

A Comparative Study of the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter Movements

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Abstract

Throughout the course of American history, protest has been a powerful method of public participation in politics. This is especially true for one of the most historically marginalized groups in American history: African Americans. This research compares two primarily African American social movements, the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, to explore how African American protest has evolved over time. My research shows that while the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements do exhibit certain similarities in both their resistance and support, these two movements also differ immensely in their participants, structure, and use of media. While the Black Lives Matter movement is still in its infancy, it ultimately does not compare to the wide reaching and massive tangible successes of the Civil Rights movement.

Prior Scholarship

Protest is a widely studied phenomenon in the field of Political Science. “Political social movements [are defined] as actors and organizations seeking to alter power deficits and to effect social transformations through the state by mobilizing regular citizens for sustained political action” (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, Su). A major question posed by protest scholars is why individuals participate in it. Many scholars see protest as a form of collective action, in which individuals benefit from participating in larger group movement (Opp). Others add that identity politics play a major role in participation. “People who are conscious of their group memberships are driven to participate in politics on behalf of their groups” (Mason). Protest is a fascinating and thus widely studied area of political participation.

CRM & BLM: Similarities

I. Counter Movements

Both the Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights movements experienced significant backlash in response to their movements. For the Civil Rights movement, this ranged from school segregation to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. For the Black Lives Matter movement, the countermovement formed around the opposing Twitter hashtags “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter.” Both countermovements were based around identity politics. Both the Civil Rights and the Black Lives Matter movements represented a “contest[ation] of racial boundaries and inequalities, thereby threatening the social position of whites” (Andrews, Beyerlein, Farnum). This threat to a white ingroup superiority was the basis for the birth of white countermovements to both movements.

II. Support Based on Geographic and Ideological Proximity

Another major similarity between these movements is that support for them was largely based on one’s proximity, both geographically and ideologically, to the protests. For both movements, “individuals living near centers of movement activity...become more favorable to protest because they become more sympathetic to the demands of activists” (Andrews, Beyerlein, Farnum). This is because “exposure to protests...helps create feelings of political empowerment” (Wallace, Zepeda-Millan, Jones-Correa). Also, greater feelings of personal identification with protesters led to greater support for both movements. If protests appealed to “identities beyond race, such as being American,” the support each movement received increased (Mazumder).

CRM & BLM: Differences

I. Diversity of Participants

Though both movements participation were dominated by young people, the Black Lives Matter movement is notable for more inclusive and diverse participants. In contrast to the male, clergy dominated leadership of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement was “founded by black women, two of whom are queer” (Rickford). While there were some women involved in the Civil Rights movement, they were “relegated to secondary roles at the March on Washington in 1963, and were not allowed to speak or march with the male leaders” (Clayton).

II. Structure & Organization

The Black Lives Matter movement is more of a loosely organized, “decentralized” grassroots movement (Clayton). Further, “Black Lives Matter has been criticized for not having a coherent set of goals” (Clayton). However, the highly organized Civil Rights movement “pursued legal avenues in the courts, policy change through legislation, and public education and advocacy through mass demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts, and other forms of peaceful resistance” (Page and Gilens). In comparison to the the Black Lives Matter movement, the Civil Right movement was a systematic, well-oiled political machine.

III. Role of Media

The other major difference between these two movements is their relationship to media. While media was a crucial part of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement was created an is continually fueled by modern social media. Also in the Black Lives Matter movement, “the audience has become more active in demonstration with social media” (Boone).



Civil Rights Protest



Black Lives Matter Protest

Conclusion & Significance

Though these two social movements are similar in many important ways, their differences ultimately reveal that the Civil Rights movement had greater tangible success than the Black Lives Matter movement. The Civil Rights movement was instrumental in passing legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and achieving judicial victories like *Brown v. Board of Education* (Page and Gilens). While, in fairness, the Black Lives Matter movement is newer and its true impacts probably need more time to develop, it has less concrete achievements to claim. This is largely due to the organizational strength of the Civil Rights movement in contrast to the decentralized, grassroots nature of the Black Lives Matter movement. However, this does not mean that the Black Lives Matter movement has accomplished nothing. The Black Lives Matter movement is a significant step forward for the inclusion of women and the LGBTQ+ community in political participation. Additionally, the Black Lives Matter Movement has revolutionized the use of social media in protests.

It is difficult to truly compare these two social movements. The historical contexts of each are vastly different. However, following the trajectory of American protest movements is important. Protest movements often serve as a test of our democracy. Maybe the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement has been less successful in achieving policy gains is indicative of a democracy that is failing its people. Or maybe, with historical retrospect, the Black Lives Matter movement will prove to be just as crucial as the Civil Rights Movement. Only time will tell.

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