

When to Listen to Protests?

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We live in a time of public anger, protest votes and street demonstrations, even in the relatively stable and well-off western democracies or what passes for them. But what's remarkable is that the two most eye-catching mass protest movements of the moment, those in France and in Israel, are not focused on achieving radical change but instead are aimed at preserving a status quo that is being assaulted by elected governments. As such they can be compared to, for example, the British anti-Brexit protests or, as a writer in Israel's Haaretz newspaper argued, the Polish protests against judicial reforms. Neither had much immediate, or even medium-term, impact.

Protesting against government policy in democracies is both a time-honoured right and a tricky proposition. Attempts in the UK to limit the right to protest and talk of limiting the right to strike have been labelled as draconian and unacceptable constraints on freedom of expression and organisation. In most quarters, including the House of Lords, the government's arguments that the public also has a right to be able to go about its business unimpeded by protests, have not made much of an impression. Protests are widely seen as part of the political give and take in democracies.

Yet, the idea that protests should be able to affect government policy in a democracy is an odd one and can in some cases veer dangerously close to mob rule, as our leaders have been duly elected to do the governing for us. Unfortunately, that is as true for Emmanuel Macron as it is for Benjamin Netanyahu, as it was indeed for Donald Trump. Protesting against someone or something that a majority has voted for and that is legitimate in the current system, with an eye on overturning that vote, has an air of sore loser complex about it, hence the remonstrations charge. It risks making countries ungovernable as it invites similar protests in case electoral fortunes are reversed next time around. The protesters, therefore, will often argue that the policies they seek to overturn are exceptionally heinous and illegitimate, or that the system to begin with, has been stacked against them.

The last major UK policy that was significantly altered because of street protests, was the poll tax, more than 30 years ago. Other mass protests, against Brexit, but also against the Iraq war in 2003, failed to impact government decisions. The question that remains is whether these mass protest movements had a longer-term effect. In the case of Iraq, Labour hung on until 2010 and is widely seen to have lost power due to the impact of the global financial crisis. Yet, its failure to regain momentum might in part be attributed to a surprisingly widely-held resentment against the Iraq war, the way the Labour government was seen to have misled the country, the way the war was conducted and the image of the UK as an American poodle. It appears to have had a similar influence on the image of Labour as the poll tax and other Thatcherite and hard-right policies previously had on the Conservatives, casting them as the 'nasty party' for well over a decade. The growing disillusionment with Brexit may similarly fuel a new series of Labour victories, but that remains to be seen.

The real target of protests is not always immediately clear. The current demonstrations and strikes in France, for example, target the raising of the pension age from 62 to 64, along with some further cuts to the pension system. Compared to other European countries, this pension arrangement still seems lavish. The whole continent is dealing with an aging population, with attendant challenges to the affordability of pension schemes. It might be tempting to paint France's eruptions of anger, including the earlier gilets jaunes protests and the large votes for the extreme right as stemming from the implosion of the traditional political parties, the Socialists and the Republicans. But that would be to mix up cause and effect.

Widespread disillusionment with the political class and public anger seem to go back at least to the 2002 presidential elections when far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen made it to the second round but lost by a landslide to the incumbent, Jacques Chirac. Until Macron's re-election, twenty years later, no other French president managed to get a second term. And in the last two elections, again, the choice was between him, a centrist, and the far-right. Chirac famously kept France out of Iraq, so that's not one of the issues fuelling anger and distrust. Macron is regarded by many with a visceral hatred that seems to stem from the fact that many voters would have opted for an alternative, had they had the choice. But he still manages a higher popularity rating than his Socialist predecessor, Francois Hollande, who at one point in his tenure had just 4 percent support in the polls.

So, what is French anger really aimed at? To answer that, it is important to distinguish between different kinds of anger. There's the gilets jaunes anger at supposedly out of touch elites sitting inside the Périphérique and not realising how raising fuel prices affects people in the countryside, there's the far-right anger at the out of touch political elites supposedly giving the country away to foreigners and letting them ride roughshod over France's cherished traditions, there's the left-wing anger at the out of touch political elites over the cost of living, deteriorating healthcare, unaffordable housing etc. And now they're all angry about pensions. One group that's less heard from in the current context but that's no less angry, is the one of the migrants and descendants of migrants in the banlieues who feel they're being treated badly by the police and the establishment, regardless of who is in charge. But it's clear that the overall anger is aimed at out of touch political elites by people who feel that they've never been given a real choice.

In a strangely twisted way, a similar mechanism is at work in Israel. There, ironically, it's the government that has been fanning and using public anger at what it says is an equally out of touch elite: supposedly left-wing judges who thwart the will of the people. That has been the gambit of the centre-right and far-right for years now, as it saw some of its more extremist initiatives blocked. Never mind that the right has been ascendent in Israel for years and has managed to push through almost its entire programme, including the massive expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, collective punishments against Palestinians, a crackdown on pro-peace NGOs, stripping certain Palestinians of residence rights, restrictions on Palestinian family reunification and a further curtailment of the Palestinian identity in Israel through the so-called nation-state law. The courts, even the Supreme Court that is so vilified on the right, have only applied the gentlest of brakes to some of the most extreme elements of this continuous assault on human rights and democracy. The right won election after election, with a brief break two years ago, partly by mobilising their voters against the supposedly radical left-wing judges. While Netanyahu might have been content to keep this antagonism going and exploit it for political purposes, his weakness while on trial for corruption finally offered some of the more extreme parties the opportunity they had been looking for; to once and for all have a free hand, unrestrained by the courts.

The massive demonstrations and unrest that followed are in one way puzzling: where are these people when Palestinians and peace activists are systematically being targeted? But let's try to be charitable and fit the mass protests in the mould of the French anger model. There's clearly a lot of anger, frustration and even naked fear among a large segment of the population that feels that it has not been fully represented in the country's governments for years. This is the mostly secular, or at least less religious, better-educated, better off part of the population, the segment that would normally belong to the out of touch elites but that has been politically marginalised in Israel over the past couple of decades. They were also in evidence at the large anti-Netanyahu demonstrations in 2020-21. Divisions in the country are about 50-50 but a large bloc of religious voters who do go to the polls and another large bloc of Palestinian Arab voters, who vote much less, has meant that the

centre and centre-left have been at an almost constant disadvantage for the past two decades. It is the outpouring of that frustration that is making the current protests so massive and noteworthy.

What both the Israeli and the French examples show in different ways, is twofold: Firstly, if a large enough segment or combination of segments of a population feels ignored and under-represented for long enough, there will be an outburst. Secondly, even democratic systems that reflect the will of the majority will at times create situations in which large groups that are not minorities feel unrepresented and ignored, whether this is the result of centrist policies, as in France (and some other European countries), or sustained one-sided policies, as in Israel. What doesn't help, is the increasing global tendency to see true democracy as a winner takes all proposition rather than a continuous process that transcends election cycles.

But whether we think protests should have a real impact, remains a matter of political persuasion. We might say Israel yes, and France no, but what would be the rationale behind that? The only conclusion can be that both countries need to work harder to include divergent views into their governing structures. The same can be said of the UK, as a softer Brexit might have prevented much of the current mess.