



Emotions Made the Difference for Women's Marches against Two Inaugurations

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When Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016 by defeating Hillary Clinton, the first woman to be nominated for president by a major political party, many women across the country were outraged. A great deal of their energy poured into a Women's March on Washington on January 21, 2017, which drew an estimated **half million participants**. Satellite marches took place in **hundreds of cities** around the world. These events were among the most significant political events of the first Trump Administration.

When Trump was elected a second time by defeating Kamala Harris in 2024, the reaction by liberal and progressive women was more muted. Many leading Democrats and left-wing activists were less sure of how to respond. Yet, planning still began for another march on the eve of the Inauguration in 2025.

This year's march was organized in large part by the Women's March organization in coalition with other left-leaning activist groups. It was reframed as a "People's March," making its gendered theme less explicit. The event was held in downtown Washington, DC on January 18, 2025 and media estimates documented that **thousands of people** were in attendance, with smaller rallies taking place in other cities.

I wanted to know how these two events compared to one another from the vantage point of the participants. To that end, I enlisted the assistance of local area college students to conduct on-site, pen-and-paper surveys of a random sample of participants at the marches in both years. The survey received 327 responses in 2017 and 232 responses in 2025. I included questions on the emotions that people feel about politics, as well as their political ideas and demographics. The results show significant emotional changes in how these activists processed Trump's victories from 2017 to 2025.

A Similar Group of Activists

Consistent with a **survey** conducted by sociologist Dana Fisher of American University, I found that marchers against the two Inaugurations were demographically very similar. In both years, they self-reported their ideologies as averaging to "a strong liberal" on a seven-point ideological scale. The average age of marchers remained constant at about 42 years of age, with greater participation among people in their 20s and their 60s.

With the de-gendering of the march's name in 2025, participation of men increased slightly (but significantly). Men were approximately 17 percent of participants in 2017, which rose to about 25 percent in 2025. Still, the march was dominated by women. Reproductive rights and sexual assault were key themes. Issues such as transgender rights and Palestinian security became newly prominent in 2025.

Emotions Made the Difference

Given that the two marches consisted of the same types of people, the major difference between the two years was emotion. I asked respondents, “These days, how often does politics make you feel” a range of emotions, including anxiety, enthusiasm, hate, frustration, surprise, anger, hope, pride, and fear. The answers reveal that the mobilization in 2017 brought out positive emotions that were less present in 2025.

Even though left-leaning activists were shocked in 2017 by Trump’s victory, the staging of a massive women’s march stimulated enthusiasm and hope, though these feelings were diminished this year. Respondents in 2025 reported feeling enthusiasm about politics about 12 percent less often than did respondents in 2017. Similarly, expressions of hope were reduced by about 10 percent in 2025 and pride fell by 9 percent.

Negative emotions surged as positive emotions plummeted. Frustration and anger rose by 3 percent and 8 percent, respectively. This outcome aligns with the uncertainty of activists about how to challenge the new Trump Administration.

The survey did not detect statistically significant changes in self-reports of anxiety, hate, or fear related to politics. Respondents claimed a significantly lower level of surprise in 2025.

Democracy in Peril?

The negative emotional trajectory among Women’s March and People’s March activists corresponds with increased skepticism about the way that democracy works in the United States. The degree of satisfaction with American democracy by these respondents declined by 15 percent in the period between the two Inaugurations. In 2025, over 80 percent of those answering the survey said that they were either “not very satisfied” or “not satisfied at all” with the way that democracy works in the United States. These views are particularly concerning given that they are held by a group that exercises its democratic rights vigorously, from voting to campaigning to grassroots demonstrations.

A Mixed Picture for Anti-Trump Activism

The results of our survey points to both opportunities and challenges for activists who would oppose Trump as he returns to office. Declining enthusiasm and hope point to declining emotional resources for Democrats and the Left more broadly. These feelings are vital for inspiring the formation of new organizations, encouraging volunteers, and motivating citizens to engage with the political system.

Elevated frustration is likely an indicator of being unsure of next steps. Many activists in the Women’s March spent years opposing the first Trump Administration. Trump has returned to Washington despite all that work. Is it rational to pursue the same strategies and tactics this time around? If not, what new approach is needed?

On the other hand, rising anger is a resource that social movements can use. According to sociologist James Jasper of the City University of New York, anger is most effective when it is combined with **moral outrage**. If activists are able to channel this anger, they may be able to draw upon it to generate grassroots resistance to the president’s agenda.

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