


# Three misconceptions about social change



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Misconception #1: Movements emerge when people are so frustrated they cannot *not* act.

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A black and white photograph showing Rosa Parks and a man sitting on a bus. Rosa Parks is on the right, looking out the window. The man is on the left, looking towards her. The bus interior has overhead luggage racks and large windows. The text "Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955

# In fact...

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- Rosa Parks was a longtime civil rights activist.
- Activists are always looking to take advantage of political openings-- elections, pending legislation, issues that are in the public eye, etc.— when protest can have an impact.



# Two examples

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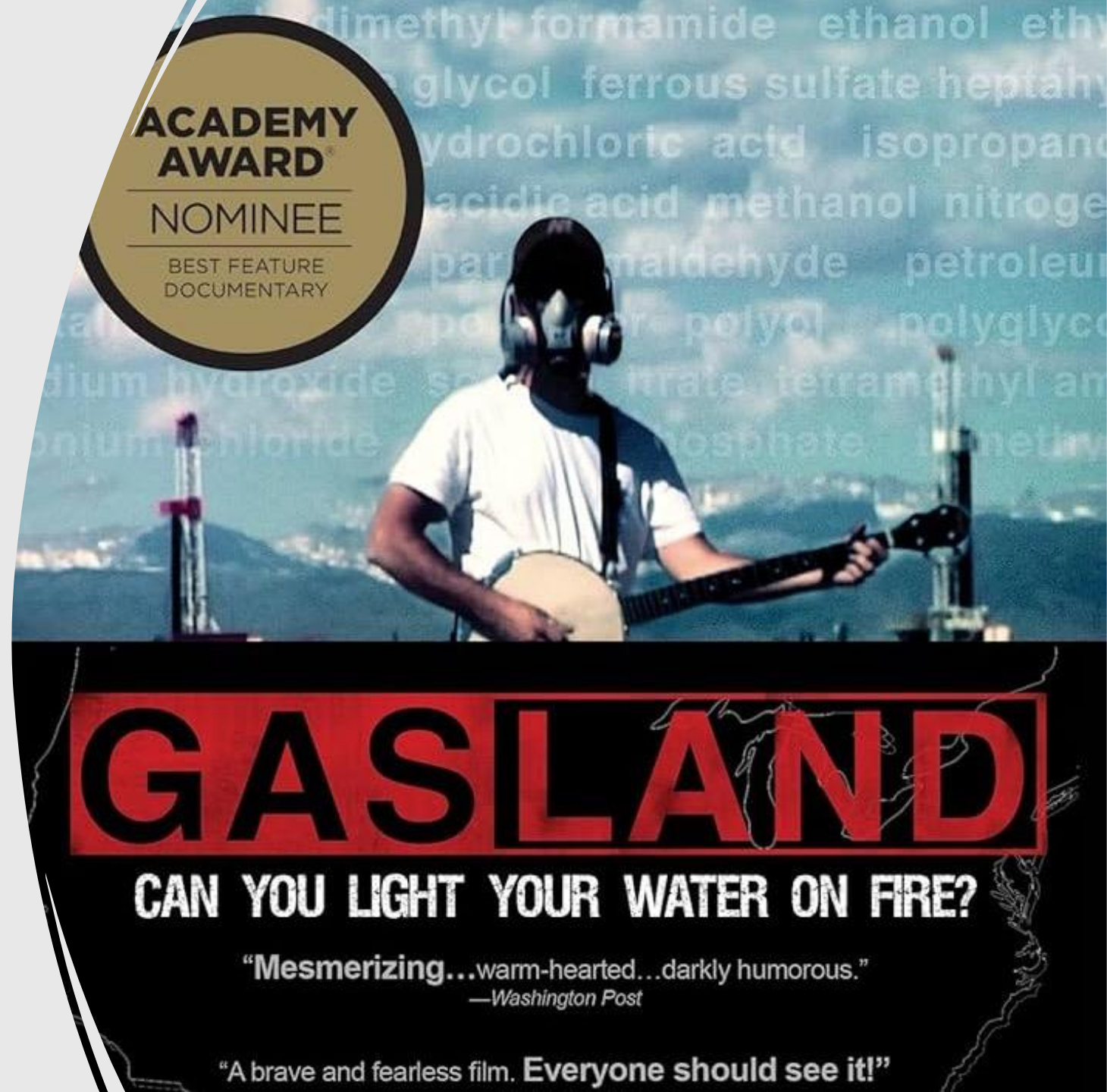
Activists in the 1990s capitalized on manufacturers' concerns for *brand visibility* to demand changes in their environmental and labor standards.

Corporations made those changes when protests received wide media coverage and/or were combined with government action (Dixon et al. 2016)



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After the film *Gasland* was released in 2010, local bans on fracking were more likely to be passed in places where environmental groups had organized screenings and demonstrations (Vasi et al. 2015)





The key for movements is to be alert to political openings for protest—*diverse* kinds of protest—to have impact.

Misconception #2: Change comes either from the top down or the bottom-up.

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# In fact...

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- Change comes from the middle; that is, from the organizations in which people live and work.
- Movements have had impact by changing, not laws, but the policies of companies, schools, churches, professions (Polletta and Amenta 2025).
- Movements have created markets (for organic food, grass-fed beef, wind and solar energy, etc.)





To change people's behavior, work from the outside in as well as the inside out: make it easy and appropriate to behave in new ways.

Misconception #3: If your story is compelling enough, it will change people's minds.



# In fact...

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- Personal stories often have no impact on people's opinions and may even backfire (Polletta and Redman 2019; Feldman et al 2019).





The key is to find occasions for stories when people are *open* to them, for example, when they are expecting to be entertained rather than persuaded.

# Making social change is hard

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- Movements need to be deliberate *and* fast-acting.
- Targeted to government, individuals, *and* every other institution that has the capacity to change the way we live and work.

