

“Covid19 and Protest Repertoires in the United States: An initial description of limited change”
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I. Introduction¹

The global Covid19 pandemic, as it rose to a peak in April and May of 2020, was the kind of crisis that could spark dramatic change in US politics.² In terms of protests, however, we argue that it did not do so in terms of the dominant protest repertoire, street protests and all the associated behaviors such as marching, carrying signs, chanting, and speeches. Using media reports of protests and data collected by the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC), we did observe several important changes. These changes include: 1) protestors’ issues of concern shifting to public health and economic policies; 2) some protestors making tactical adjustments by embracing social distancing or shifting to formats that did not require social distancing (e.g. car caravans; online); and 3) medical facilities much more commonly serving as a location for demonstrations. Preliminary analysis also leads us to believe that protestors did not use online tools in dramatically new ways but probably did make use of these tools far more frequently. In other words, this was probably more of a quantitative growth, than a qualitative shift. We conclude by noting, however briefly, the extent to which these efforts lay the groundwork for the massive Black Lives Matter protests that followed the police killing of George Floyd on May 25.

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² At the time of writing, COVID has had two major phases: 1) a ramping up of the virus and establishment of “shelter in place” policies in most countries (March, April, and May of 2020), followed by a second phase punctuated by 2) the awkward and uneven unraveling of shelter in place policies from June onward (i.e., the time of this writing).

II. Crises, process and change

Covid19 sparked a major crisis in the United States. Across the country, millions of Americans spent mid-March to early May 2020 in self-isolation. As of late May 2020, conservative estimates suggested 100,000 people had died in the United States from the virus, with many others surviving but with significant, lasting damage to their health. The losses fell disproportionately on older people and on traditionally disadvantaged groups. The national government proved unable to provide centralized leadership, lacking a consistent public health message, failing to avoid falsehoods and misinformation (e.g. injecting bleach), and unwilling to oversee the acquisition and distribution of vital personal protective equipment or PPE (e.g. gloves, masks). The Federal government failed to ensure adequate testing was available and failed to create or fund systematic contact tracing. The U.S. president expressed almost no sympathy for the dead and ill, and often used the pandemic as an opportunity to launch partisan political attacks. The US economy went into freefall, with approximately 1 in 5 workers out of work (almost 40 million unemployed). Given the existence of only a partial social safety net prior to the crisis, and given the decision not to use national government funds to support all unemployed workers in a sustained fashion (unlike, say, Denmark), tens of millions faced food insecurity, a lack of health care options, and increased stress and anxiety.

Crises often serves as a moment of dramatic change in the protest environment (Langman 2013, 512; Asara 2016; Benski et al 2013). Considering revolutionary and utopian moments, Zolberg (1972; see also Flesher Fominaya 2017) highlighted these “moments of madness” when the social structure is open to change, and many people may mobilize to try to effect that change. When publics reject the existing social order, for example through protests, this “creates spaces

for alternative, if not critical discourses, views, values, understandings, and even new identities” (Benski et al 2013, drawing on Habermas). According to the historical record, “political change is indeed often concentrated in relatively short periods of radical transformation” (Koopmans 2004, 32). These liminal moments are ripe for creative change.

At the same time, perhaps an excessive focus on crises de-emphasizes the role that long-standing processes and realities play in social mobilization. Others have pointed to longstanding issues like social and economic inequality (Tejerina et al 2013). In 2020, such pre-existing factors were evident in the United States. In the absence of national health insurance, many Americans were losing jobs *and* insurance as the virus was spreading. The low level of unionization and limited power of, for example, grocery clerks, delivery truck drivers, janitorial staff, nursing home aides, and prison guards, meant they had fewer protections and had to stay on the job physically, sometimes with insufficient PPE or cleaning equipment. In contrast, many white-collar workers switched to remote working from home.

Benski et al (2013) bridge these two ideas, arguing long-standing shortcomings are exacerbated in times of crisis.³ By way of example, they point to the fact that the Great Recession was actually the culmination of years of inequality. They connect the negative impact of decades of neoliberalism to the recurrent fiscal crises that served “as dress rehearsals for what would come about in 2007–2008 with the implosion of the US financial system.” This inequality sparked protest movements in the Middle East (think Cairo’s Tahrir Square), Europe, and then the United States (Occupy). This approach fits with Tarrow’s (1989, 4) explanation of the protests of the 1960s and early 1970s as a “protest wave [that] originated in the general structural problems of advanced capitalism.”

³ Tarrow (1993, 287) seems to agree that long-term cycles or trends plus crises spark change, but he reverses the order; moments of madness initiate the process rather than serving as its culmination.

In most cases, even with underlying realities that build toward a crisis, we would still expect to see limited, not radical, change in the *forms* that protests take. In Tilly's (1995, 27-28) words, contenders "generally innovate at the perimeter of the existing repertoire rather than by breaking entirely with old ways." Scholars do pay attention to novelty, in part because it may take novel demands, frames, identities, organizational forms or tactics "for exposing political opportunities" (Koopmans 2004, 24).

Repertoires are the collective means by which participants express their grievances. They are composed of recurrent patterns with associated rules and behavior. Repertoires may include aspects like location, tactics, issues, organizational structure, and the presence or absence of violence (Tilly 1995; See also Koopmans 2004 and Tejerina et al 2013). They are "learned cultural creations" that "emerge from struggle" (Tilly 1995, 26). Particular repertoires emerge around the regular deployment of particular tools and tactics. Tools and tactics may "emerge from struggle," but they cannot be chosen willy-nilly. Rather, they are selected based on their visibility, appropriateness, accessibility, affordability, and usefulness, all of which are effected by local sociopolitical factors (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020).

Tilly (1995, 33), drawing on the case of 18th and 19th century Britain, illustrated an example of a radical or revolutionary change in repertoires. In 18th century Britain, the repertoire was parochial (confined to a single community), particular (the form varied from place to place), and bifurcated (direct action on local issues, indirect on national ones). By the 1830s, however, the forms of protest were national, modular (same form in many places), and autonomous (direct communication with centers of power). The people were forming associations, making demands

of parliament, and holding demonstrations, public meetings, and rallies. In short, “[m]ass popular politics had taken hold at a national scale in Great Britain” (26).⁴

III. Online Innovation During COVID?

What does this crisis mean for innovation in movement repertoires? There has been much speculation about the extent to which the pandemic will fundamentally transform society.⁵ On the question of protests, we suggest two standards by which we could judge whether such a substantial innovation in repertoires has taken place, with online activism as the form most likely to displace the demonstrations and rallies that Tilly wrote about and which remain a staple of 21st century protest. One test is whether online activism can highlight a grievance, build a social movement around that grievance, and lead to policy change in the halls of power. A second test is whether online activism can not only provide a basis for protestor communication and coordination – it can – but also raise the costs for incumbent politicians who ignore the protestors’ wishes. By either test, we judge that the Covid19 pandemic protest repertoire was not fundamentally transformed in the United States.

We know that virtual action took place, including the tallying of many types of communal action beyond protests (Chenoweth et al 2020a). In March, Greta Thunberg, the

⁴ Tejerina et al 2013, looking at 2011-12, argued that, “The present international cycle of protest has also been characterized by *innovation* in both the forms of contention, and the generation or modification of discourses and frames.”

⁵ For example, will many professionals and corporate employees who shifted to remote work ever shift back to the office serving as the central work location? See Clive Thompson, “What If Working From Home Goes on ... Forever?,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/09/magazine/remote-work-covid.html>, accessed June 10, 2020.

global figurehead of environmental activism, called for climate activists to shift to a digital strike.⁶

Online tools have proved useful for meeting activist communication and coordination needs, both vital elements in social movements.⁷ Our preliminary analysis finds support for Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) argument that digital tools facilitate *connective action*. New technological tools and spaces are responsible for a significant amount of disintermediation—the removing of the institutional middle link in collective action. But those necessary functions are not sufficient for a successful movement. Cost-raising is equally vital; can an online movement make politicians squirm so that these officials feel they have no choice but to make policy changes and take legislative action in response to the protests? Can they generate media coverage that raises the issue's profile and compels politicians to respond?

IV. Form, issues, and location

What did change? We highlight shifting issue areas, tactical adjustments along partisan lines, and some location variation.

Issue areas. As the virus rapidly spread in the United States, two main lines of protest emerged, neither of which directly drew much attention before the pandemic captured national

⁶ Shola Lawal, "Coronavirus Halts Street Protests, but Climate Activists Have a Plan," *New York Times*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/climate/coronavirus-online-climate-protests.html>, accessed June 4, 2020. For a Canadian example, see Alastair Sharp, "Pandemic means a shift in tactics for social justice movement," *National Observer*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/05/25/news/pandemic-means-shift-tactics-social-justice-movement>, accessed June 4, 2020.

⁷ CCC methodology does not capture important public serving but not publicly-occurring collective action, especially those that revolve around planning, communicating, and networking. If video conference calls replace in-person meetings to coordinate a policy pressure campaign, we likely will not know of it, especially as such episodes are not likely to appear in the media.

attention. These were new claims, displacing other issues on the public agenda until the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 shifted the issue focus yet again.

First, some protestors decried the health impact of the virus and demanded government or business community action to mitigate the medical dangers. Many of these protests were medical workers demanding more PPE. On April 1, 2020, a small group of nurses protested the PPE shortage outside Research Medical Center in Kansas City. As they protested, they informally surveyed colleagues, finding extensive concern about a lack of PPE and instructions to re-use such equipment despite the risks. The protest reportedly was one of several that day at hospitals owned by HCA Midwest Health.⁸

Other protests in a similar vein included calls to free or parole prisoners and immigrant detainees to alleviate the danger of Covid19 spreading in prisons and immigrant detention centers; to give essential, non-medical workers such as warehouse employees, truck drivers, poultry workers, and nursing home staff sufficient PPE and cleaning supplies, sick time, or other workers' rights; and to cancel rent and mortgage payments and block evictions for the duration of the crisis.

Second, some protestors opposed the extended period of social distancing and stay-at-home guidelines and orders, calling for an end to government restrictions; they argued the economy should reopen regardless of public health strictures. They tied their protests into larger arguments about liberty, gun rights, and an anti-government ideology. The anti-lockdown protests received a huge, disproportionate amount of media coverage (Chenoweth et al, 2020b). On April 30, 2020, armed protestors demonstrated inside and outside the Michigan state capitol

⁸ Lisa Gutierrez and Kevin Hardy, "'Frightening': Kansas City nurses protest lack of gear to protect against coronavirus," *Kansas City Star*, April 1, 2020 (updated April 2), <https://www.kansascity.com/news/coronavirus/article241680451.html>, accessed May 26, 2020.

in Lansing. Some Michigan state senators wore bulletproof vests, presumably concerned about the possibility of violence.⁹ The presence of many visibly armed protestors, often in military garb, is itself a threat of violence.

The Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) gathers information on all types of protests, demonstrations, rallies, and strikes in the United States. The CCC partners with Countlove to use Countlove's daily web crawl of thousands of traditional media websites. CCC also collects data from twitter, public submissions, and organization websites. Human coders then list things like location, issues (claim), and crowd size when available. CCC notes when arrests, injuries, or property damage have taken place. The data have been posted on publicly-available spreadsheets since February 2017.

In April, almost 89% of protest were either for enhanced or reduced Covid-related protections or equipment. 194 protests or 43.0% of the month's total were directly to promote public health, including more PPE (60 protests), demands for other workplace protections (37), the release of prisoners and detainees (60), and general support for stay-at-home measures. At the same time, 206 protests or 45.7% opposed restrictive public health measures and called for reopening. Only 23 demonstrations or 5.1% protested non-Covid issues.

In May, state governments started with different timelines to relax public health restrictions. More people began to return to work and to public areas, though schools and larger social venues remained closed. Prior to the police killing of George Floyd, almost 80% of protest were either for enhanced or reduced Covid-related protections or equipment. 257 protests or 38.4% of the month's total were directly to promote public health, including more PPE (143

⁹ Dartunorro Clark, "Hundreds of protesters, some carrying guns in the state Capitol, demonstrate against Michigan's emergency measures," *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/hundreds-protest-michigan-lawmakers-consider-extending-governors-emergency-powers-n1196886>; and <https://twitter.com/SenPolehanki/status/1255899318210314241?>, accessed May 27, 2020.

protests), demands for other workplace protections (51), the release of prisoners and detainees (27), and general support for stay-at-home measures. At the same time, 276 protests or 41.2% opposed restrictive public health measures and called for reopening. 137 demonstrations or 20.4% protested non-Covid issues.

Tactical adjustments. Even as protests continued, some protestors made adjustments in the face of the public health pandemic.¹⁰ Protestors demanding more support for public health efforts incorporated public health guidelines into their protests or shifted to protest methods that did not put people in close proximity. At the same time, protestors focused on reopening the economy and disdainful of government public health restrictions often ignored such rules and recommendations and held protests in the same physical format they would have before Covid19.

Pro-public health protests tended to follow health recommendations. At physical or street protests, protestors wore masks and kept six feet apart. Although outside the United States, drone pictures from Israeli protests provided clear images of such distancing and how it changed the look of demonstrations.¹¹ At the Kansas City protest mentioned previously, the masked protestors maintained social distance and kept the number of protestors under ten due to the limits on gathering size.

Some protests used car caravans to maintain a sense of gathering and movement. Others used the shift to online protests to maintain a sense of togetherness. Car caravans replace

¹⁰ We do not talk about two other possible adaptations: 1) cancelling protests and withdrawing from that space during the pandemic and 2) moving from political protests to communal aid.

¹¹ Joseph Hincks, "Israelis Just Showed the World What a Socially Distant Protest Looks Like," *Time*, <https://time.com/5824133/israel-netanyahu-covid-protest-lapid/>, April 20, 2020, accessed June 19, 2020. For more on the role of drones in protest, see Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020 and 2014.

marching pedestrians with vehicles that drive together much like a car parade or funeral procession; each participant stayed in their own auto's bubble for safety from Covid19. It was a coming together of America's history of protest and its car culture, the communal and the individualistic. The socioeconomic impact would be worthy of further study since it closed off protest to those without cars. Online protests took another path, their digital engagement completely bypassing the public health implications of the protest. Protestors could hold virtual rallies, protests, sit-ins, demonstrations, and more. Activists supplemented these protests with webinars, zoom meetings, and online petitions. None of these tactics are new, but they must have had additional appeal at a time when physical proximity could endanger one's health.

Meanwhile, anti-social distancing protestors largely ignored public health guidelines. They did not make any adjustments, maintaining pre-pandemic tactics. Most of the protests were openly pro-regime. The US president modeled such behavior: he was not wearing a mask at his events and was openly skeptical of public health guidelines, including guidelines issued by the Federal government. At the Lansing protest mentioned earlier, the protestors stood close together and were largely unmasked.

In considering this contrast, we see dueling understandings of appropriateness. Movement tactics are not drawn from a script or formula, but are experimented with originally, and only adopted eventually if they are considered to be appropriate. While many protests draw on stable repertoires (marching to a state capitol), specific tactical iterations vary: for example: armed and unmasked protestors who marched on the Michigan state assembly during an anti-quarantine protest were disparaged by their opponents in April while unarmed and masked protestors who marched on the same location a few weeks later during the anti-police violence protests were disparaged by *their* opponents. The broad repertoire (march on the capitol) has

ample latitude for variation on key tactics (presence of weapons, use of PPE). The notion of appropriateness is highly variable and incredibly context-specific, as this example demonstrates (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020).

Locations. The anti-social distancing protests often took place at a common protest location, government buildings and, in particular, in or near state capitols. Protestors have long sought to direct their grievances at architectural symbols of state power. The pandemic led to collective action events in unconventional locations. For example, prisons and jails accounted for 9% of protest locations in April and 3.5% in May, representing a likely uptick for that type of location, compared to pre-pandemic events tracked by CCC.

Not surprisingly, hospitals and health centers also became frequent locations of protests, as activists called for more PPE, or other public health measures. In April 2020, medical facilities accounted for 15% of protest locations where CCC recorded an exact location. In May, not including the many protests resulting from the killing of George Floyd, this same figure was 27.7%. This was a shift from the past. According to CCC data, in 2017, for example, medical facilities, including hospitals, accounted for just 1.9% of US protest locations (a figure that includes some Planned Parenthood locations, long a site of anti-abortion protests).

While healthcare is a political flashpoint, hospitals are generally considered a public good. If a hospital becomes associated with a certain political position, one wonders if that could lead to trouble with patients opposing that position. Since demands for more PPE were often at odds with Trump statements, one could imagine his supporters shunning certain ‘activist’ hospitals, connecting political polarization to spatial choice.

Imagery. Two iconic images deserve our attention. The first is of visibly-armed protestors inside the Michigan capitol and standing in the face of statue-like law enforcement personnel. It drives home the point that white men with guns are frequently able to move with impunity. The long guns embodied an implied threat of violence at the core of Michigan's democratic politics, an image consistent with the verbal threats directed at Michigan's governor and the very idea of government restrictions, even amidst a pandemic.

A second image provides a sharp contrast: health care workers in uniform are shown blocking anti-lockdown protestors by standing in the road in front of car caravans. While some of these protests did not take place in front of medical facilities,¹² the nurses' uniforms gave one the impression that *could* have just come from the hospital. The message was clear: Frontline workers have seen the human impact of Covid19 and will jeopardize their physical safety to convince people to stay off the streets. It put a representation of the economy (in the cars) and public health (the health care workers) in a face-to-face standoff.

V. Conclusion

This account takes us up to the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The period that followed requires a separate analysis. In this article we find empirical evidence to argue that while the lockdown phase of the pandemic in the United States saw real shifts in important aspects of the protests, the broader *repertoire of action* did not change. Instead, changes included

¹² Maia Booker, "Everyone Was Screaming at Them.' The Story Behind Those Photos of the Counter-Protesting Health Care Workers," *Time*, April 20, 2020, <https://time.com/5824465/healthcare-workers-protest/>, accessed June 3, 2020.

shifting issue areas, tactical adjustments along partisan lines, and some variation in the location of protests.

A dramatic shift of most protest toward an online setting could have marked a change in repertoire from the centrality of physical events and street protests. To date virtual action has continued to complement, rather than displace offline action, even during the toughest of cases: a pandemic and global lockdown. Humans are embodied social creatures and taking to the streets together will remain a robust presence in collective action, even as digitally-enabled solidary actions that occur primarily online may well be growing alongside it.

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