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## IMAGES OF PROTEST: DIMENSIONS OF SELECTION BIAS IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF WASHINGTON DEMONSTRATIONS, 1982 AND 1991\*

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*Protest is now central to politics in Western democracies, but it is known to citizens mainly through portrayals in the media. Yet the media cover only a small fraction of public protests, raising the possibility of selection bias. We study this problem by comparing police records of demonstrations in Washington, D.C. in 1982 and 1991 with media coverage of the events in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and on three national television networks. We model the consequences of demonstration form, context, and purpose on the likelihood of media coverage. The estimated size of a demonstration and its importance to the current media issue attention cycle are the strongest predictors of its coverage. Additional analyses support our claim that heightened media attention to an issue increases the likelihood that protests related to that issue will be covered. Comparing 1982 to 1991 suggests that television coverage of protests is increasingly subject to the impact of media issue attention cycles.*

Over the past quarter-century protest demonstrations have become a central part of the process of political representation in Western Democracies (e.g., Barnes and Kasse et. al 1979; Dalton 1988; Tarrow, 1988, 1989, 1993; Tilly 1983). The demonstration became entrenched in the tactical repertoire of citizens' movements with the rise of the European labor movement (Tilly

1984), and it has become ever more common and widely legitimate since the middle of the twentieth century. The relative weight of citizen preferences is now publicly and socially constructed with evidence from several sources, including elections, public opinion polls, and demonstrations (Herbst 1993). Media reports of protest signal elites about citizen discontent expressed outside the more direct and conventional channels of political representation. As a result, whether and how the media cover demonstrations play a growing role in structuring democratic outcomes.

These same media reports have become a common source of evidence for researchers who describe and interpret the frequency, form, size, duration, and intensity of protest demonstrations. Nevertheless, there is wide suspicion that media traces are a biased selection of the population of protest events, and this suspicion has moderated scholars' enthusiasm for exploiting the rich potential of such data sources for understanding the evolving role of protest. The mechanisms by which media institutions select "newsworthy" protests for coverage have yet to be ex-

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plored using methodologically appropriate, systematic evidence. Nor has any previous research employed a source of evidence about protest demonstrations *independent* of their media traces.<sup>1</sup>

Our research uses the demonstration permit application records of three police agencies to construct a credible and objective record of the population of demonstrations in Washington, D.C. in 1982 and 1991. We compare these records with reports of Washington demonstrations that appeared in local and national print and electronic media in the same years: *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly national television network newscasts.

### THE PROBLEM OF SELECTION BIAS

Scholars from a variety of perspectives acknowledge the centrality of protest demonstrations to normal political processes in Western democracies. With the increasing frequency of demonstrations, the average citizen views this form of protest as common and acceptable, not as an unusual or deviant form of political behavior (Dalton 1988). During the last several decades we have seen an upsurge of research on demonstrations and other forms of collective action, driven in large measure by the growing appreciation of the central role of protest events in democratic politics. A growing community of researchers has focused attention on collective action events in much earlier times (Markoff 1986; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975; Tilly 1978), upon recent events in the U.S. context (Everett 1992; Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McAdam 1982, 1983; Olzak 1987; 1989a; 1989b; 1992) and upon events around the world (Feierabend and Feierabend 1966; Gurr 1968; Paige 1975; Rucht and Ohlemacher, 1992; Rummel 1963; 1965; Tanter

1966; Tarrow 1988; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975). Protest event data sets have been created from diverse source materials including official archives (Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975) and organizational histories (McCarthy et al. 1988). However, because newspapers (and now electronic news reports) are often the only source of data on protest events in many places and times, these media sources have been relied upon heavily by researchers (Franzosi 1987; Olzak 1989a).

The use of such media traces as an index of protest events is not without problems, and these problems have been identified through debates among researchers and critics over the adequacy of event data (Danzger 1975 and subsequent response by Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Snyder and Kelly 1977). These problems include: (1) media bias in the selection of but a few of the many possible events to observe and report (selection bias), (2) media bias in the descriptions of the events they do select to report (description bias), and (3) the reliability and validity of media trace recovery by researchers (researcher bias) (Franzosi 1987; Olzak 1989a). Each of these sources of bias may lead researchers to faulty inferences about the characteristics of the population of protest events they hope to describe and understand.<sup>2</sup>

Because for some protest events newspapers are the only source of data, researchers who use them have tried to systematically assess the bias in newspaper usage. As Olzak (1989a) observes, however, "there is rarely a way to evaluate these claims directly since few alternative sources contain as much information" (p. 128). Two studies have compared *The New York Times* reports of collective action in communities around the country with local community newspaper accounts. Jenkins and Perrow (1977) found few differences in the coverage of California farm workers collective actions reported in *The New York Times* and in *The Los Angeles*

<sup>1</sup> Direct observation research of protest demonstrations is very labor intensive and rarely undertaken. Hierich's (1971) and Lofland and Fink's (1982) studies are exceptions. Surveys presume sufficient numbers of sampled respondents have been aware of, have observed, or have participated in demonstrations and can therefore provide retrospective accounts. But, see MacCannell (1973) and Klandermans and Omega (1987) for exceptions.

<sup>2</sup> Considerable attention has been given to some dimensions of researcher bias (e.g., Franzosi 1990a, 1990b), as it is the bias that researchers themselves can control. But researcher bias is likely to have a smaller impact on the validity of research conclusions than are biases in data sources, namely, selection and description bias (Berk 1983; Franzosi 1987).

*Times*. But Snyder and Kelly (1977) found that national and local newspaper accounts differed in their reports of size, violence against property and persons, and number of arrests. Moreover, substantive interpretations of media traces of protest events have typically assumed that bias is stable across time (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1988). Unfortunately, none of these analyses or proposed solutions to this problem of selection bias have identified, let alone adequately estimated the effects of selection bias on the media traces used to study collective action events.

The appropriate assessment of these selection bias issues requires a credible, objective record of the population of protest events in some location over several specified periods of time. Such a record can then be compared with media trace records of protest in that location for the same time periods. Multiple and independent media traces of events at different intervals would be ideal—different media sources could be compared for the biases they introduce in the events selected for coverage as well as the stability of those biases (Franzosi 1987).

### MECHANISMS OF SELECTION BIAS

A rich and varied body of critical and analytical work on the mass media has emerged during the last several decades which has examined the mechanisms of media selection and description bias (Danzger 1975; Gans 1980; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Ryan 1991; Snyder and Kelly 1977). Media analysts have crafted several general lines of explanation for how story selections are made from a vast amount of available information to fill a very limited “newshole.” Each of these perspectives provides clues for understanding the mechanisms of selection bias in the reporting of protest events. We briefly review the more coherent perspectives that have guided our assessment of the evidence.

#### *News Gathering Routines*

News gathering routines influence much of what gets reported in the mass media. The regular assignment of “beat” reporters to specific locations and their reliance on a more or less constant set of convenient and “credible”

official sources filters out many other possible sources of political information (Gamson et al. 1992; Kielbowitz and Scherer 1986). Deadlines, lead times, staffing, and the relative flow of information also affect the selection of news. We expect, then, that protest events fitting established news gathering routines (e.g., those occurring near reporters’ assigned locations or on weekends) will be more likely to gain media attention.

#### *Newsworthy “Pegs”*

The professional incentive structures faced by reporters within large media organizations encourage their reporting of events which provide “news pegs” around which a story can be constructed (Ryan 1991). The actors and actions in events that make “good” news pegs typically have one or more of the following characteristics: *notorious* (e.g., the actors’ faces are famous, the actions taken or the objects of those actions are “trendy”); *consequential* (e.g., the actors are powerful, their actions or the events they make up have wide impact); *extraordinary* (e.g., the actions are spectacular, the events are large, or otherwise unusual and thus of broad human interest); *culturally resonant* (e.g., actors, actions, events illustrate, highlight or emphasize that which is widely familiar). As reporters compete to get their stories printed and thereby to advance professionally, they must produce copy that stands out. Clever news pegs often suit these purposes.<sup>3</sup> Following this reasoning, we would expect that demonstrations distinguished in one or more of the above ways will be more likely to gain media attention.

<sup>3</sup> Reporters are assigned to beats or stories by their editors. While reporters have varying degrees of autonomy, editors have the final authority concerning whether a story is printed, where it appears, with or without byline, and the like. Thus, a reporter must figure out what the editor wants (or what latitude a particular editor will grant the reporter) and write the story accordingly—or be prepared to have the story extensively rewritten, or to have bits and pieces stuck into someone else’s story without the reporter’s own byline, or to have the story not make the paper at all. (This account was suggested to us by David Schweingruber, a former newspaper reporter.)

*Corporate Hegemony*<sup>4</sup>

News media in the United States and other capitalist nations are profit-making institutions by design, and they are often very successful ones. They depend at least as much on advertisers as on consumers for these profits. Consequently, it is argued, they can be expected to select and shape news events in ways that do not threaten their own or their sponsor's interests (Gamson et al. 1992). Other things equal, this leads to the expectation that demonstrations challenging elite corporate interests (e.g., pro-labor, pro-environment, anti-petroleum industrial complex) will less likely be selected for media coverage than those that do not.

*Media Issue Attention Cycles*

There is more to the media's story selection process than just news gathering routines, news pegs, and vested corporate interests. There are fluctuations in the amount of attention the media give to various issues (Downs 1972).<sup>5</sup> "Media issue attention cycle" refers to the sudden ascendance of an issue from previous obscurity to a sustained prominence (indexed by the number of stories, by column inches, or by minutes and seconds of a telecast) that dominates the news for a period of time before once again fading from media attention. Some issue attention cycles are closely tied to dramatic events (e.g., the Vietnam War or Watergate), but others (e.g., poverty, environmental pollution, nuclear power) are not so obviously linked to objective trends (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Because "issue attention cycles" imply the movement of issues on and off the mass media agenda, such cycles may influence the short-term news worthiness of a particular demonstration event. Most of the

analyses of issue cycles have featured the mobilization of media attention by more highly organized, wealthy, and media-sophisticated collective actors than the typical social movement actors who organize demonstrations (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; McCarthy, Smith, and Zald 1996; Neuman 1990).<sup>6</sup>

Issue cycles may bias story selection in part because they can push other issues out of the media limelight, but more so because media personnel have a tendency to connect these cycles with ongoing events, selecting for stories those events which will receive subsequent media attention depending on ebbs and flows of media attention cycles. Recognition of this pattern led one media consultant to recommend that corporate media attention seekers "surf" the waves of issue attention cycles (Nolan 1985). These arguments lead to our expectation that, other things equal, demonstrations around those issues easily coupled with contemporaneous peaks in media issue attention cycles will more likely be selected for coverage than others.

*Washington Demonstrations as News*

We have noted the pervasive consensus that demonstrations are now a central and legitimate feature of political participation in Western democracies. Demonstrations are fielded across communities large and small throughout the United States, but they are especially likely to take place at seats of state power, such as municipal commons, state capitals (Lofland and Fink 1982), and the U.S. National Capital in Washington, D.C. Citizens who seek national recognition of their grievances are likely to choose the nation's Capital as the site for their demonstrations (Etzioni 1970). Between one and two thousand protest events occur there each year, providing an excellent opportunity to examine the dimensions of media selection bias we have just summarized.

<sup>4</sup> Our statement is a truncated version of the "propaganda model" as outlined by Herman and Chomsky (1988).

<sup>5</sup> While we discuss newsgathering routines, newsworthy pegs, corporate hegemony and media issue attention cycles as influences on media selection bias, we do not imply that each is independent. These factors are clearly related, although each leads us to varying assumptions about the structure of selection bias.

<sup>6</sup> The classic illustration of the comparative efforts and successes of local environmental activists versus national corporate actors in promoting their side of the story in local and national media is provided by Molotch and Lester (1975).



## CREATING AN OBJECTIVE RECORD OF WASHINGTON, D.C. DEMONSTRATIONS

### *Defining Demonstration Events*

Our unit of analysis is consistent with most of the criteria of other scholars who define protest demonstrations as collective action events: gatherings of two or more people in which a visible or audible "claim is made which, if realized, would affect the interests of some specific person(s) or group(s) outside their own numbers" (Tilly 1978:275).<sup>7</sup> Our unit of analysis is further specified as a demonstration with clear assembling and dispersal phases. Thus, a 72-hour continuous vigil on the White House sidewalk is counted as one demonstration event; a daily two-hour picket that is repeated for one week is recorded as seven discrete demonstration events. Finally, all recorded demonstrations involve political or religious claims, or messages of protest and/or celebration of some issue, principle, actor, action, or event.

### *Data*

We developed an objective record of demonstration events in Washington, D.C. using demonstration permit records from the three

primary policing agencies there: the National Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Capitol Police (USCP), and the D.C. Metropolitan Police (MPDC). Each agency requires that all groups planning to demonstrate within its jurisdiction apply for a permit to do so.<sup>8</sup> Guidelines have been established, particularly in the past two decades, to regulate such events (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1994). A formal permit system in each of these three jurisdictions defines the legal constraints on public gatherings and specifies demonstrators' First Amendment guarantees.<sup>9</sup>

The archival records of permits in these three policing jurisdictions in Washington, D.C. constitute an official record of public

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Capitol Police are responsible for demonstrations on the grounds surrounding the Capitol and the House and Senate office buildings. The Metropolitan Police are responsible for demonstrations on the city streets. The National Park Service is responsible for demonstrations on monument grounds, the Mall, the Ellipse behind the White House, and Lafayette Park across the street from it as well as most other parks throughout the city.

<sup>9</sup> In the District of Columbia no permit is required to hold vigil or picket on non-U.S. government property (e.g., sidewalks), provided that the demonstration does not block pedestrian traffic or interfere with entry or exit to adjoining private or public properties. If demonstrators enter the street for a procession or march, they must obtain a permit from the MPDC. Demonstrations that take place on the U.S. Capitol grounds, including the House and Senate office building grounds, require permits from the USCP. The NPS, a division of the U.S. Department of the Interior, distinguishes between two types of gatherings for which permits are required.

"**Demonstration**" includes [First Amendment] speeches, picketing, vigils, etc., and all similar activity designed to communicate a message of some kind. "**Special event**" includes any presentation, program, or display [e.g., sports events, pageants, celebrations, historical reenactments, regattas, entertainments, exhibitions, parades, fairs, festivals and similar events, including those presented by the National Park Service], which is recreational, entertaining, or celebrational in nature, etc. (Code of Federal Regulations Title 36, Chapter 1, A Sec. 50.19., 1976)

The Park Service permits no special events on the White House sidewalk bordering Pennsylvania Avenue, since these are reserved for demonstrations only.

<sup>7</sup> We take exception to the frequent limitation of collective actions (demonstrations) to nonroutine events and to the exclusion of actions by members of government. For example, Olzak (1992:54) excluded "anniversary marches or annual celebrations since their timing is predetermined and not spontaneous." But neither are the collective actions she included. Large demonstrations in the United States are almost always timed far enough in advance to permit notification and mobilization of participants; the lag time between notification and assembling allows additional planning and preparations for the target, place, and form of protest. It is difficult to characterize as spontaneous any of the demonstrations with which we are familiar, even those that were quickly planned and mobilized and therefore small in size. At the same time, we recognize that no demonstration, large or small, can ever be executed just as planned, rehearsed, and prepared. The settings in which demonstrations take place are dynamic—unanticipated and potentially disrupting events can occur which, in turn, require adjustment and improvisation on the part of demonstrators.

gatherings, some of which are First Amendment (demonstration) gatherings and some of which are Special Event gatherings. First Amendment gatherings can be further divided into political and religious demonstrations. In this paper we examine only *political* First Amendment events, excluding *religious* First Amendment events as well as nonpolitical special events.<sup>10</sup> This makes the analysis presented here comparable to the almost exclusive focus in the existing literature on political collective action events.<sup>11</sup>

For every proposed demonstration policing agencies solicit extensive information from applicants. The records provide details on the individual or organization sponsoring the event, the purpose, location, time, duration, form, activities, equipment, number of expected participants, and whether the applicants anticipate that counter demonstrators

may appear to possibly disrupt the event. Some of these permits are public records and are open to public scrutiny through the Freedom of Information Act.<sup>12</sup>

We inspected demonstration permit records for 1982 and 1991 from the National Park Service, United States Capitol Police, and the Metropolitan Police of the District of Columbia. Official constraints prevented us from copying the original application permits, therefore, we developed forms and procedures that enabled on-site coding of relevant information embodied in the records.<sup>13</sup> Many of the permit applications represent more than one demonstration (e.g., permits to picket or vigil for several days in a row). Inter-coder reliability estimates were .90 or higher for the variables we created from the several permit forms (described below).

### Validity of the Data

This body of permit records provides a fairly comprehensive portrait of collective action events in Washington, D.C. There are three potential difficulties with official records of such events. The first is that some groups who engage in collective action never apply for a permit. The NPS does not require a permit for protests involving fewer than 25 people, although it strongly encourages permits as they facilitate the efficient and orderly public use of national park space. It is likely, then, that some smaller protests within Park Service jurisdiction will not be included in the permit record. Interviews with Park Rangers responsible for the permitting process indicate, however, that “unpermitted protests” constitute no more than 5 percent of total gatherings.

The U.S. Capitol Police require permits even for solo demonstrators. Given their relatively smaller area of jurisdiction and extensive surveillance, it is our judgement that they know about practically all protests on Capitol Hill. Groups protesting without

<sup>10</sup> Mindful that NPS might classify as special events some gatherings we would consider as political or religious demonstrations, we carefully examined and coded permit applicants' stated purposes for their proposed gatherings according to our criteria for demonstrations. For the analysis reported here, we excluded religious group applicants whose stated purpose was “spreading the gospel” or “evangelizing”; we included religious group applicants whose stated purpose was advocating or protesting legislation, electoral candidates or other political agenda.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this paper we interchangeably use the terms demonstration event, protest event, collective action event, and First Amendment event. By demonstration we mean those public gatherings of two or more persons in the same space and time location whose modal behaviors are individual or collective, visible or audible claims, which protest or advocate some political (or religious) principle, actor, actions or conditions (e.g., placarding, leafleting, petitioning, tabling, as well as picketing, vigiling, rallying, marching, chanting, gesturing, and the like).

Demonstrations may involve two or more related gatherings, as when people assemble for an initial rally and later march to another location for another rally or to join or show support for a vigil or picket line, or perhaps to engage in acts of civil disobedience. The term “event” is used elsewhere (McPhail 1991) to refer to two or more related gatherings. While some of the demonstrations we discuss involve but one gathering, many involve more; therefore, we use the more inclusive concept of demonstration (or collective action, or protest, or First Amendment) event.

<sup>12</sup> NPS and MPDC permit records are available through the Freedom of Information Act and were relatively easy to access (particularly for the more recent period). USCP records, however, are not governed by this legislation and proved much more difficult to obtain.

<sup>13</sup> Copies of the codebook are available from the first author.

**Table 1. Percentage Distributions of the Estimated Size of Washington Demonstrations: From Demonstration Permit Records, 1982 and 1991**

Estimated Demonstration Size	1982	1991
Less than 26	60.4%	53.4%
26–100	17.0%	20.8%
More than 100	22.7%	25.8%
Mean size	1,218	741
Median size	20	25
Maximum size	500,000	100,000
Total number of demonstrations	1,209	1,856

permits are, typically, assigned permits on the spot.

The permitting of protests within the jurisdiction of the MPDC is governed by prevailing “Public Forum” law and precedent that governs most public space in the United States. This does not require a permit for peaceful protest in traditional public fora or on public sidewalks, as long as they do not interfere with pedestrian or vehicular traffic (cf. An 1991; Snyder 1985). As a result, it can be expected that large numbers of protests can occur in MPDC jurisdiction without permits. We estimated the number of “unpermitted” events that occurred in both 1982 and 1991 from a logbook kept by an MPDC desk sergeant for demonstrations encountered by patrol officers but for which no permits had been issued. In 1982, 61 percent, and in 1991, 68 percent of all protests known to the MPDC neither applied for nor received permits, and were only recorded in this logbook.<sup>14</sup>

Our confidence in the comprehensiveness of the permit record is substantiated by the fact that only a very small number of demonstrations that appear in the media record are not in the permit record. These excep-

<sup>14</sup> As officially recognized demonstrations, logged entries were included in our data set. MPDC logged and permitted demonstrations totaling 13 percent in 1982 and 16 percent in 1991; the National Park Service permitted 64 and 56 percent, respectively; the U.S. Capitol Police permitted 23 and 28 percent. This is the most comprehensive demonstration census we could assemble from official records for those years.

tions are almost always one of the following: a demonstration that took place at the District Building (the seat of the local D.C. government), which allows demonstrations but does not have its own permitting system; a demonstration on a sidewalk in front of a hotel or embassy, which do not require a formal permit; and an instance of civil disobedience, where demonstrators protested by refusing to comply with permitting procedures.

The second potential difficulty with our data sources is that all permitted protest events do not actually take place. However, the effort required to obtain a permit ordinarily assures that most applicants will carry through with their planned demonstrations. U.S. Capitol Police records establish that only 2.3 percent of the events permitted by the USCP did not take place. Extrapolating from these data, we estimate that 97.7 percent of the permitted demonstrations did indeed take place. We see no reason why this estimate should be much less for the other two police agencies.<sup>15</sup>

We recognize another validity issue. Demonstration size estimates appear on the official permits *in advance* of the actual demonstration event. Although these are estimates, we believe they are not excessively biased. Agency officials are experienced in anticipating numbers of protesters (especially for large demonstrations) because they must determine and justify personnel needs based on these estimates. In the few cases when these officials doubted applicants’ claims of numbers, they entered a revised size estimate on the permit; in these instances our coders were instructed to record agency rather than applicant estimates of demonstration size.

**THE POPULATION OF WASHINGTON, D.C. DEMONSTRATIONS IN 1982 AND 1991**

We summarize here some important characteristics of protests in 1982 and 1991 based on the permit records. Table 1 displays information about the size distributions of the population of D.C. protests for 1982 and

<sup>15</sup> Administrators in all three agencies also make note of permits that are canceled by organizers before the demonstration. We excluded such cancellations from our record of permitted demonstrations.



1991, derived from the permits. For each year more than half of the protests involved 25 or fewer demonstrators, and about three-quarters of them involved fewer than 100 people. These data establish that small political protests have become a daily fixture in Washington: The tactic of "voting with one's feet" has been adopted by a wide range of causes and movements. Note, too, that the size distribution as well as the median size of protests has remained fairly constant across the two periods, while the mean size is quite different. This derives from the fact that no very large protest demonstration (e.g., in the 200,000 range) was held during 1991. Finally, note that the total number of protests increased between 1982 and 1991.<sup>16</sup>

Table 2 shows percentage distributions of the other independent variables in our analyses of media selection bias. They are arranged in three major categories: demonstration form, demonstration context, and demonstration purpose (or issue). The repertoire of *demonstration forms* includes the familiar rally, march, vigil or picket, plus leafleting and petitioning although these sometimes appear in less familiar combinations. For example, while many demonstration rallies are self-contained, rallies are also frequently combined with marches; sometimes before and after, sometimes only before or only after, and sometimes punctuating the march at several points enroute. Another form involves demonstrators standing and holding placards (here termed a vigil) or walking a rotating or oscillating but fixed route (here termed a

**Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Dichotomous Independent Variables: Washington, D.C., 1982 and 1991**

Independent Variable	Percent in 1982	Percent in 1991
<i>Form<sup>a</sup></i>		
Rally	9.9	24.2
March/Rally	17.3	13.1
Vigil/Picket	51.3	35.6
Literature Table	10.2	23.6
<i>Context<sup>b</sup></i>		
Counter-Demonstration	6.2	3.2
Campaign	74.3	62.8
Weekend	32.7	33.9
<i>Purpose (Top 10 Issues)<sup>c</sup></i>		
Foreign government	17.0	19.9
Gulf War	—	14.3
Latin America/peace	13.0	—
Middle East-Lebanon War	7.6	—
School prayer	7.3	—
Anti-nuclear weapons	5.4	—
Equal Rights Amendment	4.4	—
Veterans' issues	2.9	7.2
Homelessness	—	7.0
Pro-environment	—	5.3
Women's issues	—	3.9
Democracy for Haiti	—	3.3
Labor	2.6	2.4
Health care	—	1.9
Jobs/economy	2.5	0.6
Civil rights	2.3	—
Total number of permitted demonstrations	1,209	1,856

<sup>a</sup> Each form variable is a dummy variable (1 = the form; 0 = not the form). There were only a small number of forms not included in this four-fold categorization, which explains why the four form categories do not add to 100 percent.

<sup>b</sup> Each context variable is a dummy variable. For each category the suppressed percentage figure is what remains of 100 percent.

<sup>c</sup> Each issue variable is a dummy variable (1 = issue purpose, 0 = any other purpose).

<sup>16</sup> The Associated Press has assembled, from past media reports, a list of 15 mass demonstrations in Washington, D.C. with estimated sizes of 200,000 or more between 1967 and 1993 (*The Washington Times*, April 26, 1993, p. A6). Two gatherings of this size occurred in 1982: The Viet Nam Memorial Dedication, estimated from permit records at 500,000, and a demonstration honoring Viet Nam Veterans the preceding day, estimated from permit records at 250,000. These were not included on the AP list.

If we add a third protest to this list, the 1993 gay and lesbian rights demonstration, which by any estimate was larger than 200,000, the total number of "large" demonstrations amounts to 18 over a period of 26 years, or fewer than one per year on average. The official size estimates of these large demonstrations have been a matter of some controversy.

picket) in the demonstration venue. We have combined these latter cases into a single category. Leafleting, and occasionally petition signature solicitation, occurs in conjunction with most rallies, some marches, and a few vigils or pickets. Our observations of Washington demonstrations, coupled with the permit application evidence we have described, led us to create a demonstration form category that combines leafleting and petitioning activities at a stationary (often a card table) location. We refer to the form here and subsequently as a "literature table." *Demonstration context* refers to whether a demonstration was held on a weekend or weekday, whether it was part of an ongoing campaign of demonstrations, and whether or not there was any indication on the permit that the applicants expected counter-demonstrators to be present. *Demonstration purpose* refers to our classification of the applicant's answer to an explicit question on the permit application about the purpose of the demonstration.

Table 2 also summarizes several changes in the nature of Washington demonstrations between 1982 and 1991. For instance, there were a smaller percentage of demonstrations in 1991 at which counter-demonstration activity was expected by permit applicants (three percent as compared to 6 percent in 1982). There were also fewer protests that were part of a campaign, by which we mean a series of demonstrations fielded over multiple days by the same sponsor on the same issue. One-third of the demonstrations took place on weekends in both years.

The distribution of forms of protests also changed somewhat between the two periods, with rallies and literature tables becoming more common. There was a decline in the percentage of protests that were vigil/pickets and a small decline in the percentage that were march/rally combinations. Note that a relatively small proportion of demonstrations are marches, and therefore we reasoned these would be more likely to gain media coverage. Not only are these likely to involve more people, but they are also extraordinary by virtue of their infrequency, visibility, and typical audibility.

The 10 substantive issues that were the most frequently stated purposes of protesters on the permit application forms were identified for each year; percentages are displayed

in Table 2. While demonstrations took place around a large number of issues, over 60 percent of them focused on 1 of 10 issues each year, and no issue outside of the top 10 in either year was the focus of more than 1 percent of the demonstrations. The most frequent target of demonstrations in both 1982 and 1991 was some aspect of a foreign government's policy (17 percent in 1982 and 20 percent in 1991). Often many of these demonstrators were foreign nationals or immigrants protesting at embassies or on the sidewalk in front of the White House. The issue attracting the next largest number of demonstrations for both years involved some aspect of U.S. foreign policy (13 percent on Central American policy in 1982, and 14 percent on the Gulf War in 1991), as did the third largest for 1982, the Israeli-Lebanese war. Demonstrations around Veterans' issues were common in both years, with a fairly dramatic increase in 1991.<sup>17</sup> Women's issues were a frequent focus of demonstrations in both years. In 1982 these centered around the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment; in 1991 they focused on pro-choice and health issues as well as on the debate over the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court.

## MEDIA TRACES OF WASHINGTON, D.C. DEMONSTRATIONS

### Data

We followed standard procedures developed by other scholars for gathering and reducing the media traces. We selected media sources that enable comparisons between national and local origins as well as between print and electronic media. *The New York Times* was included in our study because it is the national print source most widely used by collective action researchers. We chose *The*

<sup>17</sup> In 1991 the Park Service issued permits for over 2,500 demonstrations around the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Organizers of those vigils ostensibly intended to raise awareness of prisoners of war and missing soldiers thought to remain in Vietnam, but their extensive sale of t-shirts and literature raised questions about their motivations (McManus 1993). Given the contested nature and sheer frequency of these demonstration events, we excluded them from our analyses.

*Washington Post* because we expected it to provide the most extensive print coverage of local collective action events. In light of the citizenry's increasing reliance on television news rather than newspapers for information on social and political developments (Iyengar and Kinder 1987), we also included national television news telecasts. We used the *Vanderbilt Network News Index and Abstracts* to access the national nightly news telecasts by ABC, CBS, and NBC.

Because we were skeptical that *The Washington Post* index for 1982 was comprehensive (cf. Everett 1992), we read *The Washington Post* for the entire year, copied and coded all stories and mentions of collective action events in Washington, D.C. The 1982 *The New York Times Index* appeared to provide a reliable summary of stories on Washington, D.C. collective action events, and was used to locate relevant articles from 1982. We used similar procedures to gather print media traces for 1991. We also located (through direct reading of newscast abstracts), copied, and coded the Vanderbilt Network News Abstracts for all mentions of demonstrations in Washington, D.C. on ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news telecasts for both years.<sup>18</sup>

For the analysis reported here, we are only concerned with the presence or absence of media coverage by each source for every event, rather than the content of that coverage. Therefore, each news account was read or audited to determine which event(s) it described, and that event record was coded as being reported by that source.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The *Vanderbilt Network News Index and Abstracts* includes a subject index and brief synopses of each news item reported during the evening national news telecasts of the major networks. We initially limited our search to the indices, but later found that a direct read of the abstracts provided a more comprehensive list of stories. Our analyses are based upon evidence generated through a direct read of both years of the *Abstracts*.

<sup>19</sup> Numerous news stories describe multievent campaigns. For example, when Iranian students were reported to have been demonstrating downtown regularly for several weeks, we erred on the side of inclusiveness; that is, we coded all demonstrations in that particular campaign as having been reported although there was not a separate report on each demonstration.

### *The Media Portrayal of Washington Demonstrations*

As expected, the picture of Washington demonstrations portrayed in the mass media differs dramatically from that generated from demonstration permit records. Table 3 displays and Figure 1 pictures the distribution of Washington demonstrations across six size categories for 1982 and 1991, and the distribution of demonstrations noted in any media source across those same size categories.

For 1982, by far the largest proportion of demonstrations (60 percent) fall in the smallest size category, consistent with our earlier discussion. Despite their greater frequency, demonstrations in the smallest size category are the least likely to receive media coverage (2.9 percent). Much larger proportions of demonstrations from categories with over 1000 participants are reported, and even larger proportions of the largest demonstrations are reported—there were 2 larger than 100,000 in 1982, and both received coverage. A similar pattern is evident in 1991, although it is slightly less dramatic.<sup>20</sup> In the midsize categories (e.g., 26–100, 101–1,000, and 1,001–10,000) a smaller percentage of demonstrations is covered by any media source in 1991 than is the case in 1982.

While the media characterization of the population of Washington demonstrations clearly under represents the vast number of small demonstrations, scholars have long recognized the flawed assumption that every demonstration has an equal likelihood of media coverage (cf. Jenkins and Schock 1992; Snyder and Kelly 1977). It is also recognized that larger demonstrations may represent more widely held views and therefore are more likely to be covered. As a result, one might argue that a substantially greater proportion of citizen demonstrators are encompassed by media coverage than the small

<sup>20</sup> This is largely a result of the fact that much of the media coverage of 1991 demonstrations (as we have seen, less extensive than in 1982) was of demonstrations for or against the Gulf War. Many of those demonstrations were quite modest in size. Of the 29 permitted protests with more than 1,000 protesters that focused on the Gulf War (11 against and 18 in favor), 21 were covered by one of the media sources. We will return to this pattern in our conclusion.

**Table 3. Percentages of Annual Washington, D.C. Demonstrations by Demonstration Size and Proportion Covered within Each Size Category by any Media Source, 1982 and 1991**

Demonstration Size	1982 Demonstrations		1991 Demonstrations	
	Percent Permitted <sup>a</sup>	Percent Reported <sup>b</sup>	Percent Permitted <sup>a</sup>	Percent Reported <sup>b</sup>
Less than 26	60.4	2.9	53.4	3.3
26–100	17.0	12.3	20.8	7.7
101–1,000	15.8	34.7	20.7	11.9
1,001–10,000	5.9	47.1	4.1	29.8
10,001–100,000	0.8	77.8	1.0	37.5
More than 100,000	0.2	100.0	—	—
Total percent	100.0	13.0	100.0	7.1
Number of demonstrations	1,209	158	1,856	133

<sup>a</sup> Percent permitted represents the percentages of all demonstrations for the year by size category. The totals sum to 100 percent.

<sup>b</sup> Percent reported represents the percentage of all demonstrations in the size category that were reported in any media source. The totals are the percentage of all demonstrations reported in any media source.

number of actual demonstrations that are covered would imply. To assess this supposition we summed the permit estimates of numbers of demonstrators who took part in those demonstrations covered by the media to determine its proportion of the total pool of demonstrators participating in Washington protests in each year.

By aggregating all demonstrators who participated in demonstrations reported by the media, we get a somewhat different picture of the extent of coverage than we get from examining the number of protest events alone. The percentage of demonstrations covered by each media source and the percentage of estimated number of demonstration participants covered for each year are displayed in Table 4.

For 1982, media coverage appears to be far more comprehensive when judged by the proportion of demonstrators covered in contrast to the proportion of demonstrations covered. At least 60 percent of demonstrators are covered by each source, and 80 percent by one or another source. However, the 1991 coverage of demonstrators (as with number of demonstrations) appears to be far less comprehensive, as each source reported on less than 30 percent of the total number of demonstrators who protested in Washington that year, and only 30 percent by any source.

This 1991 pattern, in contrast to 1982, clearly results from the extensive coverage of protests surrounding U.S. participation in the 1991 Gulf War, and it follows from several interacting features of those protests and their coverage. First, the Gulf War prompted a burst of demonstrations in the first several months of 1991. The January through March period in 1991 witnessed 32.4 percent of the year's permitted demonstrations in Washington. Nearly one-half of those more than 600 demonstrations were for or against the Gulf War. But in 1982, only 12.7 percent of the total annual protests occurred in the same season, reflecting the permitting agencies' common wisdom that demonstrations are more likely in the late spring, summer, and early fall than during the winter months. Second, few of the Gulf War demonstrations were large ones, many having been quickly planned and fielded. Third, even though the annual volume of demonstrations increased between 1982 and 1991 by about 54 percent and the number of events reported remained fairly constant across the two years, the rate of coverage of those staged during the January through March period increased by almost 300 percent. Thus, media focus on demonstrations in 1991 was skewed toward the Gulf War and therefore included notice of

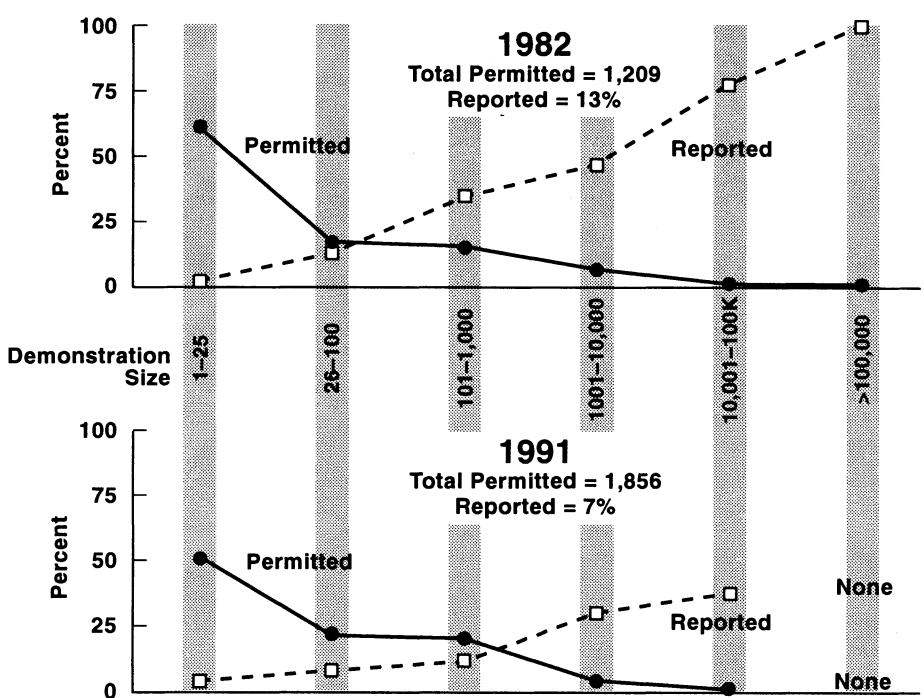


Figure 1. Percent of Demonstrations Permitted and Reported in the Media, by Size of Demonstration: Washington, D.C., 1982 and 1991

many smaller demonstrations that may have been missed in different circumstances.

Table 4 also shows the level of coverage of demonstrations by media source. Consistent with the percentage of demonstrators covered, *The Washington Post* shows more comprehensive coverage than the *New York Times* for both years, both print sources show reduced levels of coverage between 1982 and 1991, while the national electronic media show a consistent level of coverage.

DEMONSTRATION IMAGES AND PATTERNS IN 1982 AND 1991

The typical character of demonstrations, their sheer volume, and their representations in the media changed in several ways between 1982 and 1991. First, there was an increase in the total number of demonstrations permitted, even though their median size remained stable. Second, the percentage of demonstrations covered by the media sources we examined declined over the period. Third, the issues around which demonstrations were mobilized shifted. And, fourth, the propor-

tion of the total annual pool of Washington demonstrators covered by the media declined from 1982 to 1991. There is, based on this evidence, notable instability in the character of Washington, D.C. demonstrations and their media representations during these two time periods. Is this instability reflected in the structure of media selection bias?

Analyses of the Structure of Media Selection Bias

Recall what we mean by the structure of selection bias: the characteristics of protest associated with the likelihood of mass media coverage. We see no reason to expect any relationship between changes in protest patterns and the structure of selection bias in media coverage of that protest. Below we test this assertion by modeling the effects of protest characteristics on the likelihood of media coverage.

We present maximum likelihood estimates of the effects of the independent variables (described above) on whether a demonstration is covered, first, by any media source.



Table 4. Percentages of Demonstrations and of Demonstration Participants Reported in Media Sources During 1982 and 1991

Media Source	Percent Reported in 1982		Percent Reported in 1991	
	Permitted Demonstrations <sup>a</sup>	Demonstration Participants <sup>b</sup>	Permitted Demonstrations <sup>a</sup>	Demonstration Participants <sup>b</sup>
<i>The New York Times</i>	4.1	67.0	1.8	20.3
<i>The Washington Post</i>	7.9	74.7	5.8	29.2
ABC, CBS, NBC	2.1	62.0	2.1	20.0
Any media source <sup>c</sup>	13.1	80.1	7.2	29.8

<sup>a</sup> Figures represent the percentage of all demonstrations for the year reported by each source.  
<sup>b</sup> Figures represent the percentage of the aggregate number of demonstrators in each year that were part of demonstrations reported in each media source.  
<sup>c</sup> Any media represents the aggregate coverage across all three media sources.

All independent variables, with the exception of demonstration size, are dichotomous. Demonstration size is coded into the six categories shown in Figure 1. Table 5 displays, in the first and third columns, the bivariate estimates for each independent variable, showing its unmediated relationship to coverage by any of the media sources for 1982 and 1991. To the right of these columns are the full models which control for all other effects. Both the bivariate and the multivariate estimates are derived by fitting logistic regression models. The logged parameters associated with these models and the more interpretable odds ratios derived from them are presented in Table 5.

The bivariate estimates are consistent with many of the expectations we derived from theoretical interpretation of how media institutions select a few demonstrations for coverage from vast numbers that take place. The coefficients for demonstration size are positive and significant for both years, reflecting the patterns we have already discussed. The demonstrations that made up ongoing campaigns of protest are less likely to be covered in both years. More dramatic protest forms, like marches/rallies, attract more coverage; less flamboyant forms, such as literature tables and vigils, attract less. Odds ratios imply that marches and rallies were 5.4 times more likely to receive coverage than other forms of protest in 1982, and 4.3 times more likely than others to receive coverage in 1991.

Demonstrations around peak issues in media attention cycles were far more likely than

others to be covered in each year—the Israeli/Lebanese War in 1982 and the Gulf War in 1991. And, in 1991, protests against the policies of foreign governments, in spite of their high frequency, were less likely to gain attention. The pattern of coverage suggests less attention in the media to those protest issues that challenge important elite interests, such as Haitian democracy, labor, homelessness, and the environment, although these coefficients are not generally significant (with the exception of the protests against U.S. policy in Latin America in 1982 and those against homelessness in 1991). In each year, demonstrations pertaining to at least one domestic issue yield significant parameters. The associated odds ratios shown imply that in 1982 civil rights demonstrations were more than three times as likely to be covered, and demonstrations on behalf of veterans were more than twice as likely to be covered, while demonstrations on economic issues were almost five times as likely to be covered in 1991.

The multivariate estimates for the full model in Table 5 present a clearer pattern of results. With a few minor exceptions, the most consequential, statistically significant correlates of coverage in both years are a demonstration’s size and its purpose. The size effects are immense. The odds ratios indicate the increased likelihood of coverage as one moves between each of the six adjacent size categories displayed in Table 3. These ratios are multiplicative, so that demonstrations in the next to largest size category

**Table 5. Coefficients from the Logistic Regression of Media Selection Bias in Coverage in Any Media on Selected Independent Variables: Washington, D.C. Demonstrations, 1982 and 1991**

Independent Variable	1982		1991	
	Bivariate Estimates	Full Model	Bivariate Estimates	Full Model
<i>Context</i>				
Demonstration Size	1.195*** (3.305)	1.150*** (3.158)	.747*** (2.111)	.824*** (2.279)
Counter-demonstration	1.040*** (2.830)	.647 (1.910)	-.080 (.923)	.240 (1.272)
Campaign	-1.709*** (.181)	-.683* (.505)	-.705*** (.494)	-.023 (.977)
Weekend	.110 (1.116)	-.636** (.529)	.139 (1.149)	-.545* (.579)
<i>Form<sup>a</sup></i>				
March and rally	1.686*** (5.399)	-.973* (.378)	1.461*** (4.312)	1.205 (3.335)
Vigil/picket	-1.365** (.255)	-1.359*** (.257)	.267 (1.113)	.228 (1.256)
Rally	.970*** (2.638)	-1.020* (.360)	-.050 (.951)	-.038 (.962)
Literature table	-1.349** (.259)	—	-2.611*** (.078)	—
<i>Purpose (Top 10 Issues)</i>			<i>Purpose</i>	
Foreign government policy	.162 (1.176)	.326 (1.385)	Foreign government policy	-1.295*** (.274) .336 (.714)
Latin America/peace	-.997 (.369)	.644 (1.903)	Gulf War	2.800*** (16.413) 2.990*** (19.885)
Middle East-Lebanon War	1.078*** (2.939)	2.866*** (17.568)	Veterans' issues	-6.722 (.001) -5.673 (.003)
School prayer	-2.636** (.072)	-.343 (.709)	Homelessness	-1.237* (.290) -.483 (.617)
Anti-nuclear weapons	.835** (2.304)	.961* (2.614)	Pro-environment	-5.700 (.003) -6.067 (.002)
ERA	.176 (1.192)	1.291* (3.637)	Women's issues	-.296 (.743) 1.341 (3.825)
Veterans' issues	.868* (2.381)	-.145 (.865)	Democracy for Haiti	-.428 (.652) .125 (1.132)
Labor	.253 (1.288)	.287 (1.332)	Labor	-1.240 (.289) -.153 (.858)
Jobs/economy	.293 (1.341)	-.117 (.889)	Health care	.198 (1.219) 2.181** (8.854)
Civil rights	1.188** (3.280)	.672 (1.959)	Jobs/economy	1.599* (4.946) 1.769* (5.867)
Constant	—	-3.324***	—	-5.572***
-2 log likelihood	—	577.413	—	533.487
Chi-square	266.159***		286.317***	
Number of demonstrations <sup>b</sup>	1,077		1,552	

*Note:* Dependent variable is “any media coverage.” Numbers in parentheses are odds ratios.

<sup>a</sup> The literature table form category is used as the reference category; each of the other three form categories being represented by a dummy variable.

<sup>b</sup> The number of demonstrations is smaller than the number of permitted demonstrations for each year because some cases were excluded as a result of missing data. Separate analyses (not shown) of the bivariate estimates for only those cases included in the full models, are only marginally discrepant from the patterns in Table 5.

\**p* < .05      \*\**p* < .01      \*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed tests)

(10,001 to 100,000) are (3.158)4 or 99 times more likely to be covered than those in the smallest size category (1 to 25) for 1982 and (2.279)4 or 27 times more likely to be covered in 1991.

The next largest effect in both years results from a demonstration's purpose. In 1982, Middle East demonstrations were over 17 times more likely to be covered than other demonstrations, and ERA demonstrations were 3 times more likely to be covered. In 1991, demonstrations about the Gulf War were over 19 times more likely to be covered, those pertaining to health issues almost 9 times more likely to be covered, and those related to the economy almost 6 times more likely to be covered. These are large effects, but they are dwarfed by the consequences of size on media coverage.

Other effects of demonstration context in these analyses include those of weekend in 1982 and 1991. In both years demonstrations that occur on weekends are somewhat larger; however, when the effects of size are taken into account, weekend demonstrations are about one-half as likely to be covered as other demonstrations. Based on the "news routine" perspective we had anticipated, incorrectly, that the larger size of the weekend newshole would favor coverage of weekend demonstrations. The fact remains that weekend demonstrations that are small and address issues low on the media agenda are apparently neglected, and this may be a function of the routinely smaller weekend staff of media organizations.

With the exception of the vigil/picket form in 1982, there remain no statistically significant effects of demonstration form on media coverage. Vigils and pickets are less likely than are literature tables to be covered in 1982, but the odds ratios imply that the effect is not substantively significant. In 1991, the coefficient for the march and rally form approaches statistical significance ( $p = .06$ ) and shows that this form is more than three times as likely to be covered than are literature tables, even when the effects of the context and issue variables are included in the model.

Table 5 also shows significant effects of demonstration purpose on the likelihood of media coverage. Demonstrations focusing on prominent U.S. foreign policy issues were

**Table 6. Coefficients from the Logistic Regression of Media Selection Bias (Coverage in Any Media) on selected Independent Variables: Washington, D.C. Demonstrations, Full Model for Each Source, 1982**

Dependent Variable	Media Sources		
	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	National Television News
<i>Context</i>			
Demonstration size	1.037*** (2.820)	.941*** (2.564)	1.076*** (2.933)
Counter-demonstration	-.052 (.949)	.870* (2.386)	1.275 (3.577)
Campaign	.180 (1.197)	-.101 (.904)	-1.147 (.317)
Weekend	-.560 (.571)	-.516 (.597)	-.124 (.883)
<i>Form</i>			
March and rally	-.794 (.452)	-.772 (.462)	-.294 (.745)
Vigil/picket	-.399 (.671)	-1.083* (.338)	.574 (1.775)
Rally	-.411 (.663)	-.434 (.648)	.789 (2.202)
Literature table	—	—	—
<i>Purpose (Top 10 Issues)</i>			
Foreign government policy	-.251 (.778)	.202 (1.224)	-7.778 (.000)
Latin America/peace	-1.042 (.353)	-.383 (.682)	.493 (1.637)
Middle East-Lebanon War	2.088*** (8.071)	1.678*** (5.353)	-.519 (.595)
School prayer	-5.912 (.003)	-.311 (.732)	-6.998 (.001)
Anti-nuclear weapons	-.041 (.960)	.601 (1.825)	.687 (1.988)
ERA	.717 (2.048)	.803 (2.231)	-.327 (.721)
Veterans' issues	-.453 (.636)	-1.525 (.218)	.203 (1.226)
Labor	-7.210 (.001)	.422 (1.526)	-8.566 (.000)
Jobs/economy	-.074 (.929)	-.869 (.419)	.388 (1.474)
Civil rights	-1.232 (3.429)	1.037 (2.821)	.578 (1.783)
Constant	-5.076***	-3.847***	-6.313***
-2 log likelihood	289.162	464.435	156.116
Chi-square	90.948***	135.252***	66.326***
Number of demonstrations	1,077	1,077	1,077

*Note:* Dependent variable is "any media source." Numbers in parentheses are odds ratios. See notes a and b on Table 5.  
\* $p < .05$     \*\* $p < .01$     \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 7. Coefficients from the Logistic Regression of Media Selection Bias (Coverage in Any Media) on selected Independent Variables: Washington, D.C. Demonstrations, Full Model for Each Source, 1991**

Dependent Variable	Media Sources		
	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	National Television News
<i>Context</i>			
Demonstration size	1.096*** (2.993)	.835*** (2.304)	.381 (1.463)
Counter-demonstration	-7.465 (.001)	.672 (1.958)	-7.332 (.001)
Campaign	.853 (2.347)	-.056 (.946)	-.334 (.716)
Weekend	-1.762** (.172)	-.524 (.592)	.179 (1.196)
<i>Form</i>			
March and rally	.208 (1.232)	2.339* (10.367)	.528 (1.696)
Vigil/picket	-.644 (.525)	.760 (2.138)	.399 (1.490)
Rally	-.207 (.813)	.527 (1.694)	-.373 (.689)
Literature table	—	—	—
<i>Purpose (Top 10 Issues)</i>			
Foreign government policy	-5.251 (.005)	-.616 (.540)	.229 (1.258)
Gulf War	4.759*** (116.651)	3.354*** (28.625)	1.683*** (5.382)
Veterans' issues	-4.889 (.007)	-5.722 (.003)	-6.381 (.002)
Homelessness	-6.008 (.002)	.272 (1.312)	-6.870 (.001)
Pro-environment	-5.313 (.005)	-6.301 (.002)	-6.501 (.001)
Women's issues	2.957 (19.248)	-6.221 (.002)	1.810* (6.108)
Democracy for Haiti	-6.143 (.002)	.551 (1.735)	-7.089 (.001)
Labor	3.317* (27.589)	.158 (1.171)	.885 (2.423)
Health care	-4.719 (.009)	2.099* (8.162)	1.432 (4.187)
Jobs/economy	-6.605 (.001)	1.290 (3.631)	1.796 (6.025)
Constant	-8.930***	-6.858***	-5.183***
-2 log likelihood	175.283	418.289	262.245
Chi-square	136.473***	280.040***	57.200***
Number of demonstrations	1,552	1,552	1,552

*Note:* Dependent variable is "any media source." Numbers in parentheses are odds ratios. See notes a and b on Table 5.

\**p* < .05      \*\**p* < .01      \*\*\**p* < .001

more likely to be reported in both 1982 and 1991. And demonstrations associated with some prominent domestic policy issues, such as the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 and health care in 1991, were also more likely to be covered. This finding suggests that selection by the media of demonstrations for coverage may be influenced by some external assessment of what issues merit media attention. It suggests also that demonstrations on issues central to the current media agenda will more likely be covered than those that try to introduce neglected issues onto the media agenda. We further explore this interpretation and its implications in our discussion.

### Media Source Comparisons

Table 6 presents coefficients for each of the three media sources for 1982. Analyses are equivalent to the full model presented in Table 5. Table 7 presents the same for 1991. What is striking about the coefficients in these two tables is how similar each is to the models' coefficients based on coverage aggregated across media sources shown in Table 5; and, also, how similar each is to the other (with a few minor exceptions). In 1982, demonstration size shows constant, statistically significant effects across media sources (note the relative similarity of the odds ratios for size across media sources), but there are no statistically significant effects on network TV coverage of any of the protest purposes.

In 1991, the most substantively important result is the *lack* of a statistically significant effect of size on the likelihood of coverage for network TV—in that year, a Gulf War demonstration purpose is the only significant effect. The size of the effect for network TV is smaller than for the other media sources—Gulf War demonstrations are only about 5 times more likely to be covered, compared to more than 25 times and 116 times more likely in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, respectively. And there are differential effects of demonstration purpose, aside from the Gulf War, across the two print media sources: *The New York Times* was more likely to cover labor issues, and *The Washington Post* was more likely to cover health issues.

## SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION

Nearly three decades have passed since Michael Lipsky's (1968) insightful discussion of the relationship between the mass media and political protest.

To the extent that successful protest activity depends upon appealing to, and/or threatening, other groups in the community, the communications media set the limits of protest action. If protest tactics are not considered significant by the media, or if newspapers and television reporters or editors decide to overlook protest tactics, protest organizations will not succeed. Like the tree falling unheard in the forest, there is no protest unless protest is perceived and projected. (P. 1151)

Our comparison of official records of Washington demonstrations for 1982 and 1991 shows significant variation in how they were covered by the media for these two years, as well as in several of their characteristics. Their typical forms, temporal patterns, and purposes changed; their numbers increased. Some of these changes may represent trends, and some may be episodic.<sup>21</sup>

These differences notwithstanding, the structure of media selection bias appears to be relatively stable between 1982 and 1991.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority of demonstrations are ignored by the mainstream media; the very large ones are covered. Demonstration size is, by far, the most important characteristic determining the likelihood of media coverage.

After the effects of size are taken into account, the next most important correlate of coverage is being in the right place at the right time in a media attention cycle. While

social movements may, at times, be central to the shape of a media attention cycle, demonstrators are probably more often at the mercy of large cycles upon whose trajectories they can have little impact. The peaks of issue cycles, then, can be thought to provide windows of opportunity for demonstrators who are unwilling or unable to mount large protests. When the volume of coverage for an issue is large, pertinent protests, even small ones, are more likely to attract coverage. So here, the purposes of newsmakers and protesters mesh.<sup>23</sup>

We explored this interpretation by using a Nexis search to construct an independent measure of media coverage of the issues around which protests occurred.<sup>24</sup> We combined the total number of stories from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* by issue for 8 of the top 10 demonstration issues shown in Table 5 for 1982 for each three-month period (quarter) in each year; we did the same for stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.<sup>25</sup> The correlations for 1982 between these two independent, aggregated measures of issue coverage and the likelihood that a demonstration on that issue was covered<sup>26</sup> by

<sup>23</sup> As several reviewers and colleagues pointed out to us, the lack of such an independent measure makes our interpretation highly speculative, however plausible.

<sup>24</sup> The Nexis search included all *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Time Magazine* reports in 1982 and 1991 and the quarters preceding and following those years. The ranking of demonstration issues did not vary substantially across newspapers and newsweeklies, respectively, so the sources were pooled for the searches. The issues "economy" and "foreign government" proved to be too broad to yield usable comparative results, so they were excluded from the analyses.

<sup>25</sup> The Spearman rho correlation between the combined newspaper and newsmagazine story counts by issue was .69 for 1982 and .89 for 1991, suggesting quite strong correspondence in attention to issues between these two sets of news sources.

<sup>26</sup> The unit of analysis here is the issue-quarter: eight demonstration issues aggregated by quarter, for the four quarters of the year. Of the 32 possible issue-quarters, four were omitted as there were no demonstrations on that issue in that quarter. The rank-order correlation technique was

<sup>21</sup> Using available archives, we compared the NPS permit records from 1973 with those of 1982 and 1991 in an effort to disentangle trends from instability in the 1982 versus 1991 comparison. This truncated comparison showed substantial annual volatility in the volume of demonstrations rather than a steady increase in the number of demonstrations. Also, 1973 patterns of media coverage resembled the lower levels of coverage found in 1991, a finding which cautions against interpreting our results as a trend.

<sup>22</sup> This conclusion is buttressed by our preliminary analyses (not shown) of the NPS data for 1973, where quite similar patterns of selection bias were observed.



any media source appear in Table 8. The quarter before coefficients represent the relationship between the number of stories in the three-month period preceding the quarter in which demonstrations occurred; the current quarter represents that relationship within the same three-month period in which the demonstrations occurred; and the quarter after represents the three-month period following the quarter in which the demonstrations occurred. For both aggregated sources of media coverage, the number of stories in the quarter preceding the quarter in which protests occur is significantly correlated with the rate of coverage. And, so is the number of current quarter stories for the newspapers. In other words, the media's attention is already focused on an issue before demonstrations on these issues themselves become more likely to be the subject of media attention.<sup>27</sup> This evidence strongly supports our interpretation that issue-attention cycles affect the likelihood of coverage of demonstrations.

Notice that we have not presented (although we completed) similar analyses for 1991. This is because the vast majority (76 percent) of demonstrations covered that year (among the top 10 demonstration issues) pertained to the Gulf War.<sup>28</sup> Thirty-three percent of the Gulf War demonstrations, the most common demonstration issue in 1991 (most demonstrations occurred in the first quarter of the year), were covered by some media source, while only 2.5 percent of demonstrations on any of the other 10 issues were covered. This pattern even more strongly supports our supposition that media coverage of demonstrations is a consequence media-attention cycles.

These patterns indicate that media agenda setting processes are a key to understanding how public dissent is selected for reporting.

used because the distributions were severely skewed in each year.

<sup>27</sup> This does not necessarily demonstrate that public protests cannot influence the definition of media issue attention cycles—different kinds of data are necessary to evaluate that relationship.

<sup>28</sup> As a consequence, 22 of the possible 32 issue-quarters contained no demonstrations covered by any media source. Therefore, a similar quantitative test of our interpretation of the issue-attention cycle was not possible for 1991.

**Table 8. Spearman Rho Coefficients Showing the Correlation between Newspaper and Newsmagazine Coverage of Demonstration Issues and the Likelihood that Demonstrations on those Issues Were Covered in the Media: Washington, D.C., by Calendar Quarter, 1982**

Calendar Quarter, 1982	Media Source	
	<i>The Washington Post/The New York Times</i>	<i>Time/Newsweek/U.S. News</i>
Quarter before	.44 ( <i>p</i> = .01)	.49 ( <i>p</i> = .01)
Current quarter	.51 ( <i>p</i> = .01)	.18 ( <i>p</i> = .36)
Quarter after	.31 ( <i>p</i> = .10)	.21 ( <i>p</i> = .28)
Number of quarters	28	28

Few analysts of agenda setting processes in the media attribute much general influence to protest movements. Rather, officials, both elected and appointed, well-organized interest groups, and the internal workings of media organizations themselves are seen as more important in accounting for normal patterns of media issue attention (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The likelihood that a protest will be reported by the mass media is shaped by forces mostly beyond the control of most protest groups, unless they are capable of generating mass participation in demonstrations.

The factors of demonstration size and media issue cycle in concert, then, provide a reasonably good account of the structure of media selection of Washington, D.C. demonstrations in these data we have examined, providing a rather straightforward answer to the question of the structure of selection bias. Nevertheless, the sharp escalation of news coverage surrounding the Gulf War in the first months of 1991 was apparently capable of muting what appear to be the typically overwhelming effects of size on demonstration coverage. The impact of the Gulf War on the relative coverage of the other top protest issues is made clear by our *Nexis* search. For the first quarter of 1991, coverage of the Gulf War was 39 times more prevalent in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and

52 times more prevalent in *Newsweek*, *Time Magazine*, and *U.S. News and World Report* than was coverage of the least reported protest issue (pro-environment) in the same quarter. In contrast, during 1982, the top demonstration issue (war in Lebanon) was only 8 and 5 times more likely to be covered in those sources, respectively, than was the least reported issue (school prayer) in the same quarter.

Important questions remain concerning the generalizability of the patterns we have shown. As we noted above, Washington is the national capital, and probably a majority of those who participate in large demonstrations there come from elsewhere in the United States. As a result, media organizations may view demonstrations in Washington differently than those that occur elsewhere.

Whether or not the selection processes defining local media organizations' coverage of local demonstrations mirror national media patterns remains to be seen. For 1982, we were able to develop an 1982 estimate of coverage for one local television network affiliate in Washington (results not shown), marginally apropos to this problem. That local electronic coverage was more extensive than any of the other media sources by a noticeable margin, but the structure of selection mirrored the patterns we have already described—demonstration size remained the most important factor in accounting for the likelihood of coverage. The only noticeable differences on the likelihood of local coverage were the important positive effect of demonstrations targeting economic issues and the significant negative effect of demonstrations concerning the policies of foreign governments. Neither effect is evident in coverage by the national media sources. These results suggest that national and local issue attention cycles may diverge from one another, differentially affecting national and local coverage of demonstrations.

Demonstrations in Washington in 1982 and 1991 were, in the main, quite orderly; thus, our test of the impact of disorderliness on the likelihood of coverage was, by necessity, a weak one. (Recall that our measure was a permit applicant's estimate prior to a demonstration that a counter-demonstration would occur, and the prevalence of such estimates declined dramatically over the period.)

A few unruly and unpermitted demonstrations were covered by the media—typically small sit-ins resulting in confrontations and arrests. As a result, we are unable to adequately assess the independent effects of disruptive versus routine protest demonstrations. Extrapolating from White's (1993) evidence showing higher rates of media reporting of Northern Ireland conflicts when deaths were involved, we would be surprised if demonstration unruliness was not an important factor influencing the media selection from a population of demonstrations with any variation on this characteristic (cf. Snyder and Kelly 1977).

What have we learned by comparing media attention across several media sources? First, there is a strong correspondence between the aggregate results we have described and the separate analyses for *The Washington Post* and for *The New York Times*, which is the usual print media source for past studies on collective action events in the United States. This suggests that the structure of bias is rather stable across these two sources, even given the wide variation between them in the extent of coverage. Selection bias is similarly stable across time, in spite of high levels of volatility in the characteristics of populations of demonstrations and in the patterns of media coverage. In short, judging from our comparison, the national print media provides an amazingly stable portrait of the churning mixture of protest forms, purposes, and contexts in Washington, D.C. during 1982 and 1991.

The same cannot be said for the aggregated national television network newscasts. The disappearance of size as a statistically significant factor in the likelihood of television network coverage in 1991 by the television networks suggests somewhat less stability over time in the structure of bias for television coverage of Washington demonstrations. The intense focus on Gulf War issues and the attendant protests markedly altered the structure of selection bias for television networks when compared with the newspapers. The networks covered a few more Washington demonstrations on the top 10 issues in 1991 than in 1982 (101 versus 83), but, as we noted, the vast majority of them (76 percent) were focused on the Gulf War during a short period of the escalated media coverage. To

the extent that this contrast between print and electronic media is a trend, rather than an aberration, there are enormous implications for how protest is mediated in the United States. To the extent that media issue cycles become the dominant factor in accounting for media coverage of demonstrations in the electronic media, this increasingly "legitimate" channel by which citizens may register their policy preferences is undermined. If media issue attention cycles come to play a more significant role than do the form, context, substance, or size of citizen protests in determining which demonstrations are selected for media coverage, then protest in modern democracies will have become mediated to a greater extent than even Michael Lipsky's (1968) prescient observation presupposed.

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