

Research position paper: Why measuring the effectiveness of nonviolent grassroots activism requires specificity

Introduction

To study social movements is in large part to study change. Not just the change a movement advocates, but the emergence and decline of philosophies informing the movement and shifts in strategy and broader terrain on which the movement operates. The farmed animal advocacy movement offers a very good example of this. Recently, several developments have begun to stir the winds of change within the movement.

1. Critiques of effective altruism, which has deeply influenced movement funders and leaders over the past decade, have cast doubt on the rigid approach often associated with the philosophy.
2. The failure of corporations to follow through on animal welfare policy commitments has led some movement leaders to reconsider corporate engagement strategies.
3. Unexpected legal victories for grassroots activists involved in open rescues have prompted a revisiting of tactics that had previously been marginalized.

All these conditions help explain a resurgence of interest in the potential of people power globally, but particularly in the United States, where many groups have largely foregone public awareness campaigns and individual-focused outreach in the past decade. Until recently, the typical strategy for many farmed animal advocacy organizations was to have a small number of staff members focus on corporate and political engagement, seeking to directly pressure institutional decision-makers to change. Now, however, we're beginning to see a change; staff at these organizations first focus on public engagement to build support that other departments can build on to pressure institutional decision-makers to change.

In essence, the public is being added back into the equation to demonstrate power to decision-makers. This shift raises the question, What should people do to display their power? In the past several years, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, most farmed animal advocacy groups have engaged supporters in digital activities such as signing online petitions or emailing companies. But it seems these activities may fall short, both in terms of leveraging effective pressure and in building committed supporters.

As groups reimagine their future strategies to include more in-person activities, a much wider set of activities becomes available. In addition to traditional techniques, such as tabling and leafleting, which primarily seek to engage and educate “the public,” more oppositional actions express dissent and object to the status quo. Such actions, while myriad, are too often aggregated under the broad umbrella of “protest” or “direct action,” both in casual conversations and in more formal research spaces.¹

In defining tactics of this nature, typically only one element is highlighted—the level of disruption,² which is sometimes conflated with the level of extremism³ or violence. While that factor is certainly worth considering, many other specificities need deeper investigation.

Research thus far delivers a mixed report on the value of protest, suggesting a fair amount of hesitation and caution.⁴ Some research offers more detailed recommendations⁵ and insights into impacts beyond public opinion.⁶ Analysts at Faunalytics note the difficulty of researching the set of tactics loosely grouped under “protest.”⁷

Given these circumstances, the murkiness of the waters is easy to understand. Recent developments suggest that farmed animal advocacy efforts could benefit from broadening the types of oppositional tactics deployed, but the ambiguity of terminology around these tactics leads to hesitation and possibly dismissal without proper consideration. There are several potentially negative repercussions of this, but of primary concern is that resources may not be directed toward tactics that could be effective. Here I argue that to assess effectiveness, specificity is called for on a number of fronts—in sum, (1) among advocates, a common vocabulary around tactics, (2) for groups, clearly setting and articulating objectives, and (3) for researchers, operationalizing specific tactics.

This paper begins by suggesting a shift in terminology when discussing tactics previously lumped together as “protest” or “direct action.” It argues that even though these tactics have common objectives, they are meaningfully different and must be distinguished. A brief background on the

¹ Toni Adelberg, *Protests Intervention Report* (Covina, CA: Animal Charity Evaluators, 2018); James Ozden and Sam Glover, “Effective Advocacy for Animals Through Protest,” Faunalytics, April 20, 2022, <https://faunalytics.org/effective-advocacy-for-animals-through-protest/>.

² Andrea Polanco, “Planting Seeds: The Impact of Diet & Different Animal Advocacy Tactics,” Faunalytics, April 27, 2022, <https://faunalytics.org/relative-effectiveness/>; Rachel E. Menzies, Matthew B. Ruby, and Ilan Dar-Nimrod, “The Vegan Dilemma: Do Peaceful Protests Worsen Attitudes to Veganism?,” *Appetite* 186 (July 2023): 106555.

³ Sara Streeter, “Extreme and Effective Aren’t the Same,” Faunalytics, February 28, 2020, <https://faunalytics.org/extreme-and-effective-arent-the-same/>.

⁴ Polanco, “Planting Seeds.”

⁵ Susan Gabriel, “What Makes a Successful Protest Movement?,” Faunalytics, May 2, 2023, <https://faunalytics.org/what-makes-a-successful-protest-movement/>.

⁶ Simon Völker, “Protest Movements: Are They Actually Impactful?,” Faunalytics, February 10, 2023, <https://faunalytics.org/protest-movements-are-they-actually-impactful/>.

⁷ Andrea Polanco, “The Challenges of Researching Animal Advocacy Protests,” Faunalytics, June 22, 2022, <https://faunalytics.org/the-challenges-of-researching-animal-advocacy-protests/>.

use of these tactics, both broadly and by farmed animal advocates, follows. From there it summarizes prior efforts at delineating tactics before focusing on an approach developed by Center for Story-based Strategy. A framework for tactic delineation in our movement based on that approach follows. Finally, this paper recommends next steps for both advocates and researchers.

Rationale for describing these tactics under the umbrella of nonviolent grassroots pressure tactics (NGPT)

Given that a broad category is needed as a starting place for effectively identifying these types of tactics, and the terms “protest” and “direct action” have already failed to encompass them and are referred to as tactics themselves, I suggest a new term—“nonviolent grassroots pressure tactics” (NGPT). While this phrase is also subject to criticism, I have selected it not only because the other terms were problematic but because it has specific benefits that can best be understood by taking up each of its words.

- **Nonviolent** – Highlights the absence of physical violence directed at other beings and opens space for conversation regarding violence and use of angry or indignant vocalizing and physical actions⁸
- **Grassroots** – Signals that everyday activists (sometimes in conjunction with organizational staff) carry out the tactic, though the tactic may have been orchestrated by a large social movement organization, and suggests the importance of physical presence
- **Pressure** – Acknowledges that these activities not only signal objection but power by gathering large numbers of people and having them communicate outside the normal channels of engagement
- **Tactics** – Recognizes that these actions support larger strategies and aim to fulfill articulated objectives

Common objectives associated with NGPT

In preparing this paper, I communicated with both researchers who study this topic and the organizational staff who employ them. We discussed that while research often focuses on how these tactics impact public attitudes, the objectives of organizations who deploy them are more numerous and nuanced. We also agreed that it was important for organizations using NGPT to communicate with others in the movement about their objectives in using specific tactics. Below is a list of objectives that is thorough but not exhaustive.

- Pressure decision-makers to respond to requests and demands

⁸ Corey Lee Wrenn, “Abolition Then and Now: Tactical Comparisons Between the Human Rights Movement and the Modern Nonhuman Animal Rights Movement in the United States,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 27 (2014): 177–200.

- Gain media coverage of the issues
- Increase public awareness of the issues
- Increase public antipathy for the opposition
- Increase public support for movement objectives
- Grow the number of activists
- Deepen activists' commitment to the cause
- Increase solidarity among activists
- Train existing activists
- Create leadership opportunities for activists
- Recruit new activists
- Establish major positive legal precedent
- Encourage possible coalition partners (e.g., environmental advocacy groups) to more actively support the cause
- Urge moderate allies to pursue more radical actions or demands
- Demonstrate a shift in social norms

Background on nonviolent grassroots pressure tactics

Historical view of NGPT

A quick glance at the Global Nonviolent Action Database⁹ confirms that throughout history, social movement organizations have relied on a wide variety of tactics to bring about the change they seek. Some fall within socially accepted engagement, such as negotiation, lobbying, or public education campaigns. Other forms, however, such as marches or sit-ins, are by nature different and diverge from expected forms of communication. Often groups intentionally deploy various tactics in service of their ultimate goal, and sometimes the movement splits, with some groups using more moderate tactics and others using more radical ones.

Research terms the impact of radical groups on the effectiveness of more moderate ones “radical flank effects,”¹⁰ whereby radicals can have both negative impacts, such as reducing credibility in the eyes of decision-makers, and more positive ones, such as the opposition’s greater willingness to work with moderate groups to avoid the radical groups.

Nonviolent grassroots pressure tactics have been widely used in the United States, including by groups in the civil rights, anti-nuclear, and environmental movements. Scholars of the civil rights movement generally recognize that legal and political wins resulted from a combination of tactics, both more moderate and NGPT, such as sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations. Two laws that were instrumental in restoring rights have largely been credited to the influence of both of these types of tactics—those in Birmingham leading to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and later in Selma, which

⁹ “Global Nonviolent Action Database,” Swarthmore College, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>.

¹⁰ Herbert H. Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954–1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

brought about the Voting Rights Act. Through these grassroots tactics, Martin Luther King Jr. exerted pressure leading to a violent response from the southern whites and the federal government's support as it became necessary to step in to restore order and pass the legislation the movement was fighting for.

The best-known U.S. anti-nuclear group, Clamshell Alliance, actively trained members in NGPT with a focus on tactics such as blockades and occupations. The group believed that the public witnessing the activists' determination to stop the proliferation of nuclear armaments, including a willingness to be arrested, would lead to more support for de-escalation. While the environmental movement has a long history in the United States, it has been the modern interpretation of the movement that has brought about a new variety of grassroots tactics to influence public opinion and ultimately lead to legislative action. Some NGPTs include tree sitting by activists like Julia Butterfly,¹¹ protests and marches opposing the Dakota access Pipeline,¹² and Fridays for Our Future school walkout and strike activities.¹³

Use of NGPT in the broader U.S. animal advocacy movement

While NGPT have been used in some form by animal advocates in the West dating back to the early 1900s,¹⁴ a notable uptick in these types of tactics can be seen between the late 1970s and mid-1990s with a wave of new organizations and activists that framed their fight in terms of animal rights, rather than animal welfare, and sought animal liberation. Some NGPT include protests over cat experiments done with funding from the American Museum of Natural History, protest and civil disobedience at the University of Pennsylvania over head injury experiments on baboons,¹⁵ the 1990 March for Animals, which drew 25,000–50,000 people to Washington, DC,¹⁶ and ongoing nationwide Fur-Free Friday protests that began in 1985.¹⁷

In addition to these more public displays, the emergence of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) added a new layer to tactics used by animal advocates. Operating with less structure and undefined leadership, the ALF maintains that anyone can take action within their policies and identify as acting on behalf of the organization. These policies are tied to key objectives that include liberating animals, inflicting economic damage, and exposing the horrors of animal abuse

¹¹ Jill Ettinger, "Two Decades On, the Enduring Resolve of Tree Activist Julia 'Butterfly' Hill," *Ethos*, October 26, 2022, <https://the-ethos.co/environmental-activist-julia-butterfly-hill/>.

¹² "Treaties Still Matter: The Dakota Access Pipeline," Smithsonian Institution, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-treaties/dapl>.

¹³ Fridays for Future home page, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>.

¹⁴ "Brief History of the Animal Protection Movement," WorldAnimal.net, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://worldanimal.net/our-programs/strategic-advocacy-course-new/module-1/history>.

¹⁵ Susan Finsen and Lawrence Finsen, *The Animal Rights Movement in America: From Compassion to Respect* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers, 1994).

¹⁶ "Animal Rights Activists March on Washington," UPI, June 10, 1990, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1990/06/10/Animal-rights-activists-march-on-Washington/1747644990400/>.

¹⁷ "The History of Fur-Free Friday," Last Chance for Animals, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.lcanimal.org/index.php/campaigns/fur/fur-trade-facts-2>.

while taking precautions and analyzing ramifications.¹⁸ One of the ALF's earliest actions in the United States was breaking into an animal research facility at New York University Medical Center in 1979 and taking five animals. In 1985, during a raid on the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine's labs, the ALF removed videotapes that they then shared with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).¹⁹ These types of activities were chilled by the passage of legislation that labeled the groups terrorists and prosecutions that came with potential for significant jail time.²⁰

A wide range of tactics has also been used by activists and groups specifically advocating for farmed animals. For example, Mercy For Animals participated in open rescues in the early 2000s and continues to conduct undercover investigations on factory farms and in slaughterhouses.²¹ They also hold demonstrations both to pressure specific companies to make animal welfare commitments and to build public awareness.²² Other groups aim to be more disruptive in their actions. For example, PETA members have thrown pies at the Pork Queen in Iowa and Animal Rebellion-UK, now Animal Rising, has occupied restaurants, created blockades, and poured milk out in stores.²³ Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) and the Animal Save Movement have also employed a number of different NGPT, including marches, open rescues, and vigils. Additionally, other groups, such as Anonymous for the Voiceless, employ street activism, showing powerful footage of farmed animal exploitation to educate the public and engage people in conversation.

Prior Approaches to Delineating Tactics

Given that NGPT are both widely used and clearly varied, one might rightly assume that there has been a fair amount of research into their effectiveness. This is not the case, perhaps largely because they can be difficult to delineate. Recognizing this, a handful of researchers interested in social change have previously made attempts to distinguish and categorize them.

Contemporarily, Mark and Paul Engler have brought to light a mix of strategies used by historic and contemporary movements in their 2016 book, *This Is an Uprising*.²⁴ Through their exploration of social change efforts, they demonstrate how important it is to combine inside strategies, such

¹⁸ David Naguib Pellow, *Total Liberation: The Power and Promise of Animal Rights and the Total Earth Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

¹⁹ "What's PETA's Position on the 'Animal Liberation Front'?", People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.peta.org/about-peta/faq/whats-petas-position-on-the-animal-liberation-front-alf/>.

²⁰ Dara Lovitz, *Muzzling a Movement: The Effects of Anti-terrorism Law, Money, and Politics on Animal Activism* (Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2010).

²¹ "Undercover Investigations," Mercy For Animals, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://mercyforanimals.org/investigations/>.

²² Hannah Bugga, "Mercy For Animals Holds Its Largest Demonstration Ever, in Mexico City," Mercy For Animals, March 9, 2023, <https://mercyforanimals.org/blog/largest-demonstration-ever/>.

²³ "Press," Animal Rising, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.animalrising.org/press>.

²⁴ Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016).

as negotiations and lobbying, with outside strategies, such as direct action and organizing. In addition to delineating between these broad frameworks, the Englers also make a distinction between two approaches to outside strategies, direct action and organizing. Instead of pitting these approaches against one another as has been done previously, they see value in the intentional execution of all of them depending on contextual factors. They argue that deploying multiple strategies in a movement allows each organization to lean into their strengths; while one sector can focus on building momentum, the other can work to shift structural change to help sustain the progress made. While the broader characterizations have been enormously helpful for those thinking through movement strategy, the Englers do not delve deeper into the different types of tactics under direct action.

A more nuanced view on the breadth of NGPT was developed by Gene Sharp much earlier in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* in 1973.²⁵ This book sorts 198 methods of nonviolent action into three categories: protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. Sharp classified protest and persuasion as acts used to express an opinion to attempt to change the behavior of other individuals through means such as speeches, distribution of information, or the wearing of symbols. Noncooperation can come in the form of social (boycotts, suspension of activities, or withdrawal), economic (boycotts and strikes), or political (refusal of public support or boycott of elections) actions. Nonviolent intervention involves taking action in an attempt to end or prevent an event with methods such as blockades, sitting-in, or fasting.

More recently, Michael Beer, the director of Nonviolence International, has worked to update Sharp's tactics. With the introduction of a new database and book, *Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21st Century*, Beer has expanded Sharp's methods of nonviolent action to 346 nonviolent tactics used by modern movements.²⁶ The additions and updates show the ever-evolving nature of social movements and the growing number of virtual tactics available.

Framework for NGPT in farmed animal advocacy

Why a new framework is needed for animal advocacy

While those extensive lists of tactics are very useful for illuminating the many possible types of action under NGPT, they have some limitations for our purposes. First, both the original and updated lists contain tactics that could be seen as spanning several categories of action—e.g., a banner can be its own stand-alone tactic or a sub-tactic within a march.²⁷ Many may be better understood as nested tactics: activities taking place within the main tactic. That may be particularly true for activities falling under “civil disobedience,” in which a portion of advocates

²⁵ Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

²⁶ Michael Beer, Maciej Bartkowski, and Julia Constantine, *Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021).

²⁷ “Gene Sharp’s 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action,” War Resisters’ International, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://wri-irg.org/en/resources/2008/gene-sharps-198-methods-nonviolent-action>.

involved in a broader tactic decide to perform illegal actions. Second, many of the tactics listed by Beer apply to virtual environments, which I believe may correctly be understood as inherently different in nature. Finally, and perhaps of greatest concern, while both Sharp and Beer include many tactics that are not applicable to farmed animal advocacy, they leave out others that play a central role, like open rescues.²⁸

The proposed framework

The Center for Story-based Strategy has developed a framework that works quite well for both planning and evaluating NGPT in animal advocacy. This framework accomplishes several valuable ends by using place as the major point of distinction between tactics. Their approach allows for a broad set of tactics, while also leaving space for consideration of nested activities. The framework also generally assumes a physical presence, narrowing the types of tactics under consideration. Finally, it provides space for open rescues under tactics that occur at the points of production and destruction. Each category is presented below with the Center's definitions.²⁹

Point of assumption

Challenging underlying beliefs/control mythologies. Could also be actions tied to cultural moments or pop culture trends. Or prefigurative actions, such as actualizing alternatives.

Point of decision

Anywhere there is decision-making. Corporate headquarters, polling places, town halls, city council meetings, slumlord's office, etc. Interventions here are often about challenging the assumption of who is a legitimate decision-maker.

Point of consumption

Places where people are in the role of customer. Stores, restaurants, online spaces, TV/movies, etc. Sometimes the only place that an audience has a physical interaction with systems we are changing. The realm of consumer boycotts and markets campaigns.

Point of production

A place where things are made. Factories, crop lands and schools. The realm of strikes, picket lines, crop-sits, etc. Interventions here are often about leveraging labor power or impacting profits.

²⁸ Wayne Hsiung, "The Rise of Mass Open Rescue," Simple Heart, May 25, 2023, https://simpleheart.substack.com/p/the-rise-of-mass-open-rescue?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

²⁹ "Story-Based Strategy," Center for Story-Based Strategy, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/what-is-storybased-strategy>.

Point of destruction

A place where something is destroyed. Dumpsters, mines, clearcuts, landfills, jails, etc. Interventions here are often about stopping the bad.

Applying this to farmed animal advocacy (some examples)

Point of assumption Performing an intentional action in public places (public streets, public events)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Marches• Protests• Demonstrations• Flash mobs• Disruption of public events<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Disrupting speakers◦ Disruptions of event activities
Point of decision Performing an intentional action at places of decisions or decision-makers (political spaces, corporate spaces, jails, courtrooms)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outdoor<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Marches◦ Protests◦ Demonstrations• Indoor<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Solidarity attendance: legislative hearings◦ Disrupting investor meetings◦ Solidarity attendance: courtrooms
Point of consumption/purchase Performing an intentional action at places where animal products are being consumed (grocery stores, restaurants)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disruptions inside grocery stores and restaurants<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Group◦ Solo• Disruptions of public events<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Group◦ Solo• Occupations of public property near businesses• Projections onto businesses selling animal products

Point of production/distribution Performing an intentional action at places where animals are being raised or transported (factory farms, transport trucks and ships)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protests • Demonstrations • Undercover investigations • Providing sustenance • Open rescues • Vigils • Whistleblower outreach • Blockades
Point of destruction Performing an intentional action at places where animals are killed (slaughterhouses, processing plants)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protests • Demonstrations • Undercover investigations • Vigils • Open rescues • Whistleblower outreach • Blockades

Conclusion: potential pathways for focus on NGPT

Given the recent recognition that NGPT's adaptability to different contexts makes them difficult to research,³⁰ the place-based framework offered above presents a clearer path for researchers. The framework offers important new research questions to consider, such as (1) are advocates seen more favorably when they use NGPT in one context over another (e.g., in performing open rescues at the place of production/destruction rather than demonstrations in places of assumption)?, (2) is it easier to recruit advocates to participate in NGPT in some places than in others?, and (3) do opponents demonstrate more willingness to engage with advocates when faced with NGPT in a particular place?

There are also several research methodologies that can be applied to help answer these questions, depending on which stage in deployment the researcher finds the most value. For example, prior to using one or more NGPT, researchers can use vignette studies or create virtual reality scenarios where various elements are compared in terms of audience responses. For real-time field studies, short interviews and surveys could be conducted with observers.

Additionally, a broader, more nuanced set of objectives allows for more obvious measures of effectiveness following the use of NGPT, though the same constraints on demonstrating causality that apply to other research endeavors also hold true here. In cases where the specific objective was tied to media coverage, researchers can conduct media analysis, both in terms of quantity of coverage and story-framing. This could be done in conjunction with Google trend analyses. In

³⁰ Polanco, "The Challenges of Researching Animal Advocacy Protests."

cases where deepening activist commitment to the cause was the objective, researchers could compare social media users connected to the organization and whether one tactic resulted in more social media posts than another. When the objective is tied to a campaign designed to pressure decision-makers to act on a specific demand, researchers could compare whether certain tactics led to quicker acquiescence than others by using different tactics against different targets.

These are just some of the fruitful paths researchers can take to better understand the effectiveness of particular NGPT. This topic is ripe for creative, important research endeavors when specific objectives and approaches are delineated. As advocates seek to grow the number of tools in their toolkit, especially tools designed to build and display people power, researchers can play an invaluable role by working to determine best practices.