

## VARIATION, SELECTION, AND SOCIAL ACTION

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This article describes a case study in local activism and suggests that a social-action project can be conceptualized in Darwinian terms: Variation (generation of diverse activities, as in biological reproduction), and Selection (survival of variants selected by their encounters with the world). Participants in this project are identified by first names only.

### The Setting

The island of Martha's Vineyard, known as presidential vacationland (Clinton, Obama), has a year-round population about 16,000, divided into six fiercely independent towns, each with its own police force and fire department. Politically, about 80% voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012, likewise for Elizabeth Warren as Senator from Massachusetts. Economically, the island has huge disparities in income and wealth: for example, some summer people use their 20,000 sq. ft. houses for only a month, while many low- and middle-income year-round members of the island community struggle to find affordable rentals. There is not enough affordable housing to keep some low-income families on island. Many immigrant workers, not all of them documented, have to live in cramped housing.

### November 2016 – January 2017 (Phase 1)

Many islanders express general shock and dismay at Trump's election, with special concern for his repeated threats to deport lots of immigrants. The idea of establishing Martha's Vineyard as a sanctuary for immigrants occurs, more or less simultaneously, to a number of politically active islanders. Nora speaks with Melinda, a sympathetic Selectman in our town, and I discuss the possibilities with Richard, a supporter of left-wing causes and a Selectman in the next town to the west. I have no idea how many similar discussions are taking place elsewhere.

In December, Jack Fruchtman, a professor of constitutional law and a summer resident, publishes an opinion piece in the *Martha's Vineyard Times*, a local weekly devoted almost entirely to island affairs, about what we can do as citizens to preserve policies set in place by President Obama, with special emphasis on immigration and health care. A spontaneous rally is announced on social media to express resistance to hateful policies proposed by Trump during his campaign, sparking the formation of an all-island group known as *We Stand Together* (WST), with working groups addressing diverse concerns. Irene serves as the general convener, Jill as leader of the group concerned with safety and security for our immigrants. The basic idea is to make it safe for our immigrants, whatever their status, to approach the police for help when threatened by domestic violence or drug abuse.

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Even before the formation of WST, several of us, quite independently, start learning about the relevant law and sanctuary policies in Massachusetts cities. For our town, I take some language from the Cambridge (MA) Trust Act, check it out with Jack, and propose the following as town policy:

*"To see if the Town will vote to request the Selectmen to authorize Tisbury police and other town officials to comply with a federal ICE detainer request pertaining to undocumented immigrants only if presented with a criminal warrant or other evidence of probable cause, as required by the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution."* Note that this does not wave the red-flag language of "sanctuary."

Several WST members, including Jill, present this draft at an all-island Police Chiefs meeting in January, and learn that the police, without publicity, are already doing exactly what the warrant article would require. A letter to the *Martha's Vineyard Times* asserts that WST was proposing a "solution for which there is no problem," and that towns adopting such a warrant article could attract adverse attention from federal immigration officials (including ICE) and lose all federal funding. Our efforts now seem off the mark, or even counterproductive.

In a WST meeting a few days later, there is serious consideration of abandoning the entire process, but after intense discussion among half a dozen of us (including Jill and Sheila, a lawyer, who assures us that loss of federal funds was improbable), we decide to proceed. We modify the proposed warrant article language by inserting "*in keeping with current practices,*" to acknowledge the chiefs' concerns, and agree to place the new version onto the warrants of all six towns.

### **March-April 2017 (Phase 2)**

To make any island-wide policy such as "sanctuary" effective, all six towns must vote to adopt the same warrant article at their annual town meetings in April or May. There are two ways to place an article on the Town Warrant for a vote at Annual Town Meeting in April: Persuade the Selectmen to adopt the article, or collect signatures on a petition requesting its appearance on the Warrant. WST agrees to proceed separately within each town, to allow individual acquaintance, personal schedules, and the like to guide the process locally.

Approaching the Selectmen in my town, I suggest that this article supports the police by converting their practices into town policy, and ask them to consider accepting it as their own; however, for weeks their agenda is too full to consider it. Bruce, a WST participant in another town (and my distant cousin), comes up with the very same phrase and meets a similar lack of action; only in Richard's town does the full Board of Selectmen adopt the article. So WST folks in each of the remaining towns scurry about, talking to friends and neighbors, and gathering enough signatures to secure a place on their town's warrant before the spring deadline.

To achieve uniformity across all six Town Meetings, WST suggests that after our article is introduced by the Town Moderator, a WST member would speak briefly in support, following an agreed script. Then, by prior discussion and agreement, the town's Chief of Police would endorse the article. Both the WST member and the Chief would then respond to questions from the floor.

Holly, a WST member in my town, is a friend of the Chief and obtains his agreement to this scenario the day before Town Meeting. When the Moderator introduces the article, I speak briefly in support and the Chief gives his endorsement. There are no challenges from the floor, only two questions for information, and the article is adopted unanimously. The Chief and I shake hands, and the meeting erupts into applause. The same result is achieved in all other towns. And there it

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is: The island of Martha's Vineyard has declared its opposition to assisting federal immigration enforcement without a criminal warrant or its equivalent.

### Interpretation

The entire process can be conceptualized as two successive funnels, with wide initial variation narrowing to selection of the text and determination to proceed at the end of Phase 1, followed by renewed variation again narrowing to uniformity by the end of Phase 2.

In Phase 1, variations in behavior across individuals generated by Trump's threats concerning immigration and deportation (and many other federal programs) led to several lines of activity, at first without central coordination, then folded into the activities of Jill's WST working group. These variations led to selection of a final text and its general adoption (I don't recall any sort of vote). Variation may also have been important for the perseverance of our efforts in the face of adverse commentary.<sup>2</sup>

In Phase 2, selection of a single text unleashed a new cycle of variation within and between towns as individuals circulated petitions and spoke with town officers. There was a lot of redundancy despite (or because of) our informal and distributed leadership. Again, this variation led to development and selection of a uniform—and successful—approach to town meetings.

### Final Comment

About a year after the WST warrant article campaign began, I asked our Sheriff, Robert Ogden, to review the effect of the island-wide vote from his overall law-enforcement perspective. He said that it had made no difference to police operations, in part because there had been no ICE requests for assistance in detentions. The major effect of the overwhelming town votes, in his words, was to “reset my moral compass,” and he has encouraged a similar resetting by his officers.

### References:

- Doughty, A. H., & Lattal, K. A. (2001). Resistance to change of operant variation and repetition. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 76, 195-215. doi: [10.1901/jeab.2001.76-195](https://doi.org/10.1901/jeab.2001.76-195)
- Arantes, J., Berg, M. E., Le, D., & Grace, R. C. (2012). Resistance to change and preference for variable versus fixed response sequences. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 98, 1-21. doi: [10.1901/jeab.2012.98-1](https://doi.org/10.1901/jeab.2012.98-1)

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<sup>2</sup> In at least two studies (Doughty & Lattal, 2001; Arantes, Berg, & Grace, 2012), pigeons have been trained to peck keys for food in a highly variable pattern in one experimental condition, and to peck for food in a constant repeated pattern in a separate condition. A number of tests showed that responding in the Vary condition was more persistent than in the Repeat condition. Speculatively, the persistence of activity by a group of humans may be enhanced if the activity is highly variable and distributed over many individuals than if it is the same for all group members with central leadership.