

To What Extent Is Public Demonstration Effective to Combat Environmental Injustice and Safeguard Community Rights in the United States?

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Abstract: Public demonstrations have emerged as an essential strategy for addressing environmental injustice and promoting systemic change. Other potential approaches such as legal actions face resistance due to resource limitations and urgent need for solutions in underprivileged regions. Through case studies, this research underscores the unique strength of public demonstration to mobilize comparatively immediate actions and exert political pressure. The substantial social influence made is crucial in driving reforms, given that environmental injustice issues typically pose continuous and serious health impacts on residents. The research points out that though community solidarity and governmental repression are two potential risks, public demonstration's effectiveness and accessibility still make it an optimal strategy. In addition, adopting micro protests across diverse locations is recommended to enhance the visibility of demonstrations further while reducing risks of injuries to participants. The study offers perspectives and operations for activists and community leaders on creating more resilient movements for equitable environmental governance.

Keywords: environmental justice, public demonstration, grassroots activism, United States.

1. Introduction

On April 25th, 2014, the decision to switch Flint, Michigan's water source from the Detroit system to the Flint River triggered a severe public health catastrophe. It serves as a symbol of long-standing environmental injustices. Led by the need to reduce expenses, this governmental decision resulted in a series of repercussions, as underscored by the startling discoveries made by Marc Edwards from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University: nearly one-fifth of residences in Flint were discovered to have dangerously high levels of lead in their water tests [1]. This severe issue disproportionately affects almost one hundred thousand Flint residents, predominately African American and economically disadvantaged communities, exacerbating the pre-existing inequalities in terms of access to clean water sources and healthcare [2]. The Flint water crisis exemplifies an ongoing national trend of environmental injustice, where socioeconomic status, racial disparities, and the political influence of the community determine who suffers the most from ecological damage. It emphasized the crucial need for grassroots activism and legal oversight to guarantee governmental responsibility.

Generally, movements seeking environmental justice rely on more immediate actions, especially public demonstrations. For instance, residents of Cancer Alley in Louisiana organized large public demonstrations to protest against pollution from adjacent industrial facilities [3]. Despite their prevalence, the tangible effects of these demonstrations in addressing environmental injustices and empowering affected communities have yet to be comprehensively evaluated. This gap emphasizes the pressing demand for research that measures the instantaneous impact of public demonstrations and their profound social and political ramifications. Hence, this paper aims to meticulously analyze this distinct activism effort, evaluating its psychological, political, and socioeconomic strength. By determining public demonstration as a vital catalyst for systemic transformation, this research ultimately provides targeted recommendations to strengthen further its role in achieving environmental justice.

2. Strength of public demonstration

To gain a deeper comprehension of the distinctive strength of public demonstration, it is imperative first to grasp the nature of other prevalent grassroots movements. The conventional grassroots-led initiatives to combat environmental injustices include legal actions (lawsuits or legal advocacy), education and awareness campaigns (to inform and engage the public), as well as alternative economic model provisions (community-owned enterprises, sustainable agriculture). However, Professor David Schlosberg from the University of Sydney argues that legal actions typically require substantial resources, time, and legal knowledge, hindering underprivileged communities from seeking justice [4]. Residents experiencing environmental injustices cannot afford to wait for prolonged periods, as contamination of the environment has already caused severe damage to their health.

In addition, as stated by Yale's sustainability article, the impact and effectiveness of awareness campaigns are limited. It stresses the need to transfer decision-making power to underprivileged communities beyond awareness-raising [5]. Last, alternative economic model provisions face challenges in operation expansion, gaining financial resources, and overcoming regulatory obstacles, though they offer alternatives to polluting extractive industries [6]. Given the limitations of other grassroots-led initiatives, the great potential of public demonstration should be proven and furthered to combat environmental injustices more efficiently.

2.1. Psychological empowerment

One of the most prominent strengths of public demonstrations is its capacity to empower marginalized populations. Specifically, demonstrations serve as an opportunity to gather the people mistreated, collectively articulate their concerns, display solidarity, and fight for environmental justice. It is found that, as published by Grinnell College, public demonstrations offer a sense of unity to protesters, letting them feel less alone [7]. In this case, affected populations are more likely to participate in social movements to seek environmental justice. For instance, a large landfill in Uniontown, Alabama, began to receive hazardous coal ash in 2017 from power plants throughout the southeast, posing severe health risks to local residents, who are predominantly African Americans. In response, the community organized a series of public demonstrations on the streets, incorporating all the residents in the areas, including elders and children, to fight against governmental contamination of their air, water, and soil [8].

Additionally, several studies prove the psychological impact of public demonstration on an individual's perception. The study published by Van Zomeren in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* discovered that participating in collective actions enables people's confidence to bring about social change. Hence, participants are empowered psychologically [9]. It is evident that

public demonstrations have facilitated dialogues, established connections, and strengthened the community's resilience in battling environmental injustices, which is preferable to protect the rights of underprivileged communities.

Though public demonstrations play a vital role in increasing awareness and rallying support among disadvantaged communities, their potential risk to exacerbate polarization is pointed out by scholars. Specifically, it is suggested that demonstrations reinforce divisions within communities, especially when demonstrations are confrontational and emotionally charged. Such division hinders effective communication and complicates consensus-building. The Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock controversy provides a real-world example [10]. Specifically, proponents argued pipeline construction to be the most secure and efficient way of oil transportation, which can also provide employment opportunities and generate substantial revenue. Critics, especially conservationists and Native Americans, held large public demonstrations, emphasizing the water contamination potential of this project. In this case, the extreme division hindered the process of regulation reforms. The research conducted by Kubinec and Owen further indicates that exposure to confrontational social movements can contribute to ideological polarization, leading to firm convictions that resist changes [11]. Consequently, the efficacy of public demonstration in solving environmental injustices is impeded due to the deep disparities of positions.

Nevertheless, this perspective also needs to acknowledge the potential benefits of polarization. The research conducted by Romain Badouard demonstrates divergent viewpoints' potential to promote the formation of public discourse and political engagement [12]. Thus, polarization may enhance public awareness and understanding of specific environmental injustice issues, contributing to more informed involvement and advocacy. This outcome further attests to public demonstrations as a crucial means of addressing injustices.

2.2. Direct political influence

From a political standpoint, public demonstrations can directly influence political processes, driving swift legislative reforms to combat environmental injustices. Sidney Tarrow, the emeritus professor of political science at Cornell University, emphasizes the significant role of public demonstrations in forming policy decisions and public discourse, as they can mobilize large numbers of people to attract media attention [13]. Earl further explains that heightened media attention to public demonstrations can shift public opinion, exerting pressure on politicians. That is because policymakers are more inclined to address incidences that have attracted substantial public scrutiny, especially if there is a perceived risk of political fallout [14].

For instance, as introduced previously, the Flint water crisis exemplifies the considerable significance of public demonstrations in stimulating political actions. According to the Harvard Kennedy School, the protests brought attention to Flint and facilitated a wide range of national and international advocacy for policy reforms [15]. State and local officials initially dismissed protestors' concerns, ignoring the seriousness of water poisoning problems. Nevertheless, the government's attitudes started to change due to rising media attention and public pressure. As a result, the ongoing public protests lead to political involvement, with a state judge eventually approving the \$626 million Flint water crisis settlement to compensate the affected citizens and \$100 million to replace Flint's lead service lines [16][17]. The legislative and financial outcomes demonstrate how public demonstrations transform societal concerns into policy actions, catalyzing substantial reforms.

Some experts argued that social media has presented potential obstacles to policy transformation despite its capacity to share messages of public demonstrations swiftly. Tufekci raised the dual nature of social media, arguing its ability for government and opposing groups to monitor, transmit false information, and swiftly spread alternative narratives [18]. For instance, protesters in the

Dakota Access Pipeline protests were depicted by authorities and some media as violent extremists and lawbreakers, especially in terms such as "rioters" and "agitators." The economic advantages of the pipelines were emphasized, while the potential risks of environmental pollution were downplayed [19].

However, rapidly disseminating alternative narratives and opposing viewpoints is not inherently a weakness but can also be a strength. Bennett emphasizes that the nature of digital platforms enables activists to quickly challenge false information and introduce a broader range of viewpoints to enrich the public debate [20]. In this scenario, the general public can engage critically in a well-informed discussion. This involvement amplifies the influence of specific environmental injustice issues and provides individuals with a comprehensive understanding of the truth.

2.3. Accessibility and economic efficiency

Apart from psychological empowerment and direct political influence, the high accessibility and economic efficiency of public demonstration further make it the most preferable approach. Contrary to other types of activism that require significant financial means, such as legal action and the provision of alternative economic models, public demonstrations typically rely on simple organizational tools. Specifically, the only requirements are word-of-mouth, community networks, and minimum materials for posters and banners. In their book "Social Movements: An Introduction," Della Porta and Diani revealed the nature of public demonstrations as highly economical, relying mainly on the collective dedication and enthusiasm of the community members [21].

Moreover, the high accessibility of public demonstrations is emphasized by its open participation style. All the affected citizens can be involved, regardless of their income, skills, or access to particular groups. Thus, public demonstrations can be frequently and quickly held as a platform to express collective identities, overcoming the conventional barriers to political participation. Considering the common traits of affected communities, these attributes are essential for executing future grassroots-led initiatives. As the Massachusetts government defined environmental injustices, the majority of affected communities are poor and predominantly minorities. Therefore, public demonstration is an indispensable tool in fighting unjust incidences, as it democratizes activities and enables underprivileged citizens to voice their demands.

3. Limitation and recommendation

Admittedly, there exist certain limitations to public demonstrations. To be more specific, demonstrators are likely to confront repression and aggression carried out by governments and rival groups. Such repression can lead to physical suffering, psychological distress, and even enduring injuries, as supported by Erica Chenoweth in the book "Why Civil Resistance Works." Governments might employ multiple strategies to suppress grassroots mobilization, including state-sponsored violence and arrest, and legal intimidation [22]. If proactive measures are not taken to prevent violent repression, both the size of participation and the impact of the demonstration will significantly decrease.

Hence, to further improve the feasibility of public demonstrations, activists should promote diverse locations micro-protests. This approach involves spreading smaller protests in different locations, attracting consistent attention without experiencing the potential dangers of large gatherings. It becomes much more complicated for authorities to suppress the movement entirely. This strategy, in short, not only heightened public attention towards the issue but also significantly diminishes the risks of injury.

4. Conclusion

This research reveals the substantial benefits of holding public demonstrations to address environmental injustice. Such demonstration raises the visibility of marginalized communities and promotes immediate political engagement. It not only provides financial efficiency and accessibility but also dramatically enhances psychological empowerment by fostering a sense of solidarity within the community. Despite its strength, the demonstration is susceptible to repression and logistical challenges. In tackling these difficulties, the recommendation is to establish micro-protests at multiple locations, minimizing the likelihood of confrontations with police and attracting persistent public attention. Shortly, it is expected that this adaptive strategy will both expand the influence of public demonstrations and facilitate long-lasting policy reforms, thus promoting more equitable environmental governance.

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