



How to Transcend Partisanship and Create Effective Movements for Change in the Trump Era

Michael T. Heaney, University of Glasgow

President Trump has wasted little time in trying to install key elements of his agenda through executive orders on health care, infrastructure, immigration, and other issues. Meanwhile, resistance movements opposing Trump's Administration have frantically leaped into action. But what is the likely outcome of this struggle? Will nascent social movements succeed in winning any political victories or stalling any of Trump's initiatives?

Partisanship is a Double-Edged Sword

The answer to these questions rests largely on whether movement leaders – and their followers – are able to move beyond the boundaries of partisanship. Partisanship is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is a tremendous resource for movements: if a movement can tap into people's partisan feelings, then it can draw upon a reservoir of strongly held beliefs about how politics should work. Partisan Trump resistance movements can leverage post-election anger, resentment, and partisan kinship to pull many people out into the streets. For example, disappointment over Clinton's loss seems to have motivated much initial opposition to Trump. When I surveyed 294 Women's March attendees, I found that 89 percent reported having voted for Clinton.

But the other edge of partisanship cuts just as sharply. When a group consists almost entirely of one type of people, it is unlikely to organize itself around messages that appeal to a wider audience. If anti-Trump movements are to shift the balance of power back in their direction, they will need to draw support from the ranks of nonvoters and, ideally, even find a way to attract some disappointed Trump voters. But an overwhelmingly Democratic movement is unlikely to do such things. Rallies focused only on channeling Democratic opposition to Trump may amplify polarization by pushing away those who might otherwise have joined parts of the opposition.

In other words, a movement that lives by the partisan sword dies by the partisan sword. For example, Fabio Rojas and I found that the movement against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan initially benefited from Democratic partisanship, but when Democrats returned to power, partisan loyalties steered antiwar activists away from calls to withdraw troops from invaded countries. As a result, Democrats in Congress and the White House did not face much grassroots opposition to the continuation of George W. Bush's foreign policies.

Defeating Trump Depends on Building Nonpartisan Movements

Trump's presidency has brought existing issues such as healthcare access, racism, gender inequality, and the needs of immigrants and refugees into the forefront. But if Trump's opponents focus on *him* as the embodiment of all that is currently wrong in this country, then the mobilization is likely to collapse once he exits the public arena. If those opponents want to solve these problems, they need to find a way to stay mobilized even after the Democratic Party eventually regains power. Thus, the key to defeating Trump's agenda lies in opponents actually turning their focus *away* from the President himself, and toward the *underlying* social conditions and policy problems that they wish to address.

Refocusing a movement from an individual person to specific issues is much easier said than done. As long as Trump is in the White House, it may be difficult to shift the focus of opposition. Trump's temperament, history of divisive language, and apparent lack of policy knowledge, provoke immediate feelings of outrage among many; and because he is a Republican, partisan identities affect how he is judged. Difficult as it may be to create a non-personal, non-partisan social movement, activists should make efforts to do so nonetheless. Here are five tactics for building broader movements:

- **Use ideologically balanced rhetoric.** For every liberal, progressive, or humanitarian argument that a movement uses in favor of a given cause, it should strive to find a conservative, libertarian, or patriotic argument as well. For example, a movement arguing that prisons treat people of color unfairly could also point out that prisons require wasteful spending.
- **Focus on issues.** Resistance movements would be wise to organize around individual issues rather than “resistance” itself. Focusing on policy specifics may attract some Republicans and independents. A lifelong Republican is unlikely to show up at a “Stop Trump” event, but could potentially be drawn into, say, a “Hunters and Hikers Together for National Parks” rally.
- **Look for unifying concerns.** Movements would benefit from focusing on topics with the potential to unify rather than divide people. A large number of women, of all political stripes, could perhaps be persuaded to support a movement for pay equity, but may not agree about abortion policies. Movements benefit from highlighting issues where preexisting partisan alignments are less extreme.
- **Agree to disagree.** Movements gain strength when they explicitly recognize the right of members to “agree to disagree” on non-focal issues. To build a wide-ranging coalition of individuals around increasing background checks and keeping guns out of the hands of criminals, for example, members should make sure that they don’t allow disagreements about, say, school choice to get in the way. Successful movements avoid elaborate litmus tests.
- **Avoid demonization.** When speaking to supporters, movement leaders should avoid demonizing other political groups and instead look for ways to understand others and make common cause around specific issues.

Employing these tactics may yield less *short-term* mobilization than deploying explicitly partisan rhetoric. The fuel of partisanship burns more brightly, but also more quickly. A deliberately nonpartisan approach has the potential to shift the balance of power over the long term by attracting support from groups that were formerly unaligned or opposed. The success of this strategy depends heavily on both the skill of leaders and the openness of followers to experimenting with new approaches in this most unusual political era.

This brief is based on Michael T. Heaney, “**Transcending Partisanship in the Age of Trump**,” *Democracy*, March 13, 2017. Read more in Michael T. Heaney & Fabio Rojas, *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).