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## Issue Brief: Socioeconomic Status and Protest Politics

## Key Words

Socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, 1960s, riots, Vietnam, civil disobedience, violence, poor, immigration

## Description

This brief shall focus upon protest politics in the most recent years like the famous protests against the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement as well as examples from today like the protest against stricter immigration laws and a 700-mile fence between the Mexican and American border<sup>1</sup> and how exactly members from different socioeconomic backgrounds participated in these demonstrations.

## Key Points

- Correlation is there between socioeconomic status and protest politics
- Different ways to protest
- Notable examples of protest politics
  - Vietnam
  - Civil Rights
  - Immigration movement

## Issue Brief

The struggle for American independence began with protest politics, especially in Massachusetts with the Boston Tea Party and Boston Massacre. Protest politics have always had an important role in the governing of the United States. At first glance it may seem as if a correlation between socioeconomic status and protest politics does not quite exist. One would be tempted to say that only the higher classes have the privilege to protest because they have the leisure time and the poorer classes have to focus more on working. The time one spends protesting is the time they lose from making money. The socioeconomic status of a group of people greatly affects how they exercise political right<sup>2</sup>. However, since poorer groups lack the resources necessary to write a check to their political causes; they have to find alternatives. So protestations become an effective way for these classes to voice their opinions without having to suffer a monetary cost. Education is key<sup>3</sup> in becoming politically active but as demonstrated by the table below there is a disparity the different racial groups though in this table only whites, blacks and Latinos are taken into account. There are elite divisions when it comes to protest politics<sup>4</sup> and these divisions wield a lot of power.

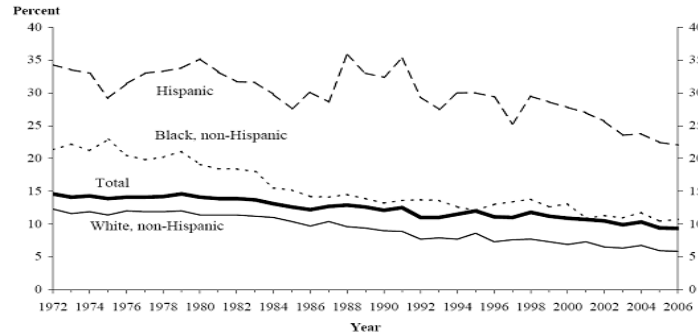
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<sup>1</sup> “United States: More marches, a growing backlash; Immigration policy”

<sup>2</sup> “Race, Ethnicity and Political Resources: Participation in the United States.”

<sup>3</sup> “Race, Ethnicity and Political Resources: Participation in the United States.”

<sup>4</sup> “Political Opportunities and African-American Protest, 1948-1997.”



While race may not be a certain divider for socioeconomic status, it is a good indicator. There is a disparity between whites and nonwhites in education  
 National Center for Education Statistics  
[http://nces.ed.gov/ssbr/pages/dropout1972\\_2006.asp?IndID=46](http://nces.ed.gov/ssbr/pages/dropout1972_2006.asp?IndID=46)

A famous time for protest was during the Vietnam War. There are very many different types of protests from sit-ins to rallies to riots to civil disobedience. Not all forms or protests are benign, some can be very violent. Mainly college age students protested the war and the draft as well as the inhumane warfare like the My Lai massacre. There are many instances of peaceful protests and sit-ins but there are also examples of people burning themselves in protest. As much as one would like to say that it was a certain class that protested the most studies have shown to be inconclusive<sup>5</sup>. That is to say that there were a lot more factors than socioeconomic status that contributed to the protests.



Many protested against the Vietnam War, the 60s are known for the many protests that took place  
*Forrest Gump* Paramount Pictures

*“Sometimes when people go to Vietnam, they go home to their mommas without any legs. Sometimes they don't go home at all. That's a bad thing. That's all I have to say about that.”*

The Vietnam War protests have some roots in the Civil Rights Movement. Two groups that practiced different types of protests were the Black Panthers and the followers of Martin Luther King Jr. The Black Panthers are a clear example of the marriage between

<sup>5</sup> “Socioeconomic background and war mortality during Vietnam's wars.”

socioeconomic status and protest politics. The Black Panthers were a coalition that fought for the rights of the lower socioeconomic classes, who were mainly of color. The Black Panthers started out as a social group to protect its communities from police brutality but expanded to include ideologies like Black Power. The Black Panthers did run into some police opposition especially when they took over churches and the like to give out breakfast to the black children in the area; they were adamant on giving breakfast to these children because they were poor and usually did not have a good breakfast before school.

King however started the Poor People's Campaign and by its name alone it is evident which group of people he set out to help. The struggle for economic inclusion was harder than desegregating the South<sup>6</sup>. King fought for a better minimum wage and engaged in civil disobedience as well as marches. The slogan for the 1963 march on Washington (where King delivered his "I Have a Dream") was jobs and freedom. It is evident that this march had socioeconomic roots because of the call for jobs.

"The Civil Rights Movement did not begin in Washington with a march. It built around the indignities of Jim Crow that Black people faced on a day to day basis."<sup>7</sup> King and the rest of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement started fighting the simple injustices of their quotidian life: be it having separate utilities for blacks and whites or not being allowed to sit in a certain part of the bus. The blacks of the South were, for the most part, of a lower socioeconomic status. They called for an end to discrimination and their form of protest was mainly civil disobedience and other nonviolent protests.

Like the Civil Rights Movement the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 70s called for equal education, employment and political inclusion among other things. An example of ongoing protests is the protest against stricter immigration laws. Though the emphasis is usually placed on Latino immigrants, Asian immigrants are also affected by new legislation. New proposals include building a fence at the Mexican border as well as deportation and strict fines for undocumented immigrants. The protests begin and the immigrants risk losing their jobs to march. Their socioeconomic status is not one that can afford them the luxury to skip work and possibly be fired but through protests is the only way their voices can be heard.

# MISSING



# JOSE

*A Day Without a Mexican Eye on the Ball Films*

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<sup>6</sup> "Marches on Washington and the Black Protest Movement."

<sup>7</sup> "Marches on Washington and the Black Protest Movement."

This film shows the tremendous impact immigrant workers have on the Californian economy

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