Protest During a Pandemic: How Covid-19 Affected Social Movements in the United States

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how a global health crisis affects the causes and consequences of social movements. Drawing on media coverage, press releases, emails, and other available primary data sources, we examine how the pandemic changed the opportunities and conditions for activists on the right and left and those they challenge. We begin by considering the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant government response, which alters the structure of political opportunities activists face. We then look at the development of a range of protest campaigns that have emerged in response, assessing changes in opportunities for activists to reach and mobilize target constituencies, the construction of grievances, nature of alliances, as well as innovation in tactics and organization. Finally, we consider the potential outcomes of these protests during the pandemic and extending afterward.

**Keywords**

activism, protest, Trump, Black Lives Matter, COVID-19

Dressed in gym clothes, a couple of dozen people assembled across the street from the Clearwater, Florida courthouse in May of 2020. These fitness enthusiasts and entrepreneurs were angry that the city had closed health clubs—as well as restaurants and bars—in response to a global pandemic (Meyer, 2020b; Noor, 2020). The novel coronavirus didn’t seem to affect anyone they knew; everyone didn’t get it, and even

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among those who were infected, only a small percentage got very sick and died. By the
day of the event, approximately 75,000 Americans had died from COVID-19 (Reynolds, 2020), a fraction of 330 million Americans who were all facing severe
constraints in their social, political, and economic lives. The gym rats were angry
about the restrictions, arguing that their lives had been unfairly constrained by local
government. On their since removed Facebook page, Open Tampa Bay, the adminis-
trator noted that the page was
dedicated to those who believe enough is enough. We must never allow our civil liberties
to be encroached upon and we must allow our businesses in the Tampa Bay Area to
reopen and give all lawful business owners the right to operate their businesses to provide
for their communities, families, employees, and themselves (Pedersen, 2020).

So, in protest, they started doing calisthenics outside the courthouse.

Many observers found the open-up-the-gym protests trivial and insensitive. The
very act of exercising outdoors seemed to belie the claim that the protesters were really
facing severe restrictions anyway: they showed that they could do push-ups and squats
outdoors (Aggeler, 2020). For our purposes, however, the gym protests underscore an
important analytical question: how does the advent of a global health crisis affect the
causes and consequences of social movements in the United States? The gym rats
protest illustrates that the pandemic caused government action which generated new
grievances among the citizenry, created new alliances among actors inside and outside
of government, and mobilized the aggrieved to advocate for political change. In this
case, frustrated work-out enthusiasts found common cause with proprietors and
patrons of restaurants and bars and hoped, by engaging in peaceful protest, to pressure
Florida Governor Ron DeSantis to open up the state immediately. They were not the
only protestors advocating for businesses to open. In other parts of the country, includ-
ning California, Colorado, Illinois, Tennessee, Washington (Deliso, 2020), Michigan
(Press, 2020a), Texas (Press, 2020b), and Wisconsin occasionally armed demonstra-
tors answered Donald Trump’s call to “liberate” states and gathered outside of state
capitols to protest stay-at-home orders, sometimes violently (Shepard, 2020).

While the grievances and alliances are new, the dynamics motivating them are not.
Like other systemic shocks, the pandemic caused widespread disruption, and the real
or perceived losses felt by swaths of the population spurred protest (Meyer, 2004). The
Great Recession of 2008 mobilized citizens across the political spectrum. In the United
States, the largely conservative Tea Party movement pressed politicians to lower taxes,
decrease the national debt, and oppose universal health care (Meyer & Van Dyke,
2014; Rohlinger et al., 2014), while the progressive-minded Occupy Wall Street move-
ment focused attention on economic inequality (Gitlin, 2012). And political contention
emerged globally (Castañeda, 2012; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson,
2012); disruption as an impetus for widespread mobilization is not the only similarity
among protests pre- and during the pandemic. Expressions of emotion (Goodwin
et al., 2001; Jasper, 2011), the use of digital media to organize people in space and time
(Earl & Kimport, 2011) as well as the importance of existing movement groups to
harness the energy and resources of individuals looking to get involved (McCarthy & Wolfson, 1996) are all common characteristics of protests.

In this paper, we mean to sort what’s new—and not so new—about protests in the pandemic. The global COVID-19 pandemic is a unique moment in history, with no health emergency remotely similar in just over a century. By looking analytically at the effects of this dramatic change in opportunities and grievances for a vast range of constituencies to effect change, we can better understand the relationships of movements to the world around them. We begin by considering the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant government response, which alters the structure of political opportunities, that is, the world around a social movement that affects the prospects for mobilization and potential influence facing activists (Meyer, 2004). In addition to making some issues more salient or pressing, the pandemic—and government measures taken in response—altered the conditions under which people could organize and be mobilized. Here, we draw on media coverage, press releases, emails, and other available primary data sources to consider a range of movements that emerged during the pandemic on the right and left, and highlight what is novel, and potentially consequential, about protests during the COVID-19 pandemic. We note asymmetrical effects on different constituencies, with activists on the right less constrained by the pandemic than those broadly on the political left. Finally, we consider the potential outcomes of these protests during the pandemic and extending afterward.

**Political Opportunities Favoring the Powerful: Mobilizing Conservatives**

The discovery of a novel coronavirus in China in January of 2020 delivered a shock to global politics, and to the domestic politics within all affected countries. The harshest and most dangerous infection to torment the world since the so-called Spanish Flu (it probably originated in Kansas; see Barry, 2004), the public health crisis presented challenges to international politics, governance, and economic and social life. Nations approached the pandemic with varying degrees of commitment; affected nations imposed some combination of more and less strict quarantines, restrictions on international and local travel, mandates to wear face coverings, and offered varying policies on virus testing and economic support. Governments approached COVID-19 with widely varying constraints, depending not only upon wealth and the quality of government, but also the raw materials of demography, population density, and infrastructure. Urban areas dependent upon mass transportation, for example, were presented with different challenges than rural areas. The strength of the state and the extent of political compliance also mattered. The governments of Wuhan, China and New Zealand imposed strict regimes that would be extremely difficult to replicate in the United States. China could impose such strictures because of the dominance of the national government and the party over the citizenry. New Zealand could do so because the citizenry had largely bought into the government’s legitimacy in dealing with a crisis.
These differences mattered because they shaped both citizen grievances and the available channels for acting on them (Meyer, 2004).

Governmental response in the United States was particularly inconsistent, scattered, and ineffective, which gave rise to numerous grievances among citizens as well as plenty of opportunities for them to advocate for political change. Of interest here is how the pandemic affected prospects for protest on the right and left differently.

There were at least three, related factors that contributed to an opportunity structure that encouraged protest, particularly among conservatives opposing school closures, stay-at-home orders and mask mandates as well as citizens who believed COVID-19 was a hoax. First, the inconsistent federal response to the pandemic created a powerful elite ally and a window of opportunity for protest. Although the federal government supports bureaucratic institutions charged with maintaining public health and even dealing with epidemics, the Trump administration initially diminished the urgency of the viral threat and rejected the primacy of scientists and public health officials (Tollefson, 2020). At the end of January 2020, the administration recycled and repurposed policies restricting travel first from China, and later, from parts of Europe, while talking about sanctions (Mason et al., 2020; Soergel, 2020). Then, the Trump administration insisted that state governments take the lead in managing testing for the virus and additional public health responses. On occasion, Trump offered support to states seeking protective equipment or medical support, but such support was inconsistent and, sometimes, the administration commandeered medical supplies that states had arranged to buy. In mid-April 2020, Trump first demanded that states “open up,” and, then, issued a set of nonbinding guidelines outlining a reduction in restrictions on social life and commerce, and a resumption of full-time, in-person public schools with minimal limitations (Liptak et al., 2020; Shear & Baker, 2020). Putting additional pressure on governors, Trump took to Twitter and urged Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia to “LIBERATE” (Breuninger, 2020). Trump’s call, amplified by a powerful conservative network, spread across social media, spurring protests outside of state houses across the country (Gabbatt, 2020; Meyer, 2020a; Stanley-Becker & Romm, 2020).

Second, absent a strong response to the pandemic from the federal government, state and local governments were forced to fill the gap. Not surprisingly, officials from different political parties did not always agree on the risks COVID-19 presented or on how to manage local health conditions, which also gave aggrieved citizens elite allies and created opportunities for protest. In some states, the governors assumed a similar stance to Trump and initially pushed the pandemic response to municipalities. Florida governor Ron DeSantis of Florida, for example, refused to close the beaches and was slow to issue social distancing guidelines to spring breakers flocking to the state. In a March 2020 statement, DeSantis said that he was leaving it up to localities to decide how to respond to crowded beaches (Ritchie & Glorioso, 2020). His hands-off approach changed in the summer, when DeSantis declared that all K–12 schools would fully reopen in August, and, in September, declared Florida open for business without restriction, overruling local prerogatives (Solocheck, 2020). Some local governments mandated that citizens wear face coverings in public (Morgan, 2020), spurring a rash
of anti-mask protests in counties where mandates were in place (Huriash, 2020; Huriash & Olmeda, 2021). DeSantis ultimately sanctioned citizen resistance; first by making face mask policies unenforceable in the state and, then, by pardoning anyone penalized for violating COVID-19 guidelines in Florida (Huriash & Olmeda, 2021; Reimann, 2021).

Finally, the electoral cycle, which presents opportunities for citizens to capture the attention of elites in normal circumstances (Meyer, 2004), intensified political polarization. Politicians on both sides of the aisle stoked the fears of citizenry, and fundraising and astroturf (or fake grassroots) groups channeled partisans into contributing money as well as action on Election Day. Democratic presidential nominee, Joseph Biden, suggested that Trump was an inept and corrupt president, who, if reelected, would continue to fumble the health crisis and line the pockets of the wealthiest 1% (Unknown, 2020b). Republican rhetoric was even more harsh. Vice President Mike Pence warned that Americans wouldn’t be safe if Biden won (Unknown, 2020c), and, in his speech accepting his renomination, Trump attacked Biden directly and argued,

This election will decide whether we SAVE the American Dream, or whether we allow a socialist agenda to DEMOLISH our cherished destiny . . . whether we will defend the American Way of Life, or whether we allow a radical movement to completely dismantle and destroy it (Unknown, 2020b).

While channeling social movements into institutional politics is not new (Piven & Cloward, 1977), the concerted efforts of actors inside and outside the Republican Party to construct opportunities for citizens to protest against the legitimacy of American institutions and its electoral process is. The “Stop the Steal” movement provides a good example. The phrase was coined by Trump ally Roger Stone in 2016, and was used to defend Trump’s Republican nomination and, then, to protest a potential Hillary Clinton victory. The phrase emerged again in 2018 in Florida during the state’s close Senate and gubernatorial races, and during the 2020 presidential race (Holt, 2021). Leading into the election, Trump repeatedly asserted that mail-in voting, which was expanded in some states because of the pandemic, would increase fraud and confusion. He argued that Democrats would use the chaos of the pandemic to try and “steal” the election by manipulating the mail-in vote, and urged his supporters to “vote twice” as well as to monitor polling places very carefully (Oliphant, 2020; Silva, 2020). Trump was not alone in raising the alarm. The “Stop the Steal” movement benefited from a complex conservative media ecosystem built over the last 30 years, consisting of conservative groups, think tanks, elected officials, talk show hosts and news outlets, all working synergistically to spread disinformation about the election and intentionally blurring the line between those movements challenging the status quo and institutional politics (Holt, 2021; Rohlinger, 2021a; Schradie, 2019).

Arguably, the pandemic, which undermined normal face-to-face campaigning as usual impossible, made spreading the “Stop the Steal” message even easier. In normal circumstances, public attention is a scarce resource and elite actors compete with movement actors and others for this attention (Gamson, 1990; Hilgartner & Bosk,
1988). This is true even in the digital age because the number of outlets catering to niche political predispositions abound (Tufekci, 2013). During the pandemic, however, journalists and industry experts found that Americans, largely stuck at home, spent lots of time online, engaged in a range of activities, many of which had nothing to do with work (Koeze & Popper, 2020; Wolf, 2020). Between September 1, 2020 and February 2, 2021, 8,200 online stories contained “stop the steal.” These articles garnered 70,000,000 engagements on various platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and Reddit; more than 43.5 million of these engagements were in December 2020 (Holt, 2021).

In sum, Trump, aided by allies in government and mass media, exploited his own administration’s inconsistent response to the pandemic to nurture grievances and fear, while casting himself as a victim of democratic malfeasance. Over time, all of these efforts focused, ultimately unsuccessfully, in keeping Trump in office (Rohlinger, 2021a). Even in the wake of the 2020 presidential election, once it was clear that Trump had lost the election, he and his supporters intensified the “Stop the Steal” efforts, filing scores of unsuccessful lawsuits, pressuring Republican election officials, and working to rally his base of support (Cummings et al., 2021; Gardner, 2021; Holt, 2021).

On January 6, 2021, the day that the new Congress met to certify Electoral College votes from the states, a Trump-led rally led to an invasion and attempted occupation of the Capitol building by the defeated president’s supporters. Trump spoke to a large group of disappointed supporters (Naylor, 2021) urging them to go to the Capitol to show their support for the incumbent and pressure members of Congress, particularly the Vice President, to reject the election’s results. Trump promised to march with them, but retreated to the White House, from where he watched televised scenes of some of his supporters storming Capitol barricades, battling with police, and bustling through the building (Petras et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2021). In retrospect, while it’s clear that at least some of the Capitol invasion was planned and coordinated by far right groups, it’s quite likely that some participants were just caught up in the moment (Rohlinger, 2021b).

It took hours for the president to tell the demonstrators to vacate the building, and for Capitol police, aided by the military, to clear the building and allow elected officials to return and certify the election results (Petras et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2021). Even then, most Republican representatives—and more than a few Republican senators—followed Trump’s lead and protested the results (Sprunt, 2021). At once, a number of events are striking. First, protesters effectively, albeit relatively briefly, seized control of the nation’s capital building for the first time since the War of 1812. Second, although the pandemic was still well in progress, there were no visible signs of accommodation to the risks of transmitting an airborne virus. Third, for the first time, a defeated president refused to accept the results of an election. Fourth, and most significantly, both Trump and his grassroots supporters were able to command the quiescence of a large majority of institutional Republicans, even after he left office (Jackson, 2021).
Political Opportunities and Fights Against Inequity: The Progressive Movement Finds Corporate Allies

When a global pandemic hit the United States, it shook up what people considered urgent and possible. In fairly short order, the pandemic changed the daily realities of Americans and made some issues salient at the expense of others. Economic and racial inequity were two issues that gained national prominence, particularly among liberals and young people. Economic inequality had grown in the United States since the 1970s, and even the boom growth of the internet under one Democratic president, and the recovery from the Great Recession presided over by another did little to slow the move to even greater inequality (Wolff, 2018). As states across the United States shuttered schools and businesses to slow the spread of COVID-19, many upper income workers, in technology, education, or investment, for example, were able to continue their work at home, but their experience was hardly universal (Robinson et al., 2020). It became clear that many essential workers—janitors, migrant workers, grocery store employees, delivery drivers, workers at meat-processing facilities, and Amazon warehouse employees—were poorly paid, lacked health insurance benefits, and were essentially forced to work in unsafe conditions.

At the same time, other longstanding issues became more visibly urgent. The pandemic laid bare the consequences of institutional racism. Black Americans, who are more likely to have preexisting medical conditions, less access to health care, and work in low-wage jobs, have COVID-19 rates approximately five times higher than White Americans. The same is true for non-Hispanic American Indians and Alaska natives (CDC, 2020). The spotlight placed on the infection rates of Black Americans coupled with deaths of three unarmed Black people—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd—at the hands of current and former police officers and a president known for using race and racism to mobilize his conservative, white base (Bobo, 2017) fueled widespread outrage. Millions of Americans took to the streets in protest of racism in the criminal justice system (e.g., Morris, 2021).

Unlike other political moments, however, the causes of economic and racial inequality did not remain siloed, creating new opportunities for activists to illustrate how interlocking oppressions affect the lived realities of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) Americans. For instance, on Mayday workers from Amazon, Whole Foods, Instacart, FedEx, Target, and Walmart engaged in a series of work stoppages to advocate for better practices and equipment to protect workers from contracting COVID-19 and to press corporations to do more for employees who fell ill with the virus (Ghaffary, 2020a, 2020b). Protest organizers explicitly connected the dots between racism, structural inequalities and health (Del Ray, 2021). These efforts continued throughout the summer with workers staging walkouts and caravanning from, in the case of Amazon, one distribution center to the next in states where cases were on the rise (Brémond, 2020; Dickey, 2020).

Trump played an important role in changing the structure of opportunities available to liberals during the COVID-19 pandemic. His presidency was a prime provocation for movements on the left (Meyer & Tarrow, 2018). His electoral campaigns which,
among other things, appealed to racist resentment and anti-immigrant sentiments among White Americans (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; McVeigh & Estep, 2019), created the conditions under which activists could coalesce around progressive issues, and connect causes that seemingly were disparate in the eyes of average Americans. The potential to create new coalitions was evident immediately after Trump’s election. The Women’s March, for example, was spearheaded by four seasoned activists interested in sponsoring an event to push back on Trump’s rhetoric, which involved issues as varied as racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-science, anti-environmentalism, and reproductive rights (Fisher et al., 2017). The march mobilized more than two million Americans and laid the groundwork for the sustained protests visible during the pandemic (Fisher, 2021).

A key difference between protest on the left and right was the unwillingness of liberals to ignore the health risks of protesting during a pandemic. Organizers tried to find ways to establish a public presence while navigating the constraints of social distance and good hygiene. A relatively small group of activists dressed in protective gear assembled at appropriate distance in front of Trump Tower, leaving stylized body bags in front of the office and residence in Manhattan (Truong, 2020). The demonstrators explicitly criticized Trump’s haphazard response to the pandemic, incorporating the charges into a much longer set of grievances. Groups concerned with the rights of immigrants staged drive-by protests outside of detention centers, assembling scores of cars driving slowly and honking (Graceffo, 2020). Using cars to create a tableau, make noise, and take up space wasn’t completely new, and in the early days of pandemic protest, it generated attention.

A critical event galvanized collective action on the left, and Black Lives Matter provided the umbrella for gathering protest on intersecting inequalities. In May 2020, a video depicting a police killing of a Black man in Minneapolis circulated widely on social media. George Floyd, a man in his 40s, was apprehended on suspicion of trying to pass a counterfeit US$20 bill. The video showed one officer kneeling on Floyd’s throat for nearly 9 minutes, while Floyd gasped that he couldn’t breathe and called for his mother. Three other Minneapolis police officers stood by (Taylor, 2021). The dramatic and disturbing video spread quickly on all sorts of social media, and then mainstream media, and came at a time when many people were still home and had more time to watch. It also came on the heels of two other highly publicized and very shocking killings of Black people. In February in a coastal South Georgia neighborhood, three White men in a truck chased Ahmaud Arbery, who was jogging in their neighborhood, shooting and killing him. In March, heavily armed police had shot a Louisville EMT, Breonna Taylor, while enforcing a search warrant; asleep in her bed, Taylor died after being shot 8 times. George Floyd’s death turned out to be the last straw; demonstrations started almost immediately, and spread rapidly from Minneapolis to the rest of the United States and then beyond. This new round of protests against racialized police violence deployed familiar tactics and slogans, but was extraordinary in its reach. Observers found that the George Floyd demonstrations appeared to be the largest, broadest, and most covered political protests in American history (Buchanan et al., 2020; Heaney, 2020; Putnam et al., 2020).
Despite some similarities with protests of the past, the pandemic protests were unusual in several ways. First, the organizational foundations of the protests were exceptionally diverse. Novice organizers put together demonstrations in Camden, New Jersey, Red Hook, New York, and in towns all across Texas (Meyer, 2020c, 2021a). The compelling stories of each demonstration are distinct: an underemployed student or the owner of a business shuttered by quarantine or someone else newly politicized posts an announcement of a time and a place, followed by #BlackLivesMatter (Meyer, 2020c). With so many people spending so much time at home, there was an unusually large number of Americans available for mobilization, with a shared focus on transmitted incidents of racialized police violence.

Second, this very diverse and decentralized leadership meant that there really was no one to direct the course of the emerging movement, which largely focused on stemming police violence against Black Americans. A focus on state and local policing was, in part, a function of Trump’s response to initial protest, which made clear that efforts to effect national change would fall on deaf ears. After signing an executive action on policing, Trump quickly pivoted to a strong law-and-order message and lashed out at demonstrators calling them “anarchists,” “agitators,” and “lowlifes.” (Nakamura & Hermann, 2020). The Black Lives Matter frame and organizations provided a ready identifier for the emergent movement (Bennett & Sergerberg, 2013; Buchanan et al., 2020), but there was no identifiable spokesperson in a position to advance some set of unified goals, to negotiate authoritatively with political authorities about reforms, or to provide the movement with a common template for managing diverse perspectives and people. Public stances and police responses varied locally, with politicians more (or less) eager to endorse and participate in an event or a march, often depending on their political party and alignment with Trump (Unknown, 2020a; Vetterkind, 2020). Differences were particularly clear around calls to defund the police, which, for some activists, represented a call to re-envision policing in America and, for others, was a call for funds to be reinvested in social and community services (Novacic, 2021).

Third, the demonstrations generally featured more diverse crowds (Buchanan et al., 2020). To be sure, Whites and other ethnicities had participated in earlier Black Lives Matter protests, but not to the degree that observers noticed this time (Harmon & Tavernise, 2020). The participation of more diverse crowds seemed to add political heft to the demonstrations. Fourth, the demonstrations and the cause enjoyed broad popular support, particularly in comparison with earlier social movements about racial injustice. Roughly two-thirds of Americans expressed support for Black Lives Matter; the cause enjoyed support from 60% of Whites, with even greater support from other ethnic groups (Parker et al., 2020).

Certainly, the infusion of new leadership, the diversity of the crowds, and growing public support all reflected activist work in the preceding years. Black Lives Matter started as a hashtag in the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal in the killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teen in 2013. The hashtag came to unify protests against particular incidents of police violence that had occurred for decades, giving a national profile to cases which were scattered across the United States. Endorsed by
visible celebrities, including African-American athletes, the movement established symbols and slogans that raised awareness of a persistent condition in American life. Picked up by activists on college campuses in 2015, its concerns grew to include curricula, faculty diversity, and commemorations, including statues and names, of earlier American icons with complicated, even completely horrific, records on race (Brown-Nagin, 2015). Racial justice activists had also protested against the Trump campaign from its outset, and those protests were the early outbursts of what came to be a much larger and broader Resistance movement (Meyer & Tarrow, 2018). The point is that activists had spent years raising awareness, training organizers, and building support for a cause that came to fruition in a particularly opportune and unpredictable moment.

The movement for police reform found a powerful set of allies: corporate actors. The willingness of large numbers of corporate actors to actively voice support for progressive causes arguably began in 2016 with the “bathroom bill” in North Carolina, which limited the bathroom options for transgender people and excluded sexual orientation from a statewide definition of who is protected from discrimination (Gordan et al., 2017). While generational turnover and culture shifts get some credit for the shift (Rochon, 1998), so do movement groups, which spent decades reaching out to Corporate America and advocating for LGBT-friendly policies (McGregor, 2016; Raeburn, 2004). By 2016, nearly 120 corporations saw North Carolina’s bill as at odds with their corporate values (McGregor, 2016).

Businesses of all kinds supported the Black Lives Matter protests during the 2020 pandemic. The National Football League (NFL) and NASCAR both responded to calls to address institutional racism. The NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell, apologized for not listening to players about racism and pledged his support to their right to protest. This apology came nearly 4 years after 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick first sat and then took a knee during the national anthem to protest police brutality and racism (Maske & Kilgore, 2020). NASCAR also responded to the protests and an incident in which a noose was hung in Bubba Wallace’s stall at the Talladega racetrack. While the FBI concluded that a federal hate crime against NASCAR’s only elite Black driver had not been committed, Wallace—supported by other drivers—called on NASCAR to ban the flag outright, noting that fans should not be uncomfortable at races (McCarriston, 2020). NASCAR lept at the opportunity to ban the flag, a measure leadership had been eager to take to diversify the audience and market for the sport, and ruled that it would no longer allow the display of the Confederate flag at its events or on its properties (Gleston, 2020). The flag and by extension white supremacy are in embedded in NASCAR’s history (Newman, 2007; Newman & Giardina, 2008); in 2015, NASCAR asked fans not to bring the flags to races after photos circulated online of the White man who killed nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, S.C., posing with it. The request was largely ignored. The protests gave NASCAR coverage to do more.

Media corporations also responded to the killing of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests by pulling shows that portrayed law enforcement as quintessentially good (Schneider, 2020). Live action programs such as Cops and Live P.D. are criticized for their selective take on policing and glorifying the abuse of citizens at the hands of law enforcement officers—all in the name of preserving order (J. Fishman,
In 2013, the same year the Black Lives Matter movement emerged, Color of Change, a racial justice organization, called on the Fox network to drop *Cops* from its lineup because it offered a “distorted and dehumanizing portrayals of black Americans and the criminal justice system.” The group added, “Although marketed as unbiased, *Cops* actually offers a highly filtered version of crime and the criminal justice system—a ‘reality’ where the police are always competent, crime-solving heroes and where the bad boys always get caught” (Sperling, 2020). Fox canceled the program, which was quickly picked up by another network. Both shows, however, were canceled during the 2020 pandemic. Individual actors and artists responded to the protests as well. The platinum-selling country band, The Dixie Chicks dropped “Dixie” from their name and became The Chicks, and Jenny Slate and Kristen Bell quit voice roles as Black characters on animated shows, announcing that the roles should have gone to actors of color.

Corporations are limited political allies. They leverage capital to their political advantage, which can weaken a state’s policy-making authority (Pellow, 2001). This has implications for movements because, while a corporation may choose to back an existing group or campaign, it may also create opposing organizations to champion its positions (Rohlinger, 2020; Walker, 2014). The point is that corporations increasingly are part of the polity and, like other actors, they will use their power to affect change that supports their interests (de Bakker et al., 2013). Additionally, corporate support may be relatively short-lived or weak. Corporate actors often are loath to change a system from which they largely benefit, and, after a brief hiatus, will resume business as usual. For example, some of the same corporations that opposed North Carolina’s bathroom bill and moved their money-making events to other states quietly donated money to republican political campaigns the following year (Juney, 2016; Morrill & Off, 2017). More recently, in 2021, corporations have spoken out against “voter-integrity” laws, which have passed in Republican-dominated states, that purport to make voter fraud more difficult (Unknown, 2021). In a statement regarding Georgia’s new law, Ed Bastian, CEO of Delta Air Lines, who pressured legislators to eliminate broad swaths of the bill, called the final bill “unacceptable,” adding that it “does not match Delta’s values.” Governor Jack Kemp accused Bastian of being duplicitous regarding their negotiations and of spreading “the same false attacks being repeated by partisan activists” (Impelli, 2021). While it is unclear where the truth lies, the example underscores the fact that movements may have difficulty working with partners whose financial interests are likely to supersede political goals.

**Consequences of Protests During the Pandemic**

It’s almost reckless to consider what’s likely to come of all this protest, even a year later. Even with historical hindsight, the consequences of social movements are notoriously difficult to trace. In the best of times, the effects of protest are wide-ranging and often unanticipated (Meyer, 2021b). That said, we can envision consequences for politics and movements as a consequence of these protests.
Policy change is often slow and incremental. Social movements occasionally speed up the pace of change, although rarely in conditions of their own making. Activists try to take advantage of events, elections, and shifting alliances in ways that will gain acceptance or garner “new advantages” for their issues (Gamson, 1990; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). A global pandemic, like other crises, disrupts the normal operations of political institutions and creates opportunities for social movements to push forward their goals. Protests during such a crisis can reframe national conversations and spur policy processes as well as symbolic change. While these consequences are not specific to a pandemic, the speed at which political and symbolic change occurs may be. The capture and focus of public attention during pandemics is unique. If protests break out during health crises, some politicians will be eager to channel outrage into more institutionalized forms of political participation (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Tilly, 1978) in order to curb the spread of a virus, while others may take Trump’s approach and use it as an opportunity blur the boundaries between movements and political parties with the hope of maintaining political power.

On the left, activists pushing to reimagine what constitutes public safety in cities and states across the United States advanced their cause. The first obvious responses to the protests were the indictments of the officers involved in the shooting, who now face harsh charges for their conduct in uniform; criminal charges against police who commit violent acts in the course of their jobs are rare, and usually take a long time to develop. Convictions are less common, but the officer who killed George Floyd by crushing his throat was tried and convicted, the prosecution’s case buttressed by the testimony of higher level police officials. Additionally, several police chiefs who saw themselves as reformers, like Atlanta’s Erika Shields, resigned to allow new leadership to take power; others who resisted reform, like Fort Lauderdale’s Rick Maglione, were forced out of office (Dewan, 2020; Unknown, 2020). In response to protesters’ calls for defunding police departments, Minneapolis, New York City, Durham, Los Angeles, and other cities announced that they would redirect funds from police departments, one of the few mechanisms of control elected officials have over law enforcement, to community programming, offices of violence prevention, and to tasks force charged with creating plans for community wellness and safety.

Likewise, these protests sped the pace of symbolic political change, which refers to the “transformation of a power relationship through the communication of normative and affective representations” (Brysk, 1995, p. 561). In Southern states, including Virginia, Kentucky, Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida mayors or local officials ordered the removal of Confederate statues and monuments (Treisman, 2021). The state of Mississippi was successfully pressured to remove its state flag, which included the rebel army’s battle banner, after the SEC and NCAA, a star Mississippi State football player, several national brands and the Southern Baptist Convention pressured the state legislature to rid the state of this “totem for African Americans of human bondage, lynchings, institutional disenfranchisement, systemic penury, segregated schools, substandard housing, high unemployment and more” (Lewis, 2020). None of these actions were unprecedented, and requests for action were longstanding. Protests, however, pushed action in favor of liberal movements, at least in the short term.
The point is that disruptions can be used to accelerate changes to a political system, blur the lines between institutional politics and participation, and can threaten or enliven democratic processes. But both the less powerful and the more powerful work to exploit the opportunities of the moment. While, arguable, movements and political parties always have had a marriage of convenience, it typically has been clear how citizens can work in- and out-side of the political system to pressure politicians and parties to effect change (Goldstone, 2003; Kitschelt, 1993). Now, that the lines between the two are blurred, the conservative movement and the Republican Party are largely united in their opposition to liberals. Consequently, it will be harder for the state to maintain its legitimacy and authority over time, and harder for conservatives concerned about this development to effectively challenge the trajectory of the modern movement and party (Rochon, 1990).

The protests during the pandemic also portend changes for social movements. Social movements become a crucible in which to forge an identity and engage in political education, for the self and for others (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2018). It is not clear what this means on the right, where conservatives are united by a shared sense of urgency regarding the need to get the “truth” out to a broader public. This quest to spread the “truth,” which encompasses everything from QAnon to white supremacy to concerns about secular schools and the rights of the unborn, has supplanted resentment as a tool for mobilization and unites conservatives, who many not agree on much else, under a single, big tent with a common cause (Rohlinger, 2021a; Schradie, 2019). It also means that politicians, pundits, and organizers can quickly find a new truth that needs to be spread, a campaign that requires funds and action, often animated by a caricatured presentation of political opponents. Arguably, this is one way to understand the renewed attack on higher education generally and critical race theory and gender theory specifically (Gabriel & Goldstein, 2021; Shephard, 2021). They are chimeras in a war for political power, where movements serve as soldiers for competing elites.

**Conclusion**

A global pandemic reached the United States in the midst of a highly partisan and polarized political conflict leading up to an election. We wanted to explore how that pandemic altered the protest politics of the moment—and beyond. To do so, we explored the political opportunities available to movements on the right and left, their asymmetries and the potential consequences for each. Of greater consequence are the longer term outcomes of the pandemic/protest moment. The bizarre pandemic year—or more—will dramatically affect American lives, ending some, and altering far more. The emergent protest movements offer directions and possibilities for the future. Unwritten as yet, many things are possible. Following the last 4 years, we could see continued polarization and protest, and an increasingly dysfunctional and unpopular government.

Another possibility is more attractive to us: The pandemic’s rampage across American institutions has demonstrated the potential those institutions, if
better maintained, could have in helping and protecting American lives. The explicit
denigration of scientific expertise in 2020 could wind up underscoring the importance
of such expertise in the future and resurrecting a respect for fact. And the mobilization
and engagement of new political actors could help create a more expansive ideal of
citizenship, one practiced by a larger number of people. The economic crisis resulting
from the pandemic demands a massive government intervention in the economy, with
targeted and enhanced spending not seen since, perhaps, the New Deal of the 1930s.
Investments in infrastructure, online and land, the environment and energy, and education,
a Green New Deal of sorts, could help create a more vigorous democracy—if the
movements of the moment grow and make it happen.

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