

## Many People, One Voice

On December 16, 1773, colonists in Boston, Massachusetts emptied over three hundred chests of tea into Boston Harbor. On December 5, 1955, African Americans began a boycott of Montgomery buses to protest segregation. On October 21, 1967, protesters gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to protest the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. Collective behavior has been at the core of United States democracy from its beginning to the present, and it will always be a fundamental principle of democracy. Collective behavior is so ingrained in all the systems of the United States government and society that it can often be forgotten how much of an effect it has. The many forms collective behavior takes determine almost every aspect of a democratic society, and they are critical to preserving democracy.

In government, collective behavior refers to how the collective actions of many people can have a much larger impact on society than the actions of an individual. The principles of popular sovereignty are rooted in the shared belief that the decisions of a large collective body of citizens are greater than any of the individuals who make up the body. Collective behavior is not just a single phenomenon, though. Protests, boycotts, and labor unions are examples of collective behavior that are planned and organized. Collective behavior can also form as a direct result of the democratic process; representatives are elected by the people, so representatives must cater to the broad options of their constituents. Finally, collective behavior is also the natural effect an unorganized group making similar decisions has on society.

The most obvious ways collective behavior can impact society are through organized collective action and the democratic process. Throughout history, civil

disobedience, boycotts, and protests have proved to be invaluable in protecting the civil rights of people across the United States and the entire world. During the Civil Rights Movement, if just one person had decided to boycott segregated buses, no one would have even noticed. Through the combined voices of hundreds organized into one, the outcry against segregation was heard, advancing the progress of the civil rights movement. Labor unions work in the same way: if one person threatened to halt labor until a company's working conditions were improved, the company would simply hire a different worker. Unions coordinate a collective strike of workers, motivating the company to make a change. Collective action that is carefully organized to advocate for a desired reform is incredibly effective and necessary for the preservation of free democracy.

Voting is a perfect example of the way collective behavior and the ideals of popular sovereignty are ingrained in democratic governments. In a national election, the vote of just one citizen will not change the outcome of an election. Even in close elections, the difference in votes is in the hundred-thousands, so a single vote will not make any difference. Many people use this fact as a reason to not vote. Their vote will not change the election result, so it does not matter. On the contrary, this fact proves that every vote sums to represent the collective will of the population. The purpose of an election is not for one individual to choose a representative; an election chooses a person to represent the entire group. While one vote on its own would be a poor representation of the will of the people, when combined with the votes of others, a more accurate depiction of the people's will can be formed.

The effects of unorganized collective behavior are subtler than boycotts or marches. Even when unorganized, though, individuals will independently make the same choices as others, and these small decisions will affect society in the long run. For example, many people independently choose to eat at fast food restaurants. As a result, there are dozens of fast-food bands and chains that stretch across the world. Social media is another example of the effects of collective behavior. Liking, commenting on, or even just viewing a post on social media will change the video's engagement statistics, causing the social media platform's algorithm to show the post to more people. The choices that many individuals make on an everyday basis add up to a large effect on society, even when they are not coordinated.

The collective behavior of a society's population impacts every aspect of its government and culture. Whether people use strength in numbers to call attention to a social issue, use the sway of their votes to elect sound leaders, or even grow a company through collectively choosing its products over a competitor, the choices each individual makes, when combined with the choices of others, drastically affect society. The ability of the population to have so much impact has many stipulations, but most importantly, it allows the people to use their voices, their opinions, and their sense of justice to keep democracy alive. Where one voice could be easily drowned out, the voices of the people will combine and ring towards justice and equality.

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