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How do campaigns to stop bad stuff happening differ from frontfoot activism to make the world a better place?

Duncan Green wants to start a conversation about a big and topical issue for activism – defensive (back-foot) campaigns to protect the status quo or ward off attacks by those in power. He argues that many of the case studies and theorization of influencing have focussed on front-foot activism to make the world a better place, but the current situation requires us to think more deeply about defensive activism, and identify how it differs in terms of the contexts in which it takes place and the tactics it uses.

I've started listening to a really interesting podcast, [100 Campaigns that Changed the World](#), partly because the podcaster, Steve Tibbett, has asked me to come on and discuss the overall patterns that emerge from its first 37 episodes. One thing that struck me is that of the 37, only two appear to be 'defensive campaigns' to stop bad stuff happening to the status quo (the campaign to stop football's shift to a [European Super League](#), and the [Better Together](#) campaign against Scottish independence).



All the other campaigns discussed in the podcast, from Jubilee 2000 to Surfers Against Sewage to the Suffragettes, aimed at making the world a better place. And that seems to be the framing for much of the thinking and advice to would-be activists, including a lot of the training materials we use at the LSE.

But the world has changed, and stopping bad stuff happening is increasingly what activism is about. About a year ago, I wrote something on [my old blog](#) on this, but given what has happened since, it looks very inadequate. So do the tactics differ in such defensive campaigns, compared to the 'front foot' campaigns from happier times?

To answer this, I turned to Steve's podcast, a 2019 paper [When the Best Offense is a Good Defense](#), by Sarah Stachowiak Joel Gutierrez (thanks for the link Tom Aston), and my trusty research assistant, aka ChatGPT.

Stachowiak and Gutierrez discuss what they call 'reactive defense': a new bill with negative effects gets proposed, or a prior win's funding is going to be gutted. In these cases, defensive advocacy means maintaining the status quo, keeping a past win on the books or fully funded.

Quoting one campaigner, they contrast the level of existing urgency, missing in a lot of frontfoot advocacy, but present for many defensive campaigns

'Urgency is not a problem: 'I think about work I did years ago on paid sick days. It was still kind of a new idea as far as a workplace standard. And it's challenging to build urgency on the issue if it's "not going anywhere," right? Whereas I think on defense you have that urgency. Oftentimes, if it is a big enough threat in front of you, that creates the energy that you can mobilize people around.'

Their implications for strategy are also interesting

- Finding funding and philanthropic support is especially hard (how do you prove you stopped something bad from happening?). Philanthropy undervalues it because foundations want to move the ball forward, but that's not the world we live in.
- Standing capacity is crucial. Much of what we think of as traditional defense involves advocates rapidly responding to a new policy situation or threat. When those moments arise, advocates don't have time to build new relationships with champions, policymakers, partners, or constituents.

Steve Tibbet's football podcast shows the importance of pre-existing relationships. Football fans were already organized and linked between clubs. They were connected, trusted each other and could make a very big noise very quickly.

But also, the podcast points out what they *didn't* do. They didn't have some nuanced analysis of who would make the decisions, who the messengers should be etc etc. They went much more for a short, sharp noisy campaign and it worked – the clubs backed down within 72 hours of the announcement.

Another interesting observation from Stachowiak and Gutierrez:

Sarah Stachowiak
Joel Gutierrez

When the Best Offense is a Good Defense



'We were surprised to hear many advocates literally use the word "easier." Because defensive work is responding to a political opportunity, it means the issue has already been defined as a policy problem with a particular solution. Advocates can then focus on generating or harnessing energies to debate the policy solution. In comparison, much proactive advocacy work must seek to define an issue as a policy problem and wait for a political opportunity to take action as well as advocate for a particular policy solution.

Advocates doing proactive work often try to develop broad coalitions or cultivate unlikely allies; however, those we interviewed thought it was often easier to form a broad coalition in a defensive advocacy scenario. Even if people or groups disagree about certain elements of an issue (which would make it difficult to cultivate aligned support for a proactive decision), they can frequently align around a shared interest in defeating or preventing a specific policy.

Additionally, some of our interviewees noted that, within a communications strategy, it can be easier to get media attention, sow uncertainty or doubt, or play up the worstcase scenario of a potential policy change: the individuals who are most likely to be impacted by a policy decision are not hypothetical— affected individuals or groups stand to lose something with a change. Some

advocates spoke to the fact, too, that being able to point legislators to constituents in their state or district was much more powerful as a strategy in defense than when advocates try to proactively push a new policy or innovation that has worked somewhere else but doesn't have current application "at home."

ChatGPT added a few additional thoughts, and some seriously Machiavellian suggestions, into the mix: I asked it two questions

1. What tactics have been successful in advocacy and campaigns to prevent bad stuff happening – e.g. repressive legislation or moves to curb human rights?
2. What tactics have been successful in defensive campaigns and advocacy – aimed at maintaining the status quo

Some of its suggestions included:

● 2. Strategic Litigation and Legal Challenges

Why it works: Legal action can block or delay the implementation of harmful legislation by challenging its constitutionality or legality.

- **Example:** In the U.S., the ACLU and other organizations have used lawsuits to challenge anti-immigrant laws, voter suppression, and discriminatory policies.
- **Tactics used:**
 - Filing lawsuits in domestic or international courts
 - Using legal injunctions to halt implementation
 - Leveraging human rights treaties and conventions

✓ 1. Framing the Status Quo as Stable, Familiar, and Safe

- **Fear of the Unknown:** Emphasizing the risks and uncertainties of change. People are often risk-averse, so highlighting potential negative consequences of reform (e.g., economic instability, job loss, or unintended consequences) can be persuasive.
- **"If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It" Messaging:** Defenders of the status quo frequently argue that the current system is working well enough, and any change could disrupt stability.
- **Nostalgia and Tradition:** Using appeals to tradition or historical continuity can create emotional resistance to change. "This is how it has always been" can be a powerful narrative.

👉 **Example:** In campaigns against marriage equality, some groups framed traditional marriage as a long-standing, stable institution, warning that changing it could undermine social norms.

💡 2. Leveraging Incumbency and Institutional Power

- **Bureaucratic and Legal Barriers:** Incumbent institutions often have built-in advantages, such as legal frameworks or administrative inertia, that make it hard to implement change.
- **Regulatory and Legislative Delays:** Delaying tactics (e.g., procedural challenges, filibusters, or lawsuits) can slow down reform efforts and frustrate their supporters.
- **Control of Resources and Infrastructure:** Groups defending the status quo often have access to established networks, funds, and relationships with influential policymakers, making it easier to block or stall reforms.

👉 *Example:* The gun rights lobby in the U.S. (e.g., the NRA) has used legal challenges and lobbying to stall gun control measures, capitalizing on institutional familiarity with existing laws.

🗣️ 3. Mobilizing Powerful Stakeholders

- **Coalition Building:** Defensive campaigns often form broad alliances to present a unified front. By partnering with industries, unions, or interest groups, they amplify their influence.
- **Elite Influence:** Gaining the support of influential figures (e.g., celebrities, business leaders, or trusted public figures) can help legitimize the defense of the status quo.
- **Astroturfing and Grassroots Mobilization:** Simulating broad public opposition by creating fake grassroots campaigns (astroturfing) or encouraging genuine grassroots movements to express support for the current system.

👉 *Example:* During net neutrality debates, major internet providers mobilized influential business groups to advocate against regulatory changes, arguing that the existing system was working effectively.

So, what else should I be reading? All advice welcome!

About the author

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