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Protests, the left and the power of democracy

The American left should not squander the sea-change in public opinion of recent weeks by only preaching to the converted

From the outside, what is going on in the United States may seem bewildering. Not only has the most powerful country in the world (as well as one of the richest and most technologically advanced) proved unable to deal effectively with the pandemic; it now seems to be tearing itself apart in paroxysms of protest and civil discord. Reflecting a common view, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, proclaimed that the US was in a 'deep internal crisis'′— one which echoed, others asserted, the type of crisis that plagued the Soviet empire as it careened towards its collapse.

The US is at a critical juncture, its most obvious manifestation being protests which may be the largest in our history. But rather than reflecting or furthering a 'deep internal crisis', as Putin and other believe (and perhaps hope), these protests are as likely to strengthen American democracy as weaken it.

Moreover, they may produce victories for the left which would have been unimaginable only a few weeks ago. Whether we will look back at this time as one in which the US shifted from a path of democratic decay and discord to one of positive and progressive change will depend on many factors — not least choices made by the left itself.

Protest is a legitimate political exercise in democracies, a way for citizens to make their voices collectively heard outside the electoral process. Indeed, protesting is often motivated by dissatisfaction with that process — with the decisions and behaviour of elected officials. Large-scale mobilisation and even dissatisfaction are not, therefore, necessarily problematic for democratic regimes. By providing citizens with myriad, legitimate ways to express their demands, democracies have peaceful means of self-correction dictatorships lack.

Astonishing manifestation

The protests agitating the US are indeed motivated by dissatisfaction with the behaviour of elected officials and other decision-makers. They were triggered by outrage at the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota in late May by a police officer, subsequently charged with his murder. But they quickly grew to encompass demands that longstanding injustices and inequalities which made Floyd's murder possible be addressed. In their scale and scope — they have occurred in every state, in urban and rural areas, and included participants from every imaginable ethnic, religious and socio-economic group — the protests have been an astonishing manifestation not merely of anger and discontent but also of the potential power of democratic participation.

Within a few weeks they have had dramatic impacts — perhaps most obviously on public opinion. In contrast to past episodes when African-American citizens were killed by the police, excuses for, or rationalisations of, Floyd's murder have been absent. 88 per cent of white Americans believe the protests it has triggered are justified. As CNN's incredulous political director noted, that percentage 'don't agree on anything'.

Also shifting rapidly are views of the movement most associated with the protests. Black Lives Matter was previously criticised or looked upon with wariness by many white citizens but in the last few weeks support for BLM has increased by almost as much as in the preceding two years.

Deeper issues

Yet it is not merely views of Floyd's murder, police brutality and BLM that have shifted; more citizens have acknowledged and begun to confront deeper issues of racism and inequality. For example, six in ten white Americans now say that racism is a 'big problem' in society and over two-thirds that Floyd's killing reflects broader problems within law enforcement in the US.

Reflecting this wider shift, even deeply conservative publications, such as the *National Review* and *The American Conservative*, have recently run articles with titles like 'Seven Reasons Police Brutality is Systemic not Anecdotal' and 'America Begins to See More Clearly Now What its Black Citizens Always Knew'. As one observer of race in the US noted, 'When it comes to such a dramatic, almost on-the-spot change, I don't think we've ever seen anything of this level.'

In short, the protests reflect precisely the way democracy should work: citizens acted collectively to express their demands and the political system has begun to adjust accordingly.

And it's not just public opinion that's in flux. Businesses, sports franchises, entertainment outlets and other institutions, which had previously avoided confronting issues concerning racial justice, have shifted course too.

The National Football League has belatedly accepted the legitimacy of the 'taking the knee' protests by Colin Kaepernick and other athletes against police brutality. Several brands which explicitly or implicitly employed racist imagery have been withdrawn. Companies and other organisations rushed to celebrate Juneteenth — a holiday, previously unknown to many white Americans, which commemorates the proclamation of freedom for slaves in Texas on June 19th 1865. All this has been associated with a 'record-setting flood of donations to racial justice groups, bail funds and black-led advocacy organizations across America, remaking the financial landscape of black political activism in a matter of weeks'.

Influencing policy

The political pressure coming from the protests, the attitudinal shifts and the behaviour of private-sector and civil-society actors has already begun influencing policy. Politicians at the local, state and national levels have begun debating and implementing reforms. Congressional Democrats, for example, have put forward a reform bill (the 'Justice in Policing Act') which represents 'the most expansive intervention into policing … proposed in recent memory'.

The bill would, among other things, ban chokeholds, establish a national database to track police misconduct and make it easier to hold officers accountable for misconduct in civil and criminal courts. In response, Congressional Republicans released their own reform bill (the 'Justice Act') which, while much less far-reaching than the Democrats', nonetheless reflects a recognition of the way the winds are blowing.

In short, the protests reflect precisely the way democracy *should* work: citizens acted collectively to express their demands and the political system has begun to adjust accordingly. For change to be long-term, structural and institutionalised, however, more will be needed. Fundamental, progressive reform of society and the economy in the US will require winning elections and holding on to political power.

Which brings us to the crucial backdrop to the protests — the most important election in modern American history.

Ugliest tendencies

During his time in the White House, Donald Trump has supercharged the ugliest tendencies in American society, deepened the problems which made Floyd's murder possible and undermined American democracy more than at any point in recent history. Despite over three years of corrupt, divisive and reactionary behaviour, Republican politicians and voters had however hitherto stuck with him.

And yet, in the last few weeks, the political shift Democrats and progressives long expected and hoped for may have begun to emerge. Alongside his incompetent handling of the pandemic, Trump's authoritarian and polarising response to Floyd's death has led figures such as James Mattis, James Miller, George W Bush, Colin Powell and others to say they could no longer support him and might even vote in November for his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden.

The prominence and in many cases impeccably conservative credentials of these critics may finally lead to a 'tipping point', enabling other Republican politicians and voters to turn their backs on the nativist populism peddled by Trump. Reflecting this, the polls have begun to shift, with some now showing Biden amassing a dramatic lead.

Longstanding divisions

What should the left do in this incredible situation?

The response thus far has reflected longstanding divisions within the Democratic party and among left-wing activists. Winning elections requires building coalitions and making compromises — as well as avoiding anything which enables Republicans to shift attention away from injustices that need addressing or erodes broad but fragile support for significant change.

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Just as the Trump presidency has made crystal-clear the role played by the politically polarising, racially-inflammatory tendencies built into the Republican party since the era of Richard Nixon, the left needs to recognise that denigrating compromises and coalitions and

express anger, rather than attract a broad array of citizens to the cause.

shouting down opponents, rather than engaging with and trying to convince them, are incompatible with democracy.

We have seen these tendencies over the last days, as defences and rationalisations of rioting have abounded in sections of the left. And in a widely-reported scene in Minneapolis the mayor, Jacob Frey, a civil-rights lawyer, progressive and second-youngest mayor in the city's history, gave an impassioned speech in favour of 'deep seated, structural reform' — only to be surrounded by protesters telling him, *inter alia*, to 'get the f*** out of here', having refused to commit to fully defunding and abolishing the city's police department.

Confusing and confrontational

The demand to 'defund the police', which has been central to the protests, is designed to mobilise the already committed and express anger, rather than attract a broad array of citizens to the cause. The goal, of course, is to create a new model of policing — less violent and aggressive, more deeply and organically embedded in communities, more integrally paired with expanded social-service organisations to deal with mental health and poverty-related issues with which cops are not trained to deal.

There is broad support for such reforms, yet if couched as 'defunding' or abolishing the police majorities are consistently opposed. If the goal is to win elections and institutionalise major structural reforms, emphasising confusing and confrontational slogans such as 'defund the police' is counter-productive. Unless, of course, the real goal is *not* to win elections and power but rather to 'make a point' or mobilise the already discontented — tendencies towards which parts of the left are all too prone and have left it consistently vulnerable to being overwhelmed by a more strategic and focused right.

Now is the time the American left has been waiting for. The protests over recent weeks have been a remarkable manifestation of the power of democracy — citizens from every state and every background have made their voices heard and forced American society to confront problems which it ignored for too long. The protests have also helped turn the tide against a president who represents the greatest threat to progress and democracy our country has experienced in modern times.

But to seize this opportunity the left needs to recognise that in a democracy there are only two ways of achieving your goals: you can compromise with those who disagree with your views or you can convince them that your views are correct. Illiberal behaviour, purity tests

and name-calling are antithetical to both. The US is indeed at a critical juncture — the democratic left must recognise this and act accordingly.

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Sheri Berman
New York City

Sheri Berman is a professor of political science at Barnard College and author of *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe. From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day* (Oxford University Press).