

How the perception of unfair economic inequality leads to civic unrest

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Why are there not more mass demonstrations across the United States with a president as controversial as Donald Trump? The President's thoughts, tariffs, and tweets affect global economies, societies, and sensibilities. Amid all the anger, frustration, and unfairness felt by large sections of the American public, the lack of street demonstrations is surprising.

In "The Deprivation-Protest Paradox: How the Perception of Unfair Economic Inequality Leads to Civic Unrest," published in the December issue of *Current Anthropology*, Séamus Power illustrates how the tipping point at which tolerance for hardship and injustice turns into civic discontent in the form of street demonstrations could be reached and how it might be closer than it seems.

Power's article describes how the Irish people tolerated [economic hardship](#) following the collapse of the Great Recession, but counterintuitively began protesting during a recovery which was unequally felt after a new tax on water was introduced. But there's nothing particularly Irish about the Irish case.

Danny Dorling of Oxford University argues that suppressed, denigrated, or ignored voices build disgruntlement and breed frustration. Symbols can embody injustices (Wagoner, Aalborg University) and technology can spread these images (Jindra, Boston University). But it is comparison by comparing your lot in life with those of other groups, and perceiving that you are disadvantaged, that leads to anger and the possibility of

protest. This finding explains why there were mass protests on Irish streets during an economic upturn: people expected to reap the benefits of an improving economy. But it was the rich, not the rest, who disproportionately benefitted from the upturn. A new water tax added insult to injury. Mike Norton and Serena Hegarty from Harvard Business School summarize the premise when they stated, "While periods of austerity may cause hardship, heightened awareness of inequality in the restoration period—and the shifting reference points that recovery engenders—can lead to the strongest reactions from citizens."

The lessons for the United States are stark: the perception of unfair economic growth can lead to mass demonstrations. Trump gained supporters during his presidential race by highlighting workers in the Rust Belt who got left behind during Obama's recovery. People expect to reap the benefits of voting for him, meaning they expect to benefit from economic growth. But the recent closure of manufacturing plants, and the resultant loss of jobs, can be the tinder for popular demonstrations against the president. In addition to prevalent and widespread sense of anger from many sectors of the population, the growing disgruntlement of voters who supported Trump, only to see their expectations and perceptions of fairness violated as economic promises are broken, can push towards the tipping point of civic discontent and mass protests.

It is not just objective economic conditions, but people's subjective understandings of them, that matter. This might seem paradoxical. But history is filled with these paradoxes. People take to the streets when the gap between their expectations and lived realities becomes too great. In the United States, as in Ireland, the surprising lack of street demonstrations does not mean there isn't tinder that is ready to ignite.

More information: Séamus A. Power, The Deprivation-Protest Paradox: How the Perception of Unfair Economic Inequality Leads to Civic Unrest, *Current Anthropology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1086/700679](https://doi.org/10.1086/700679)

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