

# HOW TO READ A PROTEST

## The Art of Organizing and Resistance

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Protests work—just not, perhaps, the way you think.

When you're in the midst of a demonstration, especially a very large one, the sense of collective power is stirring and immediate. There's a great feeling of purpose and unity when you stand with a huge crowd of other people who share your outrage over an injustice and your eagerness for action. Joining a protest, whatever the cause, gives you the direct bodily experience of being part of something larger than yourself. In a literal and immediate way, you add your heart and your voice to a movement.

But afterward, you might wonder if that's all there is. You march, and it feels good to march, but did the marching matter? And if it did, what *exact* difference did it make? Do protests change policy? Do they change

minds? Or do they just let off steam? Millions of Americans have taken to the streets in recent times, breaking previous records for protest participation, but there's widespread skepticism around demonstrations—a suspicion that protests are purely expressive, a venting of frustration with no quantifiable effect, and that the real work of reform happens through established channels of influence like elections and lobbying. Every time there's a major wave of protests in the United States, a flurry of think pieces follows, questioning whether demonstrations accomplish anything that can be measured. We celebrate past protests that we think did have lasting impact, from the stately 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom to the unruly 1969 Stonewall riots that kicked off the modern LGBTQ movement, but there's often a gestural quality to the acclaim, a broad sense that these actions helped create change, but no detailed accounting of exactly how and why.

Some protests, of course, have no more enduring effect than a gust of wind. There are failures as well as successes in any area of human endeavor, and with protests, the odds are against you from the start. By definition, people demonstrate when normal channels are blocked or unresponsive, when institutions allow injustice to flourish, when the powerful act with impunity. Protests are what political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott famously called “weapons of the weak,” used by those who lack the power to achieve their goals through official means. The ultimate measure of a movement's success may be if it can move from protest to power, from an outside critique to inside influence, but history moves slowly and unevenly. Structures of power are entrenched and resilient, and injustices go deep. The work of movements is filled with setbacks, reversals, and defeats, and victories are often partial or fragile or both. You may need many years of changing attitudes before you can begin to change

policy. You may lose for a very long time before you begin to win. If power conceded without demands, protests would never be necessary.

Protests come in many forms, and happen on wildly varying scales, from a single individual kneeling on a football field to a million people marching through the streets of a major city. There are as many kinds of protests as there are tools in a well-stocked toolbox, and part of the difficulty in coming to terms with what protests do is that they don't all work in the same way. A silent vigil, say, and a freeway blockade are as different in character and effect as a sanding block and a sledgehammer. A vigil is a bid for public sympathy, an appeal to the heart and to common ground. A blockade is intentionally polarizing and controversial; in creating a logistical crisis, it seeks to create a political one, forcing those in power to respond. Successful movements tend to use many different tactics, of which protests are only the most visible, and skilled organizers will use protests of different kinds at different moments in an unfolding campaign.

The most iconic form of protest in America is the mass march, exemplified by the legendary 1963 event where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. Mass protests may be the hardest of all to evaluate, even as they've become recurring fixtures of American political life. At first glance, they all look similar, with huge crowds converging on the nation's capital or some other major city to take a public stand. But they are not all alike. Mass protests have been organized very differently over time, and their function has varied and evolved as part of a long series of shifts in the nature of movements and activism in America. Sometimes, a huge demonstration can function like the capstone to a movement, as happened with the 1963 march, which is widely viewed as representing what a successful protest can be. On other occasions, mass protests can channel

vast anger with seemingly no effect on the course of events, as happened on the eve of the Iraq War in 2003. In the hope of deterring President George W. Bush from waging a war on false pretenses, millions around the globe poured into the streets for what remains the single largest day of protest in world history; the massive outcry, however, failed to stop the Bush administration's rush to war. And, in rare and remarkable instances, a mass mobilization can help galvanize and energize a sprawling new movement, as the 2017 Women's Marches did with the resistance to Trump. These nationwide marches were organized differently from any major protests in American history, and the bottom-up, women-led way they came together gave them a powerful and unprecedented movement-building impact. If you want to understand what protests do and when and how they work, you first have to understand their character: You need to know how to read a protest.

An excellent place to begin is by looking carefully at the signs that demonstrators carry. After all, signs are often the first thing that tells you a protest is a protest and not some other large assemblage of people, like a crowd waiting to enter a performance venue or celebrating the victory of a sports team. People carry signs to communicate, and to affiliate—to tell the broader public how they feel and what they want, and to show they identify with a movement or a group. In most cases, you should be able to figure out at a glance whether a protest concerns the construction of a gas pipeline or the police murder of an unarmed Black teenager or an elected representative's vote to gut health care. Big protests, especially, almost always feature signs or banners, and these offer rich clues to what's really going on: how the demonstration came together, what kind of movement it grew out of, who sponsored it, and what impact it might have.

Take a look: Are the signs professionally printed, by and large, and quite similar in appearance? That's what the posters looked like at the most famous demonstration in US history, the 1963 March on Washington. Examine images from that day and you'll see impeccably dressed marchers carrying uniform-looking placards, each trumpeting an urgent demand: "WE DEMAND VOTING RIGHTS NOW!" "WE MARCH FOR INTEGRATED SCHOOLS NOW!" "WE MARCH FOR JOBS FOR ALL NOW!"

The 1963 March on Washington is so universally known and so widely celebrated that for many people it's what comes first to mind when thinking of demonstrations at all. It's the benchmark against which other large protests are most often measured, so mythic that it almost stands above and outside history in many people's imaginations—as a pinnacle moment of social struggle, in which the pressing need for change in America's racial order was conveyed with such force and dignity that reform seemed natural and inevitable. Scholars might debate how much the march can be credited with the passage of the Civil Rights Act the following year—overall, they're skeptical, seeing it as but one step in a long and complex process—but the connection is firmly cemented in popular understandings of American history. This sense that the march helped secure the passage of key civil rights legislation, along with the enduring resonance of the powerful words that King spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, have led many to view the 1963 March on Washington as the consummate example of what a successful protest can and should be: a convergence that so beautifully crystallizes and amplifies the concerns of those gathered that it pressures recalcitrant institutions to act. By any standard, the event came off splendidly, stirring the world's conscience, and more than a half century later, it continues to inspire and educate.

But much as the larger history of the civil rights movement has often been distorted and depoliticized in the retelling, so has the nature and impact of this key protest. Of course the 1963 March on Washington contributed to the multifaceted effort to pass federal civil rights legislation in the United States, but the contribution was relatively indirect. It helped create a sense of national consensus around civil rights and gave a new stature and legitimacy to the movement—that is to say, it had a diffuse and long-term influence, the very sort that tends to be either ignored or dismissed as political failure when pundits evaluate other mass protests. Political scientist Jeanne Theoharis has written powerfully about how myths of the civil rights movement have been “weaponized” against subsequent movements, setting up a hallowed standard against which all other efforts have been harshly judged. In popular discourse, a grandeur and effectiveness has been attributed to the 1963 March on Washington that no subsequent march could ever match. In sanctifying this one protest and making it larger than life, all other protests are diminished by comparison.<sup>1</sup>

The more closely you look at how the march was actually organized, and what impact it had on the unfolding civil rights movement, the more it stands out as singular and anomalous. In a great many respects, from the way the organizing proceeded to the effects that it had, the 1963 March on Washington was unlike any other demonstration that came before or after it. The eye-catching signs that marchers carried on that storied August afternoon are just one small detail in the great drama of the day, but they help explain what made it so unique—and in so doing, help explain how the political landscape for protest, and the parameters for what protests can and do accomplish, have shifted over the decades since. The posters at the 1963 March on Washington look so uniform for a quite



Volunteers stack signs at the DC office for the 1963 March on Washington in advance of the event.

[FIG 3]

extraordinary reason. They were completely controlled by the organizers, who took great care to make sure that the only signs that appeared at the demonstration were ones featuring slogans they had approved. So unusual was this course of action that it would never be repeated at any other sizable demonstration in the United States: The protest march that's come to epitomize peaceful popular dissent in America was an event where all but authorized messages were silenced.

To understand how and why this happened, it's crucial to remember that the 1963 March on Washington was the first event of its kind. It was not the first demonstration in the nation's capital, but it was the first genuinely mass one, and the first protest march of its size in US history. The man who would direct the organizing, longtime civil rights and labor leader A. Philip Randolph, had dreamed for decades of holding a massive march on Washington, but none had ever actually happened. There had been a few noteworthy prior events in DC that were designed to showcase collective strength, but they were modest in scale and almost always parade-like in character. Five thousand women marched along Pennsylvania Avenue, for instance, for an elaborate 1913 Suffrage Procession and Pageant. A little more than a decade later, the Ku Klux Klan, then just past the peak of its popularity, brought 50,000 of its members to parade through Washington in full hooded regalia in 1925 and 1926. Some 17,000 World War I veterans came to demand their bonus pay in 1932, in the one sizable pre-1963 DC protest that wasn't organized in parade fashion; the Bonus Army's ragged occupation ended in bloodshed after President Hoover ordered the police to evict them. A. Philip Randolph had announced a major march in 1941 to protest racial segregation in the armed forces, an all-Black mobilization that he vowed would top 100,000 attendees, but he called it off at the last minute after then-President Roosevelt met the protest's central demand and signed an executive order prohibiting racial discrimination in federal training programs and defense industries. Until the 1963 event that we've come to think of as the basic template for big national protests, there was, in fact, just one mass protest march of any kind in America, a beautifully organized civil rights demonstration by more than 125,000 people in Detroit that took place in late June 1963, when work on the





Women's Suffrage Parade proceeds down Pennsylvania Avenue, 1913.

[FIG 4]

March on Washington was just getting under way. The success of this little-remembered event, the Detroit Walk to Freedom, helped spur and solidify plans for the DC march.<sup>2</sup>

So the planning for the 1963 March on Washington has to be understood as brand-new and unprecedented, a bold and audacious experiment with a type of collective action that hadn't been tried in the United States before. "Mobilization" is first and foremost a military term—the readying