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Madelyn Hindman
mhindman@arcadia.edu

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**Peaceful Protestors or Criminals: The Relationship Between Government, Protests, and
Social Movements in the United Kingdom**

Madelyn Hindman

College of Global Studies, Arcadia University

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Professor Simos

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Key Terms

Law. In this paper, laws refer to regulations, bills passed, or other official measures enacted by the government. Laws regarding the right to assemble, demonstrate, and protest will be prevalent.

Social Movement. Two historical social movements will be considered. First will be the women's suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second will be the anti-war movement of the early twenty-first century. Current social movements such as Black Lives Matter will be considered as well.

Protest. A protest, in this context, will be conceptualized as a public gathering of citizens as part of a social movement. Protests serve a specific purpose and are highly organized. Protests may become violent.

Demonstration. A demonstration, in this context, is defined as a public gathering of citizens as part of a social movement. Demonstrations and protests will be used interchangeably to refer to both nonviolent and violent public gatherings.

Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the critical relationship between government officials, protestors, and social movements in the United Kingdom. A three-part case study will examine how the state of the government and legal regulations impact the implementation and outcome of protests or public demonstrations in major social movements. The government along with law enforcement plays a key role in the past, present, and future of how social movements utilize protests. Social movements and organizations must carefully consider the legal regulations surrounding public demonstrations as well as the legal consequences for infringing upon the

legal regulations put into place. This study finds that a collaborative approach in which social movements and the government maintain a positive relationship establishes an environment for the effective use of the right to demonstrate and overall maintenance of public safety.

Introduction

Protesting, holding rallies, and marching are crucial tactics used by social movements to spread awareness, gain attention from key audiences and stakeholders, and influence change. When public demonstrations occur, the government reacts. The government has the power to enact legislation to protect or restrict the rights of citizens to protest or hold public demonstrations. Restrictions on the size, time, place, and noise level of the event can present small but key barriers to an effective rally, protest, or march. Arresting those participating in public demonstrations or protests adds another layer to the government's response. In 2023, although the government projects a message of respect for public safety, it is the belief of social movements that the government is purposefully attacking the right to protest. Legislative changes have the potential to influence the future of how movements organize public events. Reducing the size and scale of public gatherings will influence the ability of movements to share their message. The response of the government during the women's suffrage movement, the anti-Iraq war movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement will be compared. Analysis of each case will reveal the most useful tactics for social movements moving forward as well as recommendations for government officials on how to uphold public safety while defending the right of assembly.

Context

In April of 2022, the conservative government led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson enacted strict regulations on the right to protest and hold public demonstrations. While the scrutiny of the House of Lords removed many of the most restrictive measures of the bill, the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act passed both chambers. The law has received large amounts of backlash from citizens and social organizations who believe that the government has overstepped its boundaries and that the law infringes upon the right of citizens to freely assemble. Fast forward to 2023 and the conservative government under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is working on a new bill that would bring back the restrictive measures discontinued from the 2022 law. The Public Order Bill which introduces new offenses and broader authority for the police is in the final stages of approval after passing through both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. As protests for racial justice and strikes by different unions have taken over the streets surrounding parliament in recent years, the government has responded with limits on the ability to protest and gather in public spaces. It is critical to study this phenomenon as it unfolds so that we may understand the implications of government responses to the actions of social movements.

Methodological Approach

To understand the present, we must look to the past. History is undoubtedly repetitive. To comprehend scenarios occurring in the present moment, researchers must become historians. A full understanding of how social movements operated in the past allows us to make sense of how social movements operate now. Studying the relationship between the government and social movements throughout history opens our eyes to how government and social movements interact

today. A qualitative case study will be operationalized in this paper to understand the evolving relationship between government and social movements.

The suffrage movement in the United Kingdom serves as the first case study of this paper. Organizers of the movement from the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) maintained complex relationships with the government during their fight for women's rights. The women's suffrage movement in Great Britain sent shock waves across the country. Their public demonstrations in venues like Trafalgar Square sparked violence from police. Women were brutally beaten and arrested. The case study begins with a review of the tactics used by the women's suffrage movement, specifically their use of protest and public demonstrations. The size and scale of the demonstrations will be important factors. To understand the government aspect of this case study, a review of government responses to the demonstrations will be necessary. Police response as well as changes to legislation on demonstrations will exemplify the government's relationship with the movement. The women's suffrage movement pursued legislative changes that granted women the right to vote but also advocated for greater gender equality throughout society.

Protests against the United Kingdom's entry into the Iraq war alongside the United States will be the second case study reviewed in this paper. Organized largely by the Stop the War Coalition, millions gathered in London to protest the war on terror. The city of London was shut down as protestors consumed every park, every street, and every corner. Unlike the suffrage movement one hundred years earlier, the anti-war movement experienced far fewer violent encounters with the police and with the government. What changed in one hundred years? By understanding changes in legislation and different behaviors by the organizers of the demonstrations, we can learn a great deal about the relationship between government and social

movements. The size and scale of the antiwar protests as well as where these protests took place will be important factors for consideration. Similar to the women's movement, the Stop the War Coalition demanded swift policy changes in addition to a shift in wider cultural beliefs about British imperialism.

Fast forward to the present day and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement completes the trio of case studies. In response to racism in the United Kingdom and police violence against people of color in America, the Black Lives Matter movement has led British citizens to take to the streets to express their discontent with ongoing racial discrimination. Often, due to pandemic regulations or the eruption of violence, these protests and demonstrations were restricted. While the COVID-19 pandemic may have played a role in the changing of protest dynamics, the government's role cannot be ignored. The Black Lives Matter movement advocates for a range of policy changes to enhance racial equity and protect communities from institutionalized racism and violence. Moreover, the BLM movement fights for massive changes to society's beliefs toward non-white populations. The final case study seeks to understand the current relationship between the government and social movements through the lens of public demonstrations and related policies.

A final comparative analysis will be drawn between each case study. A thorough examination of the actions taken by social movements and the government's responses to social movements will be conducted. It must be made clear that both the government and social movements have important roles in a democracy. While governments are necessary to maintain order, uphold principles, and ensure citizens' welfare, social movements are also necessary for challenging governments to create proactive changes for a better society. The government and

social movements must work together appropriately to foster a safe and healthy environment in which citizens can exercise their rights and the government may take action accordingly.

Ethical Considerations & Stakeholder Analysis

The primary ethical concern of this research paper is personal bias. Beyond being a researcher, I am also an activist who firmly supports women's rights, anti-war, and anti-racist movements. I am fully aware of these biases toward social movements and against the government. I also hold strong personal political ideologies which do not always align with those who hold power in government. I recognize that I must, as a researcher, remain objective and provide validity to both the government and the social movements throughout my case studies.

As I discover and utilize certain sources in my research, I must remain aware of the author or publishers of the source as well as any biases they may have. For example, a government publication will have separate biases from a news publication. While my bias may steer me towards evidence or data which favors one side, I remain open to all forms of evidence. My research will be based on facts and not opinions.

Finally, my position in a non-governmental organization that educates young people on using demonstrations for social activism is an ethical consideration. My findings about the use of public demonstrations in social movements will impact how my organization as well as others carry out future public events. My findings may contradict the teachings of my organization. Once again, I remain open to all conclusions which are the result of evidence-based objective research.

Stakeholders in the field of research on social movements and government include non-governmental organizations, protestors, government officials, police and law enforcement, and citizens who act as bystanders to social movements or public demonstrations.

Suffrage Movement

The movement for women's suffrage in the United Kingdom was driven by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) under the leadership of the Pankhurst family. Fed up with the denial of rights and the prevention of political participation, women united and took action for change. The movement began peacefully with the use of tactics such as gathering petition signatures and holding meetings. As government inaction lingered, the WSPU escalated its tactics. Laura E. Nym Mayhall explores the complexities of the militancy of the women's suffrage movement in her article "Defining Militancy: Radical Protest, the Constitutional Idiom, and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1908-1909" from the *Journal of British Studies*. The shift to "street theater, such as large-scale demonstrations" marked an important turning point for the suffrage movement which forever altered the relationship between the movement and the government (Mayhall, 2000).

In 1908, the WSPU issued a pamphlet calling for their followers to join in "rushing" the House of Commons ("Start of the Suffragette Movement"). While the sixty thousand supporters were prevented from entering parliament, leaders Emmeline Pankhurst, Christabel Pankhurst, and Flora Drummond faced criminal charges for inciting violence (Mayhall, 2000). When the WSPU threatened escalation, the police and government responded with swift and strong action. Christabel Pankhurst responded to the charges with a resounding argument in defense of the right to bring a petition to the House of Commons (Mayhall, 2000). The English Bill of Rights of 1689 enshrined the "freedom to petition," and Pankhurst argued that the WSPU violated no law

in the pursuit of their right to petition ("Bill of Rights 1689"). When the Women's Freedom League (WFL), another militant suffrage organization, held a parliamentary intrusion, the government responded with restrictive action. Leaders of the WFL chained themselves to metal screens of the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons not long after the attempted rush by the WSPU (Mayhall, 2000). Other supporters of the WFL threw pamphlets advocating for women's suffrage down into the chambers. All galleries open to the public were closed by order of the Speaker of the House of Commons (Mayhall, 2000). In the case of the WFL, the government took decisive action to restrict the right to protest and bring concerns to the legislative body.

A compromise was on the horizon in 1910 when parliament considered the Conciliation Bill which would have "enfranchised approximately one million women based on a property qualification" ("Suffragettes and the Black Friday Protests"). The government offered a compromise and a step forward for women's rights. It was a show of good faith. The WSPU suspended violent campaigning while the bill was considered. When the prime minister announced the suspension of parliament in November, all hope for the success of the conciliation bill died. Emmeline Pankhurst along with Sophia Duleep Singh and other prominent leaders of the suffrage movement quickly took to the streets and marched to Parliament Square ("Suffragettes and the Black Friday Protests"). Upon the suffragettes' arrival in Parliament Square, violence erupted between the protestors and the police. A six-hour battle ensued as the result of the failure of parliament and the anger of women's rights activists. Two hundred women were assaulted physically and sexually during the events of Black Friday 1910. Witness testimony stated that "police[men] grabbed women by the collars, shook them and flung them aside like rats" ("Suffragettes and the Black Friday Protests"). One hundred nineteen protestors, four of whom were men, were arrested. Despite a plethora of evidence, the home secretary

denied calls for a public inquiry into police misconduct. Window-smashing and other violent actions increased as a result of government inaction. Black Friday exemplified the difficult and controversial relationship between the government and protestors in a social movement.

Additional government responses to the actions of social movements are found in legislation enacted in 1913. The Cat and Mouse Act was designed to manipulate the prison sentences of those who faced health issues as a result of hunger strikes ("1913 Cat and Mouse Act"). Under the legislation, suffragettes who participated in hunger strikes were released from prison to recover. Once healthy, the prisoners returned to serve the remainder of their sentence. As many suffragettes were extremely stubborn, the process of catch and release persisted for long periods as women resumed hunger strikes once returned to prison. The designation of suffragettes as criminals instead of political prisoners was another government response to protests. The first layer of response was arrest. The second layer of response was denying women the status of political prisoners which would have afforded them additional privileges and comforts prohibited to standard criminals ("Political Prisoner Status").

Anti-War Movement

The United Kingdom concluded the twentieth century with landmark legislation cementing the rights of citizens. Article 11 of the Human Rights Act of 1998 granted every British citizen "the right to freedom of peaceful assembly" with no restrictions on that right except when they are "necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety." The government took a critical step in 1998 to uphold a core principle of democracy: the ability of the governed people to gather and advocate for their cause.

Shortly after the passage of the Human Rights Act of 1998, the United Kingdom witnessed the largest political protest in the nation's long and complex history ("10th Anniversary of the 15 February"). Upon the announcement of the United Kingdom joining forces with the United States to invade Iraq in a conflict known as the war on terror, millions organized across the world to demand the superpowers stop their planned invasion. The imminence of the situation abroad summoned between one and two million anti-war supporters to the streets of London. Organized by the Stop the War Coalition, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the Muslim Association of Britain, the events of the 15 of February 2003 consisted of multiple "feeder marches" which gathered at Picadilly Circus and culminated in a rally at Hyde Park ("Hundreds Join March"). The rally collected hundreds of thousands if not over a million citizens who heard from prominent speakers and demanded a policy change. Protests remained nonviolent throughout the day with only "a handful of arrests for minor public order offenses" ("Million March").

The first response by the government to the potential anti-war protest was to prohibit the use of Hyde Park as the venue ("Hundreds Join March"). Out of fear of damaging the grounds, the government set a ban on the protest for the 15 of February and suggested Trafalgar Square as an alternative. The capacity of Trafalgar Square proved insufficient as the Stop the War Coalition predicted a turnout of five hundred thousand, twenty-five times the capacity of Trafalgar Square ("Hundreds Join March"). After much back and forth between the national government, the mayor of London, and the leaders of the anti-war movement, Hyde Park received approval as the site of the demonstration ("Hundreds Join March"). According to an article from The Guardian which consulted staff from the Royal Parks Agency, the anti-war protest resulted in one-hundred-fifty thousand pounds in damage to the grasses (Branigan, 2003).

Two years following the largest public protest in British history, the national government took action to control the right to assemble as permitted by Article 11 of the Human Rights Act of 1998 in which the government may take further action to defend public safety. The Serious Organized Crime and Police Act 2005 instituted new requirements for social movements that wish to hold public demonstrations. Written notice to the police commissioner had to be submitted six days before the demonstration to allow for proper police management of the protest ("Serious Organized Crime and Police Act 2005"). Additionally, new restrictions on the location of protests were implemented by the 2005 legislation; sites such as Parliament Square, Downing Street, and Westminster Abbey were prohibited from use by social movements for public demonstrations ("Serious Organized Crime and Police Act 2005"). Trafalgar Square, although close in proximity to many of the listed locations, was excluded from this list due to its historical use as a site for protest.

The Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act of 2011 repealed select sections of the Serious Organized Crime and Police Act of 2005. Specifically, the legislation passed in 2011 replaced the restrictions on the location of public demonstrations with restrictions on specific prohibited activities in Parliament Square that may disrupt parliamentary proceedings or threaten public order ("Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011").

Black Lives Matter Movement

Following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in America, social movements activated across the world. In the United Kingdom, the summer of 2020 filled its calendar with Black Lives Matter protests. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in the spring of 2020 added layers of complication to this case study. In March 2020, the government introduced the Health Protection Regulations which effectively prohibited social gatherings with few

exceptions ("Coronavirus"). The extenuating circumstances of the pandemic allowed the government to override the right to assembly granted in the Human Rights Act of 1998.

Despite the legal challenges, the Black Lives Matter movement persisted with its direct action campaign. On the 31 of May, protestors assembled outside of the United States embassy to call for justice for George Floyd. The first weekend in June of 2020 hosted numerous protests across the country. Violence escalated between protestors and police as more than forty individuals were arrested on charges of disorder or assault (Somerville, 2020). The statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square was defaced with graffiti that read "was a racist" (Somerville, 2020). One protester climbed the Cenotaph and made efforts to light the British flag on fire (Somerville, 2020). On the same weekend, a statue of Edward Colston fell at the hands of protestors in Bristol, and a statue of Robert Mulligan was forcibly removed outside the Museum of London Docklands (Dray, 2021). Demonstrations in the name of Black Lives Matter lacked organization, cohesion, and cooperation. Violence escalated and government responses matched the actions of the social movement. "As of the 6 July 240 people have been arrested," cites a government report from 2020 ("Arrests at the BLM Protests").

For black British citizens, summer traditionally culminates in the Notting Hill Carnival founded by activist Claudia Jones. In 2020, the carnival festivities were replaced by the Million People March to fight "systemic racism in the UK" ("Hundreds of Demonstrators"). The Million People March was highly organized with special measures put in place to maintain safety amid the crisis of the pandemic. An estimated four hundred people marched from Notting Hill tube station to Hyde Park. They were grounded by the purpose of calling for new initiatives to protect members of global majority communities from race-based violence ("Hundreds Join March").

Due to the disruptiveness of the protests held during the summer of 2020, the government drafted new restrictions on the right to assemble. Once again, the Human Rights Act of 1998 granted the government the power to alter the legislation to uphold public safety. After long periods of debate and amendment, the conservative government under Boris Johnson certified the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act 2022. The legislation expanded definitions of disruptive protests and controlled areas to allow for greater monitoring by the government ("Police, Crime, Sentencing"). The Home Secretary may regulate newly controlled areas beyond Parliament Square in a change from the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 ("Police, Crime, Sentencing"). Law enforcement earned more power of oversight over when and where demonstrations take place ("Police, Crime, Sentencing").

Supplemental legislation, the Public Order Bill, has reached the final stages of consideration after being introduced in the House of Commons one month after the passage of the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act in 2022. The Public Order Bill establishes new "criminal offenses" including locking on to buildings or other individuals, "obstructing major transport works" and "interfering with key national infrastructure" ("Public Order Bill"). The police would also be given more authority to intervene when a disruption occurs in a protest and expanded abilities to set specific conditions for an upcoming protest ("Public Order Bill"). The most recent update to the bill was on the 14 of March 2023. Rishi Sunak and the conservative government claim that existing legislation allows for the government and law enforcement to respond after a protest has commenced. The Public Order Bill would permit the government to take action to ensure public safety before any protest begins.

Findings & Analysis

A disconnection between the government and the leaders for women's suffrage defined the social movement. When the Women's Social and Political Union and the Women's Freedom League attempted public demonstrations near and within parliament, protestors were arrested and the government responded with strong restrictions on public access to parliament. The relationship maintained good terms while the government considered conciliatory legislation and the suffrage movement placed a hold on violent action. The government failed to compromise, so the social movement ended their compromise as well. Violence erupted like a dormant volcano marking the day that would come to be known as Black Friday.

The anti-war protest in February 2003 demonstrates the power of collaboration between social movements and the government. Moreover, the marches and subsequent rally in Hyde Park represent how coordination between multiple groups produces a strong and solidified front. Three organizations, the Stop the War Coalition, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the Muslim Association of Britain worked in harmony to organize the protest against the United Kingdom's entry into the war on terror with the United States. Despite initial pushback by the government on the location of the protest, a compromise was reached between both sides to hold the event at Hyde Park. The largest protest in the history of the United Kingdom with over one million protestors took place without violence or massive arrests by the police. The peaceful nature and size of the marches and rallies signify great success for the anti-war demonstrations which were enabled by a positive working relationship between the social movement and the government.

The Black Lives Matter movement triggered the strongest legislation in decades restricting the right to assemble in public. The protests throughout the summer of 2020 lacked

coordination and organization across different anti-racism organizations. Violence escalated quickly with hundreds of people facing arrest between June and August. The lack of relationship between the movement and the government lit the spark for chaos, violence, and reactionary policies. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the protests held as well as on the reactions by the government is a critical factor to consider and should be further studied.

Further, how an uncodified constitution impacts the regulation of the right to assembly presents a new avenue of study that should be explored in the future. The right to assemble and gather for purposes of public demonstration was not cemented in legislation until 1998. The lack of a firm document listing all civil rights of British citizens allows the government to alter or adjust these rights depending on other circumstances.

Conclusion

Social movements hold a significant role in the ability of a country to enact positive changes to ensure a better and brighter future for all its citizens. The government plays an important role in maintaining the safety and wellness of its citizens. Social movements, the organizations that lead movements, and the government must build collaborative and respectful relationships. Social movements may exercise the right to assemble to hold public demonstrations advocating for their cause while the government enables the safe exercising of the right to assembly, protects the rights of citizens, and upholds general public safety. A broken relationship between social movements and the government results in chaos, violence, and delayed justice. The anti-war movement in 2003 exemplifies the necessary working relationship between social movements and the government. When the leaders of the social movement worked with the government to organize the demonstrations, the right to assemble was upheld, little violence resulted from the event, and the largest political protest in British history was

successful. Collaboration is the key to protecting civil rights and creating an environment for social change.

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