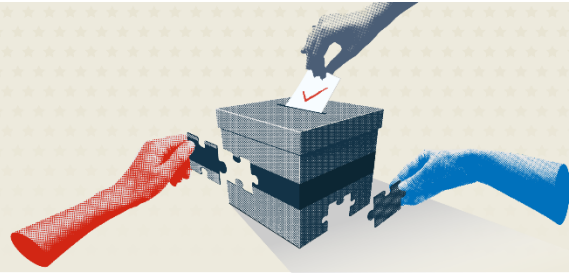


DEMOCRACY IN QUESTION

BROOKINGS



THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION *Democracy in Question* podcast

“Can democracy exist without protest?”

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Episode Summary:

Protest is a cornerstone of American democracy. It's a fundamental right, a powerful tradition, and an indicator of a healthy democracy. In this episode, host Katie Dunn Tenpas and Vanessa Williamson, senior fellow in Governance Studies, explore protest movements, dissect what makes them impactful, and examine key moments in history when the right to protest was challenged—from the abolitionist movement to the modern-day Tea Party movement.

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TENPAS: Hi, I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas, a visiting fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution and director of the Katzmman Initiative on Improving Interbranch Relations and Government. And this is season two of Democracy in Question, a podcast where we examine current events through the lens of America's political foundations, thinking about how recent events fit into the broader stream of democracy that runs throughout our history. You can find episodes of this podcast at Brookings dot edu slash DemocracyInQuestion, all one word.

On today's episode, I'm posing the question, can democracy exist without protest? In democracy, the right to protest is a core Democratic principle. It's a constitutional expression of civic duty granted by the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly, and the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Protest movements have long been the engine of democratic progress, pushing institutions to live up to their ideals. From women's suffrage to the Civil Rights movement in the United States to pro-democracy protests across the globe, these claims for rights within the polity are not signs of dysfunction, but of democracy in motion. They reflect a deep commitment to participation and accountability, a refusal to let democracy drift into complacency or exclusion.

In this episode, we'll explore how protest functions as a built-in collaborative force within democracy between citizens and their government. Through peaceful protest, civil disobedience, whistleblowing, and organizing, citizens engage in building, refining, and protecting democracy. Today, we'll examine protest not as a threat, but as a vital democratic tradition with my expert colleague on these matters, Vanessa Williamson. She's a senior fellow in the governance studies program at the Brookings, who studies taxation and democracy in America. Her forthcoming book is titled, *The Price of Democracy, The Revolutionary Power of Taxation in American History*.

Vanessa, welcome to the show.

WILLIAMSON: Thank you so much for having me.

TENPAS: So where would you like to start? How would you slice this up? It seems to me that much of your research stems from knowledge about social movements and protest movements.

[2:33]

WILLIAMSON: Well, I think it's exactly right to think of protest as an essential part of democracy, and also to imagine it as a critical political tool. So if you're thinking to yourself that in any given political fight, there's maybe a stronger party and a weaker party, for the weaker party the way for them to win is to get people off the sidelines, right? It's to get other people to intervene on their side. And that's why things like public protest are so important because it makes grievances and concerns and problems visible to others.

So you see this in all kinds of protest movements, things like, famously, the Civil Rights movement when protesters in the American South were met with fire hoses—that was on the evening news. And it meant that people in the North who didn't necessarily see the lived experience of Black Southerners every day, suddenly that was in their homes. And it was an issue that was put in front of them, and you had to pick a side. And so I think that's what protest does. Protest puts an issue in front of other people and asks them to choose.

TENPAS: And can you talk a little bit about the life cycle of a protest to a social movement? It strikes me that the protest movement has to resonate with enough of the electorate or the citizenry to the point where it then becomes a movement and then it captures the attention of the parties and makes its way into policy or legislation. Can you talk about that?

[3:53]

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, so I think one important thing to remember is, especially in this sort of very digital era, is that politics is not a public opinion poll, right? It's not the case that the thing that becomes our policies is the thing most people want or that that's how we make decisions. What actually happens is that there are competing interest groups of different levels of power, different levels of alliance, and they fight it out within a party system. And that's how a democracy traditionally works.

And so protest plays a role in that in sort of drawing attention to issues and putting issues at the forefront because the other thing that we definitely have never done in politics is address problems in their order of importance. Right? We address problems sometimes because they are urgent and sometimes because either a powerful enough interest or a large enough interest mobilizes to insist that their concern come to the front of the line.

TENPAS: And so generally speaking, what happens, like for instance, can you take us back to maybe the 19th century with some of the anti-slavery protest groups? How did they eventually sort of make their way into the realm of national politics?

[4:53]

WILLIAMSON: So, of course, the issue of slavery is not one that is resolved within our political system. Right? It's resolved by a war, so our political systems failed to solve that, address that problem fundamentally. But part of what brought the war to be was the rise of abolitionism, right? Not just anti-slavery, not just sort of soft language about how wouldn't it be great if slavery were ended someday, which many Southerners, at least of the founding generation would have agreed with. But an increasingly radical, committed movement to abolishing slavery, not in some distant future, but today.

And one of the things that happened is that that movement was always very, very small, and it was always, not just predominantly, but overwhelmingly Black, right? Free Black northerners were the backbone of the abolitionist movement. But there were supporters in the white community. And as that movement became more radical, a big part of the politics of it was the reaction, right? So one thing you see between the Revolutionary generation and say the 1830s and 1840s is the sort of

Southern political position stopped being, yes, slavery is bad, if only we could figure out a way to end it, but we can't, you know, we'll kick the can down the road. To slavery's a positive good, right? And you see these attacks on the civil liberties of white people. Things like the gag rule in Congress, they couldn't talk about slavery. Things like the policing of the mails, you couldn't send anti-slavery attacks South. And violence, right? When Senator Charles Sumner gave a very fiery anti-slavery speech on the floor, he was beaten nearly to death.

So what happened between the Revolution and the Civil War is that slavery became an issue that was inescapable, and it became increasingly clear for an increasing number of white people that this was not just about what is morally right, what is fair to Black people, but that slavery threatened the freedom of whites. And that's part of what made it an irrepressible conflict by 1860.

TENPAS: So it kind of has to be an issue whose time has come and is relevant enough for people to act on it. So I'm thinking about out in front of Lafayette Park, in front the White House, that there are protesters that I think I've seen for decades, maybe no nukes or other kinds of issues. And they keep coming out and protesting with their signs and decade after decade. And then there are other protest movements, I mean, this would have to be further back in history, but you look at the suffragettes, like they struggled to make their case heard and eventually the 19th Amendment passed. What are some of the factors at play that make for a successful protest movement that then becomes a social movement that then changes things?

[7:28]

WILLIAMSON: So, you're absolutely right that there are these huge forces at play that are completely out of the hands of any individual who wants to organize an effective movement, right? Things like a war comes and suddenly what is possible has changed. And you know, that has often been a driver of major social change in America.

But there are things that that are at least to some degree within the control of protest movement in terms of effectiveness. So there's usually a sort of mass component, so sort of a mass public component, something that's visible on the streets that any person can join, and that's a very important aspect of things. One of the things that makes movements effective is making sure that it's not excluding people who would like to participate. And this is one of the reasons that some argue that nonviolence is so effective, right? because violent movements are exclusionary, right? The grandmas in the street about any number of issues—and grandmas are very effective in the street, protesters—they can't do the kinds of physically assertive violent or disruptive politics, but they can do non-violent politics, and they can be incredibly effective and disruptive, and they can bring about change. So there's usually a mass component.

Then there's an elite component, and it's important, frankly, to have that. There always is one. And that component is, you know, people with more access to, the media, for example, with more access to leadership who can take what is always a slightly inchoate message of the masses, right? You can't put 10,000 people on the Mall and expect them to have one opinion and one statement to make. But the sort of leadership of a movement can create coherence for that movement and can

spread the message and can focus the energy of a movement on particular targets. You know, for example, if you want to change the vote of a particular legislator.

[9:07]

And then finally, there's a media component that's really significant, right? There's the how the protest movement is perceived by the media, how it is treated. And having an effective media apparatus to support your movement or at least to present it modestly, fairly, is really critical because, particularly now, when almost all the news we receive is mediated, right? we learn very little in our daily lives walking down the streets about what's happening in the world. Almost everything we learn about the world comes in through the media. So the role of the media is essential in presenting the grievances of protestors and the strength of protest to the public.

And that's a really key dynamic, right? Because any given person thinking about joining a protest movement is weighing the cost and benefits, right? They're thinking about the time or conceivably the danger of participation, depending on the context, against the possible outcome, the value. And the value is not just winning, it's also the collective action and the joy of the experience of participating in politics, the chance to make yourself heard, there are a lot of things that fall on the benefit side.

But people weigh those costs and benefits. And one of the important factors in their thinking is what's the likelihood of success? So the media's presentation of a protest movement is not just about whether they say, yeah, the issue they're raising is fair, is a fair issue to be concerned about, or you know whether they covered the movement at all, right? It's also about whether an article could start, you know, as a "part of the burgeoning protests against" issue X, Y, or Z. Well, that's something that's gonna help draw people in, in a way that, oh, "the waning protests," "the occasional protests," well, now people don't want to participate because it's not something that has got momentum.

So remembering that there are all these three components, right, there's the masses in the street, there's the elite actors who sort of frame the movement, and then there's the media's response. They're all critical to a successful protest movement.

TENPAS: I talked a lot about in the introduction about the importance of protests as kind of a representation of the relative health of a democracy. Have there been periods in our American history where protest was sort of under siege and where it may have suggested that we do not have a very health democracy?

[11:11]

WILLIAMSON: Absolutely. So, I talked about one already. If you attempted to oppose slavery in the American South, you took your life in your hands. And that could mean that you were publishing a newspaper. It didn't mean you were John Brown. You could be simply saying that slavery was wrong, and it was not safe to do so.

Similarly, you know, the entire Jim Crow period, those were one-party autocratic states, and you did not have the of free speech in those states. And it goes back earlier than that, you know, after the Revolution and the early days of the United

States, modern democracies hadn't really developed yet. And so the idea that people would disagree, that there would be factions, right? that people would be on one side or the other side of an issue, wasn't well understood. There was sort of an idea that we would have this republic, and legislators would recognize the common good and come to a conclusion. And so, we learned that's not how politics is. Actually, politics is messy. Actually, people are on opposite sides, and that's okay, it's part of the process. But people didn't know that.

And so there was a lot of concern very early days of the United States about protests seeming like, not just like a special interest, but like a threat to the country, a conspiracy against this public good that the leaders were going to ensure was achieved. So yeah, I mean, protest has always been endangered in the United States. Sometimes more than others, but it really always does indicate discomfort on the part of the country's leaders or the state's leaders with the idea of democracy.

TENPAS: Right, and it seems like some of the war protests with Vietnam also sort of generated backlash from the president's power.

WILLIAMSON: Absolutely, yeah. And then you know today too, obviously this is clearly an ongoing issue, you know the idea that for example President Trump when people protested in his rallies he regularly encouraged violence against those people. And that is an anti-democratic position, and I think it was a warning.

TENPAS: And in your prior research, there was an era where you were studying the Tea Party. Can you tell the listeners a little bit about what the Tea party is, how it got started, and kind of how you would put it in sort of the pantheon of protest movements?

[13:09]

WILLIAMSON: So the Tea Party, for folks who don't remember, was a conservative protest movement in the early years of the Obama administration. So Obama comes into office, America's first Black president, and the Republican Party was really in disarray. President George Bush had left office with incredibly low approval ratings, something like 20 percent. And Obama comes in after a very decisive victory. He's got Democrats in charge of both houses of Congress. And so it's a big moment and there's an economic crisis. So it feels like there's gonna be this big political shift.

And Obama ran on a campaign of change, right? And I think people on the left and on the center left were very excited about the change that he represented. But people on right and on far right also saw Barack Obama as a change, but they didn't like it. He represented the rise of a new, younger, more diverse America and they were frightened.

So the banner under which this sort of conservative force organized itself in the first days of the Obama administration was called the Tea Party. And the phrase Tea Party came from a rant on CNBC, by a CNBC commentator, who was angry about what he thought was contained in Obama's plans for the crashing housing market. And so he said there should be a Tea Party in Chicago. And this was picked up by the conservative radio stations and eventually by Fox News. And soon there were little Tea Party groups all over the country. I visited many of them. These were

genuine grassroots groups, small groups of, you know, older conservatives primarily who objected to various parts of what they saw as Obama's agenda. And they were very effective.

So you know in the last few months you've seen some similar actions on the other of the aisle, people holding town halls and demanding answers from their congressmen and congressmen being too afraid to show up. Well, that that technique was popularized very much in the Tea Party era. There was all this anger about Obama's health care plans. And so, you know, legislators were just shocked by their normally sleepy town halls being turned into these huge sort of circuses.

TENPAS: It turned into a ruckus.

WILLIAMSON: Exactly. It turned it into a ruckus, but that's politics and that's protest and that part of democracy, right? Democracy is not always perfectly civil. It is often contestatory.

So yes, that was the Tea Party movement. It had the sort of grassroots Tea Party groups. It had powerful media apparatus supporting it in Fox News and the conservative media, and a little bit online, though not as much as today. And it also had, you know, elite actors who were trying to harness that energy. A lot of conservatives saw this as their ticket back to power, and to a significant degree it was. That resurgence helped Republicans regain power in Congress.

TENPAS: Were they mostly in the House or were they also in the Senate too? Can you give me some rough numbers?

WILLIAMSON: It's hard to say a little bit because a lot of people associated themselves with the Tea Party and the authenticity of those connections was not, you know, occasionally there would be a Tea Party Republican who was then unseated by another Tea Party Republican who is even more Tea Party. But I think you see the beginnings of the kind of consistent movement to the right, the consistent movement who was sort of an anti-immigration right in particular in this time.

So it was in both the House and the Senate, it was the state houses, and it was in local politics too. You would see, speaking of sleepy meetings, these very small local party meetings, like a local Republican party meeting, and then the Tea Party folks would just sweep in, vote themselves into all the positions, and you know then suddenly they'd, you know, there had been basically a moribund political system, and now it was active again.

So in that sense, there was a lot to be appreciated as a political scientist about what was happening. But at the same time, there was this profound anti-immigrant sentiment and this increasing feeling that their political opponents were, you know—in the Republican Party and certainly in the Democratic Party—their political opponent were undeserving. Political activity, and I think that really feeds into what you're seeing today.

TENPAS: And, what was sort of the time frame, and did it go from being local to national, or did it start out kind of simultaneously at the national, state, and local level?

[17:00]

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, so it was definitely both national and local at the same time, and partly that was thanks to the media infrastructure, right? So Fox News could, you know, sort of send messages into the entirety of the movement on the evening news, Fox News was very popular with Tea Party supporters. But at the time, local groups could meet, right, and so, you know, they would meet in church basements, or you know, at local restaurants, and someone would bring cookies, and so it was genuinely a local event. And they talked about local zoning issues that they were concerned about, the possibility of bike lanes, I remember was very concerning in one of these meetings.

But at the same time, they were getting that national message about how, especially, frankly, it's easier to organize in opposition, right? Because you just have to say no. So how you could both be doing this local organizing and also turn out to the state house and also terrify your congressmen into not voting for Obamacare. All these sorts of issues could be harnessed together because they had that media infrastructure.

WILLIAMSON: And did their vibrancy decline once Obama stepped down? And so now how powerful is it?

[17:57]

WILLIAMSON: Oh yeah, the vibrancy of the Tea Party declined after just a few years. I mean, after, in a sense, in part because they won, right? After the 2010 elections where Obama talks about getting a shellacking, right? after that election, it was harder because the different sort of aspects of the Tea Party that could be in agreement on stopping Obama's agenda did not really agree on everything else.

So, for example, Paul Ryan and other conservatives wanted to cut back entitlements. Well, the people who were on entitlements included the people in the Tea Party, and they saw those benefits as earned. They were concerned about government benefits going to *other* people, people unlike themselves. And so, you know, there were real tensions there once you actually had to govern. That was one of the reasons you see the effort to repeal Obamacare, you know, voted on again and again and never quite managing to get over the line, because actually the act of governing is harder than the act of opposition.

TENPAS: And back to the topic about the health of democracy, when those organizations, I think many of them are academic, assess the health of a democracy, is protest one of the variables, like whether protest exists? And the basic question is, like, can democracy exist without protest?

[19:04]

WILLIAMSON: So I think it may be the case that there are more ways to measure democracy than democracies. I think that may actually be true if you really thought it through. So there are a lot of different ways of thinking about this question. And you can think about sort of a bare minimum, right? And so a bare-minimum standard is that there are elections and the people in power change. Right? That is not a high standard. That does not mean that there's a robust journalism and that citizens feel empowered to act, anyone could become president or whatever, all the things that you'd imagine that a really healthy democracy might have. So there's that bare minimum standard of electoral democracy. Not just that you have elections, but that the people in power lose, right?

But then you can imagine more than that. You can imagine a democracy that has that vibrant free speech that includes protests, that includes, you know, a healthy media ecosystem that provides factual information to voters and citizens, that holds elected officials accountable. There are all those layers on top of it. And then you can go beyond that. You know, you can talk about things like social democracy. You can talk about whether how many rights do you have if you don't have a place to live, right? How many rights you have if you're worried that you'll get fired for your political opinions? There're all sorts of layers that you can add on top that.

But I think the situation we're in now in terms of the strength of our democracy, and one reason there's so many political scientists. Despite the fact that they would happily debate about exactly how to define democracy, so many political scientists are worried is because what we're seeing now is fear of criticizing the regime. And to me, like many others, that is a real warning sign about whether democracy actually exists.

TENPAS: And from your perspective, looking at a hierarchy of features of a democracy, it strikes me that protest is near the top of yours.

[20:39]

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, right, because it gets to that question of fear. The willingness of people to go out in public and show themselves and take a risk to object to something that the government is doing, that freedom, that capacity to say no is essential, because in any given year, maybe someone doesn't vote because they had to work a double shift. We sometimes prioritize, I think, voting above all else, and elections really, really do matter. But one of the ways that you get elections that matter is by having people able to express their opposition and not be afraid of retribution. And that retribution can come in a lot of ways, right? It can come by being arrested. It can come by losing your job. It can come by feeling that the company for which you work might be punished for its role in supporting opposition movements.

And we've seen that recently, right? The willingness of the Trump administration to attack its political enemies or perceived political enemies like, say, Harvard University, or law firms that are, you know, representing their people that are the Trump administration's political opponents, that really undercuts democracy in a really fundamental way, because it undercuts the capacity of society to present options to the voters. Because without protest, without that free and open public

sphere, we can't have the conversation we need to have before election day, right? because we can't have an open conversation about what's going right and what's going wrong.

TENPAS: Right, well said. Which leads me to my final question, which also focuses on democracy. If you were teaching a high school class, what is one message about democracy that you'd want them to take away from your lecture?

[22:26]

WILLIAMSON: Democracy is not just shouting your opinion online. It's taking action with others in public. And part of that is protest, right? And one of the things that's, frankly, wonderful of every young generation is that they're very willing to protest as a rule. And I think that's great. I think that's really important. And I think that that's something that we need to preserve in a time when protest and public opinion, you know, free speech is under attack.

So yeah, what I would say is the thing that autocrats fear is actually not criticism so much. You can see this in autocratic regimes. The speech that is censored is not individual people saying, oh, the government sucks, everything is corrupt. It's the speech that organizes people. For example, "the protest is in the square on Tuesday" is much more likely to get censored than a general statement about you know everything being corrupt and bad. So when you're thinking about the power you have, you know, especially for this younger, more digitally oriented generation, part of that is not personal, it's in your network and your capacity to organize collectively.

TENPAS: It's almost as though there's a new definition of citizenship that requires far more than digital participation and maybe verbal objection. It's much more participation.

WILLIAMSON: Yeah, that's right. So I think that we're coming into an era where I think that free speech and protest are going to be under attack. And the most important thing you can do is practice those skills and to recognize that power is a collective power in a democracy.

[music]

TENPAS: That's terrific. Thank you so much for your time and your perspective. It was really interesting and helpful.

WILLIAMSON: Thank you, so much.

TENPAS: *Democracy in Question* is a production of the Brookings Podcast Network. Thank you for listening. And thank you to my guests for sharing their time and expertise on this podcast.

Also, thanks to the team that makes this podcast possible, including Fred Dews, producer; Daniel Morales, video manager; Steve Cameron, audio engineer; the team in Governance Studies including associate producer Adelle Patten, plus Antonio Saadipour and Tara Moulson; and our government affairs and promotion colleagues

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You can find episodes of *Democracy in Question* wherever you like to get your podcasts and learn more about the show on our website at Brookings dot edu slash Democracy in Question, all one word.

I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas. Thank you for listening.