



Preview: North American Activism and COVID-19

An adaptive and persistent threat

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CLIENT-DRIVEN INTELLIGENCE

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Executive Summary

This briefing outlines how North American activism has been impacted by the spread of the novel coronavirus and the associated disease (COVID-19). It also provides a forecast of how activists and their campaigns will be affected by COVID-19 going forward. For the purposes of this briefing, Welund North America did not attempt to predict the peak of deaths or infections. Accurately doing so is subject to a number of modelling difficulties. It is more important to evaluate what activist activity is expected to look like when governments begin to lift restrictions on social distancing measures.

Like the economy, politics, and society, COVID-19 has fundamentally altered activism in the US and Canada. Social distancing restrictions have deprived activists of one of their most potent tactics, public protest and civil disobedience. This is not to say that the activist threat to companies has gone away. Rather, activists have demonstrated their ability to adapt campaigns amid the more restrictive social distancing requirements. Despite the absence of protests and civil disobedience, activism will remain a persistent threat and will most likely intensify when social distancing restrictions are eased or lifted.

It is important for companies to be aware of current tactical adaptations and expect activist campaigns to relaunch, likely intensifying, when social distancing restrictions are eased or lifted. Welund North America has forecasted how activists will operate under two conditions to reflect restrictive lockdowns and more permissive public-health guidelines. Under the first condition, the majority of activism will take place online. The second condition will see activists undertake many of their traditional tactics – including protest and civil disobedience – with some adaptations to meeting local/regional restrictions. In the near-term, activism will likely fluctuate between these two conditions. During this period of fluctuation, companies should expect activists to continue pre-COVID-19 campaigns and launch new ones in response to corporate decisions and announcements, as well as to attract media attention.

The pandemic carries the risk of sparking civil unrest – the breakdown of state authority, which includes riots and looting. As of early April, there is a low risk of civil unrest in the US and Canada. In the near-term, the risk of civil unrest will increase if social distancing restrictions are perceived to be overly restrictive or if governments' responses are believed to be wholly inadequate. In the long-term, the potential for civil unrest will increase if the economic recovery is halting, uneven and not well defined.

Accurately forecasting how activists will respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in detail is fraught with challenges due to the number of intervening factors that affect their activity. Three categories of factors and assumptions – Shapers, Drivers, and Limiters – can be used to identify how activism in North America may change over time.

Under an optimistic scenario, the pandemic would be addressed in the coming months with as limited damage to political institutions and the global economy as possible. This would likely see a return to the types of activism seen before the pandemic.

A pessimistic scenario would feature repeated outbreaks and public-health restrictions, shattered political institutions, and further economic collapse. In this scenario, activism, like the coronavirus, would be novel, responding to a variety of inputs. Mainstream activism that seeks to work within existing political, social, and economic structures would likely decline, while anti-establishment activism, such as anarchism, would increase.