# Mobilization

By
Sylvie Landrième (Mobile Lives Forum's director)
Dominic Villeneuve (Researcher in Public administrations)
Vincent Kaufmann (Sociologue)
Christophe Gay (Mobile Lives Forum's director)

Mobilization is the action by which individuals are called upon to gather in the public space for a concerted effort, be it to express or defend a common cause or to participate in an event. In this respect, it is a social phenomenon appertaining to mobility. This article has been written by Sylvie Landrième, Dominic Villeneuve, Vincent Kaufmann and Christophe Gay.

---

## Long definition

### Mobilization and movement

The movement triggered by mobility results in movement to a chosen gathering place, either to occupy it in a static, more or less temporary way (symbolic occupation of public spaces like Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street in 2011 or Taksim Square in Istanbul in 2013), or as a departure point for group marches (commemorations, demonstrations, parades, etc.) along authorized or unauthorized routes.

Mobilization often takes the form of a slow march, the symbol of non-violent protest, and can take place on foot (the most common case, like the March for Equality and Against Racism in 1983), by bicycle (like Critical Mass), moped (like the March for Equality and Against Racism in 1984), rollerblade, taxi or truck. Due to the fact that it disrupts traffic in the public space (which is the whole point), occupation often seems more hostile than marches.

### Reasons for mobilization

What are the "motives" that trigger movement? Causes for mobilization can be quite different. For instance, mobilization can serve to alert, draw attention to a cause to put it on the political agenda, e.g. social, societal issues or environmental (salary demands, education, etc.), to defend values (secularism, freedom of the press, etc.), to pressure the government into abandoning a law or withdraw military troops (Vietnam or, more recently, Iraq, in the U.S. and U.K.) or, increasingly common in the past 50 years, to defend the rights of minorities (Civil Rights in the U.S. or Gay Pride in a growing number of cities around the world). Mobilization in such cases is not an end in itself. The driving force for mobilization is thus the gathering of people who think that, together, they can make a

difference. Mobilizations can also simply take the form of collective participation in commemorative events (the burial of personalities like Victor Hugo) or celebrations (sports victories like the World Cup in 1998 on the Champs-Élysées). They can also be festive, like rave parties, flash mobs or techno parades. It is not uncommon to find several registers during a single mobilization (e.g. music and singing during political manifestations or disguises during Gay Pride parades).

## Forms of mobilization

Mobilization can be exceptional (the parade for the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution in May 1989 for example) or annual/bi-annual events (Worker's day parades, national marches women's rights day, press day, etc.).

It may result from:

- a "top-down" approach to an organization's call (e.g. a political party) addressed at an institution or government to show its strength;
- a "bottom-up" response to the call of a local citizens' group addressed at an institution (like the March for Equality and Against Racism on Paris);
- or a "bottom-bottom" initiative for the pleasure of gathering and/or creating an event (e.g. a flash mob).

Mobilizations can either be spontaneous (e.g. the October 2015 events in Beirut for garbage collection) or organized and planned in advance (date, time and place, often for authorization/security reasons), like international marches for the environment or against AIDS. They can also be reactive, like the demonstration following the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, or pro-active.

## Mobilization actors and effects

Mobilization involves at least three key types of actors:

- participants,
- spectators,
- and, for politically-oriented mobilizations, the body targeted by the action. In such instances, the strength and determination is in the numbers.

The number of spectators has grown considerably with the development of mass media. Nowadays it is common witness mobilization not only physically, but also on television and via online information websites and social networks (Periscope on Twitter, Facebook live, media specific to social networks like "Brut"). A mobilization's success is measured by its media coverage. The media draw the public's attention to certain facts by providing information about and interpreting events (Nedelmann 1987: 182).

Digital technology increases the possibilities for event organization and intensifying their impact. With the development of social networks, mobilization channels have broadened and become more efficient. Through such networks, nowadays it is possible to quickly reach tens of thousands of people (e.g. to set a meeting place).

# Insights

## Characteristics of mobilization

*The cognitive dimension of mobilization.* This is the process by which actors define their interests in relation to other actors. Recognition and definition of these interests are the result of joint efforts to build awareness of specific problems and give them political and cultural meaning through interaction ( *ibid* .: 186). Traditional media and social networks play an important role in this dimension of mobilization as agents; effectively, through information management, it is possible to "adapt" the representation of reality.

*The emotional dimension of mobilization.* The "emotional" dimension of mobilization is what creates a sense of solidarity between actors. As Lolive notes (1997: 129), this key aspect is the "cement of mobilization." Excitement and indignation are intense emotions trigger mobilization even for abstract ideas, arousing feelings of solidarity among strangers. Livet and Thévenot, for instance, (2003) argue that the feeling of injustice prepares individuals for action and can trigger mobilization.

# Forms of mobilization

## Vertical mobilization (the act of mobilizing)

This is mobilization organized by institutional actors, notably political parties, states or associations (NGOs, etc.) that provide citizens opportunities for political participation through their organization. Political parties, for instance, create vertical mobilization by organizing and funding meetings and demonstrations, inviting people to take part in politics or circulating petitions so that citizens express opinions in the form of signatures (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003: 26-27). It may also consist in transporting citizens to a polling places free of charge, or providing security services so they are free to vote. It is the involvement of political elites that gives citizens the opportunity to participate and learn about political issues (idem).

## Horizontal mobilization (action of mobilizing)

This autonomous and/or spontaneous form of mobilization involves affinity networks, friends, colleagues, neighbors, social network contacts or family members.

## Digital mobilization

New digital mobile communication tools and the Internet have changed the face of mobilization (Anduiza, Cantijoch & Gallego, 2009; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). In addition to the "sounding board" effect, digital technology is increasingly used by mobilization actors. This has led to new forms of mobilization, like those that marked the Arab

springtime in the early 2010s, and a kind of reactive "vibration" on the web translated by mobilization in the public space in general (Boullier 2015). To conclude, digital technology has been a catalyst for mobilization, making it possible to mobilize more people faster and more spontaneously.

## Changes in mobilization thanks to digital technology

The authors argue that use of the Internet as a tool for mobilization does not greatly diverge from that of traditional tools, and paper petitions in particular. While this may have been true in 2008, rapid developments in new mobile communication technologies, Internet access and social networks have given rise to new practices, like indirect mobilization between individuals who do not know each other (via Twitter or Facebook) during the Arab Spring or live webcasts of demonstrations during Occupy Wall Street (Costanza-Chock, 2012, 382).

We also use the term "flash mob" to describe a group of people who assemble in a public place to do something unusual over a short time period before quickly dispersing. The participants typically do not know each other or communicate prior to or following the event, and generally coordinate via social networks.

## The intensifying of mobilization through digital technology

According to a study of the occupation movement by students of British universities against an increase in tuition fees, new technologies have specific advantages, such as high speed message broadcasting, moral support and networking ease for multiple organizations (Ward, Gibson & Lusoli, 2003, 187).

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign is an interesting example of the Internet as a mobilization tool. According to Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011), the use of technological tools in political campaigns is not new. However, the Obama campaign used them in an unprecedented way. Web 2.0 tools played a decisive role in the Democratic candidate's victory, thanks, among other things, to the mobilization of the four million voters. Emails, videos and an iPhone app mobilized citizens by sending them personalized messages inviting them to participate in nearby political events. Indirect mobilization was likewise possible using the same tools, especially during key primary battles in swing States: the contact information stored in supporters' phones were analyzed to identify those of people who lived in the targeted swing State. The application then suggested to said citizen that he/she call his/her friends – those selected - and talk to them about Obama (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011: 203).

One could even go so far as to say that the Internet has become a public space of mobilization in its own right, thanks notably to the growing number of opportunities for signing online petitions and instantly being able to see the number of people mobilized on a given issue.

## Scales and territories of mobilization

The effects of mobilization and nature of their impact on the political system vary depending on the scale. Although mobilization often takes place at the national scale for

large parades (military marches, for example), local and international mobilization has likewise considerably developed in recent years.

At the local level mobilization has the power to change how governments govern, leading to new, and more cooperative forms of governance. According to Balme and Faure (2002: 124), "(l)ocal political mobilization institutes the State's monopoly in public action and contributes to the development of a kind of 'polycentric governance,' meaning a less hierarchical, less centralized way of wielding political authority than in the past—in other words, decentralized governance marked by cooperation between different levels of government and private actors."

International mobilizations, like marches for the environment targeting global institutions (the G8, WTO, etc.) have become increasingly frequent.

## Perspectives

The politcal dimension of mobilization is the subject of abundant scientific literature. Identity-oriented or festive spatial mobilizations, on the other hand, are much less studied and still represent relatively uncharted territory in mobility research.

## Bibliography

- Auray, Nicolas. 2010, "Le Web participatif et le tournant néo-libéral : des communautés aux solidarités", in Proulx, S., Millerand, F., Rueff, J., Web social : mutation de la communication?, Presses de l'Université du Québec, pp.33-51.
- Balme, Richard and Alain Faure. 2002. "Politiques locales: acteurs, réseaux et mobilisation," in Jean-Claude Ruano-Borbalan et Bruno Choc (éds.) Le Pouvoir - Des rapports individuels aux relations internationales, Éditions Sciences Humaines., Auxerre: 121-126.
- Boullier, Dominique. 2015. "Les sciences sociales face aux traces du big data - Société, opinion ou vibrations ?", Revue française de science politique, Volume 65/5, pp. 805-828.
- Cogburn, Derrick L. and Fatima K. Espinoza-Vasquez. 2011. "From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign," Journal of Political Marketing, vol. 10, no 1-2 : 189-213.
- Costanza-Chock, Sasha. 2012. "Mic Check! Media Cultures and the Occupy Movement," Social Movement Studies, vol. 11, no 3-4 : 375-385.
- Ferraris Maurizio. 2016. Mobilisation totale: l'appel du portable, PUF, Paris
- Livet, Pierre and Laurent Thévenot. 2003. "Modes d'action collective et construction éthique," Recherches: 412-439.
- Lolive, Jacques. 1997. "La montée en généralité pour sortir du Nimby. La mobilisation associative contre le TGV Méditerranée," Politix, vol. 10, no 39: 109-130.
- Nedelmann, Birgitta. 1987. "Individuals and Parties-Changes in Processes of Political Mobilization," European Sociological Review, vol. 3, no 3: 181-202.

- Rosenstone, Steven J. and John Mark Hansen. 2003. Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America, Longman.
- Sebastien, Léa. 2016 « L'attachement au lieu, vecteur de mobilisation collective ? », Norois, 238-239: 23-41.
- Tilly, Charles and Sidney Tarrow. 2008. Politiques du conflit: De la grève à la révolution, Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques.

## Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

## Mobilization

Mobilization is the action by which individuals are called upon to gather in the public space for a concerted effort, be it to express or defend a common cause or to participate in an event. In this respect, it is a social phenomenon appertaining to mobility. This article has been written by Sylvie Landrième, Dominic Villeneuve, Vincent Kaufmann and Christophe Gay.

En savoir plus x

## Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

---

**Associated Thematics :**

Lifestyles

- Proximity

Policies

- Civic Action

Theories

- Concepts

---

Sylvie Landriève

Mobile Lives Forum's director

Sylvie Landriève has a background in the humanities (Sorbonne), urban and regional development (Sciences-Po Paris) and public policy management (Mines, Nanterre and ESCP). After working as real estate and urban projects manager for BNP Real Estate, she headed real estate management for SNCF and directed its assets management department. In 2016, she published a book : L'Immobilier. Une passion française (Demopolis).

The same author See all publications



## Is rationing carbon for travel a fair, efficient and realistic solution?

Christophe Gay, Claire-Marine Javary, Sylvie Landriève



## Mobilities: the French government has to back up its environmental ambitions with the means to achieve them

Mobile Lives Forum, Anne Fuzier, Christophe Gay, Sylvie Landriève



## Let's plan for the final days of cars

Agathe Lefoulon, Sylvie Landriève, Christophe Gay

Dominic Villeneuve

Researcher in Public administrations

Dominic Villeneuve is a doctoral assistant at the Urban Sociology Laboratory (EPFL, Lausanne). His fields of expertise: Car dependence, Mobility related social exclusion Public Policy, Public Administration, Public Transit Policy, Public-Private Partnership (P3).



Vincent Kaufmann

Sociologue

Vincent Kaufmann, a Swiss sociologist, is one of the pioneers of mobility and inventor of the concept of motility. He is director of LaSUR at the EPFL, General Secretary of CEAT and professor of sociology and mobility analyses. He is the Mobile Lives Forum's scientific director.

The same author See all publications



**Mobility, motility: What determines our ability to move?**

Video by Vincent Kaufmann

## Understanding the real reasons why people choose a particular type of transport

Video by Vincent Kaufmann



## Engineering by Seduction

Video by Vincent Kaufmann



Christophe Gay

Mobile Lives Forum's director

Christophe Gay was the Director of the Mobile Lives Forum until 2023. He has combined training in international law (Sceaux), political science (Sorbonne) and psychosociology (Nanterre). After working on the image of big companies and local governments, he was the regional transportation communication director and then headed strategic planning for SNCF communications. An expert in mobility issues, he is behind the creation of the Forum.

The same author See all publications



## Is rationing carbon for travel a fair, efficient and realistic solution?

Christophe Gay, Claire-Marine Javary, Sylvie Landrière

# **Mobilities: the French government has to back up its environmental ambitions with the means to achieve them**

Mobile Lives Forum, Anne Fuzier, Christophe Gay, Sylvie Landriève



# **"Limiting the carbon footprint of mobility: what are the right policies for France?"**

Forum Meetings by Jean-Baptiste Frétigny, Christophe Gay, Jean-Marc Offner
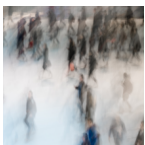
---

To cite this publication :

Sylvie Landriève et Dominic Villeneuve (09 May 2017), « Mobilization », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 05 April 2025, URL: https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/dictionary/3609/mobilization
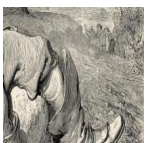
---

Other publications



Lockdown

Vincent Kaufmann



History of the concept of mobility

Vincent Kaufmann



Motility Index

Vincent Kaufmann, Emmanuel Ravalet



"Mobility as capital" Sketching the arguments

Vincent Kaufmann, Hanja Maksim, Simon Borja, Guillaume Courty, Thierry Ramadier

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_for_Equality_and_Against_Racism
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_Mass_(cycling)