

# Nuclear Weapons, Protest, and American Political Parties, 1944-2020

**Michael T. Heaney**

University of Glasgow

[michaeltheaney@gmail.com](mailto:michaeltheaney@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** Nuclear weapons and protest have had a longstanding connection in the United States since the end of World War 2. This research investigates the reciprocal relationship between political parties' positions on nuclear weapons and media coverage of anti-nuclear protest. In doing so, it considers the interactive effects of parties and protests, variations in the dangers of nuclear weapons, and the effects of presidential incumbency. The results reveal that the Democratic Party may be more responsive to protests than is the Republican Party, though protests likely react to the Republican Party. Further, the evolution of anti-nuclear discourse from arms control to proliferation does not appear to have advantaged the anti-nuclear movement. The paper concludes with lessons on how the anti-nuclear movement could approach key issues and the two major political parties.

Paper presented at the conference on "Finding Effective Strategies to Advocate for Peace and Nuclear Security: Mining the Past to Inform the Future," University of California, Irvine, February 16, 2024.



Source: Photo by author, New York City, May 1, 2005.

## Introduction

Almost 80 years have now passed since nuclear weapons were detonated on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While these weapons have not again been used against an enemy in wartime, their continued existence poses tremendous danger to humanity and the natural environment. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, nine nations together possessed more than 12,000 nuclear warheads as of January 2023, with nearly 10,000 of these being potentially operational (Kristensen and Korda 2023, p. 247). The United States and Russia alone controlled approximately 89 percent of this total nuclear stockpile (Kristensen and Korda 2023, p. 248). The risk is ever present that the nuclear club will proliferate to a larger coterie of nations or non-state organizations, as countries such as Libya, Syria, and Iran have at times given indications that they seek to become nuclear-armed states (Narang 2022). Thus, the status quo reflects the threat of what at least one scholar has labeled as “unparalleled catastrophe” (Crilley 2023).

Given that the United States is one of the world’s two dominant nuclear states, it is urgent to understand the political forces that shape the American posture on this issue, especially what activists can do to exercise influence over policy. Some of the earliest opposition to nuclear weapons was expressed in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, established in 1945 by Eugene Rabinowitch and Hyman Goldsmith (Solomon 1983). By the late 1950s, grassroots advocacy organizations – such as the American Friends Service Committee and the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (known as SANE) – had begun mobilizing against the bomb. Arms control was injected into national electoral politics by the 1960s, especially as organizations such as SANE and Women Strike for Peace (WSP) adeptly articulated the risks of nuclear weapons as a wedge in public opinion (Eastwood 2020). Anti-nuclear protests became widely visible in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s during the Nuclear Freeze campaign (Meyer 1990). However, the anti-nuclear movement has been mostly in abeyance since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Rubinson 2018) as public attention to the risks of nuclear weapons has declined (Lytle and Karl 2020). Charting a

path for a peaceful and secure future would benefit from understanding more about the political consequences of this past mobilization and demobilization.

This study focuses on political parties as one vital institutional arena over which anti-nuclear activists strive to exert influence. It investigates the extent to which there is a relationship between activism and the policy positions of political parties. American political parties are coalitions of policy demanders that attempt to control a portfolio of salient issues (Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller 2008). Parties certainly do not *determine* policy. However, parties have an important voice in the policy process, especially as they put forth platforms prior to each presidential election that prescribe an agenda should their nominated candidate win the presidency. Parties use their platforms as critical ways to respond to fluctuations in public opinion (Benefiel and Williams 2019). While these positions exhibit a certain degree of stability, they also offer opportunities for change (and, thus, influence) over time (Karol 2009).

This research examines political party platforms in the United States from 1944 to 2020 in order to understand party positions on nuclear weapons. Platforms are one of numerous indicators of a party's policy stances. Prior research has shown that organized interests pursue inclusion of their goals in party platforms, while parties sometimes reward loyalists and ideological allies through platform modifications (Victor and Reinhardt 2018). This paper investigates the relationship between party positions and activism indicated by the mass media attention to anti-nuclear protest. While protest is not the only form of activism, it is the most-commonly-used activist tactic that is also easily transparent to the public. As a result, it is possible to track protest over time more reliably than is the case for other aspects of activism.

The paper acknowledges that the relationship between party positions and protests may be reciprocal – that is, protests may affect positions at the same time that positions affect protests (McAdam and Tarrow 2010). Additionally, the research explores the potential effects of (1) differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, (2) issue evolution in discourses about nuclear weapons, and (3) variations in the institutional concerns of incumbent versus challenging

parties. In doing so, this analysis provides insights into the ways that parties and protests do – and do not – respond to one another.

This paper proceeds in six parts. First, it outlines a theoretical rationale to expect a relationship between anti-nuclear activism (manifested as protest) and party positions on nuclear weapons (articulated in party platforms), as well as the conditions of that relationship. Second, the research design is outlined, including procedures for content analysis of party platforms and mass media coverage of anti-nuclear protest. Third, the trends in party positions and protest are analyzed qualitatively and using graphical evidence. Fourth, statistical analysis is deployed to test the hypothesized relationships formally. Fifth, the statistical results are discussed. Finally, the implications for anti-nuclear activism are considered.

This research demonstrates that it is plausible that there is a reciprocal relationship between party positions and anti-nuclear protest. The results are consistent with the conclusion that the Democratic Party responds to protests while protests respond to the Republican Party. The evolution of nuclear discourses away from arms control and toward proliferation may be associated with the decreased efficacy of anti-nuclear activism. Finally, there is some evidence that incumbents are more likely to articulate anti-nuclear positions than are challengers.

Anti-nuclear advocates may draw important lessons from this study. First, advocates are wise to be attentive to the asymmetry between America's two major political parties, which are structured in ways that make them responsive to diverse types of pressures (Grossman and Hopkins 2016). Second, the way that activists respond to the parties may not be proportional to their actual positions on nuclear weapons. Third, differential interest of activists in arms control (which is mostly about superpower relations) and proliferation (which is mostly about superpower-minor power relations) poses strategic challenges for the anti-nuclear movement. Fourth, mobilization of the nuclear movement cannot be separated from inherent features of nuclear weapons technology. Further success by anti-nuclear advocates would probably require considerable creativity in introducing a new kind of grassroots politics.

## **What Connects Activism and Party Positions?**

Activism and protest are among the scattered social and political forces that political actors may monitor when taking stances on policy issues. As William Gamson (1975) emphasized, the permeability of the American political arena affords many outside groups an audience with decision makers. In this context, the strategy of social protest has diffused widely over time such that it has become more readily accepted as legitimate, making it more likely that activist groups choose protest as one of their tactics (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Recent technological advances have made protests easier to plan and stage while simultaneously undercutting the feasibility of building the kinds of organizations that effectively pressure political elites (Tufekci 2017).

A key challenge for decision makers is to determine how the information provided by protests is relevant to their political goals. Ken Kollman (1998) explained that protests can transmit signals about what issues are (or are not) important to various constituencies. If political actors observe an anti-nuclear protest taking place, they may use this observation to update their views about how pertinent the issue is to current politics. They may be keen to note the size of the protest, how it is discussed in the media, and its geographic diversity, as well as what type of people participate (or stay home). Are the protesters liberal, conservative, young, old, Black, or White? What aspects of the issue are the focus of the protests? Such information may be more politically actionable than public opinion polls, which often lack the kind of granular detail that is valuable when taking issue stances (Herbst 1998).

Kollman (1998) further argues that protests may serve to galvanize public opinion for a cause. Protests staged by the most interested and organized activists have the potential to demonstrate the viability of a cause to a broader community of activists who may then decide whether to join the bandwagon (Marwell and Oliver 1993). Protests thus serve valuable informational functions to those making decisions in parties and activist communities.

While the direct effects of protest may be immediately palpable, there may also be longer term effects that derive from changing the lives of protest participants (Meyer 2021). Involvement in

activism may steer a person's life course by directing them toward or away from certain careers, presenting them with novel forms of political participation, or altering their social networks (Corrigall-Brown 2012; McAdam 1989). As a result, the downstream effects of protests may manifest years after the initial events took place and may feed back onto the broader political culture.

Activists may respond to changes that they observe in parties, just as parties may react to protests (Tarrow 2021). The emergence of a new threat that is counter to the goals of a movement often corresponds with amplification in a wave of protest (Almeida 2003; Goldstone and Tilly 2001; Tilly 1978). For example, if one or both of the parties nominate especially hawkish candidates, groups may be unusually motivated to protest as a result. A presidential nominee such as Donald Trump, who has a record of dangerous positions on nuclear warfare (Frühling and O'Neil 2017), could be an impetus to anti-nuclear activism along these lines.

The interaction of parties and protests is not likely to be automatic or unconditional. The nature of these processes requires interpretation and judgement on the part of leaders within both parties and movements. As a result, the emergence of a particular protest may be more informative to one party than the other. Or, the positions of one party may be of greater consequence to anti-nuclear activists than the positions of the other party.

Given the possibility that different parties may diverge in their reactions to protest events, it is essential to understand the underlying variation in the nature of the Democratic and Republican parties. Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins (2016) have made a compelling case that there is considerable asymmetry between the parties on a wide range of dimensions (see also Freeman 1986 and Heaney, Masket, Miller, and Strolovitch 2012). Most notably, the Democratic Party is relatively more open to outside groups, while the Republican Party is relatively more devoted to ideological purity. Conversely, a social movement may choose to favor one party over another, even if it does not necessarily serve the activists' cause to do so. For example, the author's previous collaboration with Fabio Rojas demonstrated that the antiwar movement of the 2000s yielded ground to the

Democratic Party even though the party had not acted decisively on the movement's core policy demands (Heaney and Rojas 2015).

The ways that parties and protests interact may change over time as the nature of issues evolve. Issue evolution may be driven by a variety of factors, such as technological changes, pivotal events, and the ways that state actors have behaved relative to an issue. These developments may make an issue more or less urgent. Or, they may shift which party has more to gain from acting on it. Edward Carmines and James Stimson (1989) illustrated these dynamics with their analysis of race and civil rights issues in the United States. They showed how the Democratic and Republican parties adjusted their positions on race over time as the pro-civil rights stances became more electorally advantageous to Democrats and less beneficial to Republicans. While the issue of nuclear weapons is dissimilar to race in myriad ways, it is nonetheless possible that the nuclear issue has evolved analogously to alter the landscape on which parties and protests interact.

The way party leaders approach an issue may depend not only on the party's constituency, but also on whether the party is in power. When a party is in power, it has strong incentives to claim credit for recent developments, which may include preserving peace in difficult circumstances or securing treaties with foreign nations. Since the US Constitution designates the president as the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, military confrontations naturally direct attention to the president and their party (Kriner 2010). These considerations have the potential to alter the positions of a party depending on whether the current president is one of their own.

The factors reviewed in this section suggest several hypotheses about the relationship between party positions on nuclear weapons and anti-nuclear protests. First, protests are likely to be associated with movement toward anti-nuclear policy positions, while the absence of protest is likely to coincide with a drift in the direction of pro-nuclear positions. Conversely, protests are expected to follow pro-nuclear shifts by the parties and recede when parties move to oppose nuclear weapons. Second, the Democratic Party is anticipated to respond to anti-nuclear protests more readily than is the Republican Party. Third, the evolution of the nuclear issue toward expanded

threats should prompt anti-nuclear responses by the party. Fourth, incumbent parties are prone to claim success in preventing nuclear conflict, which could weigh in favor of an anti-nuclear posture. These hypotheses are evaluated using the data collected in this project.

## **Research Design**

This research draws data on party positions from the official party platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties. Party platforms are not a perfect measure of party positions. In 1996, Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole famously quipped that he had not even read the Republican Party platform in an attempt to maneuver around a controversial provision opposing abortion (Khim 2012). Yet the fact that a committee of prominent members of a party negotiates carefully over its provisions, a platform reflects a serious effort to summarize the views of the dominant faction of the party – or least compromises over those views. In this vein, platforms are a source of data commonly used by scholars of political parties, even if they do not always exhibit the anticipated causal effects (King and Laver 1993). Despite the flaws in party platforms, this study nevertheless takes the position there is not a better text that encapsulates the positions of prevailing party elites. Indeed, the fragmented and decentralized structure of America’s two dominant parties makes it challenging to determine where a party as whole stands on any given topic (Key 1942; Sorauf 1980).

Platform texts were accessed from *The American Presidency Project* (University of California Santa Barbara 2023). Each party typically produces a distinct platform once every four years. One exception to this rule was in 2020 when the Republican Party adopted its 2016 platform verbatim, rather than negotiate a new platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. Platforms were examined for the 1944 to 2020 electoral cycles. The first year was selected as 1944 because that was one year prior to the use of atomic bombs in Japan during World War 2, thus providing a baseline for the subsequent years. The final year was 2020 because the 2024 platforms are not yet available as of



this writing. The 2016 Republican platform was also used as data for 2020 since repeating the platform was the explicit decision of the party.

Computer-assisted text analysis (Popping 2000) enabled the selection of the paragraphs in the platforms that were most relevant to nuclear weapons. The texts were searched for the following terms: atom, nuclear, disarmament, control, intercontinental, ICBM, missile, weapons of mass destruction, and WMD. In each case where one of these terms was identified, the author read the paragraph in question to determine if it was relevant to nuclear weapons. The procedure meant that computer identification was a necessary but not sufficient condition for selection into the study. For example, a paragraph that addressed only the peaceful uses of nuclear power was not selected into the corpus of texts for further analysis, despite use of the word “nuclear.” Every reference to nuclear weapons was retained in the corpus. A visual review of all platforms by the author suggested that the automated search identified all sections relevant to the study.

If nuclear weapons were referenced at least once in a paragraph, then the entire paragraph was retained in the corpus. Search of the Democratic Party platforms pinpointed paragraphs amounting to approximately 15,000 words, which is about 4 percent of the entirety of Democratic Party platforms over the period. Search of the Republican Party platforms detected paragraphs amounting to approximately 16,300 words, which is similarly about 4 percent of Republican Party platforms.

After compiling the entire corpus of texts, the author read each paragraph and coded it for references to nuclear weapons. The a priori categories were set as Pro-Nuclear, Anti-Nuclear, and Neutral. Upon reading the materials, subcategories were derived, which are reported in Table 1. Each paragraph was coded into at least one category, with multiple categories used if appropriate. Contradictory codes were possible. For example, a single paragraph could be counted as both Pro-Nuclear Defense and Anti-Nuclear Defense. Such codings reflected the fact that the platforms encapsulated the multiple considerations of nuclear weapons policy, some of which were in tension with one another. While the majority of paragraphs were coded into only one category, some

paragraphs were coded into a maximum (for both the Democratic and Republican platforms) of three categories. The maximum was set by observation rather than design; a paragraph could have been coded into four or five (or more) categories had that been the determination of the coder.

**Table 1. Categories for Content Analysis of Party Platforms**

<b>Pro-Nuclear</b>	<b>Anti-Nuclear</b>	<b>Neutral</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrate Nuclear Weapons</li> <li>• Pro-Nuclear Defense</li> <li>• Opponents Weak on Defense</li> <li>• Anti-Arms Control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrate Anti-Nuclear Achievement</li> <li>• Pro-Arms Control</li> <li>• Opponents Weak on Arms Control</li> <li>• Anti-Proliferation</li> <li>• Opponents Weak on Proliferation</li> <li>• Anti-Nuclear Defense</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nuclear Risks High</li> <li>• Nuclear Proliferation is a Risk</li> <li>• Acknowledge Nuclear Weapons</li> </ul>

Source: Author’s coding framework

Intercoder reliability (ICR) analysis is an essential part of content analysis for studies such as this one (Krippendorff 2019). ICR ensures that the coding system is clear enough to be replicated confidently. It further guards against the possibility that a particular coder departs unreasonably from the coding plan. While ICR has not yet been implemented for this project, this procedure will be carried out before the paper is finalized.

The second vital element of data required for this study is a measure of anti-nuclear protest activity. Given the timeframe under consideration (1944-2020), newspapers are the only potential source of data that could cover the entire period. Contemporary studies are able to make use of online searches and crowdsourcing (Fisher et al. 2019; Heaney 2020a), but these approaches are unreliable (if not entirely invalid) for events from the twentieth century. *The New York Times* is widely viewed as the nation’s “newspaper of record,” offering national media coverage with greater consistency than other sources (Martin and Hansen 1998, p. 7). Although substantial resources have been invested in digitizing this resource, research has identified errors and incompleteness in the digital archives (Ringel 2023). Beyond these technical errors, editorial biases infect the *Times*, as well as all other newspaper coverage (Zelizer, Park, and Gudelunas 2002).

While recognizing the flaws inherent in newspaper data, major studies of social movements have turned to newspapers for historical evidence. In their treatise on twentieth century social movements, Edwin Amenta and Neal Caren (2022; see also Heaney 2020b) relied on four newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. The current draft of this paper relies entirely on *The New York Times*. Future drafts of this paper will also analyze data from other newspapers.

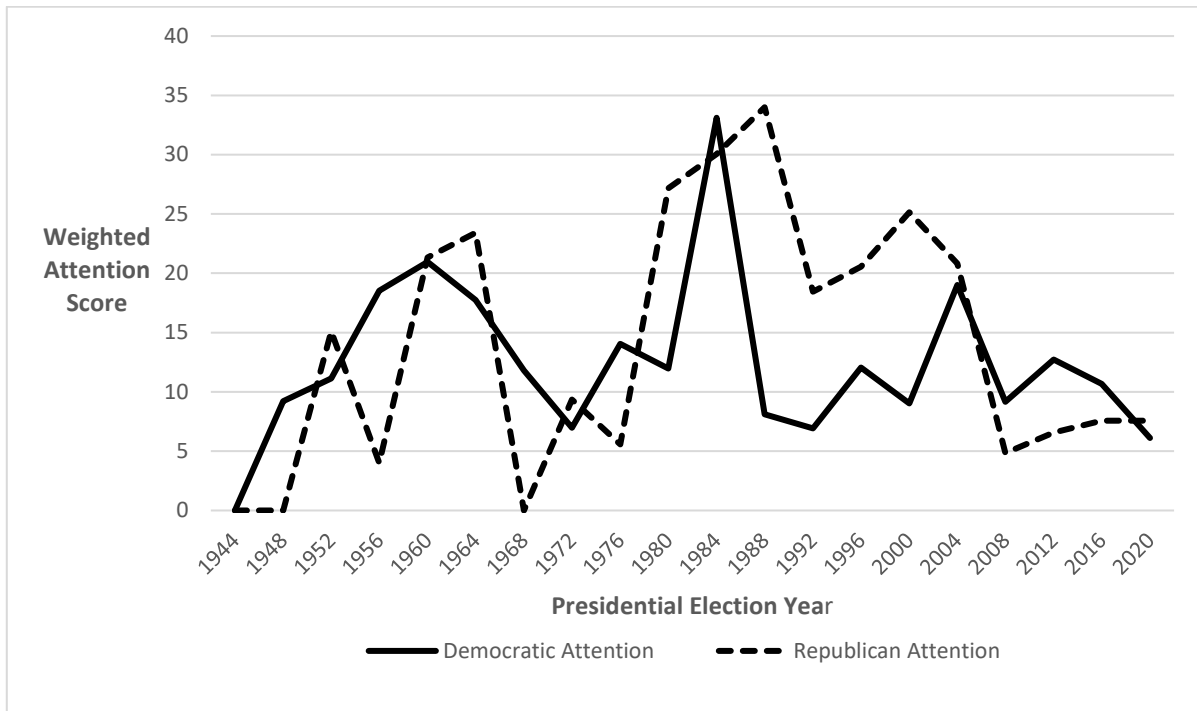
This research searched the *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times* (ProQuest 2023) database to determine the number of articles per year that referred to anti-nuclear protest. The specific search term was (“Anti-nuclear” or “Antinuclear” or “ban the bomb”) and (“protest” or “demonstration” or “march”).” The database was also searched for the use of the word “the” (i.e., a count of all articles) in order to create weights for the variation in the number of articles in the database each year.

### **Trends in Party Positions and Protests**

This section reviews trends in party positions on nuclear weapons and trends in anti-nuclear protests based on party platforms and media coverage. It begins with overall attention to nuclear weapons by the parties, followed by evolution in their positions. Next, attention is devoted in arms control and proliferation as sub-areas of the nuclear weapons policy. Finally, the trajectory of protests is examined.

The Democratic and Republican parties have fluctuated in how much attention they have given to nuclear weapons. Figure 1 reports the total amount of attention given nuclear weapons as indicated by the sum of all codes used on Table 1. These sums can be interpreted as a total number of considerations given to nuclear weapons. The sums in the table are weighted according to the length of the party’s platform that year in words. Thus, in years when the party’s platform was shorter, the sum was upweighted proportionately, and it was downweighted proportionately in years with longer platforms.

**Figure 1. Attention to Nuclear Weapons by Party**



*Source:* Author coding of party platforms from University of California Santa Barbara (2023).

Figure 1 indicates zero attention to nuclear weapons in 1944, the year before they were invented. The Democrats immediately referenced atomic weapons in their 1948 platform, having been responsible for the development during the presidential administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. By 1952, Republicans had joined the debate on nuclear weapons, encouraged by the Soviet Union's first test of a nuclear device in 1949. Party attention to nuclear weapons was at a relative peak in the early 1960s with the deepening of the Cold War and the surprise of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1963. The parties' interest in nuclear weapons dropped again in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

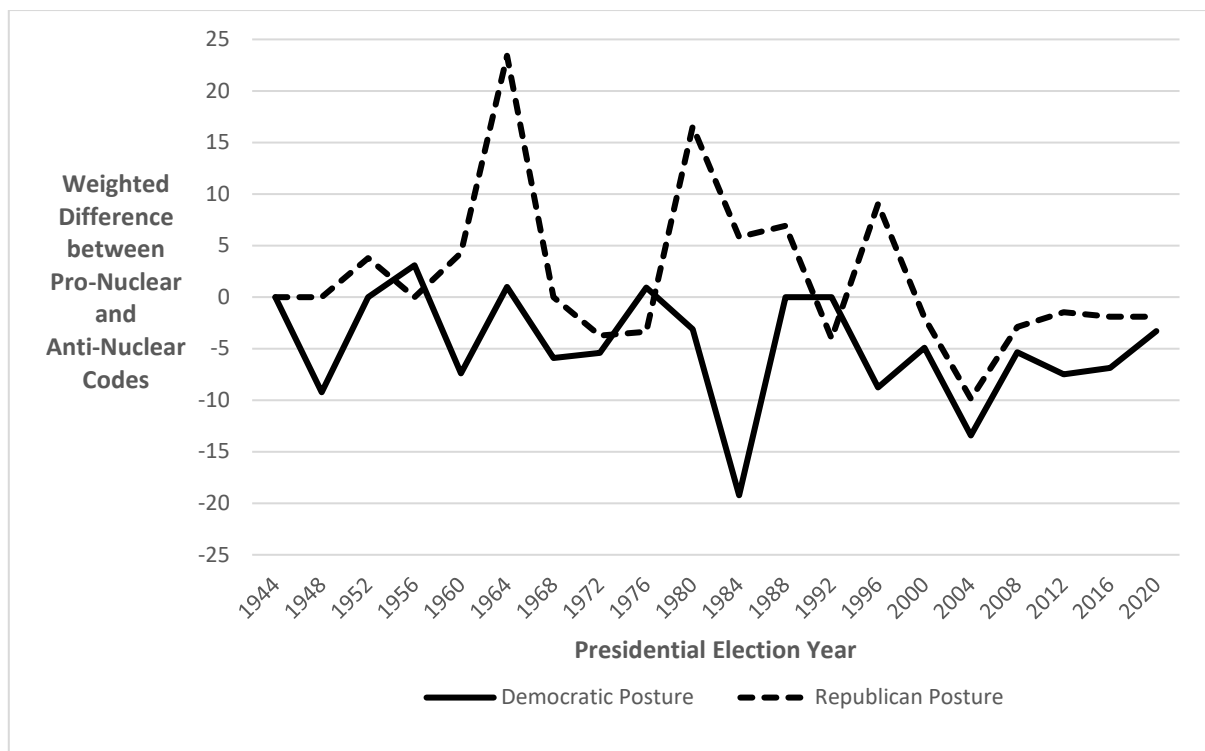
The Nuclear Freeze campaign of the late 1970s and 1980s occurred in tandem with a substantial jump in party platform discussions of nuclear weapons. The Republicans, in particular, devoted considerable energy to the nuclear issue in their 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992 platforms. Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush used the issue to bolster their presidential candidacies. The Democrats invested in the nuclear issue in 1984 with the presidential candidacy of Walter Mondale.

But having experienced overwhelming defeat in the 1984 election, Democrats appear to have ceded the issue to the Republicans for the remainder of the 1980s and 1990s.

The collapse of the Iron Curtain over Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was widely considered the “end” of the Cold War. These events aligned with less attention to nuclear weapons, especially among Democrats. Concerns about proliferation and weapons of mass destruction – particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States – were reflected by an upturn in platform discussions of nuclear weapons. Both parties appear to have been relatively attentive to the issue since 2004. The difference between the attention levels of the parties is not statistically significant, with  $t = 0.56$ ,  $p \leq 0.58$ .

Differences between the parties are more apparent once their positions are taken into account. The positions of the parties were determined by subtracting the number of Anti-Nuclear codes from the number of Pro-Nuclear codes. Neutral codes were not included in this calculation. The results are graphed in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Posture on Nuclear Weapons by Party**



Source: Author coding of party platforms from University of California Santa Barbara (2023).

The overall time series places the Republicans in a comparatively pro-nuclear posture and the Democrats in a comparatively anti-nuclear posture. The difference between the series is statistically significant, with  $t = 3.20$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ . There were a few years (1956, 1976, and 1992) in which the Democratic platform was slightly more pro-nuclear than the Republican platform, though they were relatively close in absolute terms.

The parties diverged in their nuclear postures substantially in 1964, 1980, 1984, and 1996. The Democrats took an effectively neutral nuclear posture in 1964 with the presidential candidacy of Lyndon Johnson. However, the Republicans articulated a historically hawkish position that year, along with the nomination of Barry Goldwater. This was the year in which Democrats launched the Daisy attack ad, implying that a Goldwater presidency would result in nuclear apocalypse (Jacobs 2006; LBJ Library 2012).

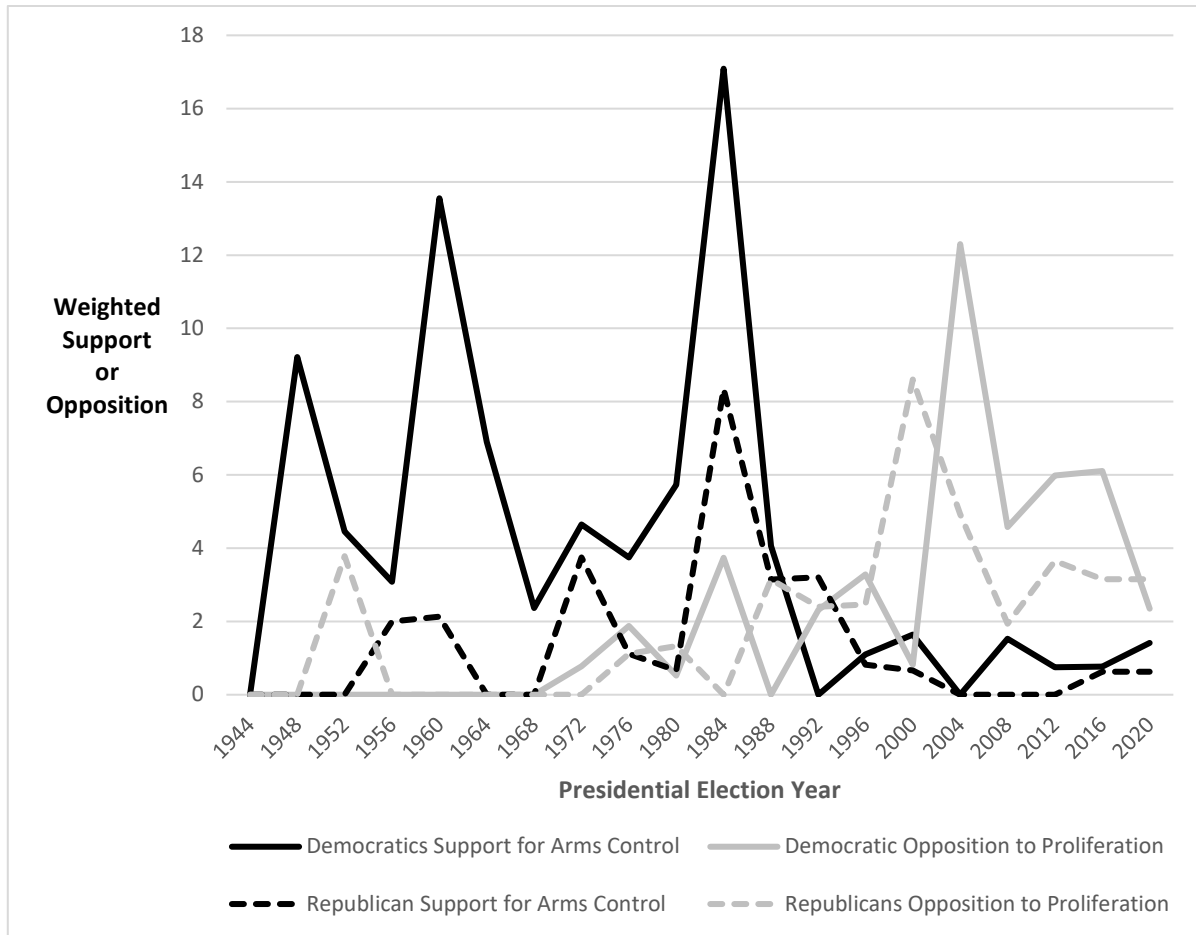
The Reagan candidacies in 1980 and 1984 matched with considerable partisan gaps. While the Democrats continued their approximately neutral posture in 1980, the Republicans pushed an aggressively pro-nuclear agenda, chastising Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter as weak in this area. The Republicans moderated their (still pro-nuclear) stance somewhat in 1984, but the Democrats plunged sharply in the anti-nuclear direction, which was followed by Democratic nominee Walter Mondale's crushing defeat.

A gap between the parties opened up again in 1996 when the Republicans nominated Bob Dole for the presidency. His predecessor, George H. W. Bush, ran along with a neutral platform that claimed credit for ending the nuclear dangers that were associated with the Cold War. Since then, both Democrats and Republicans have sustained a more neutral/negative nuclear posture. Part of the reason for this trend is a shift in the nuclear discussion from arms control to proliferation. Both parties are against proliferation, which is coded in the Anti-Nuclear category, thus yielding an anti-nuclear trend.

Given the discursive shift after the Cold War, it is informative to disaggregate the data to consider some of the sub-categories from which the summary measure is extracted. In particular,

Figure 3 charts the positions of both parties on arms control and proliferation. These issues are both Anti-Nuclear categories, so Figure 3 considers only one side of the debate.

**Figure 3. Party Support for Arms Control and Opposition to Proliferation**



Source: Author coding of party platforms from University of California Santa Barbara (2023).

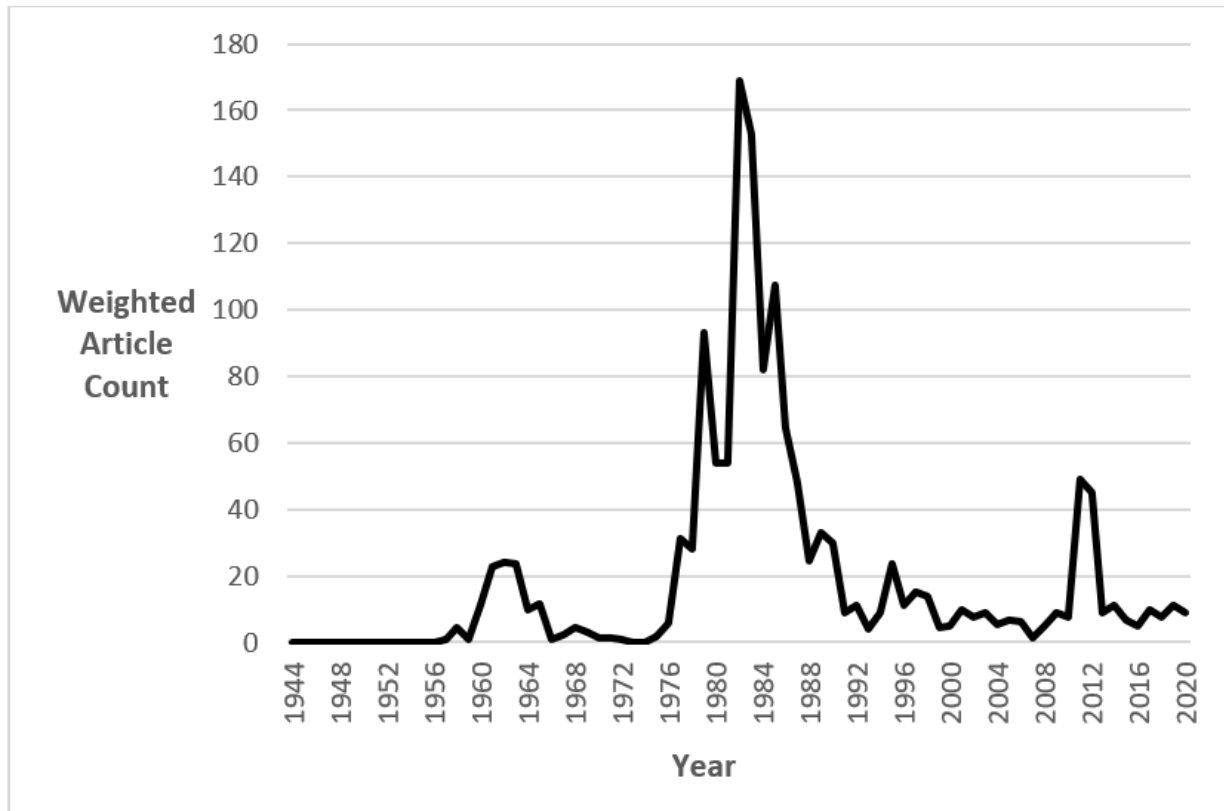
The black lines in Figure 3 represent support for arms control, while the gray lines indicate opposition to proliferation. Arms control here refers to international agreements in which the United States would agree to limit its possession or use of nuclear arms in exchange for mutual guarantees by other countries. Proliferation refers to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states or nonstate actors that do not already possess them. The figure reveals that Democrats persistently articulated support for arms control from 1948 to 1988. Republicans also gave some credence to arms control from 1956 to 1992, with 1984 being their most vocal year on this point. However, the parties

neglected to mention much support for arms control after 1992. It is not that they necessarily came out *against* arms control as much as they allowed the issue to fall from the agenda.

In contrast, proliferation was a relatively low-level concern for both parties until 1984, at which time it assumed somewhat elevated importance. By 1996, however, proliferation became the principal nuclear weapons issue. These days, when the parties mention nuclear weapons, they are mostly concentrating on stopping proliferation.

Having considered the parties' positions, the analysis now turns to the prevalence of anti-nuclear protest. Figure 4 contains an annual measure of *New York Times* coverage of anti-nuclear protests. The count of articles on this topic per year is weighted based on the total number of *Times* articles in the database for that year. The number of articles exposes not only the number of protests but also the broader significance of protests, with some events receiving more coverage than others. Note that it is possible for "protest" here to refer events other than traditional street

**Figure 4. *New York Times* Articles on Anti-Nuclear Protest**



Source: Authors searches using ProQuest (2023).



protests. For example, a statement such as “the president protested the Soviet deployment of nuclear weapons” would be captured in this search. A future draft of this paper will cull the data to eliminate count of these undesired mentions.

Figure 4 suggests that there were approximately three comparatively significant periods of protest activity. First, 1958 to 1965 was the era of the “Ban the Bomb” protests. For example, Deborah Nagin and Gale Packer held a “Ban the Bomb” sit-in at an intersection in New York’s Times Square on March 3, 1961; they were convicted of blocking traffic and given a sentence of three months probation (Benjamin 1962). On a larger scale, thousands of demonstrators took part in Easter anti-nuclear protests in April 1962 in cities such as New York, Palm Beach, Philadelphia, and Chicago (Staff 1962).

The largest spike in Figure 4 encompasses roughly the period 1977 to 1990, which was the era of the Nuclear Freeze campaign. The peak of this campaign was a rally held in New York City on June 12, 1982 when hundreds of thousands of people (or more) turned out to advocate nuclear disarmament (Montgomery 1982). While massive demonstrations may have been the most memorable aspect of the Nuclear Freeze, it is advisable to also note that this was a sophisticated movement with an extensive repertoire that was tied to party networks, Congress, and administration officials (Meyer 1990).

The final notable spike in the pattern of protest coverage occurred in 2011 and 2012. No one issue accounts for this upturn, but there were several relevant issues that drew media coverage that emerged around this time. First, the 2011 Arab Spring protests connected with issues of nuclear proliferation, such as Libya’s quest for nuclear weapons (Cowell 2011). Second, the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011 and 2012 targeted nuclear weapons as one part of its extensive critique of American government (Gitlin 2012; Roose 2011). Third, scattered stunts by anti-nuclear activists, such as a break-in at a nuclear weapons facility, drew the eye of the media (Wald and Broad 2012). Overall, 2011-2012 was an intense period of protest which swept up anti-nuclear protest to a greater-than-typical degree.

## Statistical Analysis

Having reviewed the key data collected for this study, the question now arises as to whether the data support the hypotheses discussed above. To do so, the paper reports three sets of regression models. The first set specifies party platform positions as a function of protest. The second set reverses the first specification to estimate protest as a function of party platforms. The third set more narrowly examines party positions on arms control and proliferation – rather than the entire nuclear discourse – as a function of protest,

In the first set of models, the dependent variable is party posture on nuclear weapons as is reported above in Figure 2. In Model 1.1, the independent variables are media attention to anti-nuclear protests in the previous year ( $t-1$ , the year before the election), whether the platform is for the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, a subjective/expert measure of the overall danger of nuclear weapons at a particular point in time (*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 2024), and whether the platform is for the incumbent party or the challenging party. In Model 1.2, an interaction term is introduced between protests and party. This model can be estimated using Ordinary Least Squares with panel-corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995) to accommodate the presence of both time dependence (20 elections) and panel dependence (2 parties).

Estimates of Models 1.1 and 1.2 are reported in Table 2. In Model 1.1, the coefficient on the Democratic Party is negative and statistically significant. This result implies that Democratic Party platforms were more anti-nuclear in orientation than were Republican Party platforms, which is identical to the inference drawn above from Figure 2. The other independent variables do not enter the model as statistically significant. Thus, the model does not indicate a direct association between protest, nuclear danger, or incumbency and platforms. However, the results change substantially when a protest-party interaction term is introduced in Model 1.2. The negative coefficient on the Democratic Party remains negative and statistically significant. The hypothesized interaction is negative and statistically significant, demonstrating that protests are associated with more negative anti-nuclear stances when the platform is Democratic than when it is Republican. The direct

association of protests and platforms becomes positive and significant in this model. Incumbency further enters this model as negative and statistically significant, implying that parties lean in the anti-nuclear direction when they hold the presidency. The coefficient on the subjective/expert estimate of the present danger of nuclear weapons remains insignificant.

**Table 2. Models of Party Postures on Nuclear Weapons**

<b>Independent Variable</b>	<b>Model 1.1</b> Coefficient (Standard Error)	<b>Model 1.2</b>	<b>Descriptive Statistics</b> Mean (Standard Deviation)
<i>Protest coverage, t-1</i>	0.013 (0.029)	0.091 * (0.036)	21.863 (38.272)
<i>Democratic Party=1</i>	-6.704 * (1.774)	-3.285 * (1.370)	0.500 (0.506)
<i>Party X Protest</i>		-0.156 * (0.031)	10.931 (29.239)
<i>Nuclear Danger=1</i>	0.247 (0.274)	0.247 (0.274)	7.7175 (4.042)
<i>Incumbent Party=1</i>	-2.570 (1.775)	-2.825 * (1.187)	0.500 (0.506)
<i>Constant</i>	1.162 (2.786)	-0.421 (2.658)	
N	40	40	
Groups	2	2	
Mean of Dep. Var.	-1.461	-1.461	
Std. Dev. of Dep. Var.	(7.368)	(7.368)	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.263	0.428	
Wald $\chi^2$	17.25 *	63.03 *	

Note: \* p ≤ 0.05. Estimator is Ordinary Least Squares with panel-corrected standard errors.

In the second set of models, the dependent variable is media coverage of protests in the year following the election (t+1). Model 2.1 is estimated with independent variables for the Democratic Party platform, the Republican Party platform, whether the incumbent president is a Republican, and the subjective/expert measure of nuclear danger. Model 2.2 includes the same variables but adds an interaction term between the party platforms. This model can be estimated using Ordinary Least Squares with Newey and West (1987) standard errors to account for time dependence. This regression does not have a panel dimension because there are not separate protest measures for the Democrats and Republicans, as there are for the platforms. There are only 19 observations in these

models because ProQuest historical newspaper coverage is not yet available for 2021; switching to another database for one year only would distort the data to make them incomparable.

Estimates of Models 2.1 and 2.2 are reported in Table 3. Model 2.1 shows that the Republican Party position on nuclear weapons is positively associated with protests in the following year, implying that protests received more attention in years after a more pro-nuclear Republican platform. The opposite is true with respect to the Democratic Party platform. Pro-nuclear positions by Democrats are associated with lower levels of media attention to protest in the following year. Protest coverage is, in general, higher when there is a Republican incumbent. The subjective/expert measure of nuclear danger is not associated with attention to anti-nuclear protests. Model 2.2 adds an interaction term between the party's anti-nuclear positions in their platforms. The coefficient on this interaction is negative and statistically significant. This coefficient indicates that the polarization of the parties is associated with a dampening of protest when all other variables are held constant in

**Table 3. Models of Anti-Nuclear Protest Coverage**

Independent Variable	Model 2.1 Coefficient (Standard Error)	Model 2.2 Coefficient (Standard Error)	Descriptive Statistics Mean (Standard Deviation)
<i>Republican posture</i>	2.148 * (0.727)	1.382 * (0.442)	1.936 (7.622)
<i>Democratic posture</i>	--2.477 * (1.063)	--1.973 * (0.747)	--4.768 (5.446)
<i>Party X Posture</i>		--0.223 * (0.073)	--2.344 (46.782_
<i>Republican Incumbent=1</i>	22.942 * (8.423)	22.229 * (7.272)	0.500 (0.513)
<i>Nuclear Danger=1</i>	--1.400 (0.875)	--1.309 (7.272)	7.175 (4.095)
<i>Constant</i>	0.200 (7.175)	3.794 (7.442)	
N	19	19	
Groups	1	1	
Mean of Dep. Var.	17.211	17.211	
Std. Dev. of Dep. Var.	(26.067)	(26.067)	
F	3.27 *	6.00 *	
F degrees of freedom	4, 14	5, 13	

Note: \* p ≤ 0.05. Estimator is Ordinary Least Squares with Newey-West standard errors.

the model. It also suggests that the protests are linked to the platforms jointly, rather than independently.

In the third set of models, the dependent variables are party support for arms control and opposition to proliferation, as reported in Figure 3. Models 3.1 and 3.2 examine arms control, while Models 3.3 and 3.4 examine proliferation. The independent variable specifications of Models 3.1 and 3.3 are identical to Models 2.1, while the specifications of Models 3.2 and 3.4 are identical to Model 2.2. Ordinary Least Squares with panel-corrected standard errors is the statistical estimator.

The estimates of Models 3.1 through 3.4 are reported in Table 4. Model 3.1 reveals significant, positive associations between protest coverage, Democratic platforms, and support for arms control. Incumbency and nuclear risk are not significant. Model 3.2 yields the same results as Model 3.1, with no support for the presence of an interaction effect. In contrast, Models 3.3 and 3.4 do not display significant coefficients for the parameters of any of the independent variables. Thus,

**Table 4. Models of Party Support for Arms Control and Opposition to Proliferation**

<b>Independent Variable</b>	<b>Model 3.1</b>	<b>Model 3.2</b>	<b>Model 3.3</b>	<b>Model 3.4</b>
	<i>Arms Control</i> Coefficient (Standard Error)		<i>Opposition to Proliferation</i> Coefficient (Standard Error)	
<i>Protest coverage, t-1</i>	0.049 *	0.033 *	--0.000	--0.007
	(0.014)	(0.009)	(0.013)	(0.013)
<i>Democratic Party=1</i>	2.747 *	2.078 *	0.249	--0.048
	(0.811)	(0.888)	(0.634)	(0.721)
<i>Party X Protest</i>		0.031		0.014
		(0.020)		(0.017)
<i>Nuclear Danger=1</i>	--0.006	--0.006	--0.050	--0.500
	(0.131)	(0.131)	(0.124)	(0.125)
<i>Incumbent Party=1</i>	0.317	0.317	--0.875	--0.853
	(0.769)	(0.769)	(0.634)	(0.624)
<i>Constant</i>	0.510	0.510	2.788 *	2.924 *
	(1.138)	(1.138)	(1.149)	(1.144)
N	40	40	40	40
Groups	2	2	2	2
Mean of Dep. Var.	2.728	2.108		
Std. Dev. of Dep. Var.	(3.776)	(2.692)		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.407	0.407	0.035	0.044
Wald $\chi^2$	30.39 *	30.39 *	2.20	3.02

Note: \* p ≤ 0.05. Estimator is Ordinary Least Squares with panel-corrected standard errors.

the evidence does not signal a relationship between protest coverage and opposition to proliferation.

### **What Do the Statistical Results Mean?**

The statistical results are best received as evidence of association between the variables under analysis, rather than causal effects. The most substantial reason for caution is the presence of reciprocal effects between protest coverage and platform positions. The endogeneity of these factors are not fully accounted for in the single-equation models presented here. Thus, it is not clear how much pressure is flowing from protest to parties and how much goes in the reverse direction. The wisest view is to recognize that there appears to be an association between these factors. The ultimate cause of the observations may come from one direction or the other, from both directions, or from other considerations that are not modeled explicitly.

Proceeding with all appropriate caution, there are still lessons to be drawn from these results. First, the evidence signals that there is not a direct association from past protest coverage to future party platforms. Rather, any association that may exist appears to be mediated through parties. It is plausible (though not conclusive) that Democratic Party platforms become more anti-nuclear during times of protest. It is unlikely that the Republican Party moderates its platform to be more anti-nuclear because of protests. If anything, it is plausible (but definitely not conclusive) that they are emboldened to lean in a more pro-nuclear direction by when anti-nuclear protests are in the news.

Second, the results are consistent with the idea that protests are determined to challenge Republicans in general, and pro-nuclear Republican platforms in particular. In fact, there are indications that protests may be less critically responsive to Democrats. More pro-nuclear Democratic platforms are associated with lower levels of protest coverage in the following year. Of course, Democrats are comparatively anti-nuclear when compared to Republicans. Thus, protesters may view Democrats as their allies in a broad sense without worrying about every platform point.

Indeed, the significance of the interaction effect in Model 2.2 is consistent with the idea that protests react *jointly* rather than independently to the platforms.

Third, the shift of nuclear discourse to proliferation has not been to the advantage of the anti-nuclear movement. While there is an association between arms control and protest coverage, there is no such association with attention to proliferation. Reiterating the above concerns, it would be a mistake to infer that proliferation discourses are somehow causally associated with declining protests. But it is still true that proliferation discourses are not strongly associated with a growing anti-nuclear movement.

Fourth, there could be multiple reasons for the lack of association between the subjective/expert measure of nuclear danger and party postures. One possibility is that the measure is simply not very good. It is produced by an advocacy group with an incentive to motivate mobilization. A second possibility is that political actors are not highly sensitive to variations in perceived nuclear dangers. Because nuclear weapons have not been used against an enemy since 1945, the chances that they are to be used again may be perceived as too remote to weigh systematically. A third possibility is that since the timing of changes in nuclear dangers does not occur on a timeframe aligned with the electoral cycle, any causal effects may evaporate before the party writes its platform. For example, the Cold War ended early in George H. W. Bush's term as president. By the time he was up for reelection, economic recession was a more salient issue.

### **Lessons for Peace Advocates**

Peace advocates may be able to draw lessons about activism from this analysis. Three areas that are especially worthy of attention are the issue evolution of nuclear weapons, the challenges of the Republican Party, and the Janus-faced nature of the Democratic Party.

#### *Arms Control versus Nonproliferation*

A clear lesson from this research is that the anti-nuclear movement was mobilizing to a greater extent when the nuclear discourse was focused on arms control than after it shifted to

proliferation. Hence, it would be valuable to learn more about the reasons behind this difference. There are general types of explanations. The first is historical coincidence. The anti-nuclear movement just happened to hit its apex when the debate was about arms control. The second is the nature of the issue. There is something about arms control that makes it more amenable to mobilization than is the case for proliferation. The third is the strategies of the movement. The movement's approach to arms control was comparatively smart and effective. Chances are that there is some element of truth in each of these possibilities.

Arms control as an issue had some desirable features from a mobilization perspective that may not be as present in proliferation. One, arms control debates were largely about creating mutually agreed limitations between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this situation, a typical citizen can apply a rational actor perspective, imagining that the leaders of two countries are able to meet one-on-one to hammer out an agreement. Two, the United States would be a critical decision maker in any agreement. Thus, citizens could demand that *their* leaders act to avert catastrophe. Three, war between the United States and the Soviet Union was prospectively a total war that could have involved an end to the habitability of the Earth. Fourth, the "nuclear freeze" was a relatively straightforward idea that held the promise of success and effectiveness. Five, clear partisan cues were present, with Democrats more-or-less supporting arms control and Republicans expressing greater skepticism. These elements were drawn together by skillful movement leaders to energize a movement.

Proliferation, on the other hand, offers a less clear case for mobilization. One, opposition to proliferation seeks to prevent non-nuclear nations from acquiring weapons; it is more about coercion than mutual agreement (though carrots can also be introduced, in addition to sticks). Two, the pivotal decision maker in such a situation is, thus, necessarily another country – the potential proliferator. In this situation, US citizens cannot constructively pressure North Korea, for example, to end its nuclear program. Any protest to this end within the United States would seem to be misdirected. Three, proliferation presents a less obvious case for the total destruction of life on



Earth than a war between the superpowers. A nuclear attack by North Korea would be very unfortunate, but probably not the end of it all. Four, there is not a clear, easy-to-understand proposal for how to deal with this problem. What agreement could possibly prevent every rogue nation and terrorist group from seizing a nuclear weapon if it was within its reach? Five, the Democratic and Republican parties have converged on opposing proliferation at a time when the parties are otherwise divided on innumerable other issues. These elements do not readily line up into a viable case for mobilization.

What would be the best direction for the anti-nuclear movement in light of these considerations? A first approach would be to try to revive arms control as a salient issue. A case could be made that current stockpiles of nuclear weapons are still dangerously large. If the wrong people gained power in the United States or Russia, total nuclear war could be launched. It would require large investments of resources to sway public opinion on such an issue. But it also seems within the realm of possibility.

A second approach would be to aim for significant reframing of proliferation as an issue. The development of a clever proposal for how to prevent proliferation could generate greater interest among grassroots activists. Even though Democrats and Republicans both oppose proliferation, a case could be made that the Republican approach is too hawkish and, thus, too dangerous. A successful campaign would require raising the perceived risks of proliferation while presenting a convincing policy solution. This strategy might not require as large a shift in public opinion and, therefore, could possibly be achieved with lower resource investment. Yet success would also require considerable creativity in order to transform public views on proliferation.

Any actual anti-nuclear campaign need not necessarily choose between arms control and proliferation, instead adopting a mixed approach. Nevertheless, the research in this project recommends cognizance of differences between these issues and how they have historically corresponded with anti-nuclear mobilizations.

### *How Should the Republican Party Be Approached?*

The Republican Party has not historically been a friend of the anti-nuclear movement. At times, it has resorted to an aggressive pro-nuclear posture to advance its electoral and policy goals. It has shown little, if any, sympathy for anti-nuclear protests. Anti-nuclear protests may possibly even embolden a hawkish pro-nuclear posture by Republicans.

Advocates may be inclined to note the Republican record and choose not to engage with the party. The high likelihood that the Republicans will nominate Donald Trump as their standard bearer in 2024 does not inspire confidence that the party is inclined to undertake a mission of peace. But the stakes are too high to walk away from the Republican Party, as it is one of the two major parties in the United States. America cannot be governed without the Republicans. Therefore, investment in transforming the Republican Party's stance on nuclear weapons may be crucial for peace.

The evidence at hand suggests that Republicans are not likely to change in desired ways as a result of anti-nuclear protests. The party is generally not amenable to this kind of pressure. But it is receptive to *ideological* arguments. If pro-market oriented anti-nuclear think tanks, for example, could gain a foothold in Republican circles, they could conceivably be an impetus for an anti-nuclear shift. If the argument could be advanced that nuclear weapons are not good for business and the economy, it is possible that some Republicans would listen. In any case, it is not wise to neglect the Republican Party entirely when the Democrats are not completely reliable, as is considered next.

### *Can the Anti-Nuclear Movement Count on the Democratic Party?*

If the anti-nuclear movement has an ally between the two major parties, it is the Democrats. Democratic Party platforms have consistently advanced neutral-to-anti-nuclear positions (after having been responsible for the only use of nuclear weapons against civilians in world history). The Democrats appear to have responded sympathetically to anti-nuclear protests in the past. Indeed, the 1984 Democratic Party platform was the most unabashedly anti-nuclear platform ever approved by a major party. Nevertheless, it may not be possible to trust Democrats to be robust nuclear

opponents. Democrats may not be as strongly opposed to nuclear weapons as they might be, simply because they are perceived as being better than the Republicans.

As a political party, the Democratic Party's first order of business is winning elections. If opposing nuclear weapons is electorally advantageous, then Democrats may espouse these views in election campaigns. But, in the event that they win the presidency, any Democratic president is likely to express military power (including threats of nuclear strikes) in a manner most likely to augment their power and continued electability. What is most advisable for nuclear opponents in these circumstances?

First, Democrats appear to be receptive to anti-nuclear protests. Thus, staging such protests is likely to lead to entrée within the party. Anti-nuclear activists can find a comfortable position within the party. They are viable candidates for important elected offices, possibility as high as the presidency itself. Persistence in protest does not seem to hurt acceptance among Democrats.

Second, receptiveness should not be confused with reliability or serve as a basis of trust. The Democrats are a party of groups. Peace activists are welcome – but so are many other groups. One day, the party may fight for peace, but the next day it may turn to immigration or health care as a more pressing cause, as it did once Barack Obama ascended to the presidency (Heaney and Rojas 2015). To be influential within the party requires eternal vigilance. Protest. Run for office. Give money. Do so when the Democrats are out of power *and* when they are in power. Only a constant flow of these pressures is likely to keep the Democrats on board with a peace agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Nuclear weapons are an inherently catastrophic technology. The detonation of a single nuclear device could lead to hundreds of thousands of deaths and many more injuries and illnesses, as well as environmental contamination. A wider nuclear exchange could have irreversible consequences. Policies to secure nuclear weapons are vital. But there is no way to guarantee that all nuclear

materials are in responsible hands. Warfare, accidents, and malfeasance are all serious risks. The proverbial nuclear genie cannot be forced back in the bottle.

The struggle against nuclear weapons requires people to place the survival of humanity above their own state's interests. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine altruistically transferred the nuclear weapons in its possession to Russia for safekeeping. Yet, two decades later, Ukraine finds its existence in peril as a result of Russian military invasions. Given this reality, many nations may decide that proliferating is the only way to guarantee their territorial integrity. Any effective anti-nuclear campaign must imagine new institutions and safeguards that smaller nations can count on.

More than anything, efficacy for the anti-nuclear movement demands imagination and creativity. Re-staging the 1980s – if it were even possible – might feel good. But even millions of people marching is unlikely to be enough to convince the United States the rest of the world to bring sanity to nuclear policy. New tactics, networks, organizations, proposals, frames, alliances, and ideologies are all needed.

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