

2017 Women's March solidarity events drew 100 times national protest average, study shows

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The 2017 Women's March in St. Paul, Minn., was one of many sister marches.
Credit: Fibonacci Blue.

As the next Women's March approaches, a new study of the 2017 Women's March solidarity events led by University of Notre Dame Associate Professor of Sociology Kraig Beyerlein is likely a good

predictor of what to expect. Based on a survey of sister marches across the United States, key characteristics of the events were massive turnout, majority female leadership, low rate of counterdemonstrators, substantial grassroots mobilization and strong support from faith-based groups.

The study, published in the December 2018 issue of the journal *Mobilization*, reveals that sister marches drew nearly a hundredfold more participants than an average U.S. protest as measured by Beyerlein and colleagues' National Study of Protest Events (NSPE).

"This participation blew that of a 'typical' recent protest in the United States out of the water. For example, while the mean number of protesters in the NSPE was 61, it was nearly 6,000 for the sister marches," Beyerlein and his co-authors write. "Turnout figures for the solidarity events were also considerably higher than protests from prior decades reported in the New York Times—which is particularly impressive given that newspapers heavily skew toward large demonstrations—and the April 15, 2009, Tea Party rallies."

The NSPE shows that, on a national scale, roughly one-third of all U.S. protests feature counterdemonstrators. However, only about 20 percent of the 2017 sister marches encountered counterdemonstrators. This is interesting in that conservative groups criticized the Women's March in the days and weeks leading up to it. But they generally stayed home on Jan. 21, 2017, keeping their opposition to themselves.

As expected, participants were largely female, but turnout at three-fourths of the sister marches included 25 percent or more men. For all but a fourth of solidarity events, organizing committees and volunteers were overwhelmingly female as well, at 92 percent and 96 percent, respectively. In addition, the vast majority of speakers at sister marches were women. While men had a notable presence the day of event, the

study shows that women were primarily responsible for both the organizational "heavy lifting" and for serving as the "voice" of the marches. Strong female leadership and the inclusive nature of the sister marches were likely two reasons for their numerical strength, Beyerlein said.

Grassroots efforts also likely contributed to the success of the solidarity events. Among the 86 percent of events with speakers or organizational sponsors, three-fourths or more of them had roots in the local community. Collaboration between different state marches (versus partnership with the national march) was most frequent, occurring 70 percent of the time.

While it is not surprising that the marches received strong support from women's rights and LGBTQIA groups—both of which the Trump campaign targeted—the level of sponsorship from religious-based groups is notable, and likely unexpected given popular perception of the right having a monopoly on faith.

"Faith communities' resources are rarely directed toward protest action, and when they are it tends to be for movements opposed to issues central to the Women's March, such as reproductive or LGBTQIA rights," Beyerlein and co-authors note. "Supporting this view, Trump received considerable support among certain religious circles, garnering 81 percent of the evangelical vote. An approach that emphasizes the politically conservative nature of religion would not have predicted the former to sponsor, participate in or provide material support to nearly 60 percent of all sister marches." In other research, Beyerlein and Notre Dame graduate student Peter Ryan demonstrated the dynamics of faith in the 2017 Women's March on Chicago.

Recruiting participants for sister marches was done almost exclusively through social media. This seems like a given in the internet

age—however, solidarity events also relied, in considerable numbers, on conventional mobilizing tools including traditional media, advertisements, flyers and posters. The combination of methods is likely another reason for the considerable turnout at sister marches across the United States.

Beyerlein and other members of the research team plan to continue to examine the solidarity events. "Studying change in the sister marches over time provides the opportunity to document continuity or discontinuity in gender dynamics, organizing strategies and the presence of counterdemonstrators, among other factors," Beyerlein and co-authors state at the end of the article. "Moreover, given that the 2017 Women's Marches were the first mass mobilizations of his presidency, our research can identify how they fit into the broader trajectory of the Trump resistance."

More information: *Mobilization*, [DOI: 10.17813/1086-671X-23-4-425](https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-23-4-425)

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