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## Introduction

And we had an election for president that was determined on a slogan called the silent majority. Do you remember that? And if you weren't in the silent majority, you were in the loud minority. That was me [*laughs*]. And there was something wrong with the loud minority. It was like "us" and "them." And we've been having those "us" and "them" elections ever since.

**—WILLIAM CLINTON, MARCH 4, 2000**

"I would like to punch him in the face," Donald J. Trump bellowed into the microphone with a schoolyard bully stare in his eyes as a protester was escorted from a campaign rally in February 2016. The attendees cheered and applauded emphatically. Trump paused, looked out over the crowd, and took in the favorable response. As he basked in the appreciation of his followers, he smiled contentedly, pleased to have shown up the protester. It was clear Trump was not a fan of the protests. In that moment, however, Trump had done something more than just express his disdain for a disruptive protester: he established a political narrative. To the rambunctious crowd at the rally and some viewers at home, the protester became the villain of this American story, and the contrarian political message he espoused was the evil that Trump would guard against.

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Trump strove to make it clear that this and other protesters did not reflect the public's concerns. Rather, they were isolated and erratic abnormalities—distractions that needed to be shunned. The rooting crowd of potential voters was “us,” and the rude protesters were “them.” This creation of a wedge between the public and protest activists, while far from original, warrants a closer look. In order to understand the contemporary narrative surrounding political protesters, we must understand the background story, which began nearly fifty years ago with the birth of the silent majority.

### **The Back Story**

On November 3, 1969, President Richard Nixon appeared on televisions across the United States to make an important speech about the Vietnam War. The opening wide-screen video shot showed Nixon in the Oval Office, sitting at the Wilson desk. California gold-colored drapes framed the background, and the American flag hung behind his right shoulder. It was a classic presidential shot. He firmly grasped his prepared remarks with two hands. Repeatedly glancing downward at his written statement so as not to misspeak, Nixon discussed his approach to the Vietnam War moving forward. Despite cries for him to rapidly end the war, Nixon told the American people that he would not immediately remove troops from Vietnam but rather would offer a peace proposal. This peace proposal would include a complete withdrawal of all outside forces within one year, a cease-fire under international supervision, and the pursuit of free elections in Vietnam.

Toward the end of his speech, Nixon grappled with the opposition that he predicted would arise from those who disagreed with his plan. In an attempt to ward off criticism, Nixon recounted his interaction with a protester in San Francisco—an experience that stuck with him. The protester held a sign that read, “Lose in Vietnam, bring the boys home.” Nixon acknowledged the freedom that the citizen had to voice this opinion. Yet he considered this protester and the activists accompanying him as belonging to a small minority in the nation.

Nixon used this experience as an opportunity to push back against antiwar protesters: “I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and who try to impose it on the nation by mounting demonstrations in the street. . . . If a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority, this nation has no future as a free society.” In concluding his speech, the president made a heartfelt appeal to those not participating in the antiwar demonstrations. He pleaded, “Tonight—to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support.”

Nixon’s speech introduced the notion of a “silent majority” to many in the public. The term had not been widely used at the time, but it had a nice ring to it. It made individuals in the majority feel as though they had power, but they were modest and measured in how they implemented their power. If these individuals who sat quietly watching the political activism from a distance were referred to as the silent majority, then the protesters in the streets could appropriately be referred to as the “loud minority.” Although the president did not verbalize this latter term, the implicit antithesis of the silent majority was a small group of whining complainers who did not reflect the true concerns of the American public or the reality of the times. Hence through his rhetoric, Nixon separated the concerns of protesters from those watching events unfold from the comfort of their homes.

The creation of this juxtaposition also established an atmosphere of “us versus them.” But who belonged to “them”? Historian Rick Perelstein indicated that protesters against the Vietnam War constituted a wide array of individuals that included feminists, hippies, students, and even rock and roll bands. “It was everything that threatened that kind of 1950s’ *Leave It to Beaver* vision of what America was like,” said Perelstein (quoted in Sanders 2016). This wasn’t just a distinction in political beliefs: the people in the “them” group were othered in more ways than one.

Opposition to Nixon’s military actions emerged from all walks of life, but some of the most ardent critics of the Vietnam War came

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from the black community. Thus not only was the loud minority a statistical one in the eyes of Nixon but it also constituted a large percentage of racial and ethnic minorities. Adding the contentious state of race relations to political difference about the war only increased the distinction between Nixon's "us" and the protesters' "them." The negative connotation of racial division that became attached to the silent majority now reflected another prominent divide in the United States at that time.

By the late 1960s, the civil rights movement had won many battles, not least of which were the sweeping Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act in 1965. The civil rights movement's attention quickly turned to the Vietnam War, however, when it became clear that a disproportionate number of African Americans and Latinos were returning home in body bags (Appy 1993; Baskir and Strauss 1978). Unfortunately, racial and ethnic minorities were more likely to be placed on the front lines of the war, and thus were exposed to a greater level of danger than their white counterparts. Furthermore, to civil rights leaders the deaths of many innocent Vietnamese children and destruction of land were unacceptable by-products of war. The fights for civil rights and international peace were inextricably linked.

Up until his death, Martin Luther King Jr. was adamant in his opposition to the Vietnam War. In his speech "Beyond Vietnam," delivered in the heart of New York City at Riverside Church, he encouraged fellow racial minorities to push back against the war. He went as far as imploring young college recruits seeking military service and ministers of draft age to become conscientious objectors, which meant they would refuse to serve in the armed forces due to a sincerely held moral or ethical belief that war is wrong. In referring to Vietnam, King (1967) stated that "these are the times for real choices and not false ones. We are at the moment when our lives must be placed on the line if our nation is to survive its own folly. Every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest."

Indeed, protesting the Vietnam War became a priority for the civil rights movement—a fact well known to the American people at that time. So when Nixon asked for the silent majority to stand up

and push back against the loud minority, the suggestion had a racial bent that insinuated a hard line of competition between voices in the minority community and broader US preferences.

The divisive “silent majority” term and racial connotation that it carried in the 1960s died out in political discussions over the next several decades following Nixon’s presidency. Yet this hiatus from the use of this term in political discourse came to an abrupt close as the controversial millionaire mogul Trump entered the world of politics. During his campaign for president, much of Trump’s rhetoric tugged at the nostalgia felt by some of his supporters for the “good old days” of America.

Walking along and fielding questions from reporters in 2015 early in his campaign, Trump turned to a camera to address the momentum he had gained in the polls. “You see what’s happening and now they say I’m going even higher. The country is fed up with what’s going on.” Trump continued his explanation by resurrecting the famous phrase from Nixon: “You know, in the old days they used the term ‘silent majority’; we have the silent majority back, folks.” President Trump’s revitalization of the phrase “silent majority” cleverly linked his campaign with that nostalgia. By indicating that the silent majority was back, Trump established that his supporters, “us,” were the majority, and quite different from the disruptive protesters, branded as the less popular “them.”

Trump would go on to make this tagline a staple of his presidential campaign, now rebranded and with more vigor. In a rally hosted in Alabama on August 21, 2015, he announced, “We are going to have a wild time in Alabama tonight! Finally, the silent majority is back.” In Arizona on October 29, 2016, he declared, “The silent majority is back. In ten days, we are going to win the state of Arizona.”

The Trump campaign and supporters even created signs that stated, “The Silent Majority Stands with Trump.” These signs continued to be sold online on Amazon for the low price of \$14.35 even after the election. What was once an implicit divide, alluded to by President Nixon, was now Trump’s explicit line drawn in the sand separating protesters from nonprotesters. And if protesters crossed that line, they would be met with unwavering hostility.

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Trump's words not only established a divisive political mood; they were demeaning and vitriolic to protesters. In June of the 2016 election year, Trump could be heard stating that he longed for the good old days when people could directly confront protesters and send them out of events on stretchers. Just a few months earlier, a protester was beaten to the ground and repeatedly stomped in the head by Trump supporters at a campaign rally. When asked about the situation, the then presidential hopeful confidently replied, "Maybe he should have been roughed up."

Even after Trump was elected to office he acknowledged that he knew there was a negative perception of the divisive term and how it related to protests. In remarks given at a roundtable discussion with county sheriffs and reporters, Trump (2017) stated,

And a lot of people agree with us, believe me. There's a group of people out there—and I mean much more than half of our country—much, much more. You're not allowed to use the term "silent majority" anymore. You're not allowed, because they make that into a whole big deal. . . . But there's a group of people out there—massive, massive numbers, far bigger than what you see protesting.

Trump's words, like Nixon's statements a half century prior, indicate that protesters in the streets and the nonprotesters observing them at home have conflicting political perspectives on issues. It is therefore widely assumed that the act of protesting is the sole indicator of political discontent, and inaction is a validation of the status quo. The duality suggested by notions of the silent majority poses important questions: Do protesters remain on the opposing side of the political aisle from nonprotesters, or do protests resonate with the American public and shape political preferences? Do protests affect the outcome of elections and shape our democracy? This line of questioning rekindles an old debate regarding whether the silent majority, nonprotesters, is influenced by the loud minority, the activists in the streets.

This book attempts to answer these questions by making a bold shift away from separating protest and elections, and instead

showing how protest activity spills over into the electoral process. Historically, political protest has been spurred by voices within marginalized groups, by those people who express the concerns of the repressed, and are seen as belonging to radical and isolated segments of society. Conversely, electoral outcomes in democracies demonstrate the will of the people and represent majoritarian preferences. As a consequence, political protest is often viewed as being a contrarian perspective to the outcome of political elections. I posit, though, that protests are a part of the social learning process, and act as an avenue of social communication between activists and nonactivists. In particular, protests serve as an informative cue that voters use to evaluate candidates as well as social conditions. The increasing engagement with social media by members of all social groups has allowed protest activists to interact more directly with citizens and politicians. Activists connect through popular media outlets, which disseminate persuasive information on the particular details of an issue. Protesters can now reach the silent majority in ways never before possible, figuratively moving the public ever so closer from the comfort of their homes to the activists in the streets. Protesters and nonprotesters now occupy the same rhetorical spaces for political deliberation.

Because protests place issues on the political agenda, and work to make those issues salient to the public and individuals in power, protests have the potential to shift voters' evaluation of political candidates. These informative protests can act as a mobilizing force that draws passion from constituents, heightens their interest in a relevant topic, and later increases the likelihood that they turn out on Election Day. At the heart of this influence is partisanship ties; voters use their partisan lenses to translate protest messages into ideological fodder that then propels their political actions. Not only are voters influenced by protest activity, but potential politicians looking to run for office assess their political chances of success by observing the level of activism in congressional districts. Conceived in this manner, protests are the *canaries in the coal mines* that warn of future political and electoral change. And it is the loud minority communicating to the silent majority that makes this possible.



## **A New Day for Political Protests and a New Audience: The US Electorate**

Protests, social movements, and general forms of activism are operating in a different political climate than their predecessors.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, protests are more overtly political now than they used to be. More specifically, they are more connected to political parties. Protesters lobby outside political offices and interrupt Senate confirmation hearings. They descend on the Democratic and Republican National Conventions to garner media attention and shape the agendas of presidential hopefuls. Social movements have created political fights across a host of different issues for the public to see. The public is attuned to these political battles, and as these conflicts have become more political, protest increasingly relies on the public. The influence of protest on the public is essential if we are to believe Elmer Schattschneider's (1960, 2) eloquent message that "the spectators are an integral part of the situation, for, as likely as not, the audience determines the outcome of the fight."

In so many sociological studies of protests and social movements, the public lurks in the background as a reliable force and untapped ally that can advance activists' claims. The public can be particularly effective in helping to further a movement's political agenda. In a democratic system, the silent majority that stands on the sidelines is protesters' implicit link to government. These are the people who can make protesters' political goals reality—by voting. For all its importance, we know little about the public's *political* response to social movements.<sup>2</sup> I emphasize political response to highlight the power of the public to shape the political landscape and public policy. The public holds a precious place in political science for the influence it wields and is viewed as an unbiased arbitrator willing to consider all concerns. The public is an audience to which politicians can offer

1. Throughout the book, I use the terms "protest," "social movement," and "activism" interchangeably to refer to the same form of political behavior.

2. Kenneth Andrews, Kraig Beyerlein, and Tuneka Tucker Farnum (2016) make a similar point.

their appeals to circumvent institutional gridlock. For presidents, the act of “going public” allows them to speak directly to the public to create pressure on other branches of government to support the executive agenda. Protest activists also avoid traditional political tactics and address the public directly to ensure that their voices are heard (Lee 2002; McAdam and Snow 1997, 326). The public is a necessary component of social movements’ political opportunities (Gamson and Meyer 1996).

Scholarly studies discuss the mass public as a broad entity, inclusive of all segments of society with all its different forms of activities and interests. This gives the impression that the public constitutes everyone in the United States—that there is an all-encompassing public that protesters are speaking to in their calls for social change. If we seek to understand the political consequences of social movements among the masses, however, then our efforts at focusing on the American public at large have been misdirected. The more politically consequential audience is a subset of the public; specifically, it is the voting electorate. While it is the voting public that we are concerned about, we oftentimes do not think about the distinction. Yet there are slight but important differences between the electorate and the mass public. The electorate is more politically engaged and politically active than the mass public. Most important, the electorate carries stronger partisan ties that make it more ideological. This allows the electorate to be more susceptible to the divisiveness of politics than the public as a whole.

What is more, the increasing political polarization within American politics has forced social change to be carried out by an electorate that has replaced a less pronounced mass public with markedly partisan voters. Consequently, to understand the influence of protests in American democracy, we must also turn our scholarly gaze to this new public that centers around the voter, exploring how the electorate is affected and impacted by political activism.

Surprisingly, the link between protest and our American democracy remains a gray area of uncertainty in scholarly research due to traditional disciplinary boundaries. Historians and sociologists have explored protest and social movements, but they have largely focused on movements’ origins or what sustains them; they rarely

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draw political connections to electoral outcomes, leaving this terrain for political scientists. Political scientists have added much to our understanding of American democracy and US elections, but frequently these discussions eschew political protests because activism falls outside the bounds of formal electoral institutions and is thus deemed inconsequential—and perhaps better left to sociologists. This academic perception does not encourage sociologists to look at the political outcomes found in the electoral process nor for political scientists to study the sociology of American discontent.

Real-world events do not have the same disciplinary constraints found in academia, and we have witnessed the predicted shift that Bayard Rustin (1965) detailed in his appropriately dubbed book “From Protest to Politics.” Several historical accounts embody this shift. In the 1930s and 1940s, political activism associated with the Townsend movement, named after Doctor Francis E. Townsend, who famously called for a universal pension for older Americans, led to the congressional election of candidates who supported FDR’s proposed Social Security program (Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan 1992). During the height of the civil rights movement, the 1964 congressional election ushered a new wave of liberal Democrats who were less conservative than their predecessors into the stronghold of the South, thereby establishing a “generational replacement” that some argue led to shifts in voting alignments (Black 1978; McAdam and Tarrow 2010; Bullock 1981; Fiorina 1974). For African Americans in particular, protests were relied on as a proven political strategy to confront discrimination and place racial inequality visibly on the public agenda (Lee 2002). Similarly, race has become a frequent motivator in recent years, as groups that resist progressive changes have mobilized and taken up methods of political activism to push back, reminding us of other periods of racial strife. Voices of political protest move beyond race to touch on many issues including immigration, gender equality, and sexuality. As protest begins to interact more heavily with politics, our democratic values are challenged and our American democracy inevitably evolves.

Throughout this evolution, the most fundamental trademark of a democracy remains the effort of elected officials to glean the “will

of the people” and govern in accordance with that will. Political elections are often used to gauge this will, but protest actions can mobilize and guide the political sensibilities of the public. Protest can both represent and shift citizens’ opinions. If we fail to consider how social movements are linked to the US electorate, we run the risk of misunderstanding the true political influence that protest has on American democracy. Thus we require a theory of political behavior that links protest activism to the electorate.

### **A Common Ideological Protest Voice That Binds Protesters and Voters**

My theory of ideological protest expands our understanding of the political connection that activists have with the American electorate. The information contained in protest offers a basis for my understanding (Gillion 2013). Citizens rely on multiple sources to contextualize the happenings in their daily lives. Yes, we pick up the newspaper, reading the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*. While stories tell us about the latest dealings with corruption in Washington, DC, the increasing levels of poverty in our major metropolitan cities, and the most recent technological advance produced by Google or Apple, they usually do not get our blood boiling. They convey the news and are indeed informative, but their format lacks the passion and sincerity that would move average Americans to act. News broadcasts over television networks such as CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News are only marginally more inspiring. Even when political pundits on television networks offer impassioned remarks, it is still questionable how many other individuals resonate with the delivery of the message and this perspective.

Protest, on the other hand, is a form of news that is not only informative but evokes passion too. In conveying the passion of distraught and angry individuals who want to change the status quo, protest can bring up emotions in observers while suggesting that there is a considerable portion of the masses that also shares this point of view. Most important, protest provides an overarching and sustainable narrative about what is happening in society. This

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information frequently brings new perspectives to an old issue or highlights a grave concern that had previously been ignored. Protest narratives summarize the state of the world around us, and signal to the nation that the wrongdoings occurring on a daily basis may be so egregiously bad that they warrant an assembly of individuals giving their time and energy to push back.

The main question of this book wrestles with the ways individuals respond to and interpret protest narratives when they witness political activism. Citizens can have a spectrum of reactions to a protest narrative. For one, they can disavow the protesters as extremists who are out of touch with reality. They can also view the protest narrative as new information that updates their understanding of a specific issue and draws awareness to a potential concern. In addition, they can view the protest narrative as reinforcing their already-held beliefs and thus mobilize them to action. Much of what dictates the viewer's response to political activism will depend on the identity of the messenger, background of the person receiving the message, and characteristics of the message itself.

For individuals to participate in a protest movement, there needs to be a frame alignment whereby the citizens' interests, values, and beliefs overlap with the goals, ideology, and activities of social movement organizations (Snow et al. 1986). Some individuals do not participate in protest activity but still agree with the cause of the larger movement. This support from the sidelines requires a far lower threshold than what is necessary for one to get up and march in a protest, yet the frame alignment remains the same. If voters are to connect with protesters, they must find a common ground with them. This common ground is a similar ideological connection, built on partisan ties that citizens have with social movements. In this sense, protest is mapping onto partisanship to shape our electorate. Activism is not changing the deep-rooted partisan ties that are developed during childhood. Rather, it is temporarily fortifying those ties. Protest messages are conveyed to an American public that has become increasingly partisan, and movement activism provides a source of ideological fuel for this polarization, propelling partisan

ties. This ideological connection to partisan allegiances leads to a mobilized electorate.

A mobilized electorate can ride the waves of protest movements and engage in politics that go beyond “in-the-streets” activism. People can donate financial resources to help political candidates that they believe will further the shared ideology of a movement. Protest-motivated voters can turn out to the polls to cast their ballot and change the power dynamics on the hill. Additionally, individuals can phone bank or canvas door-to-door for political campaigns to encourage their neighbors to turn out on Election Day. Highly motivated members of a mobilized electorate can even take matters into their own hands and run for office to challenge long-standing incumbents.

This conception of protests offers a revision of the idea of the mass public. The traditional perception is that those individuals who may sympathize with the movement but do not mobilize to participate in demonstrations in the streets are free riding. The term “free riding” is a harsh classification that implies these bystanders have the opportunity to reap the benefits that might come from favorable shifts in government or policy without having to engage in the work that protesting demands for hours or even days. Scholarship has implicitly labeled the silent majority as fitting this classification of a free rider.

I push back on this notion of the silent majority. Though some citizens choose not to engage directly with a protest movement by hitting the streets, they still may play an instrumental role in that movement’s success. They do their part when they voice their preferences through voting. Even if the issues that protests revolve around do not reside on the ballot, politicians, especially once in power, can create political opportunity structures that are more or less supportive of protest messages (Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978).

Members of the silent majority, particularly those belonging to the electorate, are far from free riding when they cast a vote. They become decision makers who can collectively create fertile political ground for movements to lobby their agenda to government. This

argument presupposes that the voter and protest movement share a similar political ideological leaning. There are times, however, when voters identify with a different ideological position and oppose protesters' messages. In cases in which there are conflicting ideologies, voters are still active in the electorate, yet a differing ideological vote establishes voters as gatekeepers who are likely to elect a more confrontational government that also carries a differing ideological perspective than that of a protest movement.

The individuals in the silent majority may not speak with their protest actions, but they do bellow a boisterous outcry of social change with their vote.

### **Ideology Is in the Eyes of the Beholder: The Linkage of Social Movements through the Perception of Voters**

Although there is a link between protest movements and individual Americans, as I have previously discussed, there are also links among social movements themselves. Scholars have long written about the similarities and common threads that connect movements to one another. One vein of academic thought sees these connections as marked by contention and conflict. Social movement organizations compete for participants' support, which often comes in the way of financial contributions and time (Zald and McCarthy 1980; McCarthy and Zald 2001). The organizations that propel and ignite the movement eventually find themselves competing with one another over the public's attention. This competition is viewed as a death blow to social movements as they move from the peak of the protest wave and head down what Sidney Tarrow (1994) refers to as a competitive spiral. Another vein of academic thought, though, sees social movements as building alliances that work together in a way that is mutually beneficial. Perhaps most crucial for drawing attention to their causes, movements work together to recruit participants. Activists from one organization move across movements to share strategies, information, and resources with other organizations (Minkoff 1997). When movements form alliances across multiple

issues, they have a stronger base of engagement (Van Dyke 2003). These connections of similar interests, goals, and identities bring these groups together (Bandy and Smith 2005).

These discussions suggest that social movements have a choice on how they are linked together in the eyes of voters. Movement actors drive the contention or establish allies. Moreover, these discussions lead us to believe that protest activists are the ones who are creating the messages and frames that onlookers interpret. Yet the way protesters see themselves may be different from the way the public characterizes them and their protest message. Indeed, the way in which a protest movement defines itself along ideological lines is not the definitive classification of how the American electorate views it.

Conceptually, I argue that the electorate sees social movements as bound together and interrelated along ideological lines. Yes, hundreds of protests scattered across the country may have varying messages, different participants, and unique strategies. Nevertheless, they are inescapably judged and evaluated through the politicization of the American electorate. This is an electorate that has come to see partisan differences embedded within every facet of life and thus imprints this partisan lens on social movements' messages, thereby rendering the movements as an ideological collective. The movement might not want this classification, but it is bound to it all the same in the minds of a growing partisan voter. Indeed, all protests are ideological. It is here that this book offers a theoretical innovation.

Protests exist in a new partisan and polarized political climate. As such, what makes protest ideological is not the message or the activists of a movement, though it is true movements have become more closely linked to parties (Rojas and Heaney 2015). Rather, it is the interpretation of the voters who are embracing those protest messages that has increased the ideological bend of protest in the twenty-first century. The electorate, the masses of people who cast their ballots, looks much different than it did in the 1960s, when the silent majority was first called to the fore of the American political consciousness. The defining characteristic of the electorate today is polarization.



Scholars agree that polarization has grown and people now view many of their life choices through partisan eyes. Polarization in the United States is fueling partisanship, and partisanship is fueling how we look not only at social movements but everything in life. Even our daily choices have become partisan decisions—everything from whether to stay at a Trump hotel when you disagree with presidential politics to deciding to buy Nike shoes because they support the liberal agenda of Colin Kaepernick to eating a chicken sandwich from the Christian conservative food chain Chick-fil-A. We nourish these partisan ties through our selective daily interactions of only watching those cable news channels that buttress our point of view, or reading newspapers and sharing news links that reinforce the political positions we desire. Moreover, the personalized format of social media platforms, with their user-generated commentary, allows for the routine consumption of emotionally provocative content that ignites political anger in users more readily. We eschew those who have different opinions by unfollowing or unfriending individuals on these platforms, thereby even further narrowing our ideological exposure and reinforcing the “we” in the us versus them categorization of American culture. Partisan beliefs and ideological leanings have become so strong that they engulf other identities to form a broad political identity (Mason 2016). Protest messages live within this world and become politicalized as a result.

The media plays a role in shaping the perceptions of protest as well, and there is a political bias in the media. For-profit media firms depend on audience ratings, and in an effort to keep their viewers and attract more like them, firms suppress or highlight news events that cater to their partisan viewership, which allows them to maximize profits (Bernhardt, Krasa, and Polborn 2008). These partisan frames disseminated by the media create depictions of protest events that fortify the partisan lens that voters already possess.

Individual protests movements rise and fall. Due to their ideological link to one another, however, the connection among different social movements allows for ideological longevity to be extended. One protest issue provides a liberal or conservative foundation, and another protest builds on that ideological foundation, creating

a bond. Together these movements influence the electorate leading up to Election Day. Up until elections, protesters work to sustain their “interaction with opponents,” as Tarrow (1998, 2) describes it. This book takes us on a journey through the various stages of the electoral process to show how the public’s interactions with ideological protests matter for our democracy.

## **Contributions and Implications**

There are several contributions and implications of this work. First, in considering the impact of protest on the electorate, we must recognize that the American public allegiance to a partisan worldview has intensified. This in turn has led to an evolution of how democratic concerns and grievances end up shaping the US political landscape. Today the American public is more politicized, and growing polarization has allowed politics to spill over into every aspect of our lives. As daily life has become politicized, we must come to terms with our newly created biases in order to understand how we relate to one another in the United States. That is what protest movements are about—engaging in deliberative democracy, where one citizen is speaking to another citizen, having a conversation in an attempt to influence and change one another’s perceptions. What has yet to be explored in depth is the change in the ways this discussion now takes place. The electorate’s response to societal events has evolved, and our everyday speech and interpretations have become partisan.

Through its theoretical and empirical approaches, this book grows our understanding of protest’s impact on different aspects of the electoral process. By viewing protest as ideological, I consider the effect of protest to be more than a sum of its parts; rather, the awareness of the observer, the American electorate, changes the phenomenon itself to take on a particular significance. While scholars have previously sought to link social movements with electoral outcomes, this work expands our understanding of protests’ political influence by including a long-standing political institution (voting) in the purview of movement influence. I chart a new pathway to understanding the impact of protest—namely, as working to bring

about political change through electorate influence. In doing so, I adopt a view of protest that speaks across the disciplinary divide to engage not only with political scientists but also sociologists, psychologists, and historians.

Finally, this work argues that protest can signal electoral and political change in American government, thereby offering a refinement of how protest achieves success. Protest is not only able to influence policy decisions and politicians' actions directly but can also influence the political landscape as a whole by shaping who comes into office. As we will see later, protest can change the political actors by replacing candidates who may be less ideologically favorable to particular protest issues. In other words, protest alters its own political opportunity structure and is a foreshadowing of changes in government responsiveness.

Yet protest is not going to produce instant gratification. Protesters will not be able to immediately witness a congressional bill as a consequence of a protest event or watch the president sign an executive order on equal pay the morning after the Women's March. In this day and age where television commercials are avoided and conversations are reduced to tweets, our thinly veiled impatience and high expectations often demand monumental policy changes from protests for activism to be considered a success. While as Americans we want instant gratification, protest outcomes that take months or years to become visible are not failures, though some may see them as such. On the contrary, protest can play a role in longer-term successes throughout the election process. Protest plants the seed within the electorate today that will allow change to flourish in the future. Let's journey through the electoral process to see how this unfolds.

### **Structure of the Book**

In the chapters to come, I aim to answer the central question driving this study: Do protests influence the silent majority of nonprotesters and subsequently shape electoral outcomes?

In chapter 1, I expand my argument that ideological protest plays an integral role within the electoral process and shapes electoral

outcomes. I engage with previous theories that have minimized the role of protest in politics, but then introduce an alternative theoretical framework that highlights the value voters obtain from watching their fellow Americans express grievances to the government. The theory expounds on the overarching reach of protest actions in today's media landscape and how these political movements inform voters. The chapter offers a conception of protest that builds on previous works of informative protest activism, but with the addition of an ideological link to the electorate. More specifically, I assert that the ideological leaning of a protest is an important component for it to resonate with citizens. While protests on women's rights, for example, may address the specific grievances of gender inequality, these claims also fit within a larger appeal to equal rights and thus a larger grievance expressed by those with a liberal perspective. The specific topic of gun rights, likewise, might only speak to one portion of the conservative public, but an underlying value of self-reliance or security would also appeal to proponents of strong immigration regulation or those who oppose the expansion of the social safety net. Because voters seek out and establish information networks that correspond to their own political preferences, voters use protest events as an informative cue that reinforces their political beliefs. Protest actions signal a level of constituent discontent and vulnerability that is appealing to potential political candidates who might seek to challenge incumbents. This chapter discusses the realities of this theoretical framework for presidents and congressional leaders.

Chapter 2 charts the unprecedented rise of ideological protest and its geographic expansion over time. It begins with the adaption of protest messages by the dominant political parties, and weaves through the salience of protest issues since the 1960s and the civil rights movement, which served as the foundation of ideological protest. The chapter also expands its analytic lens to situate isolated protest events within the larger ebb and flow of ideological protest movements, juxtaposing liberal activism with the rise of allied progressive movements and conservative countermovements. I then discuss my definition of ideological protest and how to measure it. Afterward, using a novel data set that draws on multiple sources to

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capture protest activism from 1960 to 2018, the chapter shows the geographic distribution of ideological protests within various towns and neighborhoods across the United States. It highlights how the rise of ideological protests, observed by the American public, leads citizens to become more partisan over time. Most important, the chapter underscores that ideological protest can heighten individuals' personal ideology. I conclude the chapter by demonstrating how the political leanings of the national electoral map coincide with the fervor and political leanings of local protests.

In chapter 3, I explore the interconnected history of ideological protest and the national political convention. The chapter connects protest to the early stages of the electoral process, observing its influence well before Election Day. In doing so, this chapter speaks to the history of conventions—what they are, why they are important, and how their purpose has evolved over time. Stepping into the current era, I move beyond an observation of protests to gauge the perceptions and attitudes of actual protesters. Through this, I seek to better understand protesters themselves. What do they want and where are they coming from? The chapter reveals results from a four-month investigation that involved my research team walking alongside and surveying political protesters who attended the 2016 Republican and Democratic National Conventions. We find that protesters' intentions are not simply to directly influence the presidential candidates at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions but rather to use the political space and media coverage to draw attention to their causes as well as persuade the American public—specifically, the American voter. Realizing this opportunity for the media to spread their message, protesters come from across the country to have their voices heard. Citizens use political protests, however, in different ways depending on the political party they are targeting and their own ideological affiliation. Surprisingly, while liberal protests at a Republican political event are capitalizing on a publicity opportunity to persuade voters, liberal protests at Democratic events are an opportunity to persuade candidates and affect policies.

In chapters 4 through 6, I look at the actual impact of ideological protest on different aspects of the electoral process, as seen through

voters' actions. In chapter 4, I begin by considering the financial benefits of protest in the early stages of the electoral process. I demonstrate that citizens respond to ideological protest not only through their vote but also with their purse. I use the Federal Election Commission's (FEC) reporting of donations to track individual contributions alongside ideological protests related to salient issues. This chapter shows that the financial beneficiaries of protests are those candidates who share a similar ideological leaning to the protesters. Consequently, liberal candidates raised significantly more campaign funds following liberal protest over a host of different issues than their conservative counterparts.

In chapter 5, I assess how ideological protest mobilizes citizens to turn out to vote on Election Day. I approach this by examining the actions of the Black Lives Matter movement in the lead-up to the 2016 elections—a contentious period marred by national publicity drawn to the disturbingly high number of unarmed African Americans dying at the hands of police officers. The chapter gauges the electorate's response to the Black Lives Matter movement, and finds that there were both supporters and critics. Yet the political implications are more intriguing than this simple dichotomy. Indeed, the liberal Black Lives Matter movement led to a conservative backlash whereby Republicans held a negative perception of activists. However, I show that these negative attitudes were not connected to their voting activity. Liberal voters, on the other hand, embraced this liberal movement, and these favorable attitudes were associated with increased voter turnout. More astonishing, African Americans—the most ardent group of Democrats—who lived in close proximity to protest activity saw a significant increase in voter turnout, but this was not the case for African Americans living in areas with no protest activity.

In chapter 6, I further explore my earlier theoretical argument by shifting the discussion of protests' influence from national activism to protests at the local level. I take this step to highlight that citizens are more attentive to protest behavior occurring within their own communities. Protests that happen in citizens' communities build on a larger understanding of people's own social environments. I

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show that protest can draw voters' attention to salient issues, educate voters on a topic, and lead them to vote for candidates whose platforms and ideological positions are consistent with the grievances expressed by protests. In particular, protests that espouse liberal views lead Democrats to receive a greater share of the two-party vote in House elections, whereas protests that champion conservative views stimulate support for local Republican candidates. Moreover, experienced or quality candidates are more likely to run for office and challenge incumbents when there is a higher level of ideological protest activity taking place. I provide a substantive understanding of protest influence on local elections by recounting the early political career of Abner Mikva and his electoral battles in Chicago politics.

I conclude the book by discussing what the findings of this work mean for contemporary politics. Given the influence that protest wields over voters and the electoral process, this work carries a powerful implication not only for an old debate in American politics on who has a say in this country but also for the contemporary question of what role citizen activism should—and does—play in governance. Protest is an expression of constituent discontent and thus an evaluation of a politician's performance. Nonprotesting voters also use protests as a barometer to assess the importance of issues in their communities and the nation at large, and may judge their candidates against the ideologies of protest. Thus protest becomes the pulse of American democracy, indicating the inevitable changing political tide that cannot be ignored.

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