

Book Review: The Loud Minority: Why Protests Matter In American Democracy by Daniel Q. Gillion

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Daniel Q. Gillion, *The Loud Minority: Why Protests Matter In American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. VIII + 207 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

The Loud Minority, written by political scientist Dr. Daniel Gillion of the University of Pennsylvania, is a fantastic work that seeks to answer big questions in the field of American intellectual history. Primarily, the work focuses on answering two questions. First, who are the agents of change in the US political landscape? And second, how do those with agency affect to change in real time? Gillion sets out to answer these questions through the use of empirical data to show, as the title states, why protests matter in American democracy. Gillion argues that protestors are the “canaries in the coal mines for future political and electoral change” (p. 7) because political protests can alert politicians of a changing tide or an issue that is rising in importance (p. 169). This is highlighted by the ongoing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and calls for defunding the police. Messages such as those communicated by protestors and activists, Gillion argues, are effectively to mobilize the masses and inform the electorate thereby causing social change (p. 29). Gillion also notes that though protestors do operate in the realm of the divide between the two political parties in the US, they are not adding to the divide (p. 190). This distinction is critical in his analysis because it shows that protestors themselves are not causing the divide in America. Rather they should be viewed as an effect of divisiveness. In other words, protests are a mere symptom of inequality, disagreement, and the lack of opportunity to effect change outside of the electoral system.

Gillion publishing this book in 2020 with the title “*The Loud Minority*” is no coincidence either. Gillion shines a light on the racist roots of the “silent majority” dog whistle by drawing parallels between former President Nixon calling upon Whites to take power back from Blacks with President Donald Trump’s revival of the same rhetoric (p. 3). The issues of race relations are identified several times throughout this work, primarily in the distinction between protestors.

Gillion stresses that while obviously protests can happen on both sides of the aisle, liberal protests have a common theme of fighting for all forms of equality throughout history (p. 58). This, paired with the fact that African Americans have the greatest sense of linked fate in the nation, means that a liberalization of the American political tradition would garner more African American support (p. 34). This does not mean that all African Americans will throw their support behind a protest movement such as BLM. However, it does mean that their political ties to the party supporting the BLM protest will normally be strengthened (p. 33). This portion of the work shows how critical the individual protestors and activists are in spreading information to voters who are not actively engaged in the protests. Underscoring the inroads made between activists and the general voters helps to strengthen his argument that protestors and activists hold the key to political change.

For all the salient points made, there are minor critiques to offer on *The Loud Minority*. First, there is a complete absence of the US labor movement and labor strikes. There are some lines such as “today we see families engaging in protests, coworkers carpooling to rallies” (p. 48) and “we see that ideological protest is a relatively new phenomenon that emerged in the 1960s and has strengthened over time” (p. 52). There several ideological protests prior to the 1960s, including the Woman’s suffrage movement, the several labor strikes, and the Ku Klux Klan March in 1925, to name a few. All of these protests were ideological in some form and, while this does not diminish Gillion’s argument, it does go to show that Gillion’s interpretation can be expanded to include Americas rich history of protesting.

Gillion’s work is a great addition to the long academic discussion of the American political tradition. Dating back to Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition* (1948) to more modern works such as Skowronek’s *The Politics Presidents Make* (1997), there has been a long discussion

about where the power to enact change lies and this work adds to the evidence that change can result from a grassroots movement. Further, the area of protests is rich with works already published. Elaine Carey's *Protests in the Streets* (2016) and Alan Brinkley's *Voices of Protests* (1982) are great examples of these types of works that can be read alongside Gillion's text. Overall, *The Loud Minority* is a work that should be read by academics and non-academics alike. Given the 2020 social unrest, this work is impactful when read by historians, political scientists, anyone studying the evolution of culture, and, most importantly, by a general audience who wants to have a firmer understanding of the political changes they are currently experiencing.

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