CALLING ALL ACTIVISTS TO THE CAPITOL: THE CASE OF CORI BUSH'S ADVOCACY FOR AN EVICTION MORATORIUM EXTENSION

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Calling All Activists to the Capitol: The Case of Cori Bush's Advocacy for an Eviction Moratorium Extension

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Article Information	Abstract
	The role of elected officials as focal points of activism is well understood. However, activism by politicians is underexplored. Drawing on the collective action framing literature and the protest paradigm, this study examines the strategic messaging employed by elected officials in their efforts to rally media attention and act as oppositional publics able to influence other citizens to action. Centered on the case of a congresswoman, Cori Bush, who mobilized support for an eviction moratorium during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study reveals patterns of strategic messaging used to mobilize key publics in support of the moratorium and highlights the potential use of activism to elevate elected officials' public profile. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Introduction

On July 30, 2021, as a temporary national eviction moratorium issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to curb the spread of the coronavirus was ending and with no extension of the moratorium in sight, Cori Bush, a representative for Missouri's 1st

congressional district and member of "The Squad," a group of eight progressive democratic lawmakers, posted on X (formerly Twitter)[1]:

> "The eviction moratorium expires tomorrow. I've lived in my car. I know what it's like not to know where I can use the bathroom, or where I can sleep safely. We have the opportunity to keep millions of people in their homes. That's a policy choice we must make." (Bush, 2021c)

As the U.S. House of Representatives entered a recess without voting to extend the moratorium (Haroun et al., 2021), Rep. Bush began to protest by sleeping on the Capitol steps. She called for others to join the protest, while sharing updates with her followers via X and Facebook Live, even hosting media interviews from the Capitol steps. A few days later, on August 4, the CDC issued a new 60-day eviction moratorium for areas experiencing high levels of COVID-19 infections. Although some criticized the extension as unconstitutional, others viewed it as a win for the congresswoman and an attestation to the power of advocacy (e.g., Fandos, 2021).

Activism can be used as a powerful tool to draw attention to social problems (Walgrave et al., 2012; Wouters & Lefevere, 2023). Although a growing body of work has explored the use of activism to achieve public interest goals and drive social change (e.g., Thompson, 2016; Williams et al., 2022), little is known about activism as a tool used by political officeholders to influence policy, or how protest by elected officials is covered in the media. The rise of activist lawmakers such as Rep. Bush provides an opportunity to explore their use of activism to advocate for, or shape, policy.

This study addresses two issues. First, it examines how Rep. Bush used a variety of tools including X messaging and statements released over the course of her protest to frame the expiring eviction moratorium and engage with citizens, activists, members of Congress, and the White House. Given that media coverage of protest tends to be negative, caricaturize protesters, and misrepresent their aims (e.g., Boyle et al., 2005, 2012; Di Cicco, 2010; Lee, 2014), this study also compares media coverage of Rep. Bush's protest at the Capitol to other pro-eviction moratorium protests not involving her (i.e., citizen protests) to examine potential differences in reporting.

This specific case was selected due in part to Rep. Bush's use of activism prior to and after being elected (Wilson & Hill, 2023), but also due to the media attention she garnered. While political officeholders such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have used activism as a tool to draw attention to issues ranging from climate change to reproductive rights (Freelander, 2021; Guitar & Studebaker, 2023), these efforts have primarily been one-off appearances to show solidarity with social movements or collectively express dissent with fellow officeholders. In contrast, Rep. Bush's protest was an individual, sustained act of opposition lasting until the eviction moratorium was extended. Findings not only reveal how messaging was strategically used to engage activists and concerned citizens, but also point to a pattern of media coverage of her protest that was generally neutral and, in some cases, positive.

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[1] The data studied pre-date Twitter's sale to Elon Musk and the transition to X.

Literature review

Activism in politics

Considerable scholarly work has examined how political office seekers and politicians utilize public relations and diverse communication strategies to achieve their goals. As expected, much of this research focuses on the use of messaging during electoral campaigns to fuel emotions such as anger and anxiety (e.g., Borah, 2016), influence candidate evaluation (e.g., Kenski et al., 2022), defend against threats to reputation during the electoral campaign process (e.g., Boyle et al, 2023), and persuade the undecided while enhancing turnout among supporters. A substantial portion of this research has also examined political officeholders' efforts to boost public support for their policy positions (e.g., Froehlich & Rudiger, 2006; Schweickart et al., 2016).

Research seldom explores the use of activist tactics by elected officeholders, possibly because politicians and activists are often seen as playing distinct and opposite roles, embodying different values and occupying separate worlds. For instance, Kerrey (2016) notes that where politicians favor compromise and negotiation to formulate policy, "good activists must be uncompromising" and willing to use aggressive or offensive tactics. Moreover, for politicians utilizing activism, the apparent disconnect between their position in institutional politics and their use of noninstitutional, contentious tactics can create unique challenges. Unlike election campaigns where candidates may primarily focus on motivating core supporters to turn out and, to a lesser extent, persuading undecideds, activists seeking broad policy change must establish mutual understanding, collaboration, and engagement with a coalition of diverse but equally passionate publics to achieve their goals (Tattersall, 2017).

Specifically, politicians using activism need to engage with and unite individuals having diverse political persuasions for a common cause, an effort that relies on strategic and careful message framing. Cultivating a sense of cognitive and emotional engagement with such publics through dialogue is essential (Devin & Lane, 2014). Dhanesh (2017) adds that mutual interest in and recognition of issue salience is the cornerstone and an antecedent of such engagement, resulting in commitment to achieve shared goals. For political officeholders seeking to use activism to advance their policy positions, strategically framing the issue is key.

Existing research indicates that activism is at the heart of many efforts to effect social change. For instance, Christiano (2017) identifies activism as one of six spheres of influence through which social change can be executed, while acknowledging that activism functions as part of a broader effort to elicit media attention, grow influence by cultivating communities consisting of relevant stakeholders, and ultimately, influence policy. Although triggering events may help to focus attention on a problematic issue and increase the propensity for action (Ciszek, 2018), strategic communications efforts must build on such triggering events, including by framing of the problematic issue in ways that resonate with stakeholders, to generate collective action and elicit meaningful change (Fessmann, 2017; Napoli, 2009).

Collective action framing and the anti-eviction protests

The way activists or social movement organizations use language to frame their grievances and the causes they consider important can determine success in mobilizing and achieving their goals. Collective action framing is a dynamic process through which activists "engage in the production of meanings and interpretations to be shared with and contrasted by constituents, antagonists, bystanders, and outsiders," and is central to recruitment, expansion of their influence, and attainment of their goals (Benford & Snow, 2000; Vicari, 2010, p. 506). This use of language to frame protest discourse may be combined with any number of tactics including dramatic and staging activities and occupation of symbolic spaces (Doherty & Hayes, 2019).

Central to the process of collective action framing is the ability of activists to frame (or reframe) discourses in ways that legitimize their grievance, portray the status quo as unjust, and proffer specific courses of action to remedy the problem (Snow et al., 1986). Accordingly, research indicates that collective action framing performs core tasks, including problem diagnosis, solution recommendation, and calls to action (Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 2019). With respect to problem diagnosis (i.e., diagnostic framing), activists seek to label certain events or situations as problematic while identifying causal agents, and thus, allocating blame. Prognostic framing involves the suggestion of prospective solutions while motivational framing refers to calls to action as well as articulation of the rationale for the proposed action. In fact, Snow and Benford (1988) note that "[protest] participation is contingent upon the development of motivational frames that function as prods to action" (p. 202).

Vicari (2010) suggests that these core framing tasks (i.e., diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing) address different message components articulated by Gamson (1992), including injustice, agency, and identity. For instance, by drawing a connection between causal agents and identifiable problems, diagnostic framing defines the core issue as one of injustice which should elicit moral outrage. Further, by suggesting prospective solutions, prognostic framing highlights the quality of agency and the potential for victimized individuals to act. And lastly, when making an explicit call to action, motivational frames draw on aspects of group history and identity in justifying recommended actions that "we" must take in opposition to "them," referring to groups with opposing goals. These framing structures reflect messaging strategies to mobilize participants and can be revealed through thematic analysis of the discourses of activists and activist groups (Vicari, 2010, 2023; Xiong et al., 2019).

For housing rights advocates, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, accompanied by widespread shutdowns, loss of employment/income, and the potential for mass evictions, served not only as a focusing event but also as an opportunity to reframe public discourse around homelessness. The expiration of the eviction moratorium and the failure of the House to extend it led to protests by various housing rights activist groups, including a brief but well publicized sleep-in by Rep. Bush to pressure Congress and later, the White House, to act. To examine her strategic use of messaging to advance her anti-eviction protest, the following question will be addressed:

RQ1: How did Rep. Bush frame opposition to the expiration of the eviction moratorium?

The protest paradigm and media coverage of Rep. Bush's protest

The media-activism interaction has been characterized as a "competitive symbiosis" (Wolfsfeld, 1991). The news media rely on activist groups for newsworthy material, while activists are dependent on the media for publicity. However, the relationship is asymmetrical. The media influence how activists and their causes are viewed, and by extension, their ability to achieve their goals (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). More importantly, news media are crucial to social change efforts through their ability to shape perception of issue relevance, contribute to the construction of master narratives, frame issues, and lend credence to (or undermine) social change actors (Christiano, 2017). The emergence of digital media in the past two decades has undeniably empowered social movements to express their grievances directly and more articulately, yet these new media do not nullify the capacity of legacy media outlets to influence public perception through framing (Tarrow, 2022).

One prominent framework for understanding media reporting on social movements is the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984), which reflects a theorized set of routines, guidelines, assumptions, and orientations that guide journalists in reporting social conflict, and ultimately shape media representations of protest. Given the media's tendency to affirm official narratives and support the status quo, in contrast with activists who espouse transformative agendas that may be seen as radical, coverage of protests tends to reflect selection and description biases (McCarthy et al., 1996), resulting in patterns of coverage that delegitimize protesters (Boyle et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2001).

With respect to selection bias, the news media predominantly attend to large-scale, dramatic and/or disruptive protests (e.g., marches and rallies) that generate substantial conflict although these tend to be relatively infrequent, while ignoring small-scale protests using less contentious tactics, although these protests occur more frequently (McCarthy et al., 1996; Oliver & Maney, 2000). Among protests that are selected for coverage, *description bias* refers to media portrayals of protest in ways that emphasize less substantive aspects (e.g., deviant acts, physical appearance of protesters) and privilege official sources and voices over those of protesters, while ignoring core aspects such as the causes of discontent and aims of protesters (Adegbola et al., 2022; Di Cicco, 2010; Lee, 2014; Smith et al., 2001). Taken together, these patterns of coverage not only delegitimize protesters but also present a unique challenge for protesters, who may be caricaturized if aggressive means of protest are used and ignored if nonconfrontational means are used. Protests that use disruptive tactics and displays of deviance by protesters tend to receive greater media attention. However, the same attributes that elicit media attention ensure a predominantly negative pattern of coverage that undermines the substantive goals of protesters and portrays them as a nuisance (Boyle et al., 2004; Boyle et al., 2012). As a result, protesters run the risk of being largely ignored on one hand, or misrepresented, negatively portrayed, and their goals trivialized on the other. While activists no longer have to rely solely on the news

media for mobilization, the news media retain the ability to validate and broaden the scope of social movements, including furthering understanding of their grievances and generating sympathy for their cause.

While research has found considerable support for the protest paradigm, protest coverage depends on a variety of factors. For instance, alternative media outlets tend to be more legitimizing in their coverage of protests compared to mainstream media (e.g., Harlow & Johnson, 2011). Other influences on reporting of protest include media outlets' ideological or partisan slant (e.g., Adegbola et al., 2022; Kananovich, 2022) as well as whether influential individual actors are involved in the protests (e.g., Coombs et al., 2020).

Rep. Bush's protest was unique in various ways. As an elected member of Congress, which possesses policymaking powers, she deviates from the archetypal protester who fights injustice despite being the underdog. Rep. Bush's identity as a member of the "Squad" also arguably positions her as a celebrity, which could shape the perceived relevance and responses to her protest, as indicated by previous literature (e.g., Duvall, 2020; Jain et al., 2024). In fact, while celebrity involvement in social issues can elicit controversial responses, celebrity activism in support of "good causes" or issues considered to be in the public interest, tend to be viewed more broadly positive (Tsaliki, 2016). Perhaps more importantly, while much of the existing work recognizes celebrity activism as a phenomenon that primarily unfolds online through low-effort social media behaviors, Rep. Bush's activism played out in public over the course of several days on the Capitol steps.

Rep. Bush's protest was also unique with its use of noncontentious tactics, relying solely on sleep-ins on the Capitol steps as the form of protest. Further, unlike most protests that feature groups of demonstrators, Rep. Bush was the individual protester and continued to be the focus even after having supporters including Reps. Ayanna Pressley and Ocasio-Cortez join her sleep-in effort. Given the unique attributes of the case, this study not only examines the extent to which media coverage of Rep. Bush's protest adhered to the protest paradigm, but also examines whether the coverage of her protest differed from coverage of other anti-eviction protests held around the same time. Therefore, the following questions were addressed:

RQ2: Did the tone of news reporting in stories featuring Rep. Bush's protest differ from anti-eviction news reports that did not feature her protesting?

RQ3: Did the sources quoted in news stories featuring Rep. Bush's protest differ from those that did not feature the congresswoman?

Methodology

Overview

This study relied on both qualitative analysis of X data, letters and press statements released by the congresswoman, and quantitative analysis of news transcripts on the protest. To address RQ1, which explores Rep. Bush's message framing, the congresswoman's communications during her protest were analyzed. Content posted by Rep. Bush using both her official (i.e., @RepCori) and personal accounts (i.e., @CoriBush) between July 30 and August 4, 2021, were collected for analysis. The former date was selected because it was when the congresswoman first called attention to the expiration of the moratorium and Congress' failure to extend it, and expressed her intention to protest. The CDC under the Biden administration announced an extension of the eviction moratorium on August 4, bringing Rep. Bush's five-day protest at the Capitol to an end.

X was selected partly because it has been described as a kind of "public sphere," but more importantly, because it is the platform on which Rep. Bush has the most followers, compared to platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Moreover, an assessment of Rep. Bush's Facebook posts regarding the eviction moratorium and efforts to mobilize for protest highlight Facebook messaging identical to her X posts. Lastly, her advocacy through press statements and letters to Congress regarding the eviction moratorium was also examined and analyzed separately from her posts.

Given the relatively short timeline examined and the limited data consisting of press statements and content posted during this period, the X posts were retrieved manually from both Rep. Bush's official and personal accounts by reviewing each content posted by the congresswoman during the selected time. This yielded a total of 49 posts across both accounts, of which only 42 were focused on the eviction moratorium and thus included in the analysis. Text-based visuals such as statements and letters to Congress that were posted as images were included for analysis, but not images devoid of text, such as photo-ops with supporters at the Capitol. Further, her official media archives were reviewed and yielded three press statements and a letter to Congress published between July 30 and August 3. These materials were focused on the eviction moratorium and included in the analysis.

The data (posts and press statements) were first analyzed in an exploratory manner using NVivo to examine frequently used words for potential codes. Subsequently, the author analyzed the data (posts and press statements separately) manually using in vivo-coding and descriptive coding to tag, label, and summarize keywords and phrases relevant to the protest. The coding of posts and statements yielded 27 and 13 codes, respectively. Despite slight variations in presentation and emphasis, all 13 of the codes developed from the press statements mirrored codes emerging from the posts. Codes were aggregated to form four broader and more abstract themes. These emergent themes, while distinct in their focus, reflect interrelated messages used by Rep. Bush to cultivate support for her protest.

To answer the remaining research questions, this study examined and compared Rep. Bush's protest to ongoing anti-eviction protests that did not involve the congresswoman. All news published in the United States about protests aimed at extending the eviction moratorium between July 1 and August 30 were collected and analyzed. This period was selected to capture anti-eviction protests that may have occurred prior to, during, and after the expiration of the eviction moratorium, as well as protests that continued demanding a permanent moratorium or "rent freeze" even after the CDC reintroduced a temporary eviction moratorium. News transcripts were accessed from the *Nexis Uni* database using the search terms "Evict* moratorium" AND "protest*" to retrieve reports.

The initial search yielded a total of 486 news manuscripts published in the United States but was reduced to 413 after removing duplicates. Lastly, each news manuscript was assessed to determine inclusion in the study. Unrelated stories and transcripts constituting mere mentions (i.e., mentioning the eviction moratorium in passing, without offering context) were removed, resulting in a final sample of 311. A preliminary assessment of reporting showed that *CNN* published the highest number of articles with 54 transcripts, followed by alternative news services and blogging platforms like *Newstex* and *MarketBeat*, which published 34 stories each. Cable news networks including *Fox News* and *MSNBC* published 21 and 18 stories, respectively, while several others had much fewer manuscripts.

Intercoder reliability

Content analysis was conducted using *A Priori* coding, with the news transcript as the unit of analysis. However, for transcripts discussing multiple topics that dedicated a single paragraph to the protests, the paragraph was used as the unit of analysis. Guided by the existing literature on the protest paradigm, a codebook was developed and used to train an undergraduate researcher to code for relevant content categories. Subsequently, the author and the undergraduate researcher independently read and coded 20 transcripts for *politician-activist involvement, evaluative tone,* and *sources* in accordance with the codebook. This initial effort revealed low intercoder agreement for *evaluative tone* and *source* with Krippendorff's alpha values of .67 and .71, respectively. Areas of disagreement were discussed and used to improve the codebook by further refining the coding categories. A new set of 35 transcripts (i.e., 11% of the sample) was randomly selected and coded using the updated codebook and achieved Krippendorff's reliability values ranging from .80 to 1 for all categories.

Politician-activist involvement was assessed based on whether Rep. Bush's protest was featured (i.e., mentioned) in a news story. Because members of the Squad, including Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley, participated during certain days of the sleep-in, they were also coded as politician-activists alongside Rep. Bush. Therefore, news stories were coded for the presence (1) or absence (2) of Rep. Bush and other politician-activists in anti-eviction protest coverage.

Evaluative tone was assessed by examining the overall slant of news articles on the anti-eviction protests. Following Dunaway (2013), the evaluative tone of news stories was assessed

as (1) positive; (2) negative; or (3) neutral. News stories were coded as positive if they predominantly portrayed the anti-eviction protests in a positive light (e.g., by praising protesters or rendering the protests as valid), while stories were coded as negative if they predominantly focused on negative aspects of the protests. Stories that were primarily fact-based or equally focused on negative and positive aspects of the protests were coded as neutral.

Sources were assessed by examining individuals to whom verbatim statements about the protests were attributed in the news coverage. Coders analyzed news stories to determine absence or presence of sources including (1) politicians involved in the protests, including Rep. Bush; (2) politicians and government officials not involved in the protests; (3) citizens involved in the protests; (4) citizens not involved in the protests; (5) social media/alternative media; and (6) experts/non-governmental organization (NGO); (7) others, to capture sources not previously mentioned; and (8) none, referring to news stories in which no source was cited. Due to low expected counts for various news sources including citizen protesters, citizens not involved in protests, politicians or government officials not involved in the protests, and experts/NGOs, these were recoded into an "other" category. As a result, news stories were categorized as having (1) political protester sources (i.e., politicians involved in the anti-eviction protests); (2) "other" sources including citizen protesters, citizens (non-protesters), experts/NGOs, social/alternative media; and (3) no sources.

Results

RQ1 asked about the messaging used by Rep. Bush to advocate for extending the eviction moratorium and cultivate support for her protest action. The qualitative analysis of posts and statements revealed four themes that reflect messaging strategies used by the congresswoman. These include "reminding and defining," "connecting and broadening dialogue," "personalizing and contrasting," and "calling for action." These interconnected themes also map onto distinct but overlapping phases of her act of protest.

Reminding and defining

"Reminding and defining" reflects efforts by Rep. Bush to call attention to the time until the expiration of the eviction moratorium on July 31 and the number of potential victims of eviction. This theme also reflects efforts to frame the problem, including defining potential evictions as "injustice" and "violence" and the expiration of the eviction moratorium as a "crisis" and "an emergency," and characterizing at-risk tenants as "our neighbors" and the "unhoused," a departure from the more commonly used but value-laden issue of homelessness. This "reminding and defining" effort began before the congresswoman took to the Capitol steps in protest.

For instance, on July 30, before the expiration of the eviction moratorium, Rep. Bush posted that "the eviction moratorium expires tomorrow" or "expires in 36 hours." On July 31, prior to

actively mobilizing for protests, she posted: "We have until midnight to act right now to keep 11 million people in their homes. Extend the moratorium!" (Bush, 2021j). She also described COVID-19 policies, including allowing the eviction moratorium to expire as "policy violence" and contended that extending the moratorium would amount to securing justice. At this time, the congresswoman began to describe the moratorium expiration in the more dire terms of life and death, saying "I know that people will die if we let the eviction moratorium expire" and "we still have time to save lives" (Bush, 2021a).

The shift from "reminding" to "defining" also marks a change in messaging. While reminding efforts were used in the hours leading up to and shortly after the expiration of the moratorium, defining and framing of potential evictions as a "crisis" and "emergency" began after the expiration of the moratorium as Rep. Bush began to seek federal intervention rather than a moratorium extension through Congress. On August 3, she claimed in a statement that "what has become clear is that the quickest way to get this [extended moratorium] done is through the executive branch" (Bush, 2021n), and subsequently began to demand executive action.

Connecting and broadening dialogue

"Connecting and broadening dialogue" refers to the use of the platform's connective affordances (i.e., tagging) to engage with other personalities, include them in the conversation, and thus broaden the dialogue. Specifically, Rep. Bush tagged prominent individuals who had demonstrated support for the protest, using praise and appreciation as tools to engage them. This strategy was unique to her messaging on X.

For instance, she posted on July 31:

> "The House can't extend the eviction moratorium without the Rules Committee. Chairman @RepMcGovern just joined us and announced his full support and that THE RULES COMMITTEE IS WILLING TO RECONVENE immediately to get this done" (Bush, 2021f)

Tagging Bernie Sanders after he joined Rep. Bush and other activists at the Capitol, she posted: "We had no question whether you were on our side @BernieSanders. Thank you for showing up. Our movement will save lives" (Bush, 2021m). Rep. Bush also used blame and shame when including prominent individuals or groups considered to be responsible for the expiration of the eviction moratorium. For instance, on July 31, just hours before the moratorium expiration, she posted:

> "Good morning. The eviction moratorium expires tonight at midnight. We could have extended it yesterday, but some Democrats went on vacation instead. We slept at the Capitol last night to ask them to come back and do their jobs. Today's their last chance." (Bush, 2021g)

These efforts to blame or attribute responsibility for the expiration of the moratorium were primarily aimed at her party as she noted the failure of the "democratic-controlled government"

to take action: "Millions are at risk of being removed from their homes, and a Democratic-controlled government has the power to stop it" (Bush, 2021i).

Lastly, tagging was used to include individuals at whom demands were directed or to seek public commitments toward the extension of the moratorium. For instance, the congresswoman posted:

> "I'm calling on @POTUS to extend the eviction moratorium. I'm calling on @SpeakerPelosi to reconvene the House for a vote. I'm calling on @SenSchumer to extend the eviction moratorium in the Senate. We control the House, Senate, and White House. We must keep people housed." (Bush, 2021h)

On August 2, Rep. Bush also posted:

> "I just had a conversation with @VP Kamala Harris. I needed her to look me in my eyes and I wanted to look in hers when I asked for help to prevent our people from being evicted. Madam Vice President let's work together to get this done. We need a federal eviction moratorium." (Bush, 2021l)

Personalizing and contrasting

"Personalizing and contrasting" reflects Rep. Bush's centering of her personal experience with homelessness in messaging, including characterizing herself as a "formerly unhoused" and "evicted" mother, and thus credible and empathetic, while contrasting herself with others in Congress. While personalizing was evident in press statements, letters to Congress, and posts, contrasting was used only in X messaging. In a letter to Democrats in Congress, she said, "I've been evicted three times myself…", "I know what it's like to be forced to live in my car with my two children…", and "I know firsthand the trauma and devastation that comes with the violence of being evicted" (Bush, 2021b).

The congresswoman also posted, "I've lived in my car. I know what it's like not to know where I can use the bathroom, or where I can sleep safely" (Bush, 2021c). In another instance, she posted that "the *House* is about to go *home* for August," in contrast to those at risk of eviction as the moratorium expires. "Delta variant is surging. I know not all of my colleagues get it, but take it from the formerly unhoused Congresswoman, we need to keep our people housed. We MUST extend the moratorium" (Bush, 2021d). Rep. Bush thus used her experience as a source of authority to make the case for an extension to the eviction moratorium, while contrasting her experience with the inability of many members of Congress to grasp the severity of the issue. "Earlier today, I sent a letter to my colleagues stressing the urgency of extending the eviction moratorium," she posted, adding that "many of them failed to meet this moment" (Bush, 2021e). The congresswoman also described the decision of the House to adjourn without voting on legislation to extend the eviction moratorium as "a moral failure," followed by a call to reconvene and later, to protest at the Capitol.

Calling for action

"Calling for action" refers to specific calls to act and extend the eviction moratorium. These calls were embedded throughout the messaging, beginning with calls to reconvene and address the expiration of the moratorium through legislative means. For instance, Rep. Bush first reached out to members of Congress, urging them to "reconvene to protect people from violent evictions during a deadly pandemic." Subsequently, she posted regarding her colleagues in Congress: "I'm inviting them now to join me in sleeping outside the Capitol in a push to extend the moratorium. It's not too late" (Bush, 2021e). This was followed by posts directed at President Joe Biden, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Shumer, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Finally, calls to action were extended to include potential protesters, as she posted:

> "Tonight, at Midnight. We're rallying for the extension of the eviction moratorium at the steps of the Capitol. If you're in DC, bring a mask, bring your voices, bring your signs.
> We need you here. To my colleagues: I'm asking you to join us, too." (Bush, 2021k)

These calls to join the protest action were accompanied by statements positioning the protest as a growing "movement" even as supporters joined Rep. Bush at the Capitol. For instance, the congresswoman posted updates such as, "It's 1 AM. Our solidarity is strong, and our numbers are growing" or "Our movement is growing. Tag your Rep…we need all hands on deck" (Bush, 2021i), while mentioning and tagging other politicians and activists who expressed support.

Most importantly, "calling for action" was characterized by a shift in messaging from emphasis on the individual (e.g., "I have been unhoused and evicted. I've slept in my car and slept outdoors. I know what it's like") to the collective (e.g., "Our movement is strong…our movement will save lives"). This shift in focus from the individual congresswoman's effort to the collective action of the movement was also reflected in Rep. Bush's post when the Biden administration through the CDC extended the eviction moratorium on August 4. She posted:

> "On Friday night, *I came* to the Capitol with my chair. *I refused* to accept that Congress could leave for vacation while 11 million people faced eviction. For 5 days, *we've been out here*, demanding that our government acts to save lives. Today, *our movement* moved mountains." (Bush, 2021o)

RQ2 asked whether the tone of reporting about Rep. Bush's protest differed from reporting that did not feature her protesting. A crosstabs analysis revealed that the tone of news stories featuring Rep. Bush protesting differed significantly from those that did not feature her (χ^2 (2, N = 311) = 25.60, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .29$). A z-test of proportions showed that reporting on her protest was more positive (28.3%) compared to other anti-eviction protests (4.5%). Conversely, news reporting on her protest featured a smaller proportion of neutral stories (65%) compared to other anti-eviction protests (93.2%). The percentage of news stories on Rep. Bush's protest that were negative (6.7%) was not significantly different from that of news stories that did not feature the congresswoman (2.3%).

RQ3 asked whether reporting featuring Rep. Bush's protest differed from those that did not feature the congresswoman in terms of reliance on news sources. A crosstabs analysis revealed

that the use of sources in news stories featuring her protest was significantly different from news stories that did not feature the congresswomen (χ^2 (2, N = 311) = 96.60, p < .001, Cramer's V = .56). A *z*-test of proportions showed that most anti-eviction news stories had no sources (87.5%) compared to reporting on Rep. Bush's protest (29.6%). Further, Rep. Bush and fellow activist-politicians (e.g., Ocasio-Cortez) featured as sources in most news stories about Rep. Bush's protest (60.1%) but only in a small portion of anti-eviction stories not focused on her sleep-in (1.1%). The use of "other" sources, including government officials, experts/NGOs, and social media sources, was not statistically different across news stories featuring the congresswoman (10.3%) and other anti-eviction stories (11.4%).

Discussion

This study set out to investigate the use of strategic messaging for protest mobilization by an elected office holder with the goal of influencing policy. Specifically, this study examined the use of messaging by U.S. congresswoman, Rep. Bush, as she mobilized in opposition to the expiration of the eviction moratorium initially put in place by the CDC during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, this study compared media coverage of Rep. Bush's protest to coverage of other protests by anti-eviction groups. While this study is limited by its focus on a single case, findings can shed light on how activism could be used by political officeholders to mobilize, engage and connect with diverse groups, while eliciting favorable media attention.

Regarding the messaging used in advocacy and protest mobilization by the congresswoman, findings highlight strategic efforts to "remind and define," "connect and broaden dialogue," "personalize and contrast," and "call for action." These themes also reflect the core tasks of collective action framing, which include defining the core issues, blame allocation, recommending solutions, and calling for specific causes of action to be taken (Snow & Benford, 1988; Vicari, 2010; Xiong et al., 2019). Moreover, the selective use of different messaging strategies on Twitter versus official communication channels reflects shifts to match specific audiences and goals.

Specifically, reminding and defining messages appear intended to create a sense of urgency and evoke empathy by humanizing individuals affected by the expiration of the eviction moratorium, both in appeals to Congress using various statements and letters, and in mobilization efforts on X. Connecting and broadening dialogue not only offers praise or allocates blame, but also bolsters Rep. Bush's position by touting her powerful allies and increases the reach of her message. As such, broadening dialogue enables activists and movements to expand their influence (Tattersall, 2017). This could also be seen as a pressuring strategy intended to publicly elicit explicit or implied commitment from others, especially individuals who may be in a position to effect the desired change.

The use of personalizing and contrasting is noteworthy. In employing this type of message, Rep. Bush reduces the distance between herself and ordinary citizens whom she sought to

mobilize. In combination with the contrasting messaging, she is calling out colleagues who, despite having the same policymaking influence, cannot claim experience or familiarity with the situation. In other words, juxtaposing her personal eviction experience with their indifference toward the issue may reflect a strategy to prevent potential challenges to her legitimacy, while positioning herself as an activist rather than a participant in the existing power structure.

Unlike conventional calls to action in which social movement organizations focus on mobilizing individual activists and supporters, the theme of "calling for action" reflects a broader effort to rally diverse individuals and groups, including activists and nonactivists. Specifically, results show an initial call to action targeted at Congress (i.e., to vote on a potential extension of the moratorium) and, subsequently, shifting to a strategy that focused both on calling for executive action and mobilizing supporters to protest the expiration of the eviction moratorium. Taken together, while the protest itself may be viewed as a reflexive act in response to the looming expiration of the eviction moratorium, analysis of Rep. Bush's messaging suggests that it was strategically crafted and deployed to motivate different groups ranging from activists to government officials to take action. For political officeholders intending to use activist messaging strategies, these findings offer insight about how to leverage triggering events, position themselves effectively in the opposition, and gain authenticity, while simultaneously engaging diverse stakeholders including policymakers and activists. This, in turn, can strengthen their position and enhance the ability to achieve the goals of the movement.

Findings regarding media reporting of the anti-eviction protests indicate clear differences between coverage of the general anti-eviction protests (i.e., by citizens) and Rep. Bush's protest. Specifically, reporting about Rep. Bush's protest was more likely to have a positive tone compared to anti-eviction stories that did not feature the congresswoman. Further, news stories featuring her protest relied heavily on her or other activist politicians as news sources. Conversely, close to 90 percent of stories featuring anti-eviction protesters other than the congresswoman had no sources.

These results lend support to the protest paradigm, to an extent, but also highlight its limitations as a framework for understanding media coverage of protests that may fall outside of the typical. On one hand, the absence of ordinary protesters as news sources is consistent with previous research (Adegbola et al., 2022; Boyle et al., 2012) and reflects a pattern of reporting that marginalizes protesters. Yet, the distinct pattern of coverage seen in stories that featured Rep. Bush point to a few possibilities.

The relatively positive tone of reporting in stories featuring the congresswoman's protest, and the fact that stories mentioning her activism heavily relied on her as a news source, suggest that reporting of protests featuring elected officials is inconsistent with the protest paradigm. That is, such protests may elicit media attention and positive coverage, without needing to resort to contentious tactics. In fact, given that reliance on official/political elites' voices is an attribute of the protest paradigm (Di Cicco, 2010; Lee, 2014), the involvement of elected officials in protest, as in the present case, could serve as a useful strategy to amplify the official's voice and publicize the grievances of the oppositional group they represent.

In addition to gaining more positive and legitimizing coverage, stories featuring Rep. Bush included several instances in which the CDC's extension of the eviction moratorium was attributed to the congresswoman's activism. For instance, *The New York Times* described her as a leader among progressives and wrote that "the first-term congresswoman from St. Louis intensified pressure on the Biden administration and showed her tactics could yield results," while the right-leaning *The Wall Street Journal* recognized her effort in a piece titled, "How Cori Bush Put Life Story to Work in Eviction Protest at Capitol." Others, such as *The CUT* were more direct in their attributions of the extension to Rep. Bush, with a headline claiming that "Cori Bush Kept Millions of People from Losing Their Homes." Such attributions, coupled with the positive coverage, could have an enhancing effect on the congresswoman's profile.[2]

This study has both practical and theoretical implications. First, the findings of this study suggest that activism can be used as a strategy by political officeholders/politicians to enhance their public profile, and potentially, as a tool to augment conventional policymaking efforts. From a theoretical standpoint, findings suggest that the very routines and guidelines that lead to delegitimizing coverage of protests may benefit certain types of activism, and thus, may allow activism to be used strategically as a tool for gaining publicity and achieving political goals. Perhaps, most importantly, this study reflects a case that is at the intersection of public relations, public interest communications, activism, and political communication, and highlights the importance of recognizing how public relations and public interest communications practices and strategy are embedded in and utilized in different areas.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. As a case study focused on a single instance of politician-led activism within the specific context of a global pandemic, it is difficult to extrapolate the findings of this study to other protests. Moreover, the short period under consideration further limits the findings of this study. Lastly, this study does not parse potential differences in news reporting across ideologically dissimilar media outlets, largely because of the modest subsamples of news stories published by each outlet. Despite these limitations, this study offers useful insight into the use of strategic messaging for protest mobilization by a political office holder, and its potential implications for media attention and coverage.

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[2] Bush's bid for reelection in 2024 failed when she lost the democratic primary to Wesley Bell.

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