

Extreme action costs popular support for protest movements, new study finds

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Matthew Feinberg is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. Credit: Rotman School of Management

Whether it's blocking traffic outside a Donald Trump rally or preventing women from entering an abortion clinic, social activists take a risk when they choose extreme tactics to make their point.

New research has found that social change advocates face an "activist's dilemma." While extreme actions can bring more attention to a cause than moderate ones, they are more likely to diminish support, even among natural sympathizers, the study found.

Finding the sweet spot between the two is tricky, acknowledged Matthew Feinberg, an assistant professor of organizational behaviour and [human resource management](#) at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

"We were curious if this dilemma exists, and if so, we wanted to more deeply understand how [social movements](#) might be able to overcome it," said Prof. Feinberg.

The researchers conducted six separate experiments in which participants were presented with different [protest](#) scenarios, including moderate and extreme protest actions at a Donald Trump campaign event, against anti-Black police violence, abortion activities, for and against gun control and in defense of animal rights.

Study participants were more likely to emerge with a negative view of the cause when a protest used extreme actions—even when participants were already politically or socially sympathetic to its message. Extreme actions were anything perceived to be highly disruptive or to cause harm to others, such as [physical violence](#) or threatening language.

Participants tended to feel that extreme behaviour crossed a line into immorality, which the researchers believe is what leads to the loss of support. Observers are less able to connect emotionally with the protest, leading them to identify less with the [movement](#) and back away from the cause.

"We found extreme anti-Trump protest actions actually led people to not

only dislike the movement and support the cause less, but to be willing to support Trump more," said Prof. Feinberg. "It was almost like a backlash."

Previous studies have been mixed about the impact of extreme action. Some have shown that it can influence large institutions to change and bring more attention to a cause. Other research has suggested non-violent campaigns are twice as likely as violent ones to achieve their goals.

It means that activists should be clear about their objectives and carefully weigh their options for the best ways to achieve them, the researchers say. A movement with relatively low profile might consider more extreme action when it's starting out, becoming more moderate later to retain and build support.

"By no means are we trying to be negative towards activism," said Prof. Feinberg. "We're actually big fans of social movements and that's the reason we study them."

More information: Matthew Feinberg et al, The activist's dilemma: Extreme protest actions reduce popular support for social movements., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000230](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000230)

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