

Polarizing politics prompts 'louder and more frequent calls for political action'

February 20 2017, by Molly Callahan



Credit: Northeastern University

In the weeks since President Donald J. Trump's inauguration, grassroots movements of the social and political variety have cropped up en masse across the country. But American history is dotted with protests,

boycotts, and political upheaval dating back to the nation's birth in 1776.

So is the recent level of civic and political engagement merely an extension of our country's history or does it represent something more? And what, if anything, can we expect these [protests](#) to achieve?

We asked political science professor John Portz to explain how these protests compare with those from the past, with a particular focus on their potential success and social media's role in sparking mass demonstrations.

On Tuesday, The New York Times reported on a group of New York middle school and high school students who are "showing a level of civic engagement not seen in years." Are the recent marches, protests, and campaigns calling for congressional outreach an indication of a more politically engaged electorate or merely an outcropping of a citizenry that's been engaged for some time?

Political engagement ebbs and flows over time, although the current level of engagement is indicative of a heightened sense of action in response to the Trump administration. As our politics become more polarized, which they are, we see louder and more frequent calls for political action. Engagement by those opposed to Trump is particularly strong and vocal since these are people who generally see a positive role for government, yet Trump is altering or dismantling policies and programs that were put in place with that positive role in mind. This is an awakening for many people after an election that defied most predictions.

In the early years of the Obama administration, Tea Party members effectively protested to sink Democratic legislative priorities. Is there a limit on the success grassroots movements can achieve?

To be effective in the policy arena, a grassroots movement needs to connect to policymakers, particularly legislators. This might be done through political protest and the show of numbers, or by having more direct influence in legislative chambers, by electing sympathetic legislators or effectively lobbying legislators. If a grassroots movement is organized in these ways, it can be quite effective. Those opposed to Trump have a significant challenge when both the House and the Senate are controlled by Republicans, but the alliance between congressional Republicans and the Trump White House is likely to be quite tenuous, creating openings for an effective movement to influence legislative priorities.

Are the protests we're seeing today likely to spawn larger, more sustained movements? Are there any indicators that they'll fizzle out or have a broader impact?

It's difficult to sustain a grassroots movement like what we've seen in the past few weeks. A key challenge is maintaining focus on one or a small number of goals and organizing in a way to show some progress in meeting those goals. President Trump's proclivity to tweet and make statements out of the political norm provides a convenient and recurring target for grassroots movements and other groups, although long-term sustainability is still difficult unless goals can be articulated and achieved that will keep the movement together.

During the Vietnam War and in prior eras, the nation saw massive protests. This all happened in an age without social media. Are we giving social media too much credit today for its contributions to mass demonstrations?

Yes, there have long been large-scale protests in American history. Social media did not create these protests. What it does do, however, is facilitate quicker and more widespread actions. With social media and other forms of rapid communications, protest actions can be much more quickly organized, and they can include sites over a much wider geographic area. The protests on the day after President Trump's inauguration took place in cities across the country and around the world. In a pre-internet and pre-[social media](#) world, that is less likely to happen.

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: Polarizing politics prompts 'louder and more frequent calls for political action' (2017, February 20) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-02-polarizing-politics-prompts-louder-frequent.html>

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