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Social science research on collective action wins National Science Foundation grant

From petitions and peaceful marches to blocking traffic and hunger strikes, protests come in many forms. And while protests — often called “collective action” in academic circles — share an underlying goal to effect social change, the public’s judgments of their acceptability and effectiveness depend on one’s allegiances, values and beliefs.

Indeed, according to social scientists at UC Santa Barbara, a person’s ideological position in favor of a certain protest action — such as a corporate boycott, for example — will often be at odds with the same action carried out by protesters who align with opposing ideological orientations.

Led by principal investigator Nils Reimer, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology & Brain Science, their study, “[Double standards in judging collective action](#)” appeared in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General. Reimer’s team also recently received [a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation](#) for further exploration.

“This project develops a model to explain why people differ in how they judge public events such as rallies, marches and other gatherings,” according to the award letter. “This research equips citizens with a better understanding of how others respond to public events and, in this way, can help foster a more informed and productive

discourse around public events.”

Reimer and a handful of colleagues first started taking a closer look at the phenomenon when, in 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the pre-game national anthem to protest racial injustice and police brutality.

“Kaepernick was kneeling down peacefully,” Reimer said. “It was not disruptive, and it was not illegal to kneel during the national anthem. And yet if you looked at the reaction at the time, it was extremely negative and also extremely divided. Only 11% of Republicans and 29% of white Americans in opinion polls thought this was an acceptable way to protest. Meanwhile, Democrats and Black Americans were much more supportive.”

“This really struck us as interesting,” he added, “because it seemed to us that maybe the distinction between a broadly acceptable protest and an unacceptable protest is in the eye of the beholder.”

Tags

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