

The Dynamics of a Direct Action Campaign

Introduction

This diagram shows, in simplified form, how a progressive activist group seeking to change the policies of a country led by a powerful elite can bring about social change through a non-violent direct action campaign. Activists can win, as shown in the lower right corner of the figure, through one of four mechanisms: conversion, nonviolent coercion, accommodation, or violent coercion.

Since the elite group is typically very powerful, for progressive activists to win, it is usually necessary for them to greatly reduce public support for the elite leaders and their policies. The change in support is shown as shades of gray across the figure: darker shades indicates more support for the power elite; lighter shades indicates decreased support for the elite and increased support for the perspective of the progressive activists. At the beginning of a campaign, the public typically supports the perspective of the elite (at least passively). If the activists conduct a poor campaign, they will not achieve their goals and public support may actually shift even more to the victorious elite (as shown in the lower left corner).

A Typical Campaign

A typical campaign begins when the social change activists decide to work on a particular problem. They investigate its nature and educate themselves. At this point there is usually considerable support for the elite leaders since they have had years to disseminate propaganda and exert control. After a sufficient period of self-education, the activists then present their demands and attempt to negotiate a change. If the elite leaders are receptive (and only hold their current position out of neglect or ignorance), they may be easily convinced and agree to the progressive change, indicated here as **Pathway A**.

More often, the campaign continues with educational outreach to the public and then preparation for direct action (possibly including acts of self-purification to bolster courage and reduce self-righteousness). If done well, this will begin to shift public support in favor of the activists' perspective and make the public receptive to the direct action. Again, if leaders of the elite are merely ignorant, they may be convinced of the validity of the activists' perspective and agree to change (**Pathway B**).

Direct Action

The activists then plan and carry out a powerful nonviolent direct action. This forces one of several responses from the elite:

1. The elite may finally realize the validity of the activists' position and agree to the change (conversion), shown here as **Pathway C**.

2. The direct action may cause a massive loss of support among the public for members of the power elite. Recognizing their loss of power and control, elite leaders may give in or, at least, offer some change (accommodation) to ensure their continued power. This is shown as **Pathway D**.

3. The power elite may respond with sanctions or direct violence (arrest, job loss, exile, physical beatings, and so on), shown as **Pathway E**. If this violent response seems unwarranted, the elite will likely lose a great deal of public support.

Response to Violence

In response to sanctions or violence, the activists then have several choices:

1. If the sanctions or violence is greater than expected or their own support is too feeble, the activists may withdraw and start all over again to build their strength (**Pathway F**).

2. The activists may be confounded, back down, and become demoralized (defeat). In this case, the public would probably also become demoralized and may shift its support even further towards the elite (**Pathway G**).

3. The activists may respond violently (**Pathway H**). In this case, the elite leaders will probably respond with even greater violence (**Pathway I**). Depending on who has the greater firepower, one group will overwhelm the other (**Pathways J & K**) or both will be destroyed. In the end, public support will probably shift towards the victor (though it may not be a complete shift).

Nonviolent Challenge Continues

4. If the activists remain firm in their nonviolent efforts (or even escalate their direct action), shown as **Pathway L**, public support for their position will often grow. Then several things may happen:

1. Once again elite leaders may be converted to the activists' position (**Pathway M**).

2. The direct action campaign may garner enough public support that the elite leaders realize they must acquiesce or lose power (**Pathway N**).

3. The direct action campaign may garner enough public support that the agents and supporters of the elite — members of the army and police, administrators, executives, workers, and so on — will no longer follow their orders. In this case, the elite leaders are incapacitated (nonviolent coercion), shown as **Pathway O**.

4. If the direct action campaign does not garner enough public support, the elite leaders may respond with another round of even greater sanctions or violence and the struggle will continue (**Pathway P**).

Weak Campaign

If the direct action campaign is not strong enough (does not provide a great enough challenge to the power elite), then it may be that the elite will respond simply by ignoring the whole campaign. This option is not shown on the diagram. In this case, the activists must escalate their challenge for anything to change.

Note that this simplified diagram presents the activists, the power elite, and the public as homogeneous groups. In fact, each group consists of many independent players, each one with her/his own history, interests, power, skills, and relationship with every other player. The dynamics of their interactions are, accordingly, that much more complex.

This diagram is based on ideas in Allan Cummings, **How Nonviolence Works**, Nonviolent Action Network, 1985, available from 20 Gillespie St., Dunedin, New Zealand.

https://coalactionnetworkaotearoa.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/how_no_violence_works_2011.pdf Many of these ideas derive from Joan V. Bondurant, **Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict**, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA., 1965; Coover et al., **Resource Manual for a Living Revolution**, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, PA, 1981; and Gene Sharp, **The Politics of Non-violent Action**, Porter Sargent Publishers, Boston, 1973.

