

# VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL PROTEST

All Canadians have the right to protest. It is a form of expression guaranteed in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

However, this right is not absolute. Protesters must follow all relevant laws. For example, there is no right to protest uninvited on private property. Protestors are not free to use hate speech. And protestors cannot resort to violence. Add to that, provinces or municipalities may have laws that limit how, when, and where protests can be held.

These limits understood, the overwhelming majority of protests in Canada respect the rules. They are peaceful and productive.

Unfortunately, some protests turn violent. While violent protest is not the norm, recent opinion polls in the United States have suggested that violence could be just around the corner. Several recent polls suggest about one in five Americans believe that they may need to resort to violence to save the country from what they perceive to be political threats.

No similar polling data is available in Canada.

These polls may be discouraging, but it is not time to panic. In 2022, four political scientists—Sean J. Westwood, Justin Grimmer, Matthew Tyler, and Clayton Nall—took a closer look at all these polls. They found several problems with them. In reality, they believe that at the very worst, less than 7% of Americans support political violence. Suggesting that these researchers are on to something, a mere 1% of violent hate crimes committed in the United States are political in nature.

On the whole, there simply is not an epidemic of violent political unrest.

Nevertheless, some protests do turn violent. When they do, the protesters generally undermine their cause.

## VIOLENCE AND PROTEST

When a protest turns violent, it can sometimes be difficult to determine who is to blame. To be sure, a few movements do have inherently violent beliefs. In many other cases, determining the cause of the violence is not that simple.

Sometimes, a few supporters of a cause can spark chaos, acting alone and without the approval of the protest's leadership. Other times, protests are infiltrated by provocateurs, people who show up to start trouble so they can ruin the reputation of a movement. And occasionally, overreactions by authorities can spark a violent reaction.

Because protests are complex, it can be difficult to determine who is responsible if a protest turns violent.

Overall, though, violence does not help a protest's cause. It usually makes the movement and its leaders look like lawless extremists. On the flip side, research has shown that the most effective and the legal avenue for change is peaceful protest.

For example, researchers Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth looked at 323 violent and non-violent protest movements between 1900 and 2006. They found that 53% of the non-violent campaigns were successful in getting the changes they asked for. On the flip side, only 26% of the violent campaigns achieved their aims. Put differently, peaceful protest movements were twice as likely to succeed as violent movements.

Another study from Florida Atlantic University looked at groups seeking greater powers of self-rule. Self-rule can include such things as autonomous governing agreements, or



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full political independence from a state. Of the 168 racial and ethnic groups across 87 states that engaged in independence protests, the strongest predictor that a group would be successful was if they used peaceful tactics and protests.

Violence may even set back a cause. This was suggested by a recent Princeton University study. It looked at American civil rights protests from 1960 to 1972. In places where non-violent protests took place, votes for the Democratic Party—which generally supported the civil rights movement—increased 1.6 to 2.5%. Meanwhile, in places where protesters initiated violence, votes by white people for the Republican Party—which generally opposed the civil rights movement—increased anywhere from 1.5 to 7.9%. In the simplest of terms, peaceful protests strengthened support for civil rights. Violent protests strengthened opposition to civil rights.

### GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

On the whole, peaceful protests are more likely to succeed. Peaceful activism sends positive signals to the greatest number of people. It minimises feelings of fear or anger in people who would otherwise not know about the cause. And it shows that the cause is willing to follow processes and respect our democratically-agreed-upon rights.

Protests do not need to be large to bring about public awareness. In July 2020, Tristen Durocher walked 600 kilometres to Regina’s Wascana Park, setting up camp and holding a ceremonial fast. He did this to bring awareness to high suicide rates in the province’s north. The government tried to evict him from the park. However, a judge ruled that attempts to remove his camp were unconstitutional: the park was a public square and a place to express dissent. In the judge’s words, “In my respectful view, Tristen’s ceremonial fast represents an admittedly small and personal attempt to encourage all of us to move a little further along in our national journey.”

### Discuss

1. Are violent protests more likely to get media attention? Is that attention necessarily a good thing?
2. Is violent protest ever justified?

