

## **Beyond the Protest**

### Considering Protests in the Events Environment

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#### **Introduction**

Protests are often viewed as reactions to a much larger movement with the main objective being to spread awareness for a cause, express objection to certain issues or call for a change in the policies surrounding them. In recent years, there has been an emergence in the analysis of protests events, and most academic research surrounding this topic is based around the idea that state action is the driver of these movements. Soule et al (1999) challenge this notion by raising the question; are protest events the cause or consequence of state action? Using case studies of the largest women's rights movements in US history this paper will attempt to evaluate the role of protests in the events industry as well as predictions for the future changes in protest action.

#### **Considering Protests in the Events Context**

Past research on the topic of social movements has been mainly retrospective, focusing only on past events rather than informed predictions for the future. The process of analysing movements has centered mainly on numerical data where many organisations tracked attendance numbers with little emphasis on the activities within the march. There was a significant lack of information on the aftermath, that is, the short- and long-term effects of these demonstrations. The concept of categorizing protest marches as events that can be planned and measured has emerged in recent studies. (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002; Lamond and Spracklen, 2015; The National Study of Protest Events, 2016)

The first national data report on protests comes from The National Study of Protest Events. They collected information on demographics, attendance and activities within a protest. “The National Study of Protest Events (NSPE) employed hypernetwork sampling to generate the first-ever nationally representative sample of protest events.” (NPSE, 2016, p.1) They were then able to cross reference things like tactics and targets with causes, allowing a clearer picture on what relationships yielded more successful results. This data set will be extremely beneficial in future research and studies on how protests can be applied to events.

In *Protests as Events*, Lamond and Spracklen introduce the connection between the study and practice of events management and the motivations of social movements. This allows for more academic and analytical research into the topic of protests. It is suggested that the “spaces and activities” (Lamond and Spracklen, 2015, p.3) involved in movements may be categorized more efficiently under the scope of events. In the past, effective analysis of protests has proven to be difficult, due to their mobilized and often disorganized nature. Recent studies, in the past several decades, have utilized Protest Event Analysis (PEA) as a means to analyze and interpret the characteristics of large-scale protests. They seek to quantify protest data, which can then be used to study the “causes or consequences” (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002, p. 231)

Lamond and Spracklen also acknowledge the question of whether civil disobedience is necessary to create an impact. While riots, rallies and marches are the most widely known forms of protest, and often the most aggressive, there are many forms of demonstration that can be considered events. These include sit-ins, walk-outs, strikes, and peaceful presentations. They do, however, state that many determine the success of a demonstration based on the degree of disruption it generated. (Lamond and Spracklen, 2016, p.90) It can be argued that chaos often leads to more media coverage which can in turn increase the pressure on the governing bodies involved.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, many believe that non-violent protests are far more effective than violent ones. Often, what may be planned as small acts of civil disobedience can become uncontrollable and unmanageable. This way of protest goes against

the theory that organisation yields results, as violence is inherently unorganised. In addition, many governing bodies and allies tend to retract support when violence comes into play.

Regarding the study of events management, the skills and knowledge tend to focus around efficiency in corporate events. Thus, the curriculum would scarcely make a connection to protest action. They discuss the lack of cultural and societal influence in such courses and stress the importance of further development in this field. They seek to redefine the event space, to remove it from the rigid box in which it has sat in the past. "We suggest that many of the spaces and activities that surround social movements and activism might best be understood as events, or at least as activities shaped by the corporate events against which people are protesting." (Lamond and Spracklen, 2016, p.93) To truly understand, interpret and make reasonable predictions for the future, we must first be able to form a "theoretical framework" for protest and in turn, be able to critically analyse that framework.

### **Cause or Consequence?**

Soule et al (1999) introduced the idea that movements influence political change as opposed to the common belief that they are in response to change. The Oxford Dictionary defines protest as "an organised public demonstration expressing strong objection to an official policy or course of action." (OD, 2018, n.pag.) In this context, it is implied that people protest in reaction or retaliation to policy changes. Soule et al conducted a research study on women's protest movements between 1956-1979 in terms of how they emerged and the results they produced. They acknowledged the lack of studies on protest outcomes, and the difficulties in connecting policy change directly with social movements.

Through the study, they sought to create a more systematic record of protest outcomes and emergence. They considered whether a movement was responsive to change in two dimensions, political opportunity and organizational resources, and if policy change can be influenced by the actions of protest movements. (Soule et al, 2015, p. 240) Their research yielded several findings with differing opinions. Using models of congressional hearings and Senate and House roll calls, they found that protest action can result in an increase or opening in political opportunity. They also concluded that the more media coverage there is for a

women's issue, the more House roll calls there seem to be regarding that issue, whereas congressional hearings seem to be unaffected by any amount of media attention. "The nature of coverage received, and the relative failure and success is predicated upon the prevailing political and media opportunities available to the protest group" (Cable, 2015, p.60)

Regarding the relationship between Senate roll call and women's issues, they discovered that during election years, Senate members seem to be more willing to delve into this issues and initiate votes on them. Their final conclusions supported the initial belief that there would be mixed results depending on variables mentioned earlier. They emphasize the importance of considering each government entity independently, as they each have significantly different motivations, moral causes and channels of influence. In addition, they concluded that one defining factor in the success of an event is the resources of the organisation. This conclusion coincides with many other academic researches, where organisation seems to be at the core of any event.

### **Women's Movements throughout History**

The term "feminist wave" was introduced in the 1960's as a way for scholars and activists to distinguish between the significant but distinctly different eras in the feminist movement (Grady, 2018). It is widely acknowledged that there have been three waves over the last two centuries though some literature has introduced a fourth wave. Each wave, while contributing to the overall push for equal rights among men and women, focused on different aspects of women's rights. The first wave covers the suffrage movement in the US and globally, which spanned over almost 100 years. The second wave arose in the 1960s and introduced the concept of radical feminism and female liberation within a patriarchal society.

### **First Wave Feminism**

Beginning in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights, the first event of its kind, women called for better opportunities in employment and education as well as the right to vote, which became the focus of this era. The convention was held over two days and consisted of professional lectures, presentations and panel discussions on the role of women in

society. An important factor of the convention was to unite and educate women on the rights they had. Hundreds of activists continued to campaign for these rights, organizing conferences and demonstrations. The movement was met with harsh objection from citizens and government entities alike.

The most notable and largest demonstration was the 1913 National Suffrage Parade in Washington D.C. On March 3, just one day before the election of Woodrow Wilson, more than 5,000 women marched on Pennsylvania Avenue. Activities included bands, floats, brigades and performances. The protest itself was a peaceful one, but was met with violence from the opposition, consisting mainly of men. Over 100 women were assaulted and hospitalized, but the march continued. The violence that ensued is widely considered to be the catalyst for the media attention the march garnered. This led to many congressional hearings for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, though the 19th Amendment was not ratified until 1920. It is important to note that this amendment excluded Native Americans, Asian Americans, and some African Americans. They were granted this right over the course of several decades, and not all at once.

## **Second Wave Feminism**

The 1960s birthed what is considered to be the second wave of feminism in the United States. The focus of this era was the combat the ideals that a woman's role was in a household which historians often refer to as the culture of domesticity. The 1950s were a time of *domestic bliss*, with women relying solely on their husbands to provide for the family, giving them very little responsibility outside of the household. This was a major issue when it came to divorce and custody battles which usually ruled in favor of the husband.

The era came to a head in 1978 with the March for Equal Rights on Washington D.C. The Equal Rights Amendment had been proposed to Congress in 1921 to guarantee equal rights for everyone regardless of gender. The amendment needed to be supported by 38 of 50 states to be ratified and the deadline was in March of 1979. The march called to extend the deadline of the ratification, as it did not have the support from state legislatures it needed, though the general population mostly supported it. Over 100,000 women participated in the march and at

least 35 well known activists gave speeches to the massive crowd. (Dismore, 2014, n.pag.) The march can be considered as a success in the fact that the deadline to ratify the ERA was extended, giving them another three years to lobby for enough support to pass it. However, to this day, the amendment has not been ratified.

Women challenged the notion that they were incapable of having successful careers and taking care of children simultaneously. Other themes of the movement included workplace equality, freedom of sexuality and the idea of independence from your spouse. This also began the trend of *radical feminism*, which centered around the ideology that women had been oppressed by men in what they conceived to be a *patriarchal society* (Grady, 2018). This shift was significant when it came to protest trends. Gone were the days of peaceful and meek reactions from activists. Marches that followed were more aggressive and more geared towards the idea of civil disobedience.

This in turn is believed to be the reason the *feminist agenda* has had such a negative connotation for the past several decades. Many women were seen as angry and resentful towards men, which Grady believes began the decline of the second wave. However, she states that this laid the foundation for the ideals of the *third wave* of feminism.

### **Third Wave Feminism**

There has been much debate around the time frame and ideals of the *third wave* of feminism. While it is generally agreed upon that the early 1990s were a turning point for the feminist agenda, there is a differing opinion on whether or not this era is still alive and well. Considering the fact that sexual harassment in the workplace and the outpour of misogyny from men were the highlights of this wave, it can be argued that we are still very much a part of the era.

The difference between the early 1990s and now, though, is that while they sought to empower women more in the sense of spirituality and sexuality, there were no defined goals during this time frame and no specific legislation they sought to change. This changed drastically when issues around intersectionality finally became a part of the national

conversation for women. The Million Woman March of 1997, modeled after the 1995 Million Man March, saw an estimated one million citizens march through the streets of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The aim was to advocate for the equal rights and opportunities of black women in America and for the revival of family values and economic development in black communities.

This march was very unique in its organising style and is considered to be a “social phenomenon” (Booker, 2015, n.pag.). During the planning stages of the event, organisers Asia Coney and Phile Chionesu said that they did not want to rely on what Soule et al would refer to as “elite allies” (2015, p. 242) or in other words, influential celebrities, to consider it a successful event. Instead the focus was heavily on rallying black communities together for support. The all-day event involved inspirational speeches from local citizens, a prayer program and musical performances. This style set the march apart from others, shifting more into a celebration. They emphasized the importance of continuing their efforts following the march, starting with work in their local communities to combat the disconnect between black women and communities.

The move into the 21st century saw a massive increase in protest events throughout the US. This was mainly to do with the past four presidential elections and the legislations passed regarding women’s rights. Core issues included reproductive rights, gender pay gaps, and sexual harassment. With the rise of the Time’s Up campaign and the #MeToo movement, there is a belief that we are ushering a brand-new era in the feminist movement, the *fourth wave* of feminism, with the Women’s March on Washington being at its forefront.

### **Criticism of The Wave Metaphor**

The wave metaphor has been met with both criticism and praise. While some argue that the established eras have had significant impacts on each other, many feminist theorists believe that this rhetoric is counterproductive. Linda Nicholson, Professor of Women’s Studies at Washington University, argues that this terminology is outdated and becomes increasingly unhelpful as the definition of the term “feminism” shifts. She states that these waves were not applicable to the early eras of women’s rights because the idea of feminism didn't technically exist then and that these movements cannot be merged into one all-encompassing term. “It

obscures the differences in the ideas that have motivated different groups of people to pursue different kinds of political goals at different moments in time.” (Nicholson, 2010, n.pag.)

Grady (2018) believes that the wave metaphor is the best tool available to distinguish and discuss the differing agendas of the gender equality movement. As the conversation around how we define and understand feminism grows, the wave metaphor can be helpful in distinguishing the impacts each era has had on the movement.

While the timing overlaps for many of the issues these activists focused on, there were vastly different motivations behind them. In particular, many of the women involved with the NAWSA only supported women’s rights as it pertained to white women, where women of color were excluded from the conversation. “...The history of feminism is a history of different ideas in wild conflict.” (Grady, 2018, n.pag.) It wasn’t until the 1960s that intersectionality became one of the core issues in regard to feminism.

### **Are the Fundamentals of Protest Changing?**

The future of protests has been widely debated between academics, activists and journalists. According to LA Kauffman, a social movement strategist and author of *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism*, the peak of protest is now. The largest protests in United States history have happened in the past two years alone. She attributes the 2017 Women’s March, the largest organised protest in US history, to the massive rise in protest turnout. But the success of the march had little to do with attendance numbers.

The differentiation between this march and its predecessors came from the activities they organised on that day and the action they took on the days that followed. The event hosted speeches from well-known activists, politicians and organisers and led to the creation of The Women’s Convention. Held annually in Detroit, Michigan, this event brings together activists and allies to educate each other on best practice when it comes to voting, legal rights and event strategies. They also created the Youth Ambassador Program, “targeting the activism, interests and unique perspectives of our child, adolescent and teenage populations. (Women’s March on Washington, 2018, n.pag.)

A large majority believe protests to be ineffective when it comes to tangible change. Nathan Heller, a journalist for the New Yorker, argues that the reason protests seem to have no effect on legislation is because the methods are outdated. He uses the Wall Street Occupation and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements as examples, stating that as recognizable as the movements were, specific results couldn't be identified. "Protesters have to be organised in a way that lets them keep pushing for the movement's goals." (Mazumder, 2017, n.pag.) No policies were changed and almost none of the officers involved were indicted for their crimes. What he fails to acknowledge though, is that there can be small victories within a movement even when the major goal has not been met. Since the BLM campaign launched there have been significant changes involving police regulations and tolerance policies.

One of the issues with these movements was the lack of clear goals and objectives to work towards. It is not enough to simply call for change, and awareness does not always coincide with effectiveness. "When marches are effective, it's because they feed into longer-term strategies, strengthening people's willingness to undertake the other kinds of work that produce concrete change." (Kauffman, 2018, n.pag.) Immediately following the march and during the first 100 days of Donald Trump's presidency, WM organisers created the 10 Actions Campaign. Every ten days they facilitated a different task for citizens to enact change on the issues they cared most about. Some of these actions included printable postcards to send to Senators, weekly brainstorming sessions with local groups and creating conversation guides to use when speaking with elected officials. "The mission of the Women's March is to harness the political power of diverse women and their communities to create transformative social change." (WMW, 2018, n.pag.)

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that protests can focus the energy of any group into a direct action, though this may not always be the goal of an organisation. They are the catalysts for the long-term movements, and it is through their campaigning that they aim to achieve their ultimate outcomes. While the debate still remains as to whether or not protest is a form of action or reaction, academic studies have proven that they can easily fit into the event space and

therefore be studied and analysed as such. There is an opportunity for event managers and academic researchers to further study the role event organisations can play in creation and execution of protests throughout the United States. It is recommended that the past movements throughout the country and internationally be analysed and utilised as guides in this process. This can only aid an increased understanding around the planning of protests. As the social and political domain in the US changes, the methods of protest will surely change with it. As far as the effectiveness of any movement, organisation is the key for any version of protest. This will facilitate the mobilization of direct action in reaction to and calling for legislative change and will continue to be a guaranteed method of empowering and connecting individuals, communities and nations.

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