Protest 101

Is Protest Legal?

Absolutely! Protest is protected by the first amendment of the US Constitution:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

The U.S. Constitution didn’t establish a flag, Pledge of Allegiance or Star Spangled Banner. It did enshrine the right to peaceable assembly, and “petition” (meaning “appeal to”) the government to fix offensive laws and policies. So, when you gather to protest, remember: You are doing something endorsed by the U.S. Constitution. Protest is patriotic!
Why Protest?

Protest is one of many ways to effect change. You can also:

1. Vote in local, state and national elections, or run for election.
2. Meet with elected officials. (This often requires persistence.)
3. Attend public meetings and speak up during the time set aside for comment.
4. Phone, email or send letters to government agencies or officials.
5. Send letters to newspapers or post your views through social media.
6. Boycott businesses, products or service you object to.

But sometimes, protest is the best way to build a movement and change things!

How do I Organize a Protest?

Organizing a protest is hard work, but it can also be a lot of fun. Here are some basics:

1. Form a committee of people who care about an issue and enjoy each other’s company. Set reasonable goals. For example, a small group (five to fifty people) might try to stop a housing development that would cause flooding. It would be unreasonable for that group to try to end all unsound development in the U.S.

2. Decide on a means to achieve your goal. For example: passage of a local environmental ordinance to protect wetlands. You might also choose to pressure an
agency or corporation to change its policies without creating a new law.

3. Be clear about what you want your protest to accomplish. It might be to: a) get your story told in the newspaper or on TV; b) publicly shame a legislator, bureaucrat or business leader who is blocking progress on your issue; c) attract new members to your group.

4. Clarify your demand so that anybody can understand it. If you can turn it into a slogan, you know you’ve succeeded. For example: “Save Paradise! Don’t Pave Our Park.”

5. Choose the best place for your protest. It might be the offices of a government agency or elected official, the headquarters of a corporation, the administrative offices of a university or simply a public gathering spot that attracts lots of passersby. Remember, protest is public – there is no point doing it where nobody ever goes!

6. Plan to create a crowd:

   A. Announce the time, date and location of your protest on social media.
   B. Check to be sure there are no restrictions on protest in that area. [Here’s a place to look.]
   C. Encourage friends and neighbors to attend. Ask musicians and singers to come!
   D. Hand out flyers on the street or door to door. It’s usually legal to hand out flyers in public rights of way so long as you are not blocking traffic.
   E. Gather emails of reporters and send them a press notice in advance.
   F. Designate somebody to livestream, take pictures and record videos.
   G. Prepare visuals! These might be posters, banners, funny costumes, or puppets.

What do I do on the day of the Protest Itself?

1. Get to your site early. Make sure any designated crowd control folks are ready.
2. Start on time, at least with music – you don’t want people drifting off.
3. Distribute your press release. Reporters may publish it verbatim.
4. Use music. Protest songs, spirituals, popular or folk songs are all great!
5. Use chants and slogans to keep protesters and your audience engaged.
6. Use your phone to livestream the event to your Facebook group or YouTube channel.
7. Gather the names and emails of people at the protest to build your movement.
Suppose it is a dud?

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, turnout for a protest is poor. That's ok. Stuff takes time. Congratulate yourselves on your hard work and think about how to do better next time.

Suppose it is wildly successful?

Follow up with more meetings and protests. Have a spokesperson ready to talk on radio or TV. Stay on message. Say what the group wants, regardless of what a reporter asks. For example:

Q: Aren’t you concerned about driving away business by regulating who can build in a wetland?
A: Protecting our wetlands will prevent devastating floods, establish a park, save homes and protect businesses. It's a win, win, win, win!