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978-1-107-03114-2 - The Political Power of Protest: Minority Activism and Shifts in Public Policy

Daniel Q. Gillion

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The Political Power of Protest

This book demonstrates the direct influence that political protest behavior has on Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court, illustrating that protest is a form of democratic responsiveness that government officials have used, and continue to draw on, to implement federal policies. Focusing on racial and ethnic minority concerns, this book shows that the context of political protest has served as a signal for political preferences. As pro-minority rights behavior grew and anti-minority rights actions declined, politicians learned from minority protest and responded when they felt emboldened by stronger informational cues stemming from citizens' behavior, a theory referred to as the "information continuum." Given the influence that minority protest actions have wielded over national government, the book offers a powerful implication. Although the shift from protest to politics as a political strategy has opened the door for institutionalized political opportunity, racial and ethnic minorities have neglected a powerful tool to illustrate the inequalities that exist in contemporary society.

Daniel Q. Gillion is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests focus on racial and ethnic politics, political behavior, public opinion, and the American presidency. Gillion's research has been published in several journals and books, including *Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, *Electoral Studies*, and *The Journal of Politics*. Before joining the University of Pennsylvania's faculty, he was the distinguished provost Fellow in the political science department at the University of Rochester, where he completed his PhD. He currently serves as the 2012–2014 Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Scholar and the Ford Foundation Fellow at Harvard University.

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Preface

After the 2010 midterm elections, President Barack Obama acknowledged that his party had received a “shellacking.” Sixty-four Democratic members in the House of Representatives lost their jobs, the Republicans picked up six additional seats in the Senate, and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi relinquished her position to the tearful Representative John Boehner who lay in the wake of the election aftermath. It was the worst midterm loss suffered by any political party since 1938.

Before Representative Boehner went to the podium to offer his first speech as Speaker, he placed a televised congratulatory call to Tea Party activists in Ohio and said to them, “I’ll never let you down.” To some, this moment confirmed what many had suspected: the antigovernmental Tea Party protests that had taken place over the previous two years were an influential part of electoral outcomes. The non-electoral actions of the Tea Party suggest a revitalization of protest behavior in the contemporary United States. Even in the international setting, protest activities, such as the revolution that occurred in early 2011 in Egypt, have forced the world to take notice of the monumental power of citizens’ protest behavior.

I see these actions as being part of the political process that we recognize exists but grapple to understand why and

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how, or even if, protest behavior matters to federal politicians. In the United States, we have a rich history of protest from which to explore citizens' influence. And arguably, nowhere is this information more abundant than in the narrative of racial and ethnic minorities' pursuit of equality. I draw on this history to delve into the political consequences of minority protest and explore some broad questions in this book: Can minority protest change citizens' perceptions of the importance of race? Can it move congressional leaders to action? Can it shift the focus of the president of the United States? Can it impact the judicial behavior of the Supreme Court? As this encompassing work will show, the answer to these questions is often "yes." However, one-word answers do not suffice in explaining the convolution that exists in linking protest behavior to federal government actions. Minority protest has succeeded in influencing government when the social environment of protest behavior, both contentious and moderate, informed politicians of the importance of minority grievances not only in relation to other salient topics on the political agenda but also in comparison to competing protests on race-related issues.

This book does not initiate the dialogue for understanding the influence of political protest on government; I stand on the shoulders of many pioneers who have come before me and added a wealth of knowledge on this subject. Neither is this book the final word on understanding the policy success of protest activity, nor should it be. What this work does is expand our discussion of citizen activism to multiple national institutions in order to recognize the larger scope of protest's influence. In doing so, I set out to challenge the myopic perceptions that constrain our understanding of the impact of protest behavior to the fringes of American democracy, rendering it as inaudible noise largely ignored by those in the political arena. I look to move beyond this impasse and center protest activity at the heart of the democratic process that has engendered, and continues to beget, national governmental attention to racial and ethnic minority concerns.

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