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UCSB Political Scientist Examines Urban Protest in Mexico and Brazil

When Kathleen Bruhn, a professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara, began her study of urban protest in Mexico and Brazil, she had a pretty good idea of what her findings would be. To her surprise, however, the research revealed practically the opposite.

In her new book "Urban Protest in Mexico and Brazil" (Cambridge University Press, 2008), Bruhn, who is also the director of UCSB's Latin American and Iberian studies program, examines how protest behavior changes among social organizations when their political allies are voted into office. She focuses on the Party of Democratic Revolution in Mexico and the Workers' Party in Brazil. The former had virtually no ties to organized labor or social movements, while the latter had a very strong relationship with both.

"I went into this thinking I was going to find -- in accordance with much of the political science theory on protest -- that when your party takes power, you stop protesting," said Bruhn. "Protesting is expensive and takes a lot of time and energy, and it's not really necessary because your ally is in power. But what I found was almost the opposite."

According to Bruhn's research, organizations tend to protest more when their party ally is in power because they believe the odds are better that their actions will be successful. "However, they only do it within the first year when they have the

greatest likelihood of affecting the whole policy agenda of the incoming administration," Bruhn said. Rather than enjoying what she described as a "honeymoon effect," the tendency is to protest more vigorously.

When Bruhn looked into case studies, she found that organizations that protest frequently have built their identities around that form of civil action. They recruit members who are willing to participate, and use protest to maintain membership solidarity and to demonstrate the breadth of their influence. In addition, some movements, such as those organized around housing issues, operate on a point system in which members are credited for paying their dues and participating in organization activities such as regular demonstrations or sit-ins. The more aggressive the action, the more points the members earn.

"I watched this happen," said Bruhn. "The leaders kept extensive records of individual members' points, and when the housing came through, the points determined who got first dibs." The protests were necessary in order for members to earn points for their housing, and the point system served to maintain member commitment to the organization. If participants decided to join other movements, they would lose all their points and be forced to start from scratch.

The characteristics of urban protest Bruhn identified in Mexico and Brazil also appear in the United States, she said, adding that in our particular political system lobbying is a more effective means of expression than protesting.

"But you're going to find the same thing happening in the United States in terms of the honeymoon effect during the first year of Obama's administration," she said. "He's going to be attacked more by the left than by the right. People are organizing and mobilizing and trying to get their political agendas advanced.

"A new administration is going to face a barrage of demands, and organizations have to find a way to stand out from one another," Bruhn said. The tactic might not be protest -- it might be something else -- but the incentives are the same. "It is often the case that having your party allied in power is an invitation to protest or take some other action because you're talking to a sympathetic ear."

This concept may help explain why social movements act as they do and how they choose their time frames, she said.

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