Why "The Resistance" to the Trump Administration is Both Stronger and Weaker than It Seems

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Following the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency, sudden and strong protests emerged to press a wide variety of claims against his administration. Beginning with the Women's March the day after Trump's inauguration, the protests took many forms. The March was swiftly followed by a campaign of lawyers defending refugees cut off at the airport by Trump's anti-Muslim policies, by campaigns and marches organized by climate change and pro-science activists, and by the formation of new groups like Indivisible that positioned themselves on the frontier between institutional and non-institutional politics. Although they arose independently, the #MeToo and #NeverAgain movements added greater depth and breadth to the cycle of contention spurred by Trump's election.

Academics and publicists soon dubbed these varied movements "The Resistance," but that label says both too much and too little. It says too much because it assumes that the varied protest movements were coherent; and it says too little because it fails to examine the complex relationships between the Resistance and its targets. The title also says little about complicated dynamics within the Resistance itself. In a collection we have edited, the two of us and our contributors explore these questions and conclude that the Resistance is both stronger and weaker than it seems, given its inner dynamics and relationship to its target.

Understanding Movements and Countermovements

Our book portrays the Resistance as a counter-movement against forces that have grown in American society over the last half-century before culminating in the Trump presidency. As Doug McAdam explains, the tendencies that paved the way for Trump started in reaction against modernity, secularism, immigration, and especially against minority gains, and then came together around the umbrella cause of opposing government interventions. The Republican Party was reshaped by this reaction — a process facilitated by the institution of the direct primary and the emergence of the Tea Party that successfully infiltrated the party during the presidency of Barack Obama. Donald Trump was able to ride this wave and add his own odd charisma and genius for media manipulation.

Why is important for policymakers and activists to understand the anti-Trump phenomenon as a counter-movement? Doing so helps us understand both the sources of Trump's power and his focal status for opponents. Viewing Trump's election as part of a longer-term movement helps explain why his core supporters do not seem discomforted by his vulgarity, his rapid policy shifts, or his dishonesty. And at the same time, his centrality to broader tendencies gives President Trump unusual leverage against his congressional allies who, while not sharing all of his policy stands, nevertheless fear his influence over their constituents. Similarly, Trump's expression of broader reactive tendencies provides the many sectors of the Resistance with a single focal point for joint opposition.

Three Challenges

However, Trump's place as a focal point poses a series of challenges to resistance activists:

- *A political opportunity challenge* — Trump's election triggered both the creation of a number of new movement groups and a strengthening of preexisting ones like the American Civil Liberties Union. But the new spurts of activism have also failed to define overarching policy goals, apart from the proximate goal of defeating Trump.

- *A coalitional challenge* — In opposition to the Trump presidency we see not just cooperation but also conflict pitting those who want to tear down the institutions that facilitated his rise against those who want to protect and improve those institutions;

- *A radicalization challenge —* Former supporters of Bernie Sanders and others on the left may respond to the extremism of Trump's threat by attempting to drive the Resistance so far to the left that it loses its moderate supporters.

What Can Progressives Do?

If they are aware of these challenges, there are several things that progressives can do to maximize their joint effectiveness:

- *Encourage cooperation* between new groups that have emerged in the Resistance and older, more experienced groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and MoveOn;

- *Focus on valence issues* like gun control and sexual harassment that can appeal to broad constituencies, rather than on issues that divide the radical left from more moderate groups;

- *Create mechanisms to manage competing priorities*, drawing on successful models forged by the right like the American Legislative Exchange Council, which has set up multiple task forces in which firms, advocates, and lawmakers set their own policy agendas;

- *Look for arenas* in various parts of the country and at different levels of government where progressive policies are most likely to succeed and inspire others. California's defense of net neutrality and New York's investigation of the dubious financial activities of the Trump Foundation are good examples.

Preparing for the Next Phase

The Trump administration and its chaos-loving leader have moved so quickly and so unpredictably from one policy initiative to another that it will be difficult to put our suggestions for Resistance tactics into effect. Activists feel a constant need to push back against rapidly shifting Trump targets. But it is important that those opposing Trump's administrative agenda not to be drawn into a purely reactive posture. To avoid that pitfall, progressive networks should work collaboratively at developing goals and methods to deal with what may be the next phase of the Trump phenomenon — which could well be an attempt to shift the entire United States government in an undemocratic direction.

Read more in David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *The Resistance: The Origins of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement*, (Oxford University Press, 2018).