



How Solidarity Activists Who Fight Injustices against Others Foster Sustained Involvement in Social Movements

Chandra Russo, Colgate University

Social movements almost always include those who do not suffer directly from the injustice they contest. In many movements, such participants are colloquially known as “allies” – as, for example, straight supporters of same sex marriage are often called by gay rights advocates. Others call these supporters “conscience constituents.” I call them solidarity activists. Common sense, bolstered by research on the topic, indicates that these solidarity activists and allies tend to be more fickle in their political allegiances, more risk-averse, and less committed to the cause in general. In my research, however, I find that this is not always the case.

For the past decade, I have studied three groups contesting U.S. security policies in three settings: at the Guantánamo Bay Detention Center, at the border between the United States and Mexico, and at a controversial military training school in Fort Benning, Georgia. Activists in these groups protest out of solidarity with those who are directly affected by the policies and institutions they contest. At its most basic level, enacting solidarity is showing up and standing up for a person or group whose plight might not appear to have anything to do with one’s own. To express this kind of solidarity, these protestors regularly do things that put their own comfort, well-being and (at times) lives at risk. They violate travel embargos to go to Cuba, walk in the 100+ degree desert for days on end, and participate in civil disobedience that sends them to jails and prisons for months. Their behavior, in short, is hardly fickle or uncommitted.

Solidarity activism of this sort does not make much sense if forced into conventional categories of political activity, especially because these activists have achieved few identifiable policy victories. Even so, my research finds that these activists engage in high-risk, high-stakes protests, not just a few times but over the long-term. Why do they persist and what can their activism teach us?

What Solidarity Activists Can Teach Movement Leaders

Because the people I study are engaged in decades-long, high-risk activism with few obvious policy victories to show for it, it makes sense to probe the roots of their sustained commitment. Why do they keep at it? Their high-risk tactics and the communities they manage to forge provide parts of the answer.

High-risk activism is not just a cost. Common sense dictates that high-risk movement activism of any kind is costly and dangerous. Participants risk jail and prison time, long-term hunger and illness, heat exhaustion and blisters because they feel they need to give something up in order to make their demands heard. Solidarity activists, those who do not experience the direct oppression they seek to contest, are a bit differently positioned than movement beneficiaries when they engage in such practices. They enjoy certain privileges and protections. The dangers to which they are exposed, and the things they must give up, are different. They know this. I find that undertaking high-risk tactics offers them a sense of efficacy, the sense that they are

accomplishing something even when their policy aims are not realized. Engaging in such tactics also helps cultivate cohesion within the group, a key part of how they sustain their activism over the long term.

Religion can be a powerful, progressive force. Although many observers view religion as a conservative force in contemporary U.S. politics, there is also a longstanding tradition of religious progressivism in the United States. The groups I study are part of a centuries-long tradition of radical pacifism that aims to further non-violence at all levels of society. This strand of activism is also characterized by cynicism towards the government and other established political institutions, and seeks to surpass mere reformist efforts by engaging in direct action and civil disobedience. Participants share a commitment to moral virtue above and beyond political calculus. This radical pacifist lineage informs the choice solidarity activists make to engage in expressions of “witnessing” that may not have immediate institutional impacts.

Across these three groups I have studied, many participants describe witnessing as a practice that not only can be but must be pursued separate from outcomes. Many faith-based activists hold a core belief that in order to do God’s work participants must relinquish an attachment to results seen in this world.

Such beliefs might imply that solidarity activists trade tangible, political gains for the pursuit of personal, spiritual aims. But there are important implications for this world as well. As a political practice, bearing witness offers a means to confront features of the nation’s security apparatus that seem impenetrable to other kinds of popular dissent. Participants’ commitments to what might be seen as drastic tactics serve to stir discomfort – and demonstrate that many believe the traditional avenues dissent and democratic influence are either absent or dysfunctional. The activists I have studied seek to illuminate such limits and craft alternative ways to make their demands heard and share their message broadly.

Radical, fringe, and gestural protest tactics should not be ignored. Although it might be easy to dismiss this set of radical practices, this would be a mistake. Social movements, after all, must endure through periods when authorities do not make any concessions. Current research suggests that opportune moments for movements to win victories are all but impossible to predict ahead of time. Activists may feel they cannot wait, and they need to sustain energy and persist in attempting to create new openings. This is not idealism but necessity. History and the trajectories of countless social movements show that every win can become a movement setback. Movement losses can in turn galvanize more people to help shift the balance of power.

Lessons from Solidarity Activists

Movements fighting enduring injustices in American society should note that mobilizing solidarity activists as allies can generate reliable supporters. And movement leaders should realize that risk-taking and costly protest actions may not only discourage participation but also build community and deepen engagement for the long term. Solidarity activists today are, after all, drawing on rich traditions of progressive protest and displaying the enduring value of tactics rooted in movements that have long fought to bend the arc of U.S. history toward social justice.

Read more in Chandra Russo *Solidarity in Practice: Moral Protest to the US Security State* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)