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Political Activism

by

Judi Lerman

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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Advisors: Joanna Zangrando and Holley Hodgins
Introduction

There are many worthwhile endeavors in life: finding cures for diseases, raising children, creating art and music, taking care of the elderly, cleaning the environment, teaching the young and many more. There is also political activism, which can take many forms: protesting, letter writing and more costly or risky activities. What is activism? According to the 4th edition of Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2005), it is “the doctrine or policy of taking positive, direct action to achieve an end, esp. a political or social end” (p. 14). While the results of political activism can be crucial for us all, it is practiced by few. Many good people do not get involved in political protest or other forms of activism, for many reasons. But, while talking about these non-participants, an activist argued that “you have to realize that this apathy.... and these various forms of giving up are in fact forms of cowardice.... [they] are fooling themselves, [because] to not choose is to choose.... The fact is, our lives are connected [to each other’s], and we either get political or we suffer for it” (Teske, 1997, p. 109).

Political commitment is vital in our society because laws get passed, attitudes are changed, money is raised and life-altering decisions can be made, all from the work of small numbers of activists. So, what spurs people towards activism? Who are these people? This thesis will examine political activism: how it is defined, the motivations and characteristics of activists, and the personal costs and benefits underlying their activism. I will discuss a variety of factors that play a role in activists’ behaviors and theories about what sustains their commitment.

As an example of an activist organization, I will explore some of the work of one social justice advocacy group, People For the American Way (PFAW), through an overview of its
his tory and priorities, and interviews with two of the organization’s leaders. On the political spectrum, this organization is considered relatively liberal. Liberal is defined by the 4th edition of Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2005) as, “tolerant of views differing from one’s own; broad-minded; favoring reform or progress... tending toward democracy and personal freedom for the individual; progressive” (p. 826). PFAW’s goals and efforts are directed towards what they might term positive social change. Their progressive orientation contrasts with other groups who believe in more hierarchical, less egalitarian policies and practices.

Specific behaviors that can be classified as examples of activism include writing letters to elected officials, making monetary donations to political candidates or social action organizations, volunteering for a cause, organizing protests and demonstrating, physically putting oneself in a forbidden place – such as crossing onto federal property at a nuclear weapon site, residing in a threatened redwood tree or chaining oneself to the door of an abortion clinic – and going on a hunger strike. Corning and Myers (2002) developed the Activism Orientation Scale in order to assist in measuring levels of activist involvement and predicting “future engagement in activist behaviors” (p. 704). They defined activist orientation as, “an individual’s developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors spanning a range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors” (p. 704). They noted several factors that may elicit activist behaviors. Some of those include having parents involved in political activism, being exposed to and getting to know activists (in college, for instance), engaging in previous activism and having the time and opportunity to get involved.

Teske (1997) described activists in terms of an even fuller commitment:
[They] live thoroughly political lives, engage in a variety of political activities every day, and even define themselves as fundamentally political people, but it would be awkward to say that they ‘participate’ in politics. Activists do more than participate; rather, they are involved in politics, they are engaged in the politics that citizens try to influence through mere participation.... The activist is not a political titleholder or a government officeholder and is not a part of the formal institutions of our political system.... [but can envision] political action as aimed not simply at influencing government but as striving to affect the collective understandings by and through which we live together (pp. 150-151).

This paper will examine those whose activism ranges from the fully committed discussed by Teske to those who match the low-risk, passive involvement included in the Activism Orientation Scale discussed above.

**Predictors of Activism**

There are many factors that contribute to one’s tendency to engage in and level of activism; they can be both internally and externally driven. This section will look at a range of studies that have identified some of those factors. Some that researchers have linked to political protest or other types of activism include political and religious socialization during childhood, educational and social class levels, gender, social psychological factors (such as the belief in one’s power to effect change), intensity of issue attitudes, availability of time, absence of stress (financial, familial, emotional) and contact with social action groups. While the available research scrutinized activists in a variety of specific areas such as war protesters, sanctuary advocates and pro-and anti-choice demonstrators, their characteristics, backgrounds, and life descriptors can be categorized and studied broadly enough to identify some universal properties of activists.

Teske (1997) interviewed sixty committed activists at length, and identified three elements that help to explain the reasons for his subjects’ activism: personal crisis, moral
discovery, and lifelong commitment. Personal crisis consists of an internal “struggle for meaning or purpose; its resolution is found in an activist involvement” (p. 51). Moral discovery evolves from “an external shock to the self.... which leads one to question the course one’s life is taking” (p. 55). Lifelong commitment involves some of the findings discussed later in this section: one’s upbringing, parental teachings and priorities, which may have a direct influence on one’s choices and values.

Beyond just looking at factors that can lead to activism, Teske examined two contradictory theories of explanation about why people become activists, and introduced a third theory. The first theory may be called altruism – that what activists do is solely for the benefit of others, for the greater good, with no regard for themselves. The second is self-interest – that their activism is self-driven, rationally calculated in order to gain something, to satisfy their own needs. This theory is also called rational choice; Stewart, Settles and Winter (1998) defined it as a model that “seeks to understand the choice to participate in terms of the costs and benefits to individuals” (p. 64). The third, Teske’s theory, is the identity-construction model, a combination of the two, which argues that, “through their involvement, activists are able to construct identities for themselves and to strive to become the kind of persons they admire and want to be” (p. 121). Activists can simultaneously be altruistic and “selfish” (p. 99). They can be both moral, concerned for others or sacrificing, and also be self-interested. They can develop a persona that they can be proud of and they can have the self-validation of doing something that they want and need. Recent research has found that thinking about donating to charity triggers activity in the parts of the brain that light up in response to money, food, sex
and drugs (Moll et al., 2006). This suggests that the assertion that altruism triggers positive and rewarding emotions rests, in part, on a neurological basis.

There are a variety of specific factors that contribute to activist behaviors. Sherkat and Blocker (1994) used data from a longitudinal study of high school graduates of 1965 in order to find characteristics of those who were involved in the protests against the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War and for the expansion of civil rights to Americans. They found that parental socialization directly affected participation in at least two ways. First, and most of all, they stated that “.... having politically active parents makes children more likely to engage in nonmainstream political activity.... by passing on participatory norms; and.... [they] indirectly influence participation through their influence on children’s academic careers.

Children seem to learn from their parents’ participation in politics that political action, and not simply obedient patriotism, is a part of citizenship” (p. 837). These attitudes were particularly evident in the upper-middle class.

Second, in contrast, they also found that in conservative Protestant families, the emphasis on obedience to authority served to discourage protest: “youths with more fundamentalist views of the Bible and members of conservative Protestant denominations are underrepresented among the protestors” (p. 830). This did not hold true in many of the Catholic and Jewish homes, where they found greater interest in social justice. More specifically, conservative Protestants had almost twice as many non-activists as protestors, but among Catholics, the reverse was true. Among the Jewish subjects, the activists outnumbered the non-activists by almost a five to one ratio. Again, class level correlated with these findings: “Upper-middle-class parents simply do not instill their children with an unwavering faith in the
inerrancy of scriptures, and this may prevent their children from developing the fatalistic, otherworldly worldview that supports submission to authority and hinders participation in movements for social change” (p. 837). In additional research, Sherkat and Blocker (1997) asserted that non-activists were affiliated with religious groups significantly more often than the protesters and supported prayer in schools in higher numbers.

Most significantly, their 1994 findings showed that students bound for college participated in the protest demonstrations in much higher numbers than non-college bound students. Specifically, 92% of the protesters attended college, while only 58% of the non-activists did. The authors stated that “college attendance is the strongest predictor of becoming involved in the protests” (p. 834). They further noted that more fundamentalist-leaning Bible beliefs were “also found to decrease the likelihood of college attendance” (p. 834), thus reinforcing the non-participation results of the more religious subjects.

Additionally, Sherkat and Blocker (1994) discussed several other important factors. Political efficacy, the belief that one can help create change in the system, was a necessary characteristic of those who joined in the protests of the 1960s. Here again, social class was an influence. Those in the higher levels had more confidence in their ability to make a difference, while those in the lower levels had less. In addition, males protested in significantly higher numbers than did females. While the researchers found significant gender differences, these numbers were “mediated by women’s lower levels of efficacy, stronger religious beliefs, and lower rates of college attendance” (p. 838).³

Finally, in their 1997 study, the same authors wrote, “Protesters had significantly more egalitarian views of gender roles in 1973 [than non-protesters] even after controlling for
background factors and education” (p. 1059). Gender participation can also be affected by the subject of the protest. The anti-war protests may have had much more importance to men, since they were the ones being drafted. Other issues, such as reproductive rights, can draw a much larger proportion of women. The environment, as something that affects us all, may be more of an equalizer. But in actuality, in 1995, Wall discussed findings which showed that “women, people with higher incomes and those with higher education levels are more likely to engage in some type of environmental behaviour” (pp. 468-469). So, here we see some evidence of women’s increased willingness to get involved, both in contrast to the research findings regarding the protesters in 1965, and as compared to men on this issue. Other factors that facilitated greater participation in the environmental activism included knowledge about the issues, peer expectations, convenience in implementing the behavior, believing that one is making a difference, and satisfaction derived from one’s participation.

Kaysen and Stake (2001) also examined predictors of activism. They focused on three variables already shown to be potential factors: attitudinal, social structural, and self-concept. Attitudinal variables encompass both the strength of one’s attitudes and the importance, or salience, of the issue to the person in question. In this study, these factors were crucial: “polarization and salience of beliefs predicted activism” (p. 2394), and salience was the stronger of the two predictors. Social structural variables focus on whether subjects have ties with other activists who would lend support, or if they simply have approval from others either within or without the movement. Kaysen and Stake found that having connections or ties with other activists did predict one’s tendency towards activism, but social approval did not. The self-concept variable concerns whether one sees him or herself as able to effect change, and
here again, as in the Sherkat and Blocker (1994) study, the researchers identified confidence in one’s ability to make a difference as a key factor in predicting activism. Other findings from Kaysen and Stake’s research, which studied activists involved in the abortion debate, included: pro-choice activists were “younger.... more highly educated.... more likely to be employed.... and employed more hours” than the anti-choice activists who were “more likely to be married.... to have children.... and to have a greater number of children” (p. 2387).

A study done by Moane (2006) concurred with some of the findings above. In interviews with sixteen female activists, she found that “all but one had had a personal experience of injustice or oppression that opened their eyes and motivated them to look for connections with other women or women’s groups” (p. 74). They also enrolled in courses in order to develop assertiveness and communication skills. Thus, these women met all three criteria enumerated by Kaysen and Stake: personal salience, ties with other activists and a conscious effort to increase their ability to confidently effect change.

The issue of salience was also a central factor in studies carried out by Duncan (2005). She found that personal political salience (PPS), the “propensity to internalize, as central to one’s self-definition, engagement with political events, issues, or ideologies” (p. 966) correlated with political interest and activism. Compared with subjects who had low scores on a PPS measurement, those with high scores processed political information more quickly, were clearer on their positions regarding political issues, participated in a variety of political and civic behaviors more often and saw meaningful links between political events and their own life choices. Duncan noted that some possible reasons for variability in levels of PPS include “the
personality trait of openness to experience.... [and] differences in social, historical, and political environments” (p. 974).

Research undertaken by Burn and Konrad (1987) showed that lowered stress levels resulting from a variety of factors also led to increased political participation. These factors include “contact by political organizations.... membership in social organizations.... job autonomy [and] higher socioeconomic status” (pp. 135-136). Contact by organizations helps provide information, thus reducing the amount of effort necessary to understand an issue or to proceed with concrete action such as letter writing, voting or demonstrating. Membership in social or political groups provides the sense of belonging to something larger than their own daily lives and routines. Burn and Konrad define job autonomy as “the amount of control individuals have over their work, including how fast they work, the order in which they perform tasks, and input in decisions which affect their work” (p. 127). The greater the feeling of control (both at work and in their lives), which reduces stress, the more likely it is that people would get involved in activism. The authors also discuss the negative effect on participation of being particularly busy (also a stressor), whether from demands of children, the workplace or personal problems, for example.

Wiltfang and McAdam (1991) were also able to identify factors that can predict political activism. More specifically, they focused on the various levels of cost and of risk to the participants. The researchers defined cost as “the expenditure of time, money and energy required of a person engaged in any particular form of activism” and risk as “the anticipated dangers – whether legal, social, physical, financial, etc. – of engaging in a particular type of movement activity.... Costs are under the individual activist’s control; risks, as future costs,
depend not only on the activist’s own actions, but on others’ responses to the activist’s actions” (p. 989). They used time as the determinant of cost and a variety of activities and personal perception to measure risk.

Wiltfang and McAdam studied a sampling from the sanctuary movement - helping Central American refugees avoid deportation by the U.S. government - to analyze differences among activists. They considered four variables – age, marital status, parental responsibilities and employment status. These are components of what they called biographical availability: “the absence of personal constraints that might increase the costs and risks of movement participation” (p. 995). They found that younger activists invested the most time (cost) and were more likely to be involved in high-risk activities. They also confirmed that “those who have never been married were more likely to give more time (48.6%) than those who have been married (29.1%)” (p. 997), but didn’t seem to find any differences regarding marital status when it came to risk factors. The parental responsibility variable was more complicated: while those with children gave less time, there was a positive correlation between having children (older than 12, specifically) and engaging in risky levels of activism. Whether this was because of the unique properties of sanctuary work or other unknown reasons the researchers did not determine, but suggested this provided more ideas for further research.

Employment status, the fourth variable, also had possibly conflicting results. Previous research has indicated that those without the pressures and responsibilities of jobs are more likely to participate in activist behaviors, but Wiltfang and McAdam found that those who were not working invested less time than those who worked full-time, and fully employed individuals undertook riskier activities than did the non-workers. Looking further, though, the authors
found more nuanced details that may help explain their findings. Those employed activists who devoted the most time came from certain professions such as professors, clergy and clerical workers. They speculated that professors may have more discretionary time than other professionals, that the clergy may see sanctuary work as part of their job (churches have played a large role in this movement) and that the clerical workers in the study may have also been employees of religious organizations. There were a significant number of non-workers who were participants – 43% of their subjects were not employed – and “another 41% were professionals who enjoyed the kind of work autonomy and discretionary time that encourages activism” (p. 1000). But they did determine that those participating in high-cost activism (giving more time to the cause) came in large part from those whose jobs were connected in some way to the sanctuary movement. Thus, they argued that “high-cost activism may depend on the individual’s ability to integrate activism into paid work routines” (p. 1000).

Wilfanger and McAdam went on to discuss the two elements that predict a subject’s risk level in the sanctuary movement, what they called socialization factors: prior activism and religious involvement and ideology. People don’t generally plunge right into risky or dangerous activist behaviors when they first get involved in a political or social movement; those who are willing to take risks have, over time, built up their level of involvement. Additionally, in the sanctuary movement, at least, both religious attendance and religious beliefs were crucial factors in risk-taking activism. The authors wrote: “In the case of sanctuary, it is a variety of religious groups that serve as [the structural and ideological] base” of the movement (p. 1003), so it is not surprising that those most willing to take risks are also those most committed to their religious ideologies and churches. These findings conflict with the conclusions of Sherkat
and Blocker (1994) who found religious commitment discouraged involvement, but this may be an isolated example, more determined by churches’ involvement in this particular cause.

McAdam (1989) also found support for the prior activism explanation in his study of participants in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project. The work in this project was to “help staff freedom schools, register black voters and dramatize the continued denial of civil rights throughout the South” (p. 748). He compared two groups of subjects who had applied to participate: those who volunteered that summer and those who had applied and been accepted but ultimately withdrew before the project started. Their biographical information from before the summer of 1964 showed little difference between levels of activism in the two groups. When McAdam undertook this study in 1983-1984, he found significant differences in the subsequent lives of those in each group, both politically and personally. In regard to the political divergence, the two groups were similarly committed to the expansion of African American civil rights before the Freedom Summer. Those who participated were significantly more politically active afterwards than those who had not. For instance, between 1964 and 1970, “the ratio of participants to no-shows involved in southern voter registration activities was eight to one. Three times as many participants as nonparticipants helped organize civil rights-related boycotts of northern schools. Twice as many returned to the South in connection with later civil rights campaigns” (p. 750). They were also more likely to involve themselves in the anti-war and women’s liberation movements. The author indicated that “participation in the summer project radicalized the volunteers and encouraged higher levels of activism” (p. 751). In addition, in support of the findings by Kaysen and Stake (2001) discussed earlier, the more continued contact that participants had with fellow activists, the greater the level of
reported activism in the years following the Freedom Summer. These trends persisted over a twenty-year span. When McAdam gathered data from these subjects in 1983/1984, he found that the participants were still significantly more involved in social movements, joined more political organizations, and were “more leftist in political orientation than the no-shows” (p. 752).

Another example of subtle influences on activism was seen in a study done by Miller and Krosnick (2004). Working with a pro-choice organization, they sent three versions of a letter to a large sample of female Democrats: a control letter, a policy change threat letter, and a policy change opportunity letter. In each, they asked the subject to contribute to the organization and sign a postcard to be sent to the President. Miller and Krosnick found that the letter that contained a threat – the possible loss of some abortion rights through new legislation in Congress – triggered a higher rate of monetary contributions than did the other two appeals, while the opportunity letter – Congressional bills that would eliminate some of the restrictions previously enacted – yielded more signed postcards for President Clinton than did the other two versions. So, even something as simple as the choice of wording may effect participation.

Gilbert (1988) investigated elements that may prevent people from becoming activists. He was specifically concerned with nuclear arms control, but the components of his analysis may be applied to a broad range of social and political activism. The first is fear of being labeled anti-American; this can arise whenever the conflict deals with military issues, for instance. One example of how this fear can be triggered was when President George W. Bush (CNN, 2001) announced "You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror" as if protesting against particular political decisions was anti-patriotic. A second factor preventing activism is
simply the time spent on the demands of daily living. Third is a lack of perceived economic consequence. In regard to supporting and funding of nuclear arms, Gilbert contended that “the large and politically influential middle and upper-middle classes do not yet perceive a relationship between increasing military expenditures and a reduction in their economic status” (p. 758). We can see evidence of this in the current recession, when, for example, people say that they can’t be bothered with politics, they just want to get health care insurance; there’s often no comprehension of the link between them.

**Lack of salient risk** is another of Gilbert’s components: thinking “it” really can’t happen. A current example of this is young women who believe that abortion will always be legal and available, since it has been throughout their lives. To them, it is incomprehensible that the procedure won’t be available if they need it: despite the fact that in 2005 there were no abortion providers in 87% of U.S. counties (and 97% of nonmetropolitan counties); despite the fact that states continue to impose restrictions on the availability of abortions; and despite the fact that the number of unintended pregnancies continues to increase for poor and low-income women (Jones, Zolna, Henshaw & Finer, 2008). **Expertism** is another factor preventing activism: the belief that unless one is an expert on an issue, one has no right to speak out. A lack of a single, agreed-upon goal is another element of Gilbert’s considerations, one he called the maze of objectives. Finally, he found that a sense of helplessness precluded individuals from standing up for their beliefs. This mirrored Sherkat and Blocker’s findings about the importance of political efficacy, the belief that one can help effect change (1994).

Finally, there is a body of research that delves in detail into the psychological processes that may help to explain people’s motivation for activism. This research focuses on the conflict
people experience between the need to fit into society and the desire to stand out as an individual; both impulses can be seen as contributors to an activist life.

Otto Rank, an early twentieth-century psychologist, developed a theory about the conflict between an individual’s need to differentiate him/herself from the greater society or community and pressure to remain a part of the whole (Menaker, 1982). Rank stipulated that a conflict exists because one must distinguish oneself in order to develop free will and to create one’s own personality and the things that will live on after one is gone, a means of gaining immortality. Solomon (2008) referred to this as a “repudiation of the status quo,” thus inducing guilt, which can be reduced or alleviated by sharing your work and creative output, using them for the benefit of others. The community, on the other hand, constantly exerts pressure on one to conform, to fit in, to give oneself over to the greater good. Of course, one’s dependency on others is a necessary part of life, since we learn from society, and many of our basic needs are satisfied by others (parents, teachers, friends, spiritual leaders), so we also cling to the notion of belonging; thus we join houses of worship, work in careers that society approves, dress in similar ways, etc. Humans live with the duality of fear of separation and fear of lack of individuation; Rank saw this as a conflict between fear of life and fear of death.

These theories suggest how activism can actually satisfy both sides of this conflict between fitting in and standing apart from mainstream society. By getting involved with an organization, a social action group or a political cause, one becomes part of a larger group, a community, which can lend support, friendship and validation. In addition, such involvement is also an opportunity to make one’s mark, to forge new paths, to create new solutions, to differentiate oneself from family, workplace or neighborhood in order to create a legacy. Thus,
one can be of service to the greater good and, simultaneously, serve one’s own needs. This corresponds to Teske’s concept of the identity construction model (1997): a combination of the rational model – centered on the self – and the altruistic model – centered on others.

**The personal tolls of activism**

There are numerous examples of the personal risks, costs and tolls of activism. These can run the gamut from physical harm, threats and arrest, to lower income, social ostracism or psychological stressors such as speaking, arguing or debating publicly. For instance, in the sanctuary movement discussed earlier (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991), activists faced the possibility of confiscation of their cars, arrests, prison sentences as long as five years and fines up to $10,000. In the reproductive rights battles of the past several decades, pro-choice advocates, doctors and nurses have been murdered, injured, threatened and harassed by their opponents. Civil rights activists in the 1960s were taunted, arrested, beaten and murdered, even by the legal authorities who were supposed to protect and defend them.

Based on his study of the long-term consequences of participation in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project, McAdam (1989) concluded that the volunteers of that movement in comparison to those who had been accepted to participate but did not (the no-shows), “entered full-time employment later, changed jobs more frequently, [and] worked fewer years during the later 60s” (pp. 754-755). Their income in that time period was significantly less, perhaps a direct result of their later entry into the workforce. In addition, by 1984, only half of the participants were married, in contrast to 72% of the non-participants.

Sherkat and Blocker (1997) compared activists and non-activists from the late 1960s and early 1970s. As in their earlier work, the subjects were high school seniors in 1965. Reinforcing
the findings of McAdam, they confirmed that in 1973, activists, while consistently more educated than non-activists, “had significantly lower incomes... [and they] were significantly less likely to be married” (pp. 1058). By 1982, though, while the education discrepancy was still present, there wasn’t a significant difference in their income levels although they still changed jobs more often than the non-activists. But, one might have assumed that with the higher educational levels, they would have earned more money; this was not the case. The authors speculated that activists may have chosen to forego more lucrative careers and instead focus on working in fields where they could make a difference: teaching, shaping public policy, social work, etc. In contrast with McAdam’s findings, by 1982, the marriage rate differential was not significant; the protesters married later, but in similar numbers. The activists were not as likely to have children, though.

Gomes (1992) identified two important stressors for activists. One was stress that came from within the movement. Examples of this were “infighting and factionalism” and “a demanding and intolerant atmosphere” (p. 142). Gomes found that “the tendency to be judgmental or intolerant emerged as perhaps the major problem reported by activists” (p. 143). The other stressor came from a perceived lack of progress, whether due to self-doubts or pessimism about the direction of the country.

Teske’s interviews were with sixty activists from three very different reform areas; “anti-poverty/social justice groups, environmental groups, and anti-abortion/prolife groups” (1997, p. 74). Among them, he found further evidence of the depressed income discussed above. Two thirds of the sixty worked full-time for their organizations, and most were paid significantly less than if they had not committed to activism. This led at least some of them to feeling different
from and outside of the mainstream, undervalued, or even ostracized. Many of them told the
author that “their friends, parents, or other relatives would ask them, sometimes kiddingly,
sometimes seriously, ‘When are you going to get a real job?’” (p. 40).

**What sustains an advocate?**

Just as there are costs or tolls inherent in activism, there are also rewards. Why would
so many fight for their beliefs for such a long time, despite all odds, if there weren’t positive
outcomes to their work?

Fifty-four of those sixty subjects in Teske’s study (1997) told him that they found their
work to be rewarding or enjoyable. Through his interviews, he was able to formulate a detailed
list of rewards they derived from their activism. As one can see in this list, the rewards support
his theory of the identity construction model as a viable explanation of activism; these rewards
satisfy “both moral and self-interested” desires (pp. 107-108):

- A paycheck. A way to make some money.
- Job satisfaction. Not having to work in a corporate or formal office setting.
- Good feelings from knowing that one is doing the right thing. A psychologically healthy
  lifestyle.
- An ability to feel good about oneself when one wakes up in the morning. Increased self-
  respect and self-esteem.
- A near-orgasmic sensation felt upon winning a political battle. The thrill of seeing
  someone get off of the streets.
- An ego rush from being in a position of organizational authority. A perverse pleasure in
  putting lackadaisical regulators on the "hot seat."
- A community of friends. A forum in which to meet really decent, good people.
- Greater knowledge about public and political affairs. An ability to speak one’s mind and
  greater self-confidence in general.
- The envy of one’s friends whose work is not connected to their values. The admiration
  and respect of one’s old friends from college.
- A chance to live up to one’s long-held principles. A sense that one is living an important
  life.
• Learning about oneself and one’s own negative stereotypes of others. An instilling of values in oneself that one wants to have.
• The opportunity to grow as a person. Being able to model a way of being in the world for one’s children.

In line with some of these findings, Gomes (1992) identified some of the primary rewards of activism. The most reported, by 68% of her subjects, was contact with other activists. This encompassed meeting interesting people, developing friendships, and “being part of the community” of like-minded advocates (p. 142). The feeling of belonging to a community reflects Rank’s and Solomon’s discussions of the need to “fit in,” a crucial psychological requirement of people.

The second most prevalent reward of activism that Gomes gleaned from her subjects was a sense of meaning, described variously as making a contribution or a difference in the world, helping to improve life for others, setting an example or leaving a legacy. These echo the behaviors that exemplify “standing out,” the response to our inherent fear of death as claimed by Rank and Solomon. Gomes concluded that, “the time and energy that the participants in this study give to their activist work, which often sets them against the mainstream of society and produces little in traditional rewards of money or status, is in itself a testament to the power that a sense of meaning can have in a person’s life” (p. 145).

McAdam (1989) also found in his subjects life-altering and positive effects from their activist behaviors. Those who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer project when they were young were more likely to be politically involved twenty years later, had higher levels of commitment and had more ties to other activists and organizations than those who had not. They reported that the summer of 1964 often changed the course of their lives, giving them new direction and purpose. He summarized: “Activism – at least of the high-risk variety –
would indeed seem to highlight the potential for personal transformation embodied in intense and sustained social action mediated through integration into organizational and personal networks of individuals” (pp. 758-759).

In a small study of peace activists, Downton and Wehr (1998) presented what they termed a “model of sustained commitment” (p. 546) that brought together the various conclusions of why and how people become activists and what sustains them in the long run. They called long-time activists “persisters” and described how they came to activism through availability by being both “attitudinally predisposed” (p. 535) and by setting up their adult life (i.e.: job schedule, daily responsibilities) in a way to allow the activism, similar to the way that Burn and Konrad (1987) discussed job autonomy as a factor in facilitating activism. Next, Downton and Wehr identified context as an element in long-term commitment, both a more global context such as a threat of war, and a more local context, such as the presence of a peace group in the community. Finally, they identified commitment-sustaining factors: “bonding [to the principles, organization, leaders, peace community].... vision sharing.... management skills [i.e.: managing criticism, competing responsibilities, burnout], personal growth and satisfaction....” (p. 540). They also contended that “The activist’s role as creator seemed equally influential in sustaining commitment. The persister’s ‘creative urge’, one might call it, and the ability to fulfill it through activism seemed particularly salient” (p. 547). This supports the theories advanced by Rank and the work of Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg (2002) on Terror Management Theory that will be discussed on pages 26 and 27. Downton and Wehr’s findings and conclusions were illustrated in a diagram (p. 546) that correlates with and sums up much of the research discussed in this paper:
One of Teske’s (1997) subjects summarized a common perspective by saying, “when I get to the end of my life... what is it that I am going to look back and remember? ....how much time I spent with my children, family, friends, and how much time I contributed to my community....that I was willing to stand up and say ‘no’ to injustice in whatever form that takes” (p. 126).

Another said of his activism, “It’s not in fact a burden, as most people think.... No. It is enlightening because it helps you connect with the rest of humanity. It is a very liberating experience” (p. 113).
1981, when Ronald Reagan became President, was the beginning of an era of
teleevangelist preachers injecting their religious beliefs into politics, advocating for religious
litmus tests of political candidates, pushing for creationism in science textbooks and classes,
and railing against homosexuals. Alarmed by this emergence of the Religious Right, television
producer Norman Lear, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, Notre Dame’s Father Theodore
Hesburgh and Time-Warner’s chairman Andrew Heiskell founded People For the American Way
and the PFAW Foundation. PFAW is a political organization that lobbies government groups,
among other activities, while the Foundation is an educational group that does not participate
in political campaigns or lobbying. For the purposes of this thesis, I do not delineate the work
of one from the other. Their mission statement (PFAW website) explains their concerns:

In times of hardship, in times of crises, societies throughout history have experienced
wrenching dislocations in their fundamental values and beliefs. We are alarmed that
some of the current voices of stridency and division may replace those of reason and
unity. If these voices continue unchallenged, the results will be predictable: a rise in
"demonology" and hostility, a breakdown in community and social spirit, a deterioration
of free and open dialogue, and the temptation to grasp at simplistic solutions for
complex problems.

People For the American Way was established to address these matters. Our purpose is
to meet the challenges of discord and fragmentation with an affirmation of "the
American Way." By this, we mean pluralism, individuality, freedom of thought,
expression and religion, a sense of community, and tolerance and compassion for
others. People For the American Way will reach out to all Americans and affirm that in
our society, the individual still matters; that there is reason to believe in the future - not
to despair of it - and that we must strengthen the common cords that connect us as
humans and citizens.

The long-term agenda of People For the American Way is broad. It includes reducing
social tension and polarizations, encouraging community participation, fostering
understanding among different segments of our society, and increasing the level and
quality of public dialogue. As an educational institution, we shall communicate with the American people through printed materials, radio, television, public lectures and discussions.

We will gather information, analyze it, and distribute our findings to the public in a manner that provides for full and fair exposition on the issues. Our highest purpose is to nurture a national climate that encourages and enhances the human spirit rather than one which divides people into hostile camps.

By educating the American people and raising their level of understanding about the basic tenets by which our society is sustained, People For the American Way will fulfill its mission.

This social justice organization, with membership numbering hundreds of thousands, reminds the country that equal opportunity, equal justice and freedom of thought and speech are core American values, vital to our democracy. They have identified several crucial focus areas, and their leaders regularly reappraise their lists over the years. Some specific goals of the organization are: preserving public education; defending freedom of religion, speech and health decisions; encouraging civic involvement; promoting tolerance, equality, diversity and personal responsibility; and supporting an independent judiciary and the right to vote. I will discuss and analyze just two of their priorities: fighting the Radical Right and working for fair and just courts.

**Fighting the Radical Right**

**Background and Causes**

The term “Radical Right” is used here to represent a coalition of conservative organizations such as the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, right-wing Republicans, the new “Tea Party,” and views that encompass xenophobia, rejection of individual and social equality, and anti-immigration, anti-gay and anti-reproductive rights
policies, among others. Working to oppose these views is the key commitment to People For the American Way. This complex battle weaves its way through much of their work over the past 29 years. First, a discussion of conservatism and its sub-category, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), will help to clarify some of their characteristics.

According to a meta-analysis of eighty-eight studies by Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003), there are two core aspects of conservatism. The first is opposition to, anxiety about, or fear of change and ambiguity, wanting to keep the status quo and resistance to innovation. The second is opposition to equality and a preference for a hierarchical organization of society. Smith and Winter (2002) listed the three primary factors of RWA: aggression, submission, and conventionalism. The first relates to one’s willingness to hurt others on behalf of the leadership, the second to one’s acquiescing to the rules or demands of the authority, and the third to one’s desire to follow the parameters of behavior set by the society. Altemeyer (2003), who has been studying RWAs for over 20 years, listed some of their characteristics (p. 162), including:

[They can be] unsupportive of civil liberties and the Bill of Rights…. mean-spirited…. happy with traditional sex roles, strongly influenced by group norms, highly religious (especially in a fundamentalist way)…. [They] endorse a multitude of contradictory beliefs, apply a variety of double standards to their thinking on social matters…. are also relatively prejudiced – against just about any racial, ethnic, or nationalistic minority…. and against homosexuals, women…. atheists, and other religious people who happen to belong to different faiths.

Milburn and Conrad (1996) found that both authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism “correlated significantly with prejudice; punitive attitudes towards homosexuals; willingness to track down, torture, and execute ‘radicals’; and support for severe sentencing of criminals. These findings held even when researchers controlled for subjects’ educational level” (p.90).
What are some of the possible underlying causes of conservative or right-wing tendencies? There are many theories; I will discuss just two of them here. Milburn and Conrad (1996) postulated that the conservative policies and attitudes are the result of denial: a “psychological defense mechanism... an unconscious mental maneuver that cancels out or obscures painful reality” (p. 1). The authors explained that what needs to be denied is the rigid, punitive upbringing that the people in question experienced. They summed up over fifty years of research that describes a path that starts with that type of upbringing: physical or emotional abuse, humiliation and an effort to break the will of the child; in fundamentalist families that treat their children this way, it’s often done in the name of God. This causes anger at one’s parents that can’t be consciously acknowledged or shown, so the child has to deny the reality of what happened and deny the characteristics within themselves that were rejected by the parents, i.e. selfishness, sexuality or anger, while leaving the child with underlying, unacknowledged “feelings of shame, weakness, and self-hatred” (p. 230). The child subsequently projects those “bad” characteristics onto others, “usually members of minority groups in.... society who are then despised as evil, inferior, and dangerous” (p. 4). It becomes easy to then scapegoat or discriminate against those groups such as African Americans, Muslims, Jews, women, gays, and to project one’s anger onto them. Because the (now grown) child cannot allow him or herself to feel his or her own pain, he or she is unable to empathize with others’ pain.

Childhood experiences can shape political views on issues such as the death penalty, war, military spending, welfare, abortion and gay rights. Milburn and Conrad noted the correlation between “high frequency of spanking in their [subjects’] childhoods” and
significantly more punitive political attitudes” (p. 119). This is evident in the debate over the death penalty – the ultimate punishment – widely supported by conservatives. In the abortion rights debate, there are two ramifications of this abusive upbringing: a desire to punish women for having sex and a feeling of being a hero by “rescuing” the fetus from its parents, something no one did for them when they were young and helpless.

There is also evidence that this upbringing also results in “antipathy toward the environment and environmentalism” (p. 204). The researchers theorized that environmental threat discussions can trigger a fear of death which causes greater negative responses in authoritarians, leading to more punitive behaviors toward or increased dislike or distrust of “others.” Milburn and Conrad argued that by “using emotionally compelling themes dramatized in simplistic media images, politicians can win office by manipulating residual rage and fear among the electorate” (p. 228). Politicians can use this process to garner support for harsh policies, even war, and to divert attention from issues that they don’t want the public examining closely. They use language as a manipulation tool (i.e.: evil empire, socialism) in order to trigger these conservative responses.

The next concept that helps to explain human behavior and conservatism is Terror Management Theory (TMT). Terror refers to the emotion we experience when confronted with the fact that we will eventually die. Being made aware of this fact, consciously or unconsciously, is called mortality salience. In addition to Rank’s and Solomon’s discussion of the creativity that stems from this knowledge, as explained earlier, fear of death can cause other reactions. According to Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg, 2002, p. 27):
This potential for terror is managed by the construction and maintenance of cultural worldviews: humanly constructed beliefs about the nature of reality that infuse individuals with a sense that they are persons of value in a world of meaning, different from and superior to corporeal and mortal nature, and thus capable of transcending the natural boundaries of time and space and, in so doing, eluding death. For this reason, a substantial proportion of human activity is devoted to maintaining faith in one’s cultural worldview and the belief that one is meeting or exceeding the standards of value derived from that worldview.

Culture is defined as “beliefs about reality shared by individuals in a group to minimize or eliminate potentially overwhelming terror engendered by the uniquely human awareness of death” (Solomon, 2008). TMT posits that cultural worldviews, such as symbols that define the culture and warnings about behaviors and people that threaten one’s way of life, act to reduce the dread caused by mortality salience. These worldviews can vary greatly from one society to the next. When the worldviews put forth by our own culture are challenged by conflicting stories, beliefs, traditions, etc., our sense of order, identity, confidence and worth are undermined, causing more anxiety. Reminders of death also increase the need for stronger reinforcement of those worldviews. This can foster a range of reactions, including hate or fear of “others” who have different worldviews – they become scapegoats. Some examples of laboratory results confirming this hypothesis include:

- Municipal court judges were given theoretical scenarios of cases involving women who had been arrested for prostitution. Those judges who had been subconsciously reminded of death levied significantly harsher monetary punishments than the judges who were not in the mortality salience group; they imposed fines that were nine times higher than those in the control group (Pyszczynski et al., 2002, p. 46).

- American college students were shown supposedly published essays that were either strongly for or against the political structure of the United States and asked to rate the
authors in terms of likeability and knowledge. While they all had more positive feelings about the pro-American author, those in the mortality salience group rated that author significantly higher than did the control group, and the anti-American author significantly lower than did the control group (p. 51).

- Lieberman, Arndt, Personius, & Cook (2001) explored a potential conflict regarding worldviews when subjects were presented with details of a hate crime. On the one hand, after mortality salience, they found that the commitment to justice and the law, as in the prostitute study mentioned above, triggered “a more punitive attitude toward hate crimes when they were referenced in the abstract” (p. 553). But, when more information was given about the hate crime itself, some of the results changed. When told that the victim was either Jewish or gay, the subjects in the mortality salience group set lower bail figures than they did when not aware of the specific details of the crime. The control subjects (who thought about dental pain instead of mortality) set higher bail amounts for perpetrators of the specified hate crimes than for the ambiguous crime. It seemed that cultural worldviews that oppose diversity or alternative lifestyles were more powerful and took precedence over those that support laws and justice.

- Other studies looked at whether there is a connection between TMT and prejudice. In one experiment, researchers found that after mortality salience, Christian college students rated other Christians more positively than they did Jewish students; without the reminders of death, they rated the other students equally (Greenberg et al., 1990). The authors noted that “religious affiliation is a type of group membership that seems especially relevant to coping with one’s fear of death” (p. 313), and that “mortality
salience appears to increase in-group favoritism, rejection of those who are different, and authoritarian tendencies.... nationalism, religious extremism, prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance of deviance....” (p. 318).

Several mitigating factors to TMT have been identified. Two of them are particularly relevant here. High self-esteem and “liberal worldviews that stress tolerance” (italics added) reduce the likelihood that reminders of death will trigger these negative responses (Pyszczynski et al., 2002, p. 191).

Example of Fighting the Radical Right: Public Education

Public education is an area that the Right has been trying to influence for many years. Books have been challenged, abstinence-only programs have been implemented instead of comprehensive sex education and “stealth” candidates have successfully run for seats on school boards. People For the American Way has been involved in the fight to preserve public education, to keep religion out of its curriculum and to defeat censorship attempts. The following is a brief look at some of the research and battles in this area, including one that took place in the town next door to mine, Pleasantville, New York.

Fear, a reoccurring theme in the discussion regarding conservatism and TMT, plays a large role in these school-based arguments. McCarthy (1993) reviewed some of the ways that conservatives were challenging the public school system. She pointed out that the terms “secular humanism” and “New Age theology,” which are “characterized by reliance on science and human nature instead of God and the Bible” by the Right, have “become catchall phrases, used by critics – much as ‘communism’ was used in the 1950s and 1960s – to refer to everything that is considered a threat to traditional American values and institutions” (p. 55).
Curriculum challenges have evolved from attacks on specific books to protests over large portions of programs and a whole series of textbooks. McCarthy argues that anything which fosters critical thinking or collaborative learning, exposes alternatives, models responsibility and citizenship, or tries to develop higher-level problem solving in the students is seen as a dangerous challenge to the hierarchical system that the conservatives support. Some of their complaints included the charges that the materials were “depressing, morbid, and violent; invade students’ privacy; attack traditional values; and promote Satanism, mysticism, and the occult” (p. 55).

These were some of the claims three Roman Catholic families used in the battle they waged against the Bedford, New York, school system from 1995 to 2001. They accused the system of fostering the work of the Devil through “science experiments that worship death, award-winning books that promote the occult and history lessons that glorify witchcraft and Satanism” (Lombardi, 1995; section 13, p. 1). The initial trigger was a card game that some of the elementary and middle school students played before or after school, called Magic: The Gathering. It involved wizards and spells, among other details. The complaining parents found playing the game dangerous, while most others described it as something that was fun and encouraged creative thinking. Once that complaint was lodged, the Superintendent halted the before- and after-school games for a month, consulted with the school board and three psychologists, and concluded that the game was harmless. He allowed the children to resume playing it again, with parents’ approval and supervision.

The three families regrouped and expanded their fight to include a variety of school assignments: certain science experiments and poetry choices, discussions of multiculturalism
and evolution, yoga as a relaxation technique, role playing, keeping a journal, and drug, alcohol and sexuality education. They objected to discussions of Earth Day, Halloween, Native American and Indian observances, peer mediation, and stress management, among others. They sued the school district in federal court, in an attempt to change curricula in all the schools: three elementary, one middle school and one high school. Later, they pressured the judge who heard their arguments to refuse to accept a Friend of the Court brief from a larger group of district parents who were supporters of the school district (Lombardi, 1997). This latter group of parents solicited the help of People For the American Way, who, along with a law firm, took on their case pro-bono (PFAW Press Release, 1997). More than a year later, the judge suggested that the two sides take the case to the State Education Commissioner, but the Commissioner didn’t accept it. Back in court in 1999, the case was heard without a jury, four years after the three families had made the original complaints. The judge found that three of the fifteen charges were substantiated, allowing both sides to claim a victory, but in the spring of 2001, “three federal judges [on the U.S. Court of Appeals] ruled that the district did not violate the religious rights of three Catholic families” (Taliaferro, p. 1), thus completely clearing the school district on all charges. Later that year, the Supreme Court refused an appeal attempt by the three families. In the end, the Bedford School District spent almost $600,000 to defend itself.

*People For the American Way* has been working to protect schools in many other ways. For instance, *PFAW* and the American Library Association are two of the groups that track book censorship attempts. Donelson (1997) gives many examples of books that have been censored or whose assignment to students has been protested in the ten years between 1986 and 1995,
including: *Of Mice and Men* (John Steinbeck), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Maya Angelou), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain), *The Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger), *Forever* (Judy Blume), *The Chocolate War* (Robert Cormier), *Annie on My Mind* (Nancy Garden) and *The Color Purple* (Alice Walker). In recent years, the *Harry Potter* books have been targeted in many areas of the country.

The debate over the teaching of evolution in public schools, as opposed to creationism/intelligent design, has raged throughout the country. Antolin and Herbers (2001) note that 33% of Americans believe that creationism should be taught in our public schools; half of them think it should be the only “version” of our origins and half think it should be taught alongside evolution. The researchers identified three reasons behind this belief: “widespread scientific illiteracy, a core value of fairness in public discourse, and the prevalence of religious values in American politics” (p. 2379). They argued that the study of evolution is crucial not only in terms of how life on earth developed, but as a background in understanding aspects of medicine, agriculture and biotechnology, among others. They advocated for continued support for teachers; community awareness of, vigilance towards and involvement in this controversy; expert assistance from colleges and universities in providing specific scientific knowledge on a regular basis; and regular attention to public school curricula. *People For the American Way* has made this one of their priorities in their work for public school education. For example, in the Issues section of their website concerning creationism, they point out:

Despite defeat after defeat, creationists have continued to attack science and refused to accept the constitutional mandate that prohibits government from endorsing any particular religious viewpoint. Over the course of the fight to ensure science’s critical place in the classroom, anti-Darwin activists have reshaped and renamed their tactics, but it’s clear that their goal — to discredit science and promote a specific religious
worldview in public schools — has remained the same. No doubt creationists will continue their efforts as the country continues to stave off attacks on quality science as an accepted standard for schools and textbooks.

Learning about religion is an important part of a high school education, but religious instruction shouldn’t shortchange science. Religion is, and should be, discussed, in classes on World Religions, the History of Religion, and art and literature classes that draw on religion’s legacy.

The newest effort by the Right to affect curricula concerns the issue of global warming. Kaufman (2010) discussed legislative bills introduced in Kentucky, Texas, Louisiana and South Dakota, stating that “Critics of the teaching of evolution.... are gaining ground in some states by linking the issue to global warming, arguing that dissenting views on both scientific subjects should be taught in public schools.... By insisting that global warming can also be debated, deniers of evolution can argue that they are simply championing academic freedom in general” (pp. A1, A4). The Kaufman article pointed out that almost all legitimate scientists agree on the veracity of both evolution and global warming; these attempts to prohibit or minimize their teaching are an encroachment of religion into the public schools. He also presented poll results that “found that white evangelical Protestants were among those least likely to believe that there was ‘solid evidence’ that the Earth was warming because of human activity” — only 23% of them accepted the global warming position (p. A4).

Battles over curricula have been particularly fierce in Texas. Because of the tremendous amount of textbooks that the state purchases, the curriculum guidelines disproportionally drive the content of those nationally distributed textbooks. Each year recently, the state’s Board of Education has reviewed and altered the materials for a different subject. Last year it was science; this year (2010) it is social studies (Shorto, 2010). The current board has ten Republicans and five Democrats; of the ten Republicans, seven are Christian conservatives who
vote together and are often joined by the other Republicans. Their agenda is far reaching:

“They hold that the United States was founded by devout Christians and according to biblical precepts.... Some activists decided that the time was right to try to reshape the history that children in public schools study. Succeeding at this would help them toward their ultimate goal of reshaping American society. [One of the board members said] ‘The philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next’” (p. 34).

Another board member, Cynthia Dunbar, whose children went to parochial schools or were home schooled, wrote a book, One Nation Under God. Its goal, according to Shorto is: “using courts and public schools to fuse Christianity into the nation’s founding” (p. 39). He quoted Martin Marty, a history of religion professor, who contended, “The more you can associate Christianity with the founding, the more you can sway the future Supreme Court. That is what Pat Robertson was about years ago. Establish the founders as Christians, and you have it made” (p. 46).

In March of 2010, the Texas Board of Education voted along party lines to implement a “social studies curriculum that will put a conservative stamp on history and economic textbooks, stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers’ commitment to a purely secular government and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light.... There were no historians, sociologists or economists consulted at the meetings” (McKinley, 2010, p. A10; italics added). Additionally, “they made dozens of minor changes aimed at calling into question, among other things, concepts like the separation of church and state and the secular nature of the American Revolution” (p. A12). There is no
indication that changes will be made to these revisions by the final vote in May, 2010. *People For the American Way* issued a press release in response (2010):

In a vote last week, the Texas Board of Education approved a Social Studies curriculum rewritten to emphasize conservative ideology and whitewash topics that don’t align with board members’ beliefs. The curriculum, which is due to receive final approval in May, was changed to emphasize the Board’s religious and political objectives by, for instance, adding flattering details about disgraced conservative Senator Joseph McCarthy, increasing focus on violent fringe members of the peaceful civil rights coalition, and even downplaying the importance of Thomas Jefferson due to his insufficiently orthodox religious beliefs.

People For the American Way President Michael B. Keegan issued the following statement:

“By rewriting this curriculum in such an Orwellian fashion, the Texas Board of Education has embarrassed themselves and their state. A majority of the Board members have made it clear that they have little interest in providing Texas students with a first rate education. Instead, they’d rather use educational curriculum as an opportunity to dishonestly push their ideological agenda to children. Whether we can ascribe their moves to arrogance, malice or sheer ignorance is immaterial—they’re harming the students they were elected to serve, and that’s unacceptable.

“Parents in Texas and around the country should be extremely concerned about what this means for their children’s education. Citizens of every state should make sure their representatives know that they want real history—not right-wing revisionist history—in their Social Studies classrooms.”

*PFAW* has also been involved in the struggle to keep responsible, comprehensive sexuality education in public schools’ curricula. This type of education discusses contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, decision making, responsible sexual behavior and abstinence. The Religious Right, on the other hand, has focused attention more narrowly, advocating abstinence-only programs. Some of these programs are quite drastic. For example, Donovan (1998) quoted from one, entitled *Choosing the Best*. In the video, “a student asks, ‘What if I want to have sex before I get married?’ The student’s teacher then responds, ‘Well, I guess
you’ll just have to be prepared to die. And you’ll probably take with you your spouse and one or more of your children.” (p. 190). This is yet another example of how the right uses fear, and specifically fear of death, in order to advance their agenda.

Some researchers believe that the overall existence of public schools is threatened. Kohn (2004) contends that the “No Child Left Behind” program, vouchers, school choice discussions and especially the increasingly difficult standardized tests given throughout the country are actually various paths to a privatized, free-market system of education. He has argued that rather than improve public schools, these are all well-disguised attacks on the current system.

Diane Ravitch, an assistant secretary of education in George H. W. Bush’s administration, has begun speaking out against charter schools and standardized testing, things that she long fought for (Dillon, 2010): “She underwent an intellectual crisis, she says, discovering that these strategies, which she now calls faddish trends, were undermining public education” (p. A13). Ravitch realized that students in charter schools weren’t doing any better than those in public schools, that funding the charter schools was causing further harm to the public schools and that the proliferation of tests has resulted in a “dumbing down” of the schools, rather than providing a means of measurement (p. A20). In an editorial, she wrote, “What we need is not a marketplace, but a coherent curriculum that prepares all students. And our government should commit to providing a good [public] school in every neighborhood in the nation, just as we strive to provide a good fire company in every community” (Ravitch, 2010, p. A21). People For the American Way has been a consistent voice for increased funding
for public schools to help train teachers, buy books and decrease class size, all steps PFAW thinks would strengthen existing schools.

PFAW summed up their position on the public school issue in a report ("Back to School with the Religious Right") by saying:

While most Americans see the schools as places where children should learn how to think critically and be given the tools to help them become productive and engaged members of the American community, the Religious Right believes that the public schools should promote the particular religious views of the movement's leaders and avoid topics and ideas that might threaten those views... The Religious Right's efforts — whether to divert money from public schools through vouchers, undermine the quality of science education, or gut meaningful sexuality education — all run counter to the larger goal of strengthening public schools. The outcome of these struggles at the local and national levels will be crucial to the future of education in America.

Working for Fair and Just Courts

Another high priority for People For the American Way is making sure that upholding the tenets of the U.S. Constitution, fairness and respect for individuals and due process are key factors in the selection of judges for the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary, all life-time appointments. The importance of this selection is underscored by Kosma (1998): “One of the most enduring marks left by a president is undoubtedly his effect on the law through his nominations to the Supreme Court” (p. 334). The last decade has been particularly difficult in terms of PFAW’s goals on this topic. In 2005, they issued a report ("Courting Disaster") that discussed the potential outcome of appointing additional Supreme Court justices similar to Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas. They painted a bleak picture:

The next appointments to the Supreme Court could well decide whether the Court will facilitate greater equality or turn back the clock on the social justice gains of the past 70 years. The current U.S. Supreme Court has already produced troubling results. Among the most disturbing is the Court majority’s embrace of a new "states' rights" theory that
is undermining the federal government’s ability to protect all citizens’ fundamental constitutional and other rights against abuses by the states. Yet, the Court’s majority has not fully embraced the legal theories of Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, who represent the views of the far-right wing on the Court.

That is why leaders of the Radical Right political movement and their allies remain so focused on the Supreme Court. Their goal is to ensure that the President nominates and the Senate confirms Supreme Court justices who share their view of the Constitution. If they are successful, they could redefine American law for a generation or more. Hanging in the balance are the right to privacy, reproductive choice, civil rights, separation of church and state, environmental protection, and worker and consumer rights. The far right hopes to push the Court further to the right and to take ideological control of the federal courts, particularly the Supreme Court.

During the past half-century, the Supreme Court protected individual rights and liberties in many critical areas: it held that a woman has a fundamental right to a safe, legal abortion; it struck down many practices related to elections and the political process that denied minorities the right to full, equal participation in our democracy; it struck down the pernicious de jure racial segregation in our nation’s public schools; it protected government employees from being fired or demoted for their political party affiliation; and it ruled that poor parents cannot be denied the same opportunity to appeal as rich parents in cases to terminate their parental rights.

Yet Justices Scalia and Thomas have used their written opinions to criticize these landmark rulings and to argue that most of these and many other decisions should be reversed, in whole or in part. If a majority of the Court came to share these views, it would overturn much of our nation’s progress toward full equality and would place many injustices beyond remedy by any courts or Congress for decades to come.

As we know, President Bush successfully placed Justices Roberts and Alito onto the Supreme Court, and PFAW’s predictions quickly started to be confirmed. According to Schaeffer (2008), in a variety of cases in just their first full term, the Court:

struck down the voluntary integration plans of two public school districts, undermining the ability of school districts to promote racial diversity in their schools; severely limited the ability of victims of pay discrimination to obtain compensation for the discrimination; chipped away at the constitutional protection for women’s reproductive freedom by upholding a federal ban on a vaguely defined abortion procedure, despite the absence of an exception in the law to protect a woman’s health; limited the ability of federal taxpayers to challenge government expenditures that violate the Establishment Clause, undermining the separation of church and state; undermined the
Endangered Species Act; [and] overturned two of its own precedents in order to hold that a person who filed his appeal within the time given by a federal district court judge was out of luck — with no legal recourse — when it turned out that the judge had given him the wrong date.

The author went on to argue that these justices have been happy to go against precedent despite their claims of respect for it during their confirmation hearings and they have been prone to denying access to the courts for average citizens.

Schaeffer (2008) also reviewed some of the decisions made by Bush’s appointees to the federal courts, and found many examples of attempts to limit rights: voting rights of minorities; the rights of individuals to be protected from sexual harassment or pay discrimination; the right to take certain types of cases to court; the right of Congress to protect groups through new laws, to name just a few. She noted that in the federal appellate courts at the time her article was published, 98 of the judges had been nominated by Republican presidents and only 67 had been nominated by Democratic presidents. While reminding the reader that not all judges nominated by Republicans turn out to be conservative activists, she did find a strong leaning in that direction among Bush’s appointees, close to 300 federal nominees confirmed before his last year in office.8

In a complex longitudinal study, Lyles (1996) analyzed “the extent to which the judicial performance of district court judges, as measured by their decisions on significant cases, reflects or comports with the overall policy objectives and/or expectations of their appointing presidents in five issue areas over a thirty-two-year period, 1960-1992: abortion rights, affirmative action, religious liberty, school desegregation, and voting rights” (p. 447). He looked specifically at federal district courts because of the large number of cases they hear and he noted that 90% of the time, the decisions they render are the final word on those cases. The
## Judicial Performance, 1960-1992

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*I added these two lines.
table showing his results follows on the next page. What he found was that, particularly when presidents purposefully seek out nominees who share their political positions, they are very successful at furthering those policy objectives.

For example, Lyndon Johnson was very outspoken about his positions regarding civil rights, school desegregation and voting rights. He and his Deputy Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, set out to identify nominees who “were both loyal to the president and committed to his programs” (p. 453). Johnson ended up appointing 122 district court judges. Between 1964 and 1992, his appointees decided in favor of affirmative action 82.6% of the time, in favor of enhancing school desegregation 62.5% of the time, and in favor of extending guarantees of voting rights 63.5% of the time. In keeping with the progressive leanings of his administration, these same judges supported pro-choice positions 94.11% of the time, and increased separation of church and state 60.46% of the time. Overall, in the given time period, his appointees to the district courts ruled on 213 cases and their decisions tended towards the more progressive viewpoint 67% of the time.

These numbers can be contrasted with the results of decisions made by Ronald Reagan’s 290 appointees, the most of any of the presidents in the study but still less than George W. Bush’s total number of appointees. President Reagan was very outspoken: for example, Lyles wrote that Reagan gave an “explicit promise in 1986 to appoint anti-abortion judges” (p. 447). In the short time between Reagan’s appointments and the time of this study⁹, his appointees ruled in a politically conservative manner 61% of the time. Lyles wrote (p. 461):

Reagan sought judges, for example, who supported: (1) A constitutional amendment to ban abortion; (2) voluntary prayer in public schools; (3) an end to the use of mandatory busing for racial balance in schools; (4) abandonment of quotas and ratios as a remedy for racial injustice in employment; and, (5) curbing the strict "one-person-one-vote"
standards for political apportionment. Additionally, where individual rights were concerned, Reagan wanted judges who would follow the "narrowest possible interpretation of the constitutional document’s plain words..." [Edwin Meese, Reagan’s Attorney General] once stated regarding judicial appointments that the administration may "institutionalize the Reagan revolution so it can’t be set aside no matter what happens in future presidential elections."

Reagan’s appointees, at least within the narrow time frame in this study, were the first to have an overall anti-choice ruling record. Even judges appointed by Presidents Nixon and Ford ruled in a pro-choice manner 82% and 100% of the time, respectively.

Conservative judicial rulings have resulted in constraints imposed on: research supported by the National Institutes of Health, funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, scientists’ ability to conduct research in their areas of expertise and libraries’ freedom to select books (Johnson, 1992). In addition to the large numbers of lower court judges appointed by each president, they appoint an average of 2.7 Supreme Court judges, so the ramifications of judicial selection extend far and wide (Kosma, 1998). A People For the American Way press release (2003, p.7) concluded:

Americans must come to understand that struggles over judicial nominations are not just partisan political battles. The judges who are appointed to lifetime positions on the federal appeals courts and the Supreme Court will answer questions that shape for decades how America works and Americans live: Will the Supreme Court undermine the federal government’s ability to safeguard the air we breathe and the water we drink? Will the courts abandon their role in preserving Americans’ right to privacy and strip women of the constitutional right to make their own family planning and reproductive choices? Will Congress lose the power to protect Americans’ civil rights from abuses by state governments and others? Will the Voting Rights Act be applied so narrowly that it fails to protect citizens’ most fundamental rights? ....It is time for the American people – and for members of the Senate – to focus on the issue with.... intensity and clarity of purpose.
Interviews

In order to bring together the organizational perspective and the personal experience, in the fall of 2009 I interviewed two women affiliated with *People For the American Way*: Bobbie Handman and Marge Baker. Handman was a Vice President of the organization, and oversaw the New York City office. She worked for *PFAW* for 28 years, starting at the organization’s beginning and retiring just a few years ago. Baker is the current Executive Vice President for Policy and Program Planning in the main office, based in Washington, DC. Her responsibilities include organizing grass-roots responses to events, advocating in Congress and helping the organization to defend constitutional rights when they are threatened or attacked. She joined the organization in early 2003.

Mirroring the data discussed earlier about activists, their evolution as they worked up to their careers at *PFAW* was gradual and steady. This echoes one of Teske’s elements that helps explain activism: lifelong commitment (1997). Both women brought political and social action experience to their jobs; Handman has also had a long-time, committed involvement in the arts. In high school, she worked for minority rights in downtown Philadelphia: “It was clear to me that I had to be active,” she pointed out. She has been fighting for awareness of and respect for the U.S. Constitution since she was a college student – having organized almost a dozen public readings of it around the country – and she worked for Eugene McCarthy’s campaign. She was brought to *PFAW* by Norman Lear, a good friend of hers. As mentioned earlier, he was one of the co-founders of this organization. He was outraged at the Right’s efforts to influence judicial selections, to bring religion into public schools, even to use patriotic terminology to represent their particular viewpoints. His passion was contagious and Handman
had both a strong interest in some of PFAW’s key issues and experience in fundraising, a major aspect of non-profit work, making her a great asset for the fledgling organization.

When I asked what inspired her to commit to a life of activism, Handman’s answer was simple: There was always something to be done and she would never give up. In contrast to the background of some of the research subjects cited earlier, her parents had not been involved in activism or politics. On the other hand, Handman’s convictions, long-term commitment, positive attitude and confidence in the benefits of her efforts and PFAW’s work echo findings by Wall (1995), Kaysen and Stake (2001) and Sherkat and Blocker (1994) regarding the importance of political efficacy: the belief that one can help create change.

Baker grew up in Baltimore and remembers clearly when she became aware of politics and social issues. She was in sixth grade and white flight – the exodus of white residents from the city – was an increasing problem. Baker’s family had many pointedly honest discussions as her parents struggled to hold on, to stay in their city. The early 1960s was a time of increased political awareness, with the presidency of Kennedy and all of the emerging social, political turmoil of the decade. Her parents were politically active, particularly on a local level, so she was exposed to that type of commitment from an early age. Here we see support for Sherkat and Blocker’s findings (1994) regarding the importance of parental modeling as a factor in activism.

Before coming to People For the American Way, Baker had previously worked for state regulatory agencies, in the consumer protection arena, for a non-profit service organization and as counsel for Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone on the Senate Labor Sub-Committee that he chaired, until he died in 2002. She then sought a place where she could “work my values, as
Paul would have wanted.” Her inspiration grew out of the “dark years of the Bush administration;” she saw the need to keep fighting for what she believed in. She said that “over the years, we started to see some electoral victories which were good.... [We] took back the Senate, took back the House, the Democrats did.... Part of what keeps you going is, yeah, you work, work, work the issues and you realize the American people are really there with you.... That keeps you going.” I believe that in these two women, we see Teske’s theory of the identity-construction model as an accurate depiction; they are both doing important work that benefits others, and they are simultaneously deriving a sense of self-worth through their efforts. Additionally, by merging their drive for activism with their full-time employment, they were able to avoid the complications of a conflict between their jobs requirements and their political commitments, as addressed by the research of Wiltfang and McAdam (1991).

I asked them both what they thought were the most important issues for People For the American Way. Handman listed several: freedom of speech, equal justice, human and constitutional rights, and freedom for the arts. She also noted the two issues that then were currently high priorities: the Supreme Court nomination (for which Sonia Sotomayor ultimately won confirmation) and improving the health care system. Baker emphasized that opposing the Right Wing was their overarching focus, the reason the organization was formed and why it still exists; that work defines all of the other issues. She noted that PFAW is “one of the go-to organizations, [after] years and years and years of.... tracking the Right Wing, for understanding what the Right is doing.” As for current priorities, she focused on the “battle for control of the federal judiciary.... Supreme Court nominations, lower court nominations.... How to find justices that.... understand the Constitution as supporting progressive values.” Both women agreed
that PFAW’s single greatest accomplishment was the role it played in the defeat of Robert
Bork’s nomination to the Supreme Court in 1987. Baker also listed other current priorities:
fighting the Right’s efforts to derail executive nominations in the current administration and
working for equality for the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender population in a variety of areas.
Finally, she argues that defending the rights of immigrants from attack by the Right will be the
next big issue in the near future.

Another question I asked was whether their work at PFAW helped to develop or
enhance any of their abilities, attitudes or traits. Baker thought that she learned not to
underestimate the Right, and that “fighting the Right when your friends are in power is
different. Your friends aren’t always doing what you’d like them to do. It’s a much more
nuanced approach.... It’s not turning the fight.... into something that distracts from the overall
reform agenda that needs to be.... and pushing your friends who are in power [to not] be
intimidated by the right, to stand up to the right.... It’s much more challenging.”

Handman answered that she learned to be a good producer through the events that she
managed and the work that she did. She pointed out that “I also think that I did something for
the Constitution, not that it needed me, but I did it anyway!” Her personal commitment to the
values inherent in the Constitution is crucial to her, and she’s worked to enhance and expand
them throughout her life. The testimony of these two women recalls Teske’s (1997) findings,
which he summarized this way: “For many activists, involvement in politics itself enables them
to fulfill certain quite rational desires, among them becoming the kind of person they want to
be, instantiating qualities and virtues that they admire, playing a role (however small) in history,
ensuring that their lives as a whole leave behind a certain kind of story, and upholding their most deeply held value commitments through their actions and lives” (p. 143).

When I asked if they ever had any concerns about working for the organization, both women firmly answered no. Both did acknowledge that they’ve received hate mail and threats; Handman said she just threw the mail out, and Baker pointed out that, as far as she knew, the hate mail and threats are directed at the organization rather than individuals. It’s possible that minimizing the risk is a psychological tool used by activists such as Handman and Baker in order to reduce stress, but of course, there are attacks and criticism of the organization. For example, one of the most publicized occurred just after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. The televangelist Jerry Falwell, speaking on Pat Robertson’s 700 Club television program, blamed the ACLU, People For the American Way, abortionists, pagans, feminists, gays and lesbians for the attacks, and Robertson concurred (PFAW Press Release, 2001). Another example took place when the Colorado Supreme Court found a school voucher program to be unconstitutional. Naku (2007) wrote:

The Colorado case shows PFAW at its worst.... PFAW has allied itself with.... other militant interest groups whose self-interest opposes giving poor and minority parents this choice.... People For The American Way may claim to be a “non-partisan nonprofit group representing 300,000 members,” but it has a long history of supporting and working in coalition with left-wing individuals and organizations.... [including] groups strongly opposed to school choice.... [and with] a major opponent of Bush judicial nominees.... Its name is a misnomer. PFAW is not interested in competition and merit. Its political self-interest is in maintaining a failed education bureaucracy and the status quo.

The president of an organization called Americans for Limited Government posted on its website a letter he had sent to PFAW (Wilson, 2009). In it, he referred to PFAW’s “slander,” their “pathetic.... predictable left-wing rhetoric,” “whose website is riddled with inaccuracies”
and their “deliberate distortions.” York (2002) railed in the *National Review* about the organization’s “intensely partisan attacks on President Bush’s judicial nominees” and criticized major media organizations that contributed money to *PFAW*. An on-line article in the *American Spectator* (Tooley, 2010) belittled *PFAW*’s response to a written declaration by members of the Religious Right that addressed gay marriage, abortion and euthanasia. On a website concerned with New Hampshire politics, Fortune (2010) wrote about *PFAW*:

> This is a Liberal Progressive effort to deceive people. The left has always had contempt for patriotic Americans.... [They] wouldn’t know the American Way if it hit them in the face.... The only way they want America to be Born Again is in the NEW Image of Obaman CHANGE; i.e. Marxism. They want to do away with our Founding Fathers and want to dismantle the public manifestation of Christianity. These are the people who want us to say Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas so we don’t offend the anti-Christians. They’re for gay marriage and for whatever other distortion of marriage it will bring. DO NOT BE FOOLED!

Horowitz (2003) attacked progressives in general and *PFAW* specifically: “Leading the leftist juggernaut in its current attack on America’s defenders is the largest and most influential hate group in America, misnamed ‘People for the American Way.’ People for the American Way is a permanent campaign of fear and hate aimed principally at Christian conservatives but at every group that attempts to defend America against the assaults of the left.” Finally, in an article for the *Washington Examiner*, Ambrose (2009) referred to *PFAW* as “People for the Gutter Way” and described them as, “a mean-spirited, relevancy-challenged, democracy-hating, stupid bunch of sniveling rats.”

These types of often hysterical rants can be disheartening, to say the least, for not only those who work for the organization, but also for their supporters. One way to cope is with humor. A past president of *PFAW* wrote a letter to the editor that started: “I am indeed honored by the attention that *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page has lavished on me lately.
But I must say that three lead editorials in less than six weeks – and more than 30 attacks on the editorial pages over the years – does seem a bit obsessive” (Neas, 2002).

Another question I posed to Handman and Baker concerned the dichotomy between a person’s standing out versus fitting in; I asked if they had ever felt that conflict in their commitment to activism. They both remembered instances that exemplified it. Baker spoke of the recent battle to get Sonia Sotomayor confirmed by the Senate, and the opposition to her from the Right. “The administration’s strategy for getting her through was not to engage on these issues... Part of you wanted to say ‘Come on!! Of course, she was right about [these issues]!’ Nobody wanted to take on those issues; we tried.... but it was frustrating.... not to engage in the debate that way.” She was willing to be perceived as ignoring the administration’s strategy, but they weren’t able to make their point effectively to other activist groups or their allies in the Senate.

An example of Handman’s willingness to take a stand occurred in 1993. Carole Marlowe, a high school teacher-of-the-year in Arizona had been fired for attempting to stage a production of “The Shadow Box,” a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that included obscenities (that would have been removed for the production) and references to homosexuality. Handman’s steadfast commitment to the arts and anger at the events in Tucson inspired her to organize a public reading of the play in that city followed by a discussion afterwards. Even the PFAW president at the time opposed this initiative because he did not think that the defenders of the teacher’s plan could pull it off.

After much effort, several well-known actors from Hollywood and New York participated, and the evening triggered a widespread discussion in Arizona schools and the local
and national media about public school curricula and censorship. Ms. Marlowe later wrote to Handman, “I was stunned, awestruck and unbelieving as you described your envisioned event with media coverage and famous actors performing... The play reading also was a healing evening my students, my children and my colleagues will never forget. The term ‘Tucson’ is now a verb describing your transformation of a community from one hiding a secret to one holding open debate... It has redefined who I am in the world and I am eternally grateful” (Marlowe, 2003).

I asked each woman about the personal and professional rewards that came from working for People For the American Way. Baker stressed that “working for her values” is the greatest reward in this job; she’s able to work on things about which she is passionate. Handman answered that the opportunity to meet all the people that she’s encountered and worked with has been very important and she’s so happy with all that she was able to do for the arts. One of her accomplishments was the launch of artsave, “a nationwide project to protect artists and arts organizations facing challenges to their work” (ArtWire, 1998). Because of her work both at PFAW and with other arts organizations in New York City, Handman was presented with the 1998 National Medal of Arts by President Clinton.

On the occasion of her 75th birthday in 2003, Bobbie Handman received a book of tribute letters. The messages she received are testimony to her commitment to a life of activism and service as a role model for other activists. Some of the rewards of activism mentioned earlier by Teske’s subjects (1997) included the admiration and respect of one’s old friends and being able to model a way of being in the world for one’s children. The ability to
serve as a role model in an often selfless capacity can be inspiring. Selected tributes convey this

(Handman, 2003):

Through all the years I’ve known her, Bobbie Handman has personified a nobility of spirit, unending compassion, unswerving conviction, a tireless pursuit of truth and fairness, and a gift for family and friendship that knows no bounds. (Norman Lear)

Whenever I have gotten really down and fatigued by the misperceptions of my own public advocacy work, and by that of People For, Bobbie has picked me up. She has helped me understand that what we are asking people to do is to sacrifice for others, so our message will always be harder to sell. We ask people to care for the greater good, so we will often be less popular. We ask people to think, so we will always struggle in our competition with those who thrive on closed minds. I have needed mentors to prop me up, spiritually, during dark times and Bobbie Handman has been one of those mentors. (Alec Baldwin)

Bobbie was the prime mover in the New York primary of 1968, probably, the greatest people’s movement in politics in the history of the United States. (Gene McCarthy)

Your commitment to the defense of First Amendment rights, along with so many other causes, has been an inspiration to all who know.... you. Your friendship and support over many years has meant so very much to me. I am proud to be your senator for many reasons, but especially because you represent everything that is great about New York. (Hillary Rodham Clinton)

Congratulations! All of us are deeply grateful for your great dedication and hard work for our important cause. (Walter Cronkite)

I’ve always felt so lucky to have known all my life, incredible women. Women who stepped up to the plate and made a difference. You’ve been one of those women. Sometimes I know we feel so overwhelmed by the ignorance greed and evil that abounds in our tattered world. But thanks to you and others we fight on. In the Jewish faith they talk of the “Just Man” – we know it’s a woman. (Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary)

Ms. Handman has been a guiding light to many, and a mentor to even more. Her passion for life, your strength of spirit, and compassion for humanity has made her a role model for many. She has fought for some of the greatest triumphs in our fight for justice and equality. (Kweisi Mfume, past president and CEO of the NAACP)

You have educated so many people in the beauty of justice that your students cannot be numbered. (Carole Shields, past president of PFAW)
You are People For the American Way at its very best – you love America and you are committed to our Constitution. You are willing to leap into leadership and you are impatient with “leaders” who don’t. You are forever coming up with new ways to help people “get it.” You don’t give up or give in to despair.... You are passionate.... indomitable, strong willed.... (Ralph Neas, past president of PFAW)

Congratulations on your 75th birthday – and on the many years you have used your unstoppable energy and dazzling vision to make our world finer and more humane. I feel enormously privileged to have known and worked with you these nine years as I have learned and been inspired by: your clarity of perception and insights; the brilliance of your creativity and strategy; your.... optimism and courage... (Roberta Cooper, past deputy director of PFAW New York)

The best thing about you.... Is that you never linger in despair. You always end our conversations with some hopeful line about how we’ll get them eventually... (Judy Green; position unstated)

This is indeed one of the most remarkable doers I have ever known, a non-stop, dedicated idealist, who honestly believes that intelligent, even cultural action can change the world. And – event by event, person by person – Bobbie changes the world. (Alberta Arthurs; position unstated)

Both Handman and Baker fit the description of “persisters” as defined by Downton and Wehr (1998). They were available by being “attitudinally predisposed” and have structured their lives in a way that allows them to be fully committed to their cause. They both identified the salience of the political issues to which they’ve devoted their lives. They have achieved success at a variety of commitment-sustaining factors such as their management skills, shared visions and personal satisfaction. Both women convey feelings described earlier by Gomes (1992) regarding the rewards of activism. They have been able to build their professional lives around others who are like-minded advocates, increasing their contact with other activists. They have served as role models to many. Additionally, they both have derived a sense of meaning from their work, a feeling that they’ve been able to make a difference or a
contribution to our society. For “persisters” like Handman and Baker, this may be the biggest reward of all.

Conclusion

Political activism, or indeed involvement to achieve social, political change, on any level, is crucial to the well-being of all people in the United States. In a democracy such as ours, the right and the responsibility to question and protest policies and decisions to which we object, play a vital role in the governing of the country. When a good education and basic health care are denied to millions of Americans, we must speak out. When our elected officials sanction illegal torture of prisoners, we must speak out. When an overzealous administration invades law-abiding citizens’ privacy, we must speak out. Whether one devotes his or her professional life to activism or simply informs oneself about current issues and votes regularly, being aware, educated and involved is one’s civic duty. It is a lack of informed participation in one’s community – small or large – that threatens control of local and national welfare by the self-interested. Undue influence by unchallenged corporate money or religious fanatics can determine the direction of a country, with disastrous results. As Edmund Burke (date unknown) purportedly\(^\text{12}\) said, “All that is required for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing.”

*People For the American Way* plays an important role in enabling us to participate. The organization researches the issues; informs the public through press releases, detailed reports, public events, direct mail campaigns and interviews with print, television and on-line media; supports or challenges political candidates; and gets involved in legal battles such as the Bedford School District case. As an organization and for the individual people who work there,
there are subsequent costs and benefits. Public attacks are unavoidable, but the rewards of accomplishment, of positive social change, of camaraderie are plentiful and celebrated.

Researchers have identified many of the characteristics of individual activists. Some of them include parental modeling, association with other activists, previous experience in activism, belief in one’s ability to effect change, the time or life structure to allow for activism, higher education, and the ability to see the relevance of politics in the lives of all. Both Bobbie Handman and Marge Baker – two PFAW staff members – embody many of these characteristics. They have devoted their lives to working for the greater good. While the costs of activism vary from person to person, the benefits of commitment to activism help advocates maintain the energy, the drive and the belief in accomplishing change in the face of negative criticism. While gratitude may come from others, the internal satisfaction described by activists is more than enough to sustain them, as Baker and Handman indicate.

One of Teske’s (1997) subjects summed up the thoughts of many activists: “Politicians make life-or-death decisions about all of our futures…. you don’t have the luxury of being neutral – neutrality is not possible. You are either going to be a part of that [political] system in one way or another…. or you are going to be rebelling against it” (p. 4). It is incumbent upon us all to consider thoughtfully our opinions on issues that are important to Americans, learn the facts, and make our voices heard.
Endnotes

1 They interviewed 1669 students in 1965, randomly selected from 97 high schools, and followed up with 1348 of them (80.8%) in 1973. The authors did not provide a breakdown of the raw numbers in terms of class, religion, gender, or parental occupation.

2 Bible beliefs were measured on a 4-point scale, ranging from “the Bible is God’s word and all it says is true” to “The Bible was written by men who lived so long ago that it is worth very little today” (p. 829), but did not break down the raw numbers in each category.

3 How different would those results be in current times, given women’s majority status in U.S. colleges and universities, and their increased levels of equality and confidence over the past 45 years?

4 This point about belonging to something larger will be discussed further later in the paper.

5 The personal effects will be discussed in other sections.

6 See page 15 and the next theory for more on this.


8 This number grew to 314 or more by the end of his term, according to the PFAW report, “The Human Toll.” For more than 30 examples of questionable rulings by Bush appointees, see this report at http://67.192.238.59/multimedia/pdf/Judiciary/human-toll-web.pdf

9 I have attempted to contact Professor Lyles on more than one occasion in order to ask if he’s done any follow-up on this research, but have not been able to speak with him. It would be very helpful not only to see the longer-term data of decisions from Reagan’s judges, but also to track subsequent presidents’ appointees.

10 I did not ask either woman about their salaries from PFAW, so the issue of “cost of activism” in terms of their earnings was not addressed.

11 These issues, for example, were Sotomayor’s widely publicized statements and rulings such as the ‘wise Latina’ comment or the Connecticut fire fighter exam case.

12 This attribution is in dispute; for example, see http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Edmund_Burke
References


(But see also http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Edmund_Burke)


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