

The 5 Factors of Polarization

Disruptive protest and nonviolent direct action make people choose sides. ***The same actions that create positive polarization—drawing more supporters into movements and increasing public sympathy—will also turn off some people and fire up the opposition.*** Therefore, movement participants must ensure that the benefits of their actions outweigh the negative effects. The “Five Factors of Polarization” provide a tool for predicting the extent and quality of public response to your action.

1

The Framing of the Cause Through a Movement’s Demands

Because disruptive protests often involve controversial tactics that cause commotion, create inconveniences, or interfere with business as usual, it’s crucial that onlookers understand the righteousness of a movement’s cause. The framing of your demands determines whether people see the tactics as being used for good reason.

2

The Balance of Disruption & Sacrifice

Disruption gets you noticed—but it can also create backlash. Therefore, it works best when it is paired with high levels of sacrifice that elicit an empathetic response from observers.

3

Sympathetic Actors & Unsympathetic Targets

Onlookers must quickly ascertain who the “heroes” and the “villains” are in an action. Who is seeking justice? Who is denying it? The presence of sympathetic protagonists or hated antagonists shapes the public’s response.

4

Media & Public Relations Capabilities

Having well-prepared spokespeople, crafting coherent written statements, and cultivating media contacts is critical to winning the war of public opinion and changing dominant worldviews.

5

Timing & Intangibles

Factors such as a movement’s prior reputation or unexpected breaking news can affect how an action lands. You cannot control all intangibles, but you can work to read political conditions and anticipate possible trigger events that could help or hurt your movement.

