

Conference Paper

From Protest to Occupation: Analyzing the Social and Political Implications of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone

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ABSTRACT

Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) or Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) was a self-proclaimed autonomous zone established in June 2020 in Seattle, Washington. After a week of fraught interactions between demonstrators and police in riot gear, protesters established the area after the Seattle Police Department abandoned the East Precinct. The area, which encompassed two intersections at the extremities of Cal Anderson Park and the roadways leading to them, was self-organized and lacked formal leadership. This research paper examines the formation of CHAZ, its processes, and its effects on Seattle's later growth. This research paper contends, utilizing Mancur Olson's Collective Action Theory and a qualitative approach, that CHAZ was established as a result of the local government's minimal effort to engage with the local community. Furthermore, Michael Lipsky's conception of protest as a political resource bolsters CHAZ's demonstration of how protest can influence decision-makers through indirect channels, such as occupation. CHAZ ultimately succeeded in persuading the public and influencing municipal policies to be more equitable.

Keywords: CHAZ, collective action, policing protest, Seattle

Introduction

Beginning on June 1, 2020, protesters affiliated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement began overwhelming the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle. They were then confronted by Seattle Police Department (SPD) officers in full riot gear who attempted to halt their advance. The tension between them continued for a week in the East Precinct building of the Seattle Police Department, with police using aggressive crowd control tactics and equipment such as flashbangs, pepper spray, and tear gas, which Mayor Jenny Durkan forbade on June 5th. On June 7th, police began erecting barricades around the building, which exacerbated the situation. On June 8th, however, police made an effort to de-escalate the situation by leaving the building entirely, which prompted protesters to occupy the structure. On that day, protesters began claiming the area surrounding the building as their own and designating it "Free Capitol Hill." By the end of the month, "Free Capitol Hill" evolved into the well-known CHAZ/CHOP.

The Area was originally five and a half blocks long but later expanded to encompass larger landmarks such as Cal Anderson Park, which then was made into a community garden on June 11th by the protesters and filled with vegetable seedlings. On the second day of the occupancy, protesters began setting up "No Cop Co-op" services which offer free water, hand sanitizer, food, and other essential amenities that came from donations. Symbolic infrastructure such as shrines, murals, and vigils was also created by the protesters occupying the area, one of which is a

How to cite:

Perbawani, F. C. L., Abimanyu, O. A., & Putri, A. F. (2023). From protest to occupation: analyzing the social and political implications of the capitol hill autonomous zone. *International Relations on Indonesian Foreign Policy Conference 2022*. NST Proceedings. pages 6-11. doi: 10.11594/nstp.2023.3402

shrine/memorial for Lorenzo Anderson, a 19-year-old boy who died in a shooting on the edge of the area (Brunner et al., 2020). July 1st marked the end of CHAZ/CHOP as dozens of SPD officers began clearing out the area and arrested more than 30 people on the order of Mayor Jenny Durkan after waves of violence the night before which consisted of four shootings and several reports of sexual assaults (Burns, 2020a).

Material and Methods

Data collection & limitations

The paper uses secondary sources such as news articles, academic papers, and other published materials to gather information about the formation and dissolution of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) or Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP). It will use a qualitative approach to analyze the data collected. One limitation of this study is that it relies on secondary sources of information, which may not provide a complete picture of the events surrounding the formation and dissolution of CHAZ/CHOP. Another limitation is that the study only focuses on the CHAZ/CHOP case and may not be generalizable to other cases of collective action or community engagement.

Theoretical framework

The paper uses Mancur Olson's Collective Action Theory to explain the formation of CHAZ/CHOP and its eventual failure. This theory explains that people with similar interests/goals are likely to form groups to achieve said goals. It suggests that individuals will only participate in collective action when they believe the benefits outweigh the costs (Olson, 1989). Collective action cannot take place in the lack of a "we" defined by shared characteristics and a particular unity. Identifying the "other," who is accountable for the actor's situation and against whom the mobilization is directed, is also essential. Second, the emergence of new networks of trusting relationships among movement participants correlates to the production of identities. The existence of feelings of identification and group solidarity makes facing the dangers and uncertainties associated with collective action simpler (Porta & Diani, 2006). Thus, the paper will analyze the incentives and motivations of the participants in CHAZ/CHOP to understand why they joined and ultimately left.

Moreover, the authors employ Michael Lipsky's concept of "protest as a political resource" to determine the extent to which CHAZ can be viewed as a form of collective dissent capable of influencing local government policies. Lipsky (1968) elucidated how demonstrations are a type of political resource for the marginalized. To be heard, there will be a logic of numbers, specifically the number of individuals who participate in the protest action. For instance, protests aimed at obstructing policy decisions may have a greater chance of success than protests aimed at eliciting constructive policy innovations (Lipsky, 1968).

From these theories and conceptions, the flow of thought in this paper can be described as follows:

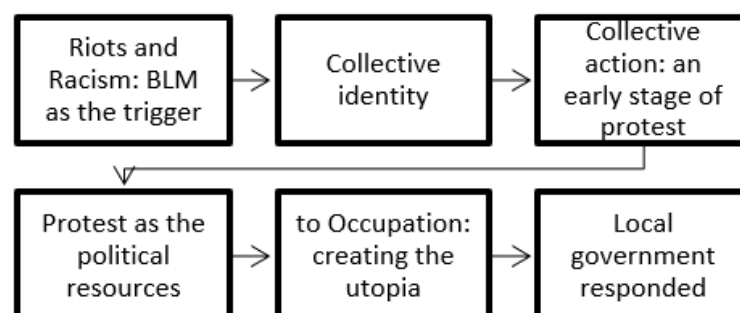


Figure 1. The authors' framework of thinking (Source: (Authors' analysis))

The preceding figure depicts the progression of this study, beginning with the point where the unstoppable increase in violence and bigotry gave birth to the BLM movement. The movement became a catalyst for uniting individuals with the same identity (collective identity). Those with the same identity and the same interests launched the protest movement. This leads to an analysis by the title proposed by the author, namely, from protest to Occupation. CHAZ is a movement that began with a massive protest action that later morphed into an occupation, particularly since the local government removed police from the zone. Thus, CHAZ was ultimately able to convince the public, resulting in a response from the local government.

Results and Discussion

The new and the old

Occupying an area as a form of protest is a common theme when talking about fighting against the elites and reforming the current system. Occupy Wall Street movement is a contemporary example of this, when on 2011, thousands of protesters gathered in New York City's Wall Street financial district, marching against the economic disparity and campaign financing that was prominent in the United States of America and other Western countries at the time, taking over the well-known area for almost two full months before being forced out of the area on November 15, 2011 (Rehmann, 2013). This movement has been said to inspire similar movements years later such as the fast food workers' protests in 2013 (Sanburn, 2013) and arguably, the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest.

One of the similarities between the Occupy Wallstreet movement with the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest is how they aim at the group who have the authority and power but do not listen to the "people". Whereas Occupy Wall Street targeted the elite, bankers, and politicians, the Capitol Hill protesters threw their agitation toward the police force and government who are blamed for being the main perpetrators of the unjust justice system with its systematic racism in place and prominent use of violent methods on detaining suspects (Jayne, 2021), hence the name "Police Brutality". George Floyd was one of the victims of this excessive use of force by law enforcement, who eventually died at the hands of Derek Chauvin, a police officer, via kneeling in George's neck for eight minutes. He and his dying words "I can't breathe" became a symbol of the newly sparked movement "Black Lives Matter," which was then translated into marches and demonstrations across the United States, one of which was the start of the eventual creation of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. The protesters said they are fighting for this because they think there is violence against Black men that are not being dealt with nicely (Brunner et al., 2020).

Starting the protest: Changing the current justice system and the police budget

The protesters at the time demanded things that could be categorized into four main types, which are interconnected, that is justice, education, health and human services, and economics. Here are some demands from the demonstrators for change in Seattle, starting with demands for the justice system. They call for the defunding and abolition of the Seattle Police Department, including pensions for police officers, the prohibition of using armed force, the end of the school-to-prison pipeline, and the release of prisoners with marijuana-related and resisting arrest charges. They also demand the creation of restorative or transformative accountability programs as a replacement for imprisonment and the autonomy of the people to create localized anti-crime systems. Economic demands include rent control, free college education, and restoring city funding for arts and culture (FreeCapitolHill, 2020).

The protesters felt that there was an unjust justice system and prosecution imposed by the Government of Seattle and the Seattle Police Department, which is why they demanded a retrial of all people of color who are serving time in prison. They also demand a full-scale investigation of officers who have a suspicion of doing police brutality in one way or another in the past and also reopening of cases related to police accountability that were closed unfairly, such as the cases of Tommy Le, Shaun Fuhr, and Charleena Lyles to name a few. Additionally, the protesters demand

banning armed forces and aggressive methods in detaining suspects and crowd control, which means no guns, no batons, no riot shields, and no chemical weapons.

“Defund The Police” was a catchphrase used by protesters to express their request to cut the police annual budget by half and repurpose the budget to more societal and communal causes such as public housing and rent control to minimize the rate of homelessness which was abundant across the country. Another sector that was a main concern for the protesters is that of education. They demand free public education, college tuition, and reforming the system to put more focus on black and Native American history using half of the police budget.

Creating the utopia

When the protesters had no law enforcer to stop them from demonstrating, and no more ears to listen to their demands, they began taking the matter into their own hands. As seen in the report made by Vox (Burns, 2020b), protesters start to make their demands into reality, one of which is how they made sure houseless people who were before the protest had no place to stay or even welcomed in some area of the town, now has the whole city park for them to set up camps and shared community garden. Not only that, ironically, after the police left the area, the neighborhood became “safer” according to the people staying in the area, and became somewhat a tourist attraction for the black people, indigenous people, people of color, queer people, and liberal white families outside of the area. The local business even reported an increase in their sales in the times of occupancy, with no reports of extortion which were assumed to happen by the general public (Seattle Times Staff, 2020).

Moreover, the locals who saw the formation of the Area from the beginning are found to share a common view, the protest has brought back the “old” heterogenetic Capitol Hill, the one that existed before it became a place known for its consumerism. Capitol Hill is famous for being the center of Seattle nightlife and art, a place where young people used to collaborate on art projects and open for LGBTQ+ communities (Jayne, 2021), but in the past few years, it has been gentrified for that same reason, capitals come flowing to the area and day by day, increasing the rents and making the art market which was prominent in the area to only cater for the market-friendly artist. CHOP has changed the scene again and brought back the nostalgia for the locals. Ironically, when the presence of the government ceased, the community became better for the locals. Art projects became abundant and captured their original meaning from being a commodity to being a collaborative work again which can be seen all across the streets CHOP’s taken place.

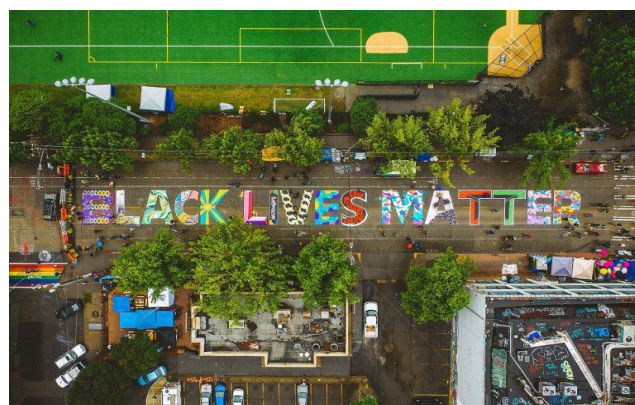


Figure 2. A collaborative artwork in East Pine Street

Responsibility of the city

As has been explained before, the zone was created by mere humans, which is why there is always a risk of it not being perfect throughout the establishment of the area, but the city and especially the police force, although being protested, still had and always must protect the city as

stated in their motto "To serve and protect" and the constitutional rights to equal protection that every United States of America Citizen has, which means by abandoning the area and letting it controlled by a protester, Seattle police department has proven themselves, ironically, that they cannot protect their citizens in front of a threat of anarchy. The amount can see this lawsuits made by many business owners towards the Seattle government, many of the plaintiffs said that by letting the protester take over, the local government indirectly deprived them of their rights to their property and also let protesters do high amounts of property damages to the local business. For example, Richmark Label, a family-run label manufacturing company, said that they are unable to receive nor send packages to customers due to the occupation of the area. Another example can be seen in the decline of Tattoos and Fortune's customers (Johnson, 2020).

All of the cases made by the business and property owners came from a legitimate concern and demand, especially for the police department, which corresponded with the decision of Judge Thomas S. Zilly of the U.S. District Court, where he allowed the claims that "The city has unlawfully taken their private property for public use with no compensation, restricted their ability to use their property to conduct business fully and failed to protect the businesses from a danger of the city's own making" made by the plaintiff to proceed (Villarreal, 2020).

Responses from the local government

With all of the things that are happening to her city during the time of the occupation, Mayor Jenny Durkan has acknowledged the demands of the protesters and responded by proposing 5% budget cuts to the police department, putting more money into efforts relating to the Covid-19 Pandemic, and put a police hiring freeze for the rest of the year, but things do not go smoothly as protesters point out that the 5% budget cut fall far too short from the 50% budget cuts demanded by them, they also restating that they mostly demand budgets to housing and healthcare (Savransky, 2020).

This asynchronism between the government and the people protesting in Seattle clearly shows the lack of community engagement by the Seattle government despite the criticism thrown at them throughout the time of the protest. Not only that, months after the zone was cleared by them, police are still doing "sweeps" around the once before occupied area, especially homeless camps that were established in Cal Anderson Park (Brownstone & Carter, 2020), which indicates that the government does not have any intention to respond to protesters demands in any meaningful and significant way.

Conclusion

Community engagement is a purposeful and strategic process involving local communities in decision-making and implementation across all areas to strengthen their capacities, foster a sense of local ownership, and promote transparency and accountability, leading to optimal resource allocation in diverse settings (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2020). When local communities are involved in decision-making and implementation processes, promote transparency and accountability, leading to optimal resource allocation and strengthening local capacities. However, failure to engage local communities can result in civil unrest and protests, as seen in the case of Seattle's protests.

The case of the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest is unique; it distinguishes itself from other forms of protest by demonstrating how collective action of people with the same agenda, in this case, a familiar ire towards local governments and law enforcers, could generate a massive result and, most importantly, an example, to the government, to demonstrate that a city would be vastly improved by doing what the people want rather than what the market wants. Multiple shootouts, reports of sexual assaults, and an abundance of violence notwithstanding, the protest demonstrates how local governments should provide for their citizens and create policies that are tailored to their needs.

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