



Is More Local Activism a Solution to Our Political Ills?

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Democratic reformers often assert that more citizen activism is the best remedy for local governments that are unresponsive to public wishes and cater to elite preferences. The thinking goes that if only residents would take advantage of the small-scale opportunities for direct engagement that localities have to offer, they could counter elite influence and promote policy that better reflects majority preferences. Others, however, see a darker side to such activism. Citizens can use their influence to promote exclusion, maintain residential segregation, or engage in “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) behavior. Activism can be used by the already privileged to magnify their advantages, and as a result, we might be better off if we restrict residents’ ability to use non-electoral participation to lobby the government.

This leads to a central question: Will more activism improve democracy and lead to more responsive government, or will it exacerbate existing problems? In my new book, *Activism, Majority Rule, and Local Democracy*, I explore this question by interviewing activists in San Diego, California, analyzing how they go about trying to influence local policy and identifying their effect on democratic practices.