

When do social movements reach out? Examining appeals to “outsiders” in abortion campaigns’ Tweets.

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The participation of outsiders in social movements is an important determinant of their success. Marginalised groups often rely on allies to act on their behalf to achieve their aims. Early rational theories on social movements suggested that social movement organisations should always seek outside help because of the resources that outsiders bring. However, the literature has since recognised the risks that outsiders pose to social movements, highlighting the importance of social identity in social movements. There has been relatively little empirical examination of theories about the relationship between social movements and outsiders. In this paper, I scrape Tweets posted by both pro- and anti- abortion groups in Northern Ireland, around the time that abortion was legalised there, and use a dictionary-based computational textual analysis to detect tweets that appeal to outsiders. I then use the data to test a hypothesis that social movements appeal to outsiders less when the cause they advocate for becomes the status-quo. If there is a decrease in appeals to outsiders, it would suggest that social movements make strategic use of outside help and, when they can, they prefer to focus on core beneficiaries. I use a parallel analysis of abortion movements in Ireland where there was no change in abortion laws, as a baseline for my results. Whilst the specifics of the cases do not fully fulfil the assumptions of a causal research design, my results make both a methodological contribution to studying social movements and test a key descriptive hypothesis in the social movements literature.