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Political Process Theory

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The standard explanation for social movement mobilization, known as political process theory (PPT), emphasizes the role of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes, along with protest cycles and contentious repertoires. Developed in the US in the 1970s and 1980s and rooted in an analysis of civil rights struggles, PPT focuses on the interaction between movement attributes, such as organizational structure, and the broader economic and political context. Critics argue that the theory is overly structural and invariant. Recent research by core PPT theorists has shifted focus to a more dynamic analysis of the reoccurring mechanisms and processes of contentious politics.

PPT is the culmination of a series of critiques against the then-prevailing social scientific view that protestors and other social movement participants were irrational mobs, overwhelmed by a collective mentality. Movements did not result from alienation or abnormal psychological dispositions, but rather were means to achieve political ends and resolve legitimate grievances. Three precursors to PPT are noteworthy for their contributions to establishing this new analysis. First, Olson's (1965) analysis of collection behavior turned old notions about the irrationality of protestors on its head, exploring the rational and deliberate choices that individuals made before joining a movement. Second, in an influential analysis of the farm workers' movement, [McCarthy and Zald \(1973, 1977\)](#) found that the availability

of resources to the movement, as opposed to the degree of oppression, explained much of the variation in the level of mobilization. This resource mobilization perspective counted more than just material goods as resources, including aspects such as organizational strength and the presence of elite allies. Third, [Piven and Cloward \(1977\)](#) brought attention to important aspects of the economic and political system. Only during periods of great system-wide crisis, such as during the Depression, for example, were movements able to extract concessions from elites. Combined, these three developments formed the basis of PPT.

The foundational work in PPT is Charles Tilly's *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978), which synthesized these insights, along with those of other historical and political sociologists. Tilly asserts that the interaction between three components – interests, organization, and opportunity – explains a contender's level of mobilization and collective action. Interests represent the potential gains from participation; organization, the level of unified identity and networks; and opportunity, the amount of political power, the likelihood of repression, and the vulnerability of the target. *From Mobilization to Revolution's* impact on social movement scholarship is largely indirect, as McAdam's subsequent analysis of the Civil Rights Movement became PPT's central text.

PPT crystallized in McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (1982). Drawing on earlier critiques of classical approaches, and building on resource mobilization and especially the work of Tilly, McAdam analyzed the rise and decline of the US Civil Rights Movement as a direct result of three factors: political opportunities, indigenous organizational strength, and cognitive liberation. Political opportunities resulted from “any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured” (p. 41). The definition was broad, and his examples included wars, industrialization, international political realignments, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes. Political opportunities worked indirectly, by changing the degree of power inequality between the challenging group and the target. Among the opportunities that McAdam found leading up to the Civil Rights Movement was the Southern black population shift from a rural to urban environment, the decline in lynchings, and the potential for international embarrassment during this phase in the Cold War.

A second factor that encouraged mobilization was the strength of indigenous organizations. These are not the organizations that were formed in the heat of the struggle, but rather the preexisting political and potentially political organizations that existed among the aggrieved community. The organizations provide members who can be recruited as a group, respected leaders, a communications network, and individual ties. For the early Civil Rights Movements, these institutions included black churches, black colleges, and the NAACP, all of which saw rapid growth in the decades immediately prior to the movement.

The third element of McAdam's political process model is a sense of cognitive liberation among potential social movement participants. This is a result of a group process, and flows directly from the political opportunities and through local organizations. In order to participate, McAdam argues, drawing on [Piven and Cloward \(1977\)](#), individuals must feel that the current political system lacks legitimacy and their social movement participation could make meaningful change happen. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, McAdam notes a dramatic shift towards optimism about the future for African Americans in polling data in the 1950s.

In addition to shifts in all three of these factors accounting for the rise of the Civil Rights Movements, McAdam also argues that PPT accounts for the decline of mobilization as well. He charts a negative shift in all three factors in the late 1960s, which, he argues, accounts for the end of civil rights protesting during that period.

PPT has evolved since McAdam's formulation. Notably, framing has largely replaced cognitive liberation and indigenous organizational strength has been replaced by mobilizing structures. Political opportunities – the element which has received the most attention – has been both narrowed and broadened. Additionally, Tarrow's (1994) notion of protest cycles is sometimes included as a part of PPT, as is Tilly's concept of repertoires of contention.

In place of cognitive liberation, PPTists soon began to speak of a movement's framing process. Drawing heavily on the work of David Snow and colleagues, framing is the “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” ([McAdam et al. 1996](#)). While McAdam's cognitive liberation was focused on an individual sense of empowerment prior to involvement, analysis of framing processes emphasizes the more strategic decisions achieved at a higher organizational level as an ongoing, dynamic process. At a minimum, a group needs to describe their grievances persuasively, the diagnostic frame, and present a feasible solution, the prognostic frame. Large movements often

provide master frames, such as “civil rights,” which subsequent movement and groups can easily refer to. In contrast to the other two primarily structural elements, framing processes are the major place where the cultural is incorporated into the model. As such, framing is sometimes stretched to include all non-structural elements impacting mobilization. This tendency is something that PPT critics fault as a model flaw and that PPT advocates warn against.

In a shift away from the explicit bias in favor of formal preexisting organizations in McAdam's indigenous organizational strength, PPTists moved towards an analysis of mobilizing structures, which are “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action” (McAdam et al. 1996). This includes not only preexisting groups, but also movement organizations and the informal networks among potential activists.

Similarly, political opportunities were found by scholars in such a variety of places as to make the concept nearly unfalsifiable. As McAdam et al. (1996) noted in their introduction, political opportunities had become an increasingly unwieldy concept, with each author operationalizing the concept in unique ways. They attempt to specify the idea by focusing on four dimensions: (1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; (2) the stability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergirds a polity; (3) the presence of elite allies; and (4) the state's capacity and propensity for repression. Where McAdam's original definition had grown to fit just about everything external to the movement, this reformulation attempted to narrow the scope by focusing on more specific aspects of the political system. These efforts did not go far enough, however, for critics.

A fourth concept that is often associated with PPT is the protest cycle. This refers to historical periods of heightened contention across the political sphere, such as in 1968 in the US or 1989 in Eastern Europe, when a host of groups was challenging the legitimacy of the state. As a new political opportunity usually affects more than one group and as frames are often transferable across movements, movements that are not obviously linked can share similar life courses.

While the number of ways that a movement can make itself heard is potentially unlimited, in practice the number available to any given movement is actually quite finite. Following Tilly (1995), this limited set of ways that actors can make claims constitutes the repertoire of contention. Tilly finds that the modern repertoire of contention, which includes strikes, demonstrations, and social movements, originated in the second half of the nineteenth century. These modular forms of protest can be transferred across issues, as petitions can be organized to free political prisoners or revive cancelled television shows; in both cases the organizers, signers, and targets all know that a petition is a form of protest.

Combined, these five elements – political opportunities, mobilizing structures, framing processes, protest cycles, and contentious repertoires – constitute the core of contemporary PPT research. In addition to explaining the rise and decline of social movements, they are also used to explain the form that protest takes and the outcomes that result.

In regards to the research by other scholars, the political-opportunities element of PPT has received the most attention. In fact, the terms political opportunities and political process theory are often used interchangeably. Political opportunity has also been the focus of much, but not all, of the critiques. Goodwin and Jasper launched the best-known set of criticisms in a special issue of *Sociological Forum*. Their piece, along with a variety of responses from PPT defenders and agnostics was published in Goodwin and Jasper (2004).

Goodwin and Jasper, along with other critics from more cultural camps, see PPT as overly structural, centering stable, external factors and analyzing non-structural features as if they were structures. The search for a series of invariant causal variables to explain social movement emergence, which is the hallmark of PPT, is fruitless. The varied historically specific conditions under which movements arise make such causal factors defined either in such a broad way as to be tautological and trivial or so narrow as to be only relevant for the examined case. This is particularly true for political opportunities, they argue, despite some efforts by PPTists to focus the definition. Similarly, they see mobilizing structures, including both formal and informal networks of individuals and institutions, not so much as causal factors for social movement emergence, but rather implicit in the notion of a movement as a collective. As such, it adds little to our understanding of the conditions for movement emergence. Framing process, in contrast, they see as a limited concept, forced to carry all of the non-structural elements, while ignoring such relevant factors as emotions, symbols, and moral principles.

McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001), the central PPTists, have moved away from general causal arguments to a more dynamic approach to the study of "contentious politics." In place of opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes, they speak of environmental, relational, and cognitive mechanisms. The emphasis is not so much on asserting that all three are causally necessary, but on identifying the specific mechanisms within each that can be found across multiple movements. Examples of such mechanisms that they identify include brokerage, the linking of previously unconnected units; category formation, the creation of identities; and certification, a target recognition of a movement, its tactics or its claims. However, despite this distancing by its founders, PPT remains the dominant paradigm for social movement research.

SEE ALSO: [Civil Rights Movement](#); [Framing and Social Movements](#); [Political Opportunities](#); [Social Movement Organizations](#); [Social Movements](#)

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