



# Non-Violent Direct Action

## What is it?

Non-violent direct action (NVDA) “refers to those methods of protest, resistance, and intervention without physical violence in which the members of the nonviolent group do, or refuse to do, certain things. They may commit acts of omission – refuse to perform acts which they usually perform, are expected by custom to perform, or are required by law or regulation to perform; or acts of commission – perform acts which they usually do not perform, are not expected by custom to perform, or are forbidden by law or regulation from performing; or a combination of both.” Gene Sharp in *Social Power and Political Freedom*. It may also be referred to as civil resistance, civil disobedience, satyagraha, nonviolent resistance, direct action, and pacifica militancia.

## NVDA and Climate Change Protest

Groups such as Greenpeace, Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain have used NVDA in recent times to protest against the lack of action on climate change by governments, institutions and corporations. Their justification for adopting these tactics is that more traditional forms of protest – marching, petitions, lobbying MPs and so on – have failed to produce any change over 30+ years of environmental protest. They say the climate crisis is now so acute that social collapse is imminent and the time to address it effectively is very short, so there is no more time to waste on ineffective protests. Disruption is justified and proportionate because climate change threatens the lives of everyone. Further reasons for using NVDA are that non-disruptive protests are easily ignored; voting does not work because, under our current electoral system, voters are limited to what the main parties are offering, and politicians are forever bound to short-term thinking and policies which are popular in the moment (as opposed to “right” in the long-term), because they want to get re-elected.



## Extinction Rebellion's Elements of NVDA

- 1. Respect:** shown towards other activists, the wider public, and police/politicians
- 2. Disruption:** so they cannot be ignored, and force the conversation
- 3. Sacrifice:** to demonstrate commitment and seriousness of the issues
- 4. Dilemma:** to put the State in a difficult situation - whether they are tolerant or they crack down, the movement benefits

## NVDA in history

This form of protest goes back to at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century and has included Percy Shelley, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Suffragettes, the Velvet Revolution, the Singing Revolution and the Orange Revolution, amongst many other examples. Erica Chenoweth's research into the history of these kinds of movements shows that non-violent resistance is twice as likely to succeed than violent alternatives.

## The strategy of NVDA

The evidence suggests that the general public are not moved by hearing the facts about climate change from scientists and other experts. Therefore the strategy is to disrupt the public and "business as usual" in a way they can't ignore and force them to confront the problem. In many cases the disruption causes an initial reaction of upset, confusion or anger; but later the hope is that they will give some thought to the issue being protested – which they would not have done without that emotional prompt. The aim is not to get everyone to agree with the tactics, but to make them more aware of the problem and hopefully to prompt them into action themselves. Chenoweth's research shows that just 3.5% of the population engaged in this type of protest can cause a social tipping point which forces change.

## The role of the media

An important part of protest is to spread the message as widely as possible. For this the media is essential (even discussions on social media are generally driven by the agenda in the newspapers and on television). But the modern media is only interested in controversy and stories that stir up division. Protesters are often asked why they target the public, or artworks, or sports events, rather than the government and the oil companies. The answer is that they **do** target them but the media barely reports it. Which of these protests do you think got more column inches in 2023? The disruption of Shell's AGM by climate protesters in May, the Extinction Rebellion protest at Parliament by 60,000+ people in April, or three Just Stop Oil activists throwing orange powder at Chelsea Flower Show in May?

