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# We Need More Protest to Make Reform Possible

If progressives are serious about economic and healthcare reform, they must embrace the same approach with Obama they once took with FDR and "make him do it."

**Peter Dreier** August 6, 2009 | This article appeared in the August 17, 2009 edition of *The Nation*.

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Why is there so little protest in response to these hard economic times?

One of the rare examples of civil disobedience occurred in late July, when more than 100 people, mobilized by the community organizing group [ACORN](#), gathered outside a foreclosed home in Oakland and attempted to take it back on behalf of its owner. The owner, [Tosha Alberty](#), said she is the victim of a predatory loan. She claims she



Reuters Pictures

Barb Zangre cheers Healthcare for America Now rally at Capitol Hill, June, 25, 2009.

had tried to work with her lender to modify the loan, but the lender refused. Alberty was at work on July 20 when sheriff's deputies showed up and evicted her family from the house, she said. A few days later, the ACORN group sat on the steps behind the padlocked gate and refused to move. Six of them were arrested for trespassing.

The protest was part of ACORN's nationwide [Home Defenders](#) campaign to challenge foreclosures and evictions by lenders and to push Congress to strengthen anti-foreclosure legislation so that banks will be required to renegotiate mortgages. (The Obama administration's program is voluntary.) The Oakland protest, however, received no attention in any major media outlet. A protest without reporters and TV cameras is like the proverbial tree falling in the forest that nobody hears. When the media cover rallies and protests, it gives people a sense that they are not alone, that others share their fears and hopes. It makes them more likely to get involved in efforts to bring about change.

In recent years, right-wingers have been more willing to protest, whether their allies were in or out of power. With Obama in the White House and the Democrats in control of Congress, they're exercising their memory muscle for creative dissent--and getting more media coverage than their liberal counterparts. In recent weeks, for example, what the *New York Times* calls a "loose-knit coalition of conservative voters and advocacy groups," including Republican activists egged on by right-wing radio talk-show hosts, have mounted protests in Texas, Pennsylvania and elsewhere to oppose Obama's healthcare reform. On August 1, a few hundred conservative activists in Austin, Texas, some carrying signs that said "No Socialized Health Care,"

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In the next four years—and beyond—progressives must create the political space for the president to represent the majority of Americans.

### Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

surrounded Democratic Congressman [Lloyd Doggett](#) at a supermarket, where he was meeting with voters.

The right-wing groups use Twitter and Facebook to recruit protesters and quickly put videos of their actions on YouTube. However narrow the constituency for these protests, the campaign is making headlines and contributing to the reluctance of centrist Democrats to back Obama's healthcare plan.

Public opinion polls reveal that Americans are angry about the current economic, healthcare, housing and environmental crises. Polls also document that a significant majority of Americans want the federal government to do something to fix these problems. But history shows that public opinion, on its own, isn't enough to change public policy.

People have to believe not only that things *should* be different but also that they *can* be different. Anger has to be mixed with hope. And to be effective politically, that hope has to be mobilized through collective action--in elections, meetings with elected officials, petitions, e-mail campaigns, rallies, demonstrations and even, at times, civil disobedience.

Protest--including civil disobedience, demonstrations and large-scale marches--is not the same as mindless militance. It is not riots and rock-throwing. To be effective, protest must be strategic and disciplined, and it must capture the public's imagination and conscience. People must view the cause as just and empathize with the protesters. As [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) explained in his famous "Letter From Birmingham Jail," civil disobedience makes sense only when all other means of reaching decision-makers have been exhausted and people's frustrations have boiled over.

Since Obama took office, there have been very few public expressions of discontent. We've heard very little about everyday Americans--workers facing layoffs and the loss of health insurance, jobless Americans exhausting their unemployment insurance, renters facing eviction, homeowners facing [foreclosures](#), farmers losing their farms, high school students facing cuts in school programs and college students facing rising tuition--mobilizing to demand immediate action to end their hardship and suffering.

During the Obama era so far, union, community, environmental and other liberal activists have carefully calibrated their efforts on behalf of legislation. They've engaged in lots of lobbying and meetings with members of Congress. E-mails to politicians have been fast and furious. Unions and other groups are purchasing TV and radio ads to push centrist Democrats to support healthcare reform. There are occasional rallies and public forums to show support for the president's agenda. Through [Organizing for America](#), the lobby group created to sustain the momentum generated by millions of campaign volunteers, Obama has encouraged liberal bloggers and supporters to rally support for White House initiatives. This week, in response to the right-wing mob attacks on Democratic legislators, Obama wrote to the 13 million people on his OFA e-mail list and asked them to commit to attend at least one event this month to show support for his healthcare plan.

These polite activities are necessary, but they don't create a sense of urgency or crisis. With some exceptions, they don't generate TV stories and newspaper headlines. They don't put pressure on Congressional fence-sitters to fear a groundswell of negative publicity or a threat to their re-election chances. They are not sufficient to balance the influence of corporate campaign contributions. As a result, many of Obama's initiatives face a stalemate.

We confront the worst economic calamity since the Great Depression, with tens of millions of Americans suffering privately and silently while Republicans and centrist Democrats thwart efforts to bring about much-needed reform.

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