



Comparing Perceived Disruptiveness and Effectiveness of Protest Tactics

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Abstract

How do U.S. voters view the disruptiveness and effectiveness of social movement tactics? Strategically-used assertive tactics can enable movement success, though tactics considered too disruptive or violent may reduce public support. The authors investigate how U.S. voters perceive the disruptiveness and effectiveness of various protest tactics. In a representative survey experiment, 497 U.S. voters ranked the disruptiveness and effectiveness of 65 tactics. The authors find that tactics' perceived disruptiveness and effectiveness exhibit an inverse relationship and a continuous character. The findings suggest that multiple, contextual factors influence public perceptions of protests.

Keywords

protest tactics, survey experiment, voter perceptions

Activists leverage wide-ranging tactical repertoires to achieve their goals (Larson 2013). Although the strategic use of assertive tactics enables movement success (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008), tactics considered too disruptive or violent can reduce public support (Larson 2013). We build on prior research investigating the relationship between perceived violence and support for protest tactics (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018) by examining how U.S. voters evaluate the disruptiveness and effectiveness of protest tactics. Drawing from Piven and Cloward's (1977:24) suggestion that "the most useful way to think about the effectiveness of protest is to examine the disruptive effects on institutions of different forms of mass defiance," we examine whether the suggested link between disruptiveness and effectiveness is perceived similarly by U.S. voters across different tactical contexts.

Data and Methods

We conducted an online survey of 497 respondents representative of 2020 U.S. voters. Respondents were presented with randomized pairs of protest tactics originating from a list of 65, selecting more *disruptive* tactics in 10 pairs and more *effective* tactics in another 10 pairs, totaling 9,940 evaluations. We estimate the predicted probability that tactics would be considered more disruptive or more effective than another random tactic using the Bradley-Terry model

to obtain aggregate rankings from paired comparisons (Bradley and Terry 1952). Our visualization compares tactics' win probability in cross-tactic disruptiveness and effectiveness comparisons.

Interpretation

Figure 1 shows the calculated disruptiveness (red) and effectiveness scores (blue). For example, the tactic "bombing an empty government building" is most disruptive, with a predicted probability of 0.98 of being viewed as more disruptive than another tactic. Conversely, it is estimated to be perceived as more effective than another randomly selected tactic with probability of only 0.23. We observe a continuum of disruptiveness and effectiveness scores rather than clear binary distinctions. Additionally, respondents viewed blocking store entrances, disrupting meetings, and hacking websites as highly disruptive despite their lack of physical violence.

Tactics' perceived disruptiveness and effectiveness are negatively correlated ($r = -0.308$, $p < .05$). Although social movements scholarship highlights the strategic use of

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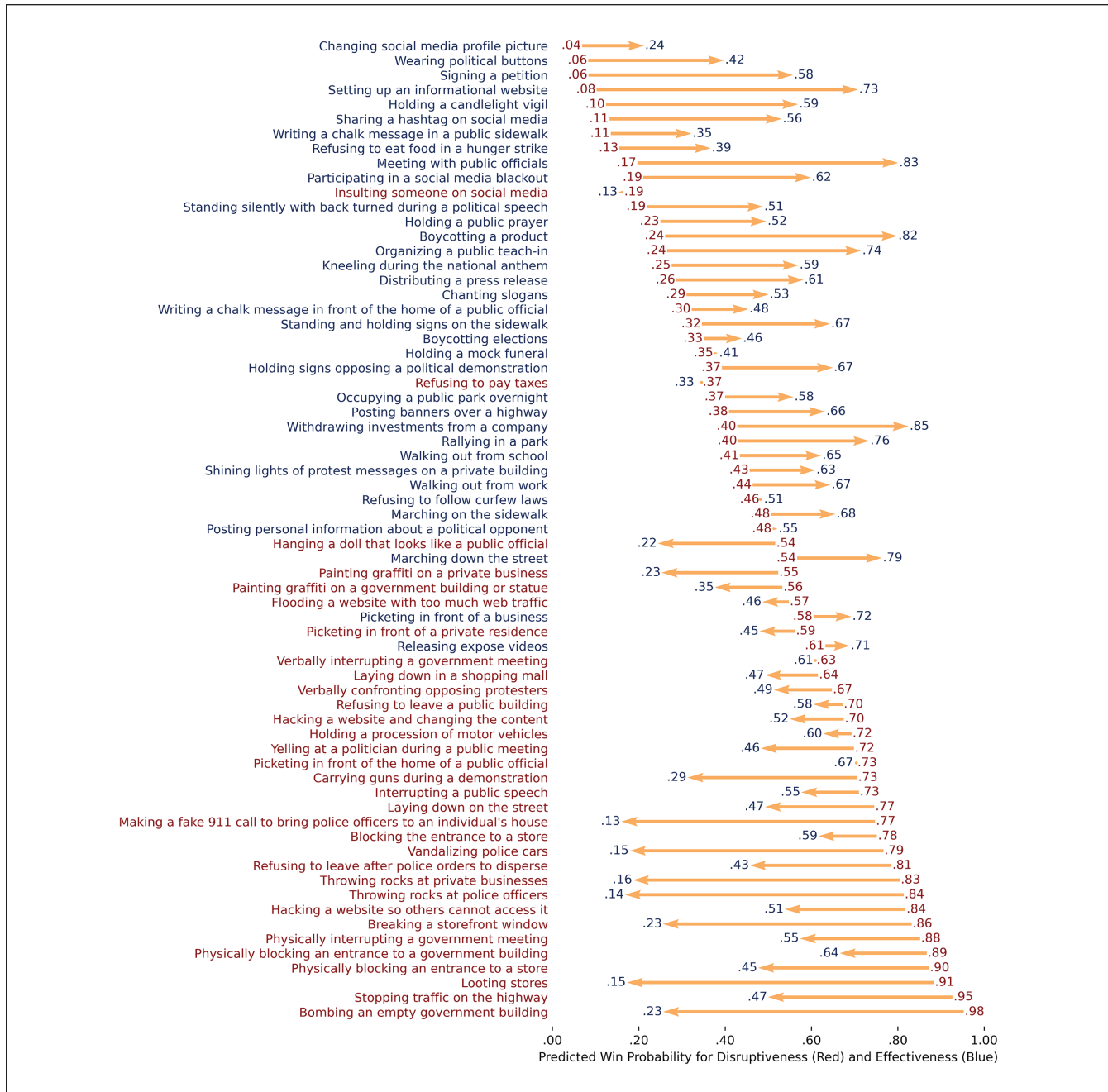


Figure 1. Predicted probability of tactics being viewed as more disruptive or effective compared with other protest tactics.

Note: Each tactic’s disruptiveness score is shown in red, and its effectiveness score is shown in blue, on the basis of a Bradley-Terry model analysis of paired comparison data from a survey experiment of 497 U.S. voters. Tactics positioned further right on the plot were viewed as more disruptive, while tactics higher on the plot were seen as more effective. The negative correlation ($r = -0.308, p < .05$) between disruptiveness and effectiveness scores illustrates how tactics perceived as highly disruptive tended to be viewed as less effective. This visualization highlights the continuum of tactic perceptions and contextual factors’ importance, particularly actors’ proximity to powerful institutions, in shaping the assessment of protest tactics.

disruptive protest tactics in social movement success, respondents consider nondisruptive tactics (meeting with public officials, organizing a public teach-in, and setting up an informational Web site) highly effective. Market-based activities (withdrawing investments), educational campaigns (organizing a public teach-in), and institutionalized political actions (meeting with public officials) are also


considered highly effective. That respondents rate tactics contingent on institutional proximity and/or economic capital as highly effective indicates potential unequal access to tactical repertoires considered most effective by U.S. voters. This highlights the importance of considering contextual factors, including the social locations of protesters and their targets, when researching perceptions of protest tactics.

Conclusion

Our visualization shows that U.S. voters view protest tactics as exhibiting a continuous spectrum of disruptiveness and effectiveness, with highly disruptive tactics perceived as less effective and institutionalized actions seen as effective but not overly disruptive. Our findings also suggest that public perceptions of protest tactic effectiveness and disruptiveness are complex, contextual, and contingent on multiple factors, including perceived violence, institutional proximity, and economic capital.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Katherine Furl is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a graduate affiliate at the Center for Information Technology and Public Life. Her dissertation examines how inequalities linked to physical appearance intersect with surveillance and pushback, social comparison and belonging, and leveraging credentials and authority across digital platforms. She has previously published work on male supremacist online communities and far-right online radicalization in *Social Psychology Quarterly* and the *Bulletin of Information Technology and Public Life*. She is pursuing ongoing research into online conspiracy communities and their connections to perceptions of (il)legitimate knowledge production.

Todd Lu is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research uses quantitative and qualitative methods to study the cultural and political impacts of social movements. His first project explores the cultural and political resonance of green jobs policies for leaders in labor unions and environmental organizations. His second project assesses the cultural impacts of Black Lives Matter on media attention to policing victims.

Austin Hoang-Nam Vo is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research examines how political action shapes and is shaped by institutional durability and change. His dissertation examines these relationships using cross-national archival data in France's former colonies. He uses both comparative historical and advanced quantitative methods in his research.

Neal Caren is an associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His current research is on contemporary U.S. social movements and the uses of media data for understanding movement processes. He is the coauthor of *Rough Draft of History: A Century of US Social Movements in the News* (Princeton University Press, 2022). His work has also appeared in journals such as *American Sociological Review*, *Mobilization*, *Social Forces*, and *Social Problems*.