, and that President Trump is a staunchly conservative politician, it is not clear what conservatives had to protest or why they went out of their way to do so. It is fruitful to think of these events as part of a movement-countermovement dynamic. Even though the events were not held on the same day as the liberal protests, they can be seen as counter-protests to the Women’s March and other liberal events. Conservatives want to let liberals, the media, and the broader public know that they support the president.
A second observation about protests during the Trump Era is that they are highly segregated on the basis of partisanship. I assessed the partisanship of participants by conducting a six-page, pen-and-paper survey on the days of the events. I hired teams of surveyors to attend each event. These teams initiated their work by originating at different points along the perimeter of the protest. Each surveyor then selected an “anchor” from the crowd (not surveyed), and then counted five persons from the anchor to make a survey invitation. Surveyors proceeded in making invitations until three surveys were accepted. At this point, a new anchor was selected, every fifth person was invited to take the survey, and so on. In total, we were able to survey 2,387 respondents, with a response rate of 73%. Of these surveys, 531 surveys were conducted at conservative events, with a response rate of 55%, while 1,855 were conducted at liberal events, with a response rate of 80%. The difference in the response rate between conservative and liberal events is statistically significant; it may be attributable to the suspicion that some conservatives have of academics and research.

The results of the survey with respect to partisanship are reported in Figure 3. Unsurprisingly, conservative and liberal protests were significantly different with respect to partisanship, with conservative protests attracting Republican-leaning crowds and liberal protests attracting Democratic-leaning crowds. More surprising is the fact that liberal events were significantly more partisan than were conservative events. Liberals were more likely to identify as a “Strong Democrat” than conservatives were to identify as a “Strong Republican”. Conservatives were more likely to identify as “Independent” or “Other” than were liberals.
From a signaling perspective, these events sent very clear signals about partisanship.

When liberals organized events, they established that Democrats are the principal constituencies that support their issues. Who supports funding for science? Democrats, not Republicans or independents, for the most part. This result stands in contrast, for example, to the antiwar movement after 9/11, which brought out a considerable number of independents and third party members. Similarly, conservative events were largely partisan Republican affairs, though there is a greater tendency for participants at these events to maintain independent identifications than was the case at liberal events.

A third observation is that conservative and liberal events were divided on the basis of sex / gender. As we can see in Figure 4, males were a slight majority of participants in conservative events, while women dominated participation in liberal events, with more than
60% of those in attendance. This difference is statistically significant and takes into account differences in response rates between men and women. The differential is lessened if the Women’s March is removed from the data, but still remains highly statistically significant.

**Figure 4. Sex / Gender at Liberal and Conservative Protests in Washington, DC in 2017**

A fourth observation is that protesters at both conservative and liberal events were largely homogenously white with respect to race / ethnicity, with minorities represented at rates far below their proportions in the population. As is indicated in Figure 5, more than 80% of participants at both conservative and liberal protests identify as white, which takes into account differences in response rates related to race / ethnicity. Differences between liberal and conservative events are not statistically significant, a fact which is unaffected if the March for Racial Justice is excluded from the data. This result is surprising because minorities are a core part of the liberal-progressive-Democratic coalition, leading to the expectation that they would be better represented at liberal events than at conservative events.
Fifth, protest events during the Trump era have been organized mostly by a new cohort of organizations, rather than just the usual suspects. The largest and most consequential event of 2017 was organized by the Women’s March, which is becoming an important new grassroots organization. In addition to the march it organized in January 2017, it held a Women’s Convention in October 2017, and has begun to plan and execute a series of other grassroots advocacy actions. The Women’s March is supported financially by traditional, mainline feminist organizations, such as Planned Parenthood. This support in no way detracts from the fact that the Women’s March is an independent organization that is beginning to fill the void left after the decline of the National Organization for Women.

Beyond the Women’s March, other events were organized by actors that have not traditionally staged national protests in Washington, DC. For example, the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, which does not typically turn to protest as a tactic, was the principal force behind the impressive March for Science. The March for Racial Justice was organized by elements connected with the Black Lives Matter movement. It is notable that the
movement came together in 2017 for a nationally coordinated march, in contrast to its more typical approach of organizing local rallies in cities that suffer from police shootings of unarmed African Americans. On the conservative side, the March for America and the Mother of All Rallies represented new organizing efforts. Nonetheless, I would be remiss not to mention the numerous organizers from 2017 – on the Right and Left – that had history of staging protests in the past. These organizers include the March for Life (conservative), the Keep Your Promises Rally (conservative / Tea Party), and the People’s Climate March (liberal).

Sixth, consequential protest actions were not limited to the peaceful, permitted events described above. The far-right rallies held in Charlottesville, Virginia – most notably the Unite the Right Rally – have featured hateful rhetoric, intimidation, and lethal violence. The far-left, anti-fascist, anarchist direct-action group, colloquially known as “Antifa”, has used violence against conservatives in its mobilizations. However, it is important to note that these violent Antifa events did not approach the level of terrorism deployed by the far right.

Seventh, Twitter, Facebook, and other internet platforms have helped to facilitate a broader range of protest actions. One of the most effective protests of 2017 occurred when people gathered at airports immediately following the president’s executive order that attempted to ban many Muslims from entering the United States. These events were organized in a quick and decentralized fashion that was only feasible due to the accessibility and public nature of the internet. Likewise, protests against police brutality through #takeaknee have gained wide visibility due to participation by prominent athletes, responses by the president, and media coverage.
Finally, protests on both the Left and Right have been keen to seek recognition for subgroups within their movements. This tendency is best reflected by the push to use “intersectionality” as a mobilizing frame at liberal protests. In their analysis of the Women’s March, Dana Fisher, Dawn Dow, and Rashawn Ray found that the march was successful in using the intersectionality frame to mobilize people to protest “on the basis of issues that fall outside their narrow interest or specific social identities.” I observed efforts by participants to deploy this frame at both the Women’s March and the March for Racial Justice. Figure 6 contains two photos from the March for Racial Justice in Washington, DC on September 30, 2017, which provide illustrations of these efforts. The use of this frame is an example of the evolution of social movement discourse in a new era of activism.

*Figure 6. Intersectionality as a Frame at the March for Racial Justice, September 30, 2017*
Political Analysis

What are the likely political consequences of this new era of protests during the Trump presidency? So far, these protests have mostly reflected efforts by different groups in society to gain recognition, but they have placed relatively little pressure on decision makers. One reason for the absence of pressure is that allied groups on both the Left and Right have chosen to organize as separate identity groups, rather than joining together in coherent social movements. There was nothing in 2017 that matched the coordinated organizing efforts of the post-9/11 antiwar movement or the Tea Party movement. The Women’s March is potentially an exception to this statement, though the March’s potential for political pressure has yet to be clearly demonstrated. A second reason for the absence of pressure is that activists have relied
on tactically familiar approaches to organizing, rather than designing strategically sophisticated campaigns. The airport protests against the Muslim ban were potentially an exception to this shortsightedness, but these protests also were never followed up by a campaign of sustained pressure.

The inability of contemporary national protests to exert substantial political pressure likely stems from what Johnathan Matthew Smucker calls a “political identity paradox”. In this paradox, participants in a movement become so focused on satisfying the identity needs of the movement that they lose sight of how to appeal the wider majority of the public. An example of this paradox occurred when the organizers of the Women’s March stated that they did not wish for pro-life women’s organizations to participate in the Women’s March. Choices such as this are part of the reason why the Women’s March drew its support almost entirely from the committed liberal-progressive-Democratic side of the political spectrum. But if the March seeks to broaden its appeal and claim a majority, then it needs to attract support from those who are not already part of its political coalition. Indeed, there are many women who oppose abortion but who also want to be free from sexual harassment and to receive equal pay for equal work. Participation by members of these groups could substantially broaden the women’s movement. Instead, it seems that the March’s commitment to liberal orthodoxy – which appeals to the identities of many of its supporters – overrides its efforts to expand its political reach.

The mentality of #theresistance that dominates much of the leftist opposition to Trump sheds light on this paradox. By turning to the metaphor of “resistance”, the Left conjures an image of launching insurgent attacks against an overwhelming, hegemonic power. Such tactics can be utilized in ways that preserve the identity concerns of Trump opponents. But reclaiming
the majority demands more than just resistance. It requires building a broader coalitions, reframing issues, and organizing in ways that attract new people into politics.

The coming months and years of the Trump presidency will certainly continue to be marked by protests, both on the Left and the Right. The impacts that these events will or will not have will depend on whether protests are also combined with other, more strategic forms of organizing. Will the energy of protest be channeled into greater lobbying, grassroots organizing, and new issue dialogues? Or, will protest simply remain on autopilot? These questions will likely offer much fodder for scholars of social movements, protest, and American politics in the near future.

**Recommended Resources**


Bio

Michael T. Heaney is in the organizational studies program and department of political science at the University of Michigan. He is author of *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11* (with Fabio Rojas). He studies social movements, interest group politics, and social networks.