

PROTEST AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

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■ **Abstract** I review the development of the political opportunity or political process perspective, which has animated a great deal of research on social movements. The essential insight—that the context in which a movement emerges influences its development and potential impact—provides a fruitful analytic orientation for addressing numerous questions about social movements. Reviewing the development of the literature, however, I note that conceptualizations of political opportunity vary greatly, and scholars disagree on basic theories of how political opportunities affect movements. The relatively small number of studies testing political opportunity hypotheses against other explanations have generated mixed results, owing in part to the articulation of the theory and the specifications of variables employed. I examine conflicting specifications of the theory by considering the range of outcomes scholars address. By disaggregating outcomes and actors, I argue, we can reconcile some of the apparent contradictions and build a more comprehensive and robust theory of opportunities and social movements.

INTRODUCTION

Social protest movements make history, one might paraphrase an earlier analyst, albeit not in circumstances they choose. The ongoing interactions between challengers and the world around them determine not only the immediate outcomes of a social movement but also its development and potential influence over time. Over the past three decades, research that emphasizes the interaction of a social movement with its context has accumulated within the “political opportunity” or “political process” tradition. The analytic focus on the mutual influence of context and strategy appropriately directs attention to the large theoretical tensions in political sociology, stated broadly, between structure and agency. Reviewing selected literature, I examine the origins, development, conceptualization, and testing of political opportunity theory. By focusing on several key questions and analytic challenges, I argue, we can move scholarship forward to address critical questions about the origins, development, and influence of social movements.

The key recognition in the political opportunity perspective is that activists' prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilizing supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent. Analysts therefore appropriately direct much of their attention to the world outside a social movement, on the premise that exogenous factors enhance or inhibit a social movement's prospects for (a) mobilizing, (b) advancing particular claims rather than others, (c) cultivating some alliances rather than others, (d) employing particular political strategies and tactics rather than others, and (e) affecting mainstream institutional politics and policy. This is, of course, a great deal of weight for any concept to bear.

The diversity of understandings of political opportunity has led friendly critics to warn, "The concept of political opportunity structure is. . . in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment" (Gamson & Meyer 1996, p. 275). Other critics (see especially Goodwin & Jasper 2003) have been less optimistic about the utility of the concept, arguing that it promises to explain too much, effectively neglecting the importance of activist agency, and that it actually explains too little, offering only a mechanistic understanding of social movements that does not apply to many cases.

Here, I review the development of the political opportunity or political process perspective, report findings from selected research over the past 30 years, and identify productive questions for future research. I begin by discussing the origins of the concept and then review various conceptualizations of political opportunity, springing from different settings and different questions. I review the relatively few studies that test opportunity theory against alternatives, noting mixed results. I then review selected studies that work to develop the theory, tracing conflicts to different specifications of opportunity applied to explain different outcomes. By looking at how political opportunities work, I argue that an approach that recognizes movements as coalitions can synthesize different visions of political opportunities. I then look at the ways in which a movement can influence or alter the conditions for mobilization, arguing for a processual analysis of opportunities.

ORIGINS OF POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY THEORY

Analysts of social protest movements, like military planners and pundits, are often fighting—or analyzing—the most recent battles, and seeking to generalize from limited experience. A brief schematic review of the development of scholarship feeding into and out of the political opportunity tradition can illuminate problems of conceptualization as well as potential solutions. Sociologists and political scientists who considered political protest in the 1950s wrote with fascism in general—and Nazism in particular—in mind. They thus defined movements as dysfunctional, irrational, and inherently undesirable, and described those who joined them as disconnected from intermediate associations that would link them with more productive, and less disruptive, social pursuits (e.g., Kornhauser 1959). The assumption was that social movements represented alternatives to, rather than

expressions of, politics; the fundamental question was why movements sometimes emerged in apparently healthy democracies.

The protest movements of the 1960s, thriving across advanced industrialized nations with a variety of pluralist political systems, led scholars to examine movements closely again. Empirical studies of activists undermined the premises of anomie and political disconnection. Keniston (1968) found that leaders of activist student groups in the United States were psychologically better adjusted than their less active colleagues. Parkin's (1968) examination of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament found that members of this activist organization were likely to be involved in many other social and political organizations. Further, policy-oriented analysts found that social unrest sometimes led to concessions from government (e.g., Button 1978, Piven & Cloward 1977), so that protest strategies could be seen as rational efforts by people poorly positioned to make claims on government using conventional means. For those left outside of the pluralist arena, protest was a "political resource" to be used to influence policy (Lipsky 1970; also see McCarthy & Zald 1977). The vindication of protest strategies as politics by the emerging "resource mobilization" school led to a shift in the research focus from *why* movements emerge to *how*.

After establishing the potential rationality of a social protest movement and the individuals who animate it, research in this area turned largely to the processes by which organizers mobilized activities such as protest or membership in civic organizations (e.g., Walker 1991, Wilson 1995). Because collective action in pursuit of either individual economic goals or nondivisible collective benefits carries an inherent "free rider" problem (Olson 1965), analysts directed their attention to how organizers overcame this problem and mobilized support. At the same time, they effectively considered the context in which strategizing takes place as a constant.

Analysts looking at the processes of generating mobilization factored out much of the stuff that comprises politics, particularly the nature of the political context and activist grievances. Political opportunity theory arose as a corrective, explicitly concerned with predicting variance in the periodicity, content, and outcomes of activist efforts over time across different institutional contexts. The approach emphasized the interaction of activist efforts and more mainstream institutional politics. The premise underlying this approach—that protest outside mainstream political institutions was closely tied to more conventional political activity within—was hardly novel to political science or sociology. Lipset's (1963) classic *Political Man*, for example, had explained the nature of grievances, the composition of constituencies, and the form of political mobilization by looking at the relationship between society and the state. At the same time, the attention focused on the connections between political structures and movements promised to build a stronger understanding of social movements. The "structure of political opportunities," analogous to the structure of career opportunities individuals face, explicitly considered the available means for a constituency to lodge claims against authorities.

The primary point of the political process approach was that activists do not choose goals, strategies, and tactics in a vacuum. Rather, the political context,

conceptualized fairly broadly, sets the grievances around which activists mobilize, advantaging some claims and disadvantaging others. Further, the organization of the polity and the positioning of various actors within it makes some strategies of influence more attractive, and potentially efficacious, than others. The wisdom, creativity, and outcomes of activists' choices—their *agency*—can only be understood and evaluated by looking at the political context and the rules of the games in which those choices are made—that is, *structure*.

The first explicit use of a “political opportunity” framework was Eisinger’s (1973) effort to explain why some American cities witnessed extensive riots about race and poverty during the late 1960s while others did not. Eisinger focused on the openness of urban governments to more conventional political inputs and found that cities with a combination of what he termed “open” and “closed” structures for citizen participation were most likely to experience riots. Cities with extensive institutional openings preempted riots by inviting conventional means of political participation to redress grievances; cities without visible openings for participation repressed or discouraged dissident claimants to foreclose eruptions of protest. The approach implicitly assumed constant pressures across urban America and treated the most proximate institutional arrangements as the key factors influencing the way political dissent emerged.

Tilly (1978) built upon Eisinger’s (1973) work to offer the beginnings of a more comprehensive theory, suggesting national comparisons, recognizing changes in opportunities over time, and arguing that opportunities would explain the more general process of choosing tactics from a spectrum of possibilities within a “repertoire of contention.” For Tilly, tactical choice reflects activists optimizing strategic opportunities in pursuit of particular claims at a particular time. Like Eisinger, he contends that the frequency of protest bears a curvilinear relationship with political openness. When authorities offer a given constituency routine and meaningful avenues for access, few of its members protest because less costly, more direct routes to influence are available. At the other end of the spectrum of openness, authorities can repress various constituencies such that they are unable to develop the requisite capacity (whether cognitive or organizational) to lodge their claims. In this view, protest occurs when there is a space of toleration by a polity and when claimants are neither sufficiently advantaged to obviate the need to use dramatic means to express their interests nor so completely repressed to prevent them from trying to get what they want.

Tilly’s empirical work traced the development of popular politics in relationship to state institutions. In his study of the development of democratic politics in Britain over nearly a century, for example, Tilly (1995) describes how a range of factors, including demographic and economic shifts and the opening of political institutions, led to a shift from local, direct, and particularistic political contention toward longer term, national, and routinized forms of politics. The development of a more democratic Parliament allowed popular politics to move indoors through the development of mass parties and electoral participation. In essence, Tilly traced the development of the same curve Eisinger postulated, in which protest is enabled, then channeled into less disruptive politics.

Taken together, Tilly and Eisinger offer models for cross-sectional comparisons and longitudinal studies. Eisinger's rather restrictive specification of opportunities focuses on formal institutional rules to explain the frequency of a particular behavior, riots. In contrast, Tilly's broader and more inclusive approach considers a wider range of variables to explain the range of expressions of popular politics over a long period. Both, however, agreed upon the fundamental curvilinear relationship of opportunities to protest politics. They also set out a spectrum of conceptual possibilities for subsequent scholars.

EXPLAINING CASES AND BUILDING THEORY

The early work on political opportunities, particularly Tilly's (1978) articulation of a broader approach to social movements, encouraged scholars to use related approaches to examine particular cases and to develop a more comprehensive theory. Both broader and more restrictive conceptualizations of political opportunity theory appeared, with findings from one case often generalized to widely disparate cases. Scholars included factors of particular—or exclusive—relevance to the cases they examined. Synthetic theoretical work, however, was often distant from the particular specifications researchers employed in empirical work.

McAdam's (1982) study of the civil rights movement in the United States demonstrates the analytic power of considering the broad range of factors that affect activists' prospects for mobilizing a social movement. Examining the trajectory of civil rights activism over 40 years, McAdam explicitly offers political process theory as an alternative to, and improvement over, previous collective behavior and resource mobilization approaches. African American civil rights activism, McAdam contends, only emerged forcefully when external circumstances provided sufficient openness to allow mobilization. Favorable changes in policy and the political environment, including the collapse of the cotton economy in the South, African American migration to Northern cities, and a decline in the number of lynchings, for example, lowered the costs and dangers of organizing for African Americans and increased their political value as an electoral constituency.

The Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared *de jure* racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, legitimated both white and black concern with civil rights and increased political attention to the issue. In explicitly endorsing integration, it also provided African Americans with a sense of "cognitive liberation" that encouraged action. Political activists used the *Brown* decision as an occasion for education and political organization, encouraging activists who wanted to challenge segregation in other venues. Congressional consideration, and ultimate passage, of civil rights bills also drew public attention to the concerns of civil rights activists. Statements supporting civil rights by elected officials, particularly Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, further legitimated political action. Their administrations' protection of civil rights workers created a safer space for political mobilization. And of course, mobilization itself

created a demonstration effect, reinforcing the sense of possible political efficacy and enhancing subsequent mobilization.

The decline of the civil rights movement also reflected changes in the political and cultural context. As activism spread and government began to respond, activists increasingly differed about political claims and tactics. Urban riots strained government and outsider sympathy for the cause of civil rights and led to repression of some forms of activism. At the same time, fiscal and political constraints on the federal government limited policy responsiveness, undermining the value of civil rights activism. McAdam's analysis of the civil rights movement, explicitly offered as an exemplar of a political process approach, inspired subsequent analysts looking at other cases.

Costain's (1992) analysis of the women's movement in the United States, modeled analytically and methodologically after McAdam's, traced a similar story of rise and decline. Here broad changes in the economy, particularly the increased presence of women in higher education and the workforce, offered additional resources to a constituency seeking to mobilize. Government openness, seen in Congressional attention to discrimination against women, legitimated and encouraged activism—as did the success of the civil rights movement. In these cases, mobilization of a normally excluded constituency followed government openings toward that constituency. Demobilization followed political defeats and government neglect. In such cases, opportunities for social mobilization are also opportunities for policy reforms, which encourage each other in a synergistic spiral.

Tarrow (1989) applied a similar model to explain the broad range of social movement activity over a tumultuous decade, 1965–1975, in Italian politics. His political process approach traces a “cycle of protest,” including decline, by considering institutional politics along with social protest and disorder. In this case, government openings reduced the cost of collective action, and the initial mobilization of one constituency encouraged others to mobilize as well. Workers, students, religious reformers, and leftist factions within parties all took to the streets. Government responses initially encouraged additional mobilization, some of which turned violent. Violence and disorder legitimated repression, raising the costs of collective action, and diminishing protest. At the same time, some of the social movement actors turned their attention to more conventional political activity, reducing their claims and moderating their tactics, effectively institutionalizing dissent.

Longitudinal studies followed the outlines of Tilly's broad theoretical argument, but they focused more on the emergence of the challenging movement than its trajectory entering political institutions. Tracing the emergence of actors more or less disadvantaged in institutional politics, they emphasized “expanding opportunities” as a proximate condition for mobilization. In effect, by focusing on emergent mobilization on behalf of excluded constituencies, they emphasized one end of the opportunity curve.

In contrast, cross-sectional comparative studies trace the curve across different contexts. For example, Kitschelt's (1986) study of antinuclear movements in four democracies, France, Sweden, the United States, and West Germany, uses political opportunity theory to explain the style and development of social movement

politics, as well as their ultimate influence. Acknowledging a broad conception of opportunity, including resources, institutions, and historical precedents, Kitschelt nonetheless offers a narrower specification. He divides the four states along two dimensions: input structures (open or closed) and output capacity (strong or weak). The simple classification, he contends, explains the strategies employed by challengers in all four states. The options for participation determine strategy—confrontational in response to blockage, assimilative in response to openness. The capacity of the state determines influence—greater procedural innovation or substantive change in response to pressures in weaker states. This spare model offers an advantage of clarity, but at the cost of simplifying and flattening a broad range of factors critical to the development of a social movement over time.

Kriesi and his colleagues (Kriesi et al. 1995) reintroduce the complexity and nuance of the longitudinal studies by comparing “new social movements” [the “family” of left-libertarian movements in advanced industrialized states (see della Porta & Rucht 1995)] across four European states (France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) over time. Opportunity structures include the nature of political cleavages, institutional structures, alliance structures (here, the openness and political position of the organized left), and prevailing strategies of social movements. By focusing on the effects of two factors, the configuration of power on the left and its presence or absence in government, they offer a fuller picture of citizen mobilization as it responds to political opportunity.

By thinking of movement participation as including less disruptive and confrontational protest, they examine the full range of expressions that activists employ to make claims. Kriesi et al. (1995) remind the reader that the state can invite action by facilitating access, but it can also provoke action by producing unwanted policies and political threats, thereby raising the costs of inaction. State action affects not only the volume of participation but also its form and location. When normalized for population size, they show, Switzerland has by far the highest level of social mobilization, but it is largely concentrated in conventional political participation and membership in social movement organizations. In contrast, France offers the lowest volume of participation, including the smallest numbers of protest events and members of social movement organizations, but the most confrontational and violent action, which declines when the left is in power. The explanation is more comprehensive than Kitschelt’s (1986), but also much more complicated and harder to translate simply to other cases. The work underscores the importance, and the difficulty, of developing a useable theory of political opportunity that can inform a variety of empirical investigations. If political opportunity theory can help explain particular cases, can it generate testable generalizations that hold across cases?

TESTING POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY THEORY

A relatively small number of studies empirically test political opportunity hypotheses against alternative theories. The premises of the political process approach, at least as articulated by the scholars testing them, generally do not perform well.

Goodwin (2002) conducted a macroanalysis testing political opportunity theory by engaging a large team of scholars to review one hundred monographs covering a wide variety of social movements, ranging from the Huk rebellion to the Harlem Renaissance. The researchers coded each study along four variables articulated in McAdam's (1996) conception of political opportunities: (a) increasing popular access to the political system, (b) divisions within the elite, (c) the availability of elite allies, and (d) diminishing state repression. Goodwin acknowledges potential flaws in the analysis that should be recognized when considering the findings. First, it is not clear that the breadth of the sample provides an appropriate test of political opportunity theory, which is unlikely to be a useful tool for all the cases—for example, analyzing cultural or artistic movements that do not make political claims. Second, Goodwin's team was dependent upon the original researchers, some of whom wrote before any articulation of political opportunity theory. If the original investigator did not look for political opportunities, it is unlikely that the secondary reviewer would find them. Third, Goodwin reports a broad range of interpretation in coding and minimal intercoder reliability.

All that acknowledged, the aggregate results raise troubling questions for political opportunity theory. Goodwin (2002) reports that one or more of the political opportunity variables he considers appear in only slightly more than half (59) of the accounts. Excluding explicitly cultural movements such as “hip-hop” from the analysis increases the percentage of cases where political opportunity turns up slightly, but many problems remain. Not the least of these is the formulation of “expanding political opportunities” in terms of increased access. This appeared far more frequently in nondemocratic contexts (73% of cases) than in democratic contexts, although the theory, as Goodwin notes, was forged primarily in democratic contexts. Further, contracting opportunities, seen in reduced access to the political system, appear important in at least one third of the cases in which political opportunities matter at all, primarily in democratic contexts.

Tests of political opportunity theory in specific cases also raise concerns about the predictive power of the theory. Table 1 summarizes the major empirical tests of political opportunity. (As is discussed below, most studies employing political opportunity concepts do not test the theory but instead start with a presumption that some element of the theory can be helpful in explaining a case.) Note that all the tests offer relatively restricted conceptions of the theory, generally locating variables in measurable aspects of formal political institutions. Deciding just what variables political opportunities include is critical in testing the theory. McCammon et al. (2001), for example, find that cultural attitudes and economic opportunities for women are critical in explaining the timing of a state's ratification of woman suffrage. This broader, issue-specific conceptualization of political opportunity is useful in explaining the case, whereas the narrower specification that focuses on formal institutional openings is not. In the same way, Van Dyke (2003) finds political opportunity theory useful in explaining coalition formation and cooperation among student groups on college campuses when threat and grievances are conceptualized as elements of political opportunity. Van Dyke & Soule (2002)

TABLE 1 Selected studies testing political opportunity structure (POS) against alternatives

Study	Subject	Dependent variable	Findings
Amenta & Zylan 1991	Townsend (U.S. states)	Membership in Townsend clubs	+ Favorable party structure and allies increase membership
Cress & Snow 2000	Homeless in U.S. cities	Policy outcomes	+ Sympathetic allies aid influence
Lieske 1978	Riots in U.S. cities	Violence	+ Openings and economic development diminish violence
McCammon et al. 2001	Woman suffrage (U.S.)	Policy change	– Formal openings less important than cultural changes in gender roles
McCammon 2001a	Labor (U.S.)	Legal grievances filed with government	– Economic pressures most important; affect employers, and workers respond
McCammon 2001b	Woman suffrage (U.S.)	Number of suffrage organizations	– Resources more important than POS
Osa & Corduneanu-Huci 2003	24 Nondemocracies	Mobilization	+/- Access to media and social networks interact with POS
Snow et al. 2003	Homeless in U.S. cities	Protest	– Strain and resources explain mobilization, not POS
Soule et al. 1999	Women (U.S.)	Insider and outsider protest	+/- Resources most important; openings do not increase mobilization
Van Dyke 2003	U.S. college students	Coalition formation and cooperation	+ POS (external threat) stimulates cooperation
Van Dyke & Soule 2002	Patriot militia in U.S. states	Number of organizations	+ Threat is key to mobilization

find similar results in looking at Patriot militia mobilization. In contrast, Snow et al. (2003) consider grievances and resources as tests of other theories (strain and resource mobilization, respectively) and find political opportunity theory wanting.

The mixed record of political opportunity theory in explicit empirical tests highlights important challenges for social movement scholars. First, competing formulations of hypotheses from political opportunity theory coexist within the literature, such that scholars do not agree on many specific refutable hypotheses. Although some articulations of the theory stress expanding opportunities as a precursor for mobilization (e.g., McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1989, Costain 1992), for example, others also consider threat and constricting institutional opportunities as conditions for extrainstitutional mobilization (Meyer 1990, 1993a,b; Smith 1996). Reconciling these ostensibly conflicting hypotheses theoretically is essential for

the continued development of the political opportunity perspective. Second, scholars differ in how many factors in the political environment they will consider as components of political opportunity. Thus, when grievances, for example, appear as a significant explanatory variable, their appearance can be used to support or refute political opportunity theory. Third, because there is considerable flexibility not only in the conception of political opportunity but also in the specification of opportunity variables, it is rarely clear that scholars have picked the most appropriate specification for the variables in each case. Nonetheless, results from empirical tests demand further theoretical development as well as additional empirical examinations. Looking at the development of the literature, I argue, we can develop a broader conception of the theory that will allow reconciliation of seemingly disparate findings.

DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

Although studies such as those outlined above call into question some specifications of political opportunity theory, they also firmly support the importance of context in analyzing the development of social movements. The challenge for researchers is to identify which aspects of the external world affect the development of which social movements, and how. Given the broad range of empirical concerns and settings, conceptual statements are necessarily broad. Tarrow's (1998, pp. 19–20) economical definition, “consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics,” affords researchers considerable latitude in tailoring the concepts to the case at hand. Although there is a large variety in the number and names of dimensions of opportunity that scholars proffer, the general orientation toward the costs, possibilities, and likely payoffs of collective action is consistent across major conceptual statements (see Jenkins & Klandermans 1995a, Koopmans 1996, Kriesi 1996, 2004; McAdam 1996, Rucht 1996, Tarrow 1998). Nonetheless, many scholars avoid a large conceptual statement of opportunities and simply identify variables they judge to be relevant to the case at hand. Importantly, most of this work is not directed toward testing political opportunity theory so much as toward explaining cases and developing an understanding of the range of factors that can affect social movements.

Predictably, analysts identify different factors as elements of opportunity depending on the sorts of movements they address and the questions they ask. In general, analysts seeking to explain how and why seemingly similar movements differ develop more restrictive models of political opportunity that emphasize stable aspects of government (following Eisinger 1973, Kitschelt 1986), essentially holding them constant for cross-sectional comparisons. Scholars who conduct longitudinal studies to explain the stages and cycles of social protest movements (following McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1989) tend to focus on more volatile aspects

of political opportunity, such as public policy and political alignments, and to employ an elaborated conception of opportunity that considers a broad range of conjunctural and issue-specific factors.

In seeking to examine the exogenous factors that could affect the development of a social movement, analysts accrete new variables they judge to be significant in the case under examination. Scholars have considered as independent opportunity variables the organizations of previous challengers (Minkoff 1997, Meyer & Whittier 1994), the openness and ideological positions of political parties (Amenta & Zylan 1991, Kriesi et al. 1995, Rucht 1996), changes in public policy (Costain 1992; Meyer 1993a, 2005), international alliances and the constraints on state policy (Meyer 2003), state capacity (Kitschelt 1986, Amenta et al. 1994), the geographic scope and repressive capacity of governments (Boudreau 1996; also see Brockett 1991, Schock 1999), the activities of countermovement opponents (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996, Andrews 2002, Fetner 2001, Rohlinger 2002), potential activists' perceptions of political opportunity (Gamson & Meyer 1996, Kurzman 1996), and even the prospects for personal affiliations (oddly named the "libidinal opportunity structure"; see Goodwin 1997). Thus, opportunity variables are often not disproved, refined, or replaced, but simply added.

Because it is often coupled with writing that suggests movements flourish during favorable or expanding opportunities and fade in times of less favorable or declining opportunities, the collective scholarship runs the risk of turning an important analytical advance into a mere tautology, defined backwards through the observation of political mobilization. Moreover, discovering opportunity by first finding mobilization or policy change, sampling on the dependent variable, factors out the strategy and agency of actors who actually mobilize. Ultimately, we need an approach to political opportunities sufficiently robust so that we can see possibilities in the absence of mobilization, that is, "missed opportunities," when activists could launch successful mobilizations and do not (Sawyers & Meyer 1999), or when a particular strategy is more likely to be effective (Valocchi 1993, Amenta 2005).

The extent of variation in both concept and use is both completely understandable and extremely frustrating. It is understandable because different things *are* relevant to different movements, and to answering different questions. It is frustrating because analysts talk past each other in answering their own questions, missing opportunities to build larger understanding. Further, because significant contextual factors are likely to affect various outcomes differently, it is important to separate and specify the different dependent variables that political opportunities are supposed to explain.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY FOR WHAT?

Scholars use political opportunity explanations to examine different dependent variables, including most commonly: social protest mobilization generally (e.g., Almeida & Stearns 1998, Tarrow 1989, Joppke 1993), particular tactics or

strategies (e.g., Eisinger 1973, Jenkins & Eckert 1986, Cooper 1996, Minkoff 1997), formation of organizations (Clemens 1997, Minkoff 1995), and influence on public policy (Piven & Cloward 1977, Amenta & Zylan 1991). Although it seems clear that key elements of political opportunity would operate differently for each outcome, and scholars have identified this issue as problematic (e.g., McAdam 1996, Meyer 2002), systematic examination of the differential effects of particular elements of political opportunity is rare (but see Meyer & Minkoff 2004).

As a first broad cut, we can conceptually separate opportunities for mobilization and opportunities for influence, and disaggregate outcomes within each. Looking first at mobilization, we can note the range of behaviors that can be explained as social movement mobilization. Much research, however, focuses only on one form of participation. Eisinger's (1973) study examined only urban riots, and other studies of the time also focused exclusively on disruptive protest (e.g., Button 1978, Piven & Cloward 1977, Lipsky 1970), suggesting that openings produced protest. Other scholars have looked at mobilization through organizations. Minkoff (1994), for example, finds that increased activism and the density of service-oriented organizations among women and African Americans, conceptualized as opportunity variables, promoted the formation of advocacy-oriented groups. Redding & Viterna (1999) note that left-libertarian movements are more likely to form parties when proportional representation affords payoffs for doing so (also see Lucardie 2000). Amenta & Zylan (1991) identify open party systems as aids to mobilization, at least when conceptualized as membership in dissident organizations. Others use local institutional rules and political culture to explain mobilization, as seen in the number of identified gay and lesbian candidates for elective office (Button et al. 1999), or through the deployment of particular identities (e.g., Bernstein 1997, Gotham 1999, Schneider 1997). There is no reason to assume that all these mobilization outcomes will respond in the same way to similar changes in contextual factors.

In contrast, Kriesi et al.'s (1995) study explicitly considers a broad range of mobilization outcomes, including conventional political participation, organizational membership, and protest participation, as aspects of mobilization. Similarly, recent studies, often employing events data, consider mobilization as an aggregate category, including the wide variety of activities in which dissidents engage, ranging from forms of action that are in liberal polities relatively orderly and nondisruptive, such as petitions and permitted demonstrations, to strikes, to political violence (see Jenkins 1985, Kriesi et al. 1995, Maney 2000, McAdam 1982, 1983; Roscigno & Danaher 2001, Tarrow 1989, Tilly 1995). Unless the forms of mobilization are sorted out in analysis, such aggregation may wash out the effects of political opportunity altogether, as increases in some kinds of mobilization will be accompanied by declines in others.

Clearly, a polity that provides openness to one kind of participation may be closed to others. There is, however, very little empirical work that notes how distinct political opportunity variables might affect the relative prominence of particular forms of claims-making differently, as elites or authorities can channel dissent into particularly unthreatening, and perhaps less effective, forms of activism (see

Jenkins & Eckert 1986, della Porta et al. 1998, McCarthy & McPhail 1998). The relationships among different types of activism are also begging for more empirical work. We need to know, for example, about the sequencing of particular influence strategies (from more to less disruptive in open polities?) and their relationship in frequency to each other. In his study of collective action in Italy, for example, Tarrow (1989) shows that a broad range of activities present at the height of a “cycle of protest” gave way to both greater institutionally oriented activism and more extreme political violence. This suggests it is a mistake to think that conceptualizing “openness” is a simple matter.

Core elements of political opportunity, such as political openness, are likely to operate differently for these distinct dependent variables (Meyer & Minkoff 2004)—and for different sorts of claimants. Unwelcome changes in policy, for example, may alert citizens of the need to act on their own behalf (Opp 2000) or may cause elite actors to side with, or try to activate, a largely disengaged public (Meyer 1993b). We can develop a more comprehensive theory of political opportunity by returning to Tilly’s (1978) curvilinear conception of openness. Well-established constituencies, and the issue-based movements they animate, such as the largely middle-class environmental and peace movements, may need to be forced out of institutional politics in order to stage a social movement. In contrast, more marginal constituencies, such as those based on ethnic identity or sexual orientation, may need to be enabled into mobilization by institutional openings. Whereas the former is pushed out to the social protest part of the curve, the latter is invited into mobilization to reach the same point on the curve.

The other broad set of dependent variables is the outcomes of social protest. Successful mobilization *sometimes* leads to policy reform, but the opportunities for policy change are distinct from those for mobilization. That opportunities for influence sometimes align with those for mobilization creates a confusion in the literature, as scholars can conflate two distinct outcomes based on cases in which they move in concert. One model of reciprocal effects notes a synergistic spiral of reform and mobilization (e.g., McAdam 1982, Costain 1992).

But this model is clearly not always applicable. Unfavorable changes in policy can spur mobilization, even at such times when mobilization is unlikely to have much *noticeable* effect on policy. Indeed, social movements that arise in response to proposed or actual unwelcome changes in policy may see their influence in moderating the efforts or achievements of their opponents or, more favorably, maintaining the status quo. In tracing antinuclear weapons mobilization over time in the United States, Meyer (1993a) finds that activists are most likely to succeed in reaching broader audiences and mobilizing extrainstitutional support when (a) government policy appears particularly hostile and bellicose, and (b) institutional routes for political influence appear foreclosed—precisely those times when they are unlikely to get what they want in terms of policy. In terms of political openness in mainstream institutions, when activists are welcomed into the White House, when the State Department contains visible advocates of arms control and military restraint, and a president visibly and vocally embraces the aims of activists, visible

activism is least likely. We can see a similar pattern for environmental activists (Schlozman & Tierney 1986) and for abortion rights and antiabortion activists (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996, Staggenborg 1991). Bad news in policy and increased distance from effective policymaking both seem to improve the prospects for political mobilization. In this case, opportunities for mobilization appear at exactly those times when influence on policy, at least proactive influence, is least likely. Influence would be seen by the stability in policies rather than change, and as activists stave off unwanted reforms (also see Reese 1996, Santoro 1999).

Only by separating the analysis of opportunities for policy reform from those for political mobilization can we begin to make sense of the relationship between activism and public policy. Additionally, because policy itself is multidimensional, analysts must choose an operational definition from many possibilities that do not necessarily move in concert (Giugni et al. 1999). Gamson (1990), for example, distinguishes between new advantages for a constituency (victory) and formal recognition of that constituency, which could be part of a policy victory, or a co-optative substitute for it (see also Strong et al. 2000). McAdam & Su (2002), for example, find that mobilization against the Vietnam War led Congress to vote more frequently on whether to continue the war, but not to vote to stop it. The movement successfully set the political agenda, but could not determine the resolution of that agenda.

Movement outcomes can be specified in a wide variety of ways that may often operate differently in response to the political environment, including: (a) a discrete policy change (Banaszak 1996, McCammon et al. 2001, Soule et al. 1999); (b) changes in levels of appropriations for an established program (Amenta et al. 1994, Button 1978, Meyer & Minkoff 2004); (c) policy implementation (Andrews 2001); (d) running directed candidates for office (Andrews 1997, Button et al. 1999); (e) creating alternative institutions (Andrews 2002); or (f) actual practices, ranging from using animals in the circus and scientific experiments (Einwohner 1999) to employing torture of political opponents (Krain 1997).

To no small degree, understanding and programmatic building of knowledge can advance if researchers follow McAdam's (1996, p. 31) advice about being "explicit about *which* dependent variable we are seeking to explain and *which* dimensions of *political* opportunity are germane to that explanation" (emphasis in original). Beyond this, finding the ways in which political opportunities influence mobilization and its development may lead to a broader understanding of the processes surrounding protest.

HOW POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES WORK: COALITIONS AND MOVEMENTS

A more processural understanding of political opportunities allows analysts to reconcile apparently conflicting findings. This understanding is based on disaggregating not only outcomes but also actors. Beyond finding correlations between

opportunities and various outcomes, it is essential to trace the processes through which changes in opportunity translate into mobilization—and into subsequent changes in opportunities. A process-oriented analysis will build on the foundations of a structural analysis and afford a meaningful analytical space for identifying mechanisms of influence (McAdam et al. 2001) and thereby discerning political agency. The presumption underneath a political opportunity approach is that the development of movements reflects, responds to, and sometimes alters the realities of politics and policy, although most work gives short shrift to how.

Analysts are divided, for example, on the degree to which activists are cognizant of changes in political opportunity. In some iterations of political opportunity theory (e.g., Tarrow 1996, 1998), activists are viewed as reasonably rational entrepreneurs waiting for signals from the state and the larger society about what, if any, claims to lodge and how. Monitoring the state and other political actors, as well as the reception accorded other social movement activists, organizers plot action more or less strategically.

Other analysts, however, are agnostic about the cognizance and intentionality of political actors. Gamson & Meyer (1996) offer a vision in which activists are constantly trying to mobilize, and are usually unsuccessful. They suggest that activists, similar to the founders of small businesses, are by disposition unduly optimistic about opportunities. They do not necessarily calculate with any rigor the prospects for successfully mobilizing or generating policy reform; they just keep trying. In this view, political opportunities are less important as signals than as environmental conditions that allow protest to emerge and resonate with government and other social actors.

These positions, of course, are not necessarily incompatible, and recognizing the diversity within any social movement is helpful in reconciling them. Whereas committed activists may always be trying to mobilize on behalf of their causes, savvy ones adjust rhetoric, focus, and tactics to respond to political circumstances (Taylor 1989). The environmentalist organizer, for example, who has a broad range of grievances to take up with the state, all in pursuit of a larger political agenda, understands that focusing on limiting logging, for example, may be a more promising issue at one time than putting toxic discharge at the top of the agenda. Skilled organizers frame their demands to mobilize others, as well as to serve an ideological agenda. Animal rights activists, for instance, with a broad agenda that includes ending meat-eating and animal experimentation of all kinds, find that they mobilize broadest support and sympathy by targeting runway models wearing furs and scientists experimenting on household pets (Einwohner 1999).

Organizers, who must convince potential activists that protest is both necessary and potentially effective, prospect for issues that represent part of a larger ideological agenda that is useful for mobilization and education, issues that seem both urgent and amenable to action (Diani 1996). At any given time, there is a broad range of opinions among mobilizing organizations and potentially mobilizable citizens about what issues are worth addressing. To make the case for any issue,

organizers depend on authorities to help, albeit perhaps unwittingly. Authorities, through policy, make issues more or less urgent and institutional politics seem more or less promising. The better authorities are at convincing citizens of the wisdom of their policies and of the openness of their decisions to citizen influence—or, paradoxically, of their complete insulation from political influence—the more difficult is the organizer's job.

It is productive to conceptualize some actors within a movement coalition as strategic respondents to opportunities and others as consistent champions of their claims, regardless of the strategic environment. The former is likely to be frequently in the middle of potentially successful organizing efforts. The latter, like the broken clock that correctly tells time twice daily, will sometimes be well positioned to reach a broader audience. The most important action, however, is within the much larger group of people who mobilize on some issues sometimes, in response to both circumstances and to organizers' efforts. It is helpful then to recognize that, particularly in liberal polities, social movements operate as coalitions of organizations and individuals who cooperate on some matters of concern, and simultaneously compete for support (Rochon & Meyer 1997).

State policy creates the conditions of coalition by producing identities and grievances through policy (Meyer 2002; also see Van Dyke 2003). In some circumstances this is explicit; by mandating particular treatment and affording or restricting opportunities for participation, states create categories that can encourage the development of oppositional identities, based on racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious categories. But constituencies can also be forged around belief, and here state policies and political opportunities are critical in setting the boundaries of a coalition. In a polity in which political organizing is heavily restricted, for example, virtually everyone with a grievance has interest in cooperating in opposition—to the degree that the threat of repression allows. Dissident networks in Eastern Europe during the last years of the cold war provide an instructive case in point. Osa (2003), for example, shows that the broad range of dissident actors in Poland unified—and differentiated—in response to openings in government.

In contrast, in a liberal polity with numerous opportunities for participation and the prospects of policy payoffs, we'd expect ad hoc coalitions on an issue-by-issue basis (Dahl 1956), with various constituencies more or less committed to extrainstitutional participation depending on the circumstances of the moment. Recognizing the coalitional nature of a challenging movement thus affords scholars that analytical purchase to see connections between processes in very different contexts on claims of widely varying scope. Assessing the ways in which authorities aid or hinder the forging of coalitions requires consideration of both relatively stable institutional structures and the exigencies of political leadership, that is, a dynamic approach to political opportunity.

The extent of grievances, the viability of various strategies of influence, and the perceived costs and benefits of various alliances all change over time, at least partly because of what social movements do and how authorities respond. President Lyndon Johnson's signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a direct response to the

civil rights movement, opened institutional access for certain claims and claimants, splitting some activist organizations whose members divided on the utility of such access for addressing broader claims such as economic inequality (Robnett 2002). Similarly, the federal government's heightened surveillance and prosecution of far right groups in the wake of the bombing of a federal office building made organizing more difficult for these groups, precluding some strategies and cutting off potential support (Blee 2002), even as institutionally oriented conservatives made important political gains.

Stated simply, political opportunities for organizing can change dramatically—and differentially—for groups within the same movement, as authorities respond to the range of groups that comprise a social movement. State responses also alter opportunities for other claimants, although this recognition is beyond the scope of most case studies. The observed responsiveness of government to particular styles of advocacy and tactics of representation encourages others to adopt the same styles, initially adopting, then eschewing, protest strategies. Although political opportunity approaches help us understand this process, they do so only if we adopt a dynamic model of opportunity and examine how opportunities actually work in relation to a variety of political actors and outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The political opportunity or political process approach to social movements has gained increasing prominence over the past two decades by promising a systematic way to examine how social movements respond to, and affect, the world around them. At the same time, frequently conceptualized broadly but operationalized narrowly, the body of research contains contradictions and confusions. I propose three strategies that will allow the scholarly community to address these challenges; all follow from the initial, often-forgotten insight that the impact of openness on protest mobilization is curvilinear. First, analysts must explicitly disaggregate and specify the outcomes political opportunities are meant to explain, identifying and comparing potentially discrepant outcomes among different outcomes and different sorts of movements. Second, we will benefit from explicit comparisons across different contexts, paying particular attention to the coalitions of actors engaged in social protest. Finally, we need to adopt a process-oriented approach to political opportunities that explicitly examines how they work and how the responses that social movements provoke or inspire alter the grounds on which they can mobilize.

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