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Social Movements, Political Consequences of

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Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the political or state-related consequences of social movements. Making sense of the state-related consequences raises specific and difficult conceptual and theoretical issues. Conceptually speaking, scholars have to address the meaning of “success” or “influence” for challengers. Theoretically, scholars need to address what, beyond some degree of mobilization and basically plausible claims-making, matters in explaining the state-related impacts of challengers. In comparison to mobilizing supporters, fashioning identities among them, or achieving recognition from targets, most macropolitical consequences of challengers are not as directly related to the efforts expended by challengers.

In designating the consequences of social movements, Gamson's (1990 [1975]) two types of success have been influential. Gamson considers success in new advantages, his first type, as meaning whether a challenger's goals or claims were mainly realized. Yet Gamson's concept of new advantages places limits on the consideration of possible impacts of challenges. It may be possible, notably, for a challenger to fail to achieve its stated program – and thus be deemed a failure – but still to win substantial new advantages for its constituents. This is especially likely for challengers with far-reaching goals. There may also be unintended consequences that influence beneficiary groups, and challengers may do worse than fail.

To address some of these issues, other scholars start with an alternative based on the concept of *collective goods*, or group-wise advantages or disadvantages from which non-participants in a challenge cannot be easily excluded (Olson 1965). Collective goods can be material, such as categorical social spending programs, but can also be less tangible, such as new ways to refer to members of a group. Social movement organizations almost invariably claim to represent a group extending beyond the leaders and adherents of the organization and most make demands that would provide collective benefits to that larger group (Tilly 1999). According to the collective benefit standard, a challenger can have considerable impact even when it fails to achieve what it is seeking. It also can address the possibility that challengers would have negative consequences or negligible ones, such as achieving a program that did not realize its intended effect to benefit constituents (Amenta 2006). Scholars working from this standard tend to refer to the consequences or impacts of social movements rather than successes or failures. From this perspective, the greatest sort of impact is the one that provides a group, not necessarily organizations representing that group, continuing leverage over political processes. These sorts of gains are usually at a structural or systemic level of state processes and are a kind of metacollective benefit, as they increase the productivity of all future collective action of the group. Gains in the democratization of state processes are perhaps the most important that social movements can influence.

Most collective action, however, is aimed at a more medium level – major changes in policy and the bureaucratic enforcement and implementation of that policy. Once enacted and enforced with bureaucratic means, categorical social spending programs, notably, provide benefits in such a manner (Amenta 2006). The beneficiaries gain rights of entitlement to the benefits, and legal changes and bureaucratic reinforcement of such laws help to ensure the routine maintenance of such collective benefits. Under these circumstances, the issue is privileged in politics, is effectively removed from the political agenda, and the political system becomes biased in favor of the group. A bureaucracy would have to be targeted and altered, if not captured, or new legislation would have to be passed rescinding benefits – a process that becomes more difficult as time passes as bureaucracies are reinforced and people organize their lives around the programs. Regulatory bureaucracies that are products of challenger mobilizations may push on their own to advance mandates in the absence of new legislation, as in the case of state labor commissions or in affirmative action. Through their policies, states can ratify or attempt to undermine potential collective identities or help to create new ones, sometimes on purpose, often inadvertently. Dividing the process of creating new laws containing collective benefits into the agenda-setting, legislative content, passage, and implementation of legislation simplifies analysis and also makes it easier to judge the impact of challengers.

Gamson's second type of success, the “acceptance” (1990 [1975]) or “representation” (Cress & Snow 2000) achieved by challenging organizations, can also be related systematically back to states and collective benefits. To the extent that state action recognizing challenging organizations influences their form or resources, it also influences their potential to gain future collective benefits. Gamson's idea of acceptance may, however, be too broadly drawn to capture the sorts of representation sought by challengers attempting to influence democratic states. More important and plausible for state-oriented challengers is a version of Gamson's “inclusion,” which would amount to the placing of challengers in state positions through election or appointment. Challengers can provide candidates for office or can stand as representatives of new political parties. As is the case for other, better politically situated groups, it is possible for social movement organizations to capture bureaucracies and run them in favor of their constituency. By gaining representation in legislative offices and bureaucracies, challengers can influence policies throughout the process, including placing programs on the agenda, helping to specify their content, aiding their passage, and supporting their enforcement. Movements may also attempt to gain recognition for altered or new movement organizations, which might include political parties, political lobbying, or educational organizations. Collective action may be intended to win or may result in winning higher-order rights through the state that advantage a group in its conflicts with other groups (Tarrow 1998). Labor movements, notably, often focus on the state to ensure rights to organize and engage in collective bargaining with businesses and business associations, and the state may be used as a fulcrum in transnational protest. Challengers blocked in one country may appeal to sympathetic organizations in others.

There are four main arguments designed to explain the impact of social movements on states. The first argument is that whatever aids a group's mobilization will lead to its making gains, as mobilization of various sorts will aid movements in whatever they do (McCarthy & Zald 2002). The mobilization of various resources is needed to engage in collective action, which is designed and expected to bring a certain amount of collective benefits. This line of argumentation is consistent with rational choice discussions of collective action problems, in that they view the main

issue for social movements as overcoming free-rider disincentives to participation (Olson 1965). The ability to mobilize different sorts of resources is key for the impact of movements and mobilization of resources and membership has been shown to influence some state-related consequences in different research (McCarthy & Zald 2002). However, mobilization seems to be a necessary condition to have influence over states, as there seems to be no connection between size of a mobilized challenger and gaining new benefits (Kitschelt 1986; Gamson 1990 [1975]).

Second, specific strategies and goals of collective action and forms of challenger organization are more likely to produce influence. Gamson (1990 [1975]) found notably that limited goals, the use of "constraints," selective incentives, and bureaucratic forms of organization were more likely to produce new advantages. In contrast, goals and strategies aiming at "displacement" – in which a movement seeks to destroy or replace its opponent – were likely to fail. Others have advanced Gamson's argument about the importance of organization in social movement success by focusing on the sorts of social movement organizations likely to produce gains. It has been argued that resourceful movement infrastructures led to gains in policy implementation (Andrews 2001) and that innovative organizational forms can lead to gains for challengers and transformations of political institutions (Clemens 1997). Singled out for special attention are claims-making and framing. Cress and Snow (2000) argue notably that for a challenger to have an impact, it is necessary for it to employ resonant "prognostic" and "diagnostic" frames; to gain results, challengers need to identify problems and pose credible solutions to those problems that play to state actors and other third parties as well as to be able to mobilize participants.

A third argument attempts to take into account contextual influences by claiming that once a challenger is mobilized, the main thing influencing its impact is the political context or "opportunity structure." This line of argumentation has both systemic and dynamic components to it, and sometimes it is also argued that systemic political contexts greatly influence or determine the strategies of challengers. Kriesi and his colleagues (1995) take the most systemic view, arguing that the openness and capacity of states largely determine whether a state-related movement will have influence. When states have both inclusive strategies and strong capacities, challengers are most likely to achieve "proactive" impacts. Under weak states, by contrast, reactive impacts are more probable, as the state lacks the capacity to implement policies (see also Kitschelt 1986).

The more overarching arguments have been criticized, however, on the grounds that all manner of social movements with different strategies have developed within similar countries (Dalton 1995) and that within any country differences in impacts have varied over time. Arguments regarding systemic political contexts have also been criticized on the grounds that they take a too abstract view of states and political opportunity structures. Notably, focusing on the overall openness of polities and strength of states ignores conceptual and theoretical developments in political sociology literatures that have addressed the influence of polities and states in more fine-grained ways. Important factors include the polity structure, the democratization of state institutions, electoral rules and procedures, and state policies. These aspects of states influence forms of challenger representation, as well as the tactics of challengers. These arguments tend to drop the weak/strong state and open/closed polity dichotomies and refer to specific aspects of polity and political actors.

The centralization and division of power between each branch of government also has an impact on social movement organizations (Amenta 2006). An autonomous court system with veto power over the legislative branch, for example, may lead to an emphasis on legal mobilizations, which may shift focus away from more mass-based protests. Multiple points of access are a two-edged sword, however, as they also provide multiple points of veto. The level of democracy has important consequences for the forms that mobilization will take. Specifically, the greater the exclusion from the democratic process, the more likely non-institutional forms of protest will take place. Electoral rules may have the greatest impact on the relationship between social movements and the party system. Winner-take-all systems, such as in the US, discourage the formation and legitimacy of new political parties. Initiative and referendum procedures increase the likelihood that organizations will be single-focused. In addition, states can also provide a variety of resources for specific social movements that can vary from concrete items to legitimacy.

On the dynamic side, the political opportunity argument focuses on alterations in political conditions that improve the productivity of collective action of challengers. In their study of farm workers' mobilization and collective action, Jenkins and Perrow (1977) found that changes in the political context influenced their growth and impact, through the rise to power of favorable political regimes and through the support of liberal organizations like organized labor. In his study of the Civil Rights Movement, McAdam (1982) argued that favorable political conditions were necessary

for its gains – which were based on tactical innovations. In short, according to the strongest form of this argument, mobilized challengers have impacts largely because they engage in collective action at the right time. This argumentation has suffered, however, in comparison with the systemic view of political contexts in being able to specify what constitutes a favorable context. The main candidates – polity openness, instability of elite alliances, the presence of elite allies for challengers, declines in capacities and propensities for repression – are drawn so widely as to be difficult to operationalize.

Finally, many scholars have developed different political mediation models of social movement consequences, which build on arguments concerning strategy, organizational form, and political contexts (Amenta et al. 1992; Skocpol 1992; Amenta 2006). The basic point of this argument is that the collective action of challengers is politically mediated. In a democratic political system, mobilizing relatively large numbers of committed people is probably necessary to winning new collective benefits for those otherwise underrepresented in politics. So, too, are making plausible claims regarding the worthiness of the group and the usefulness of its program. Yet challengers' action is more likely to produce results when institutional political actors see benefit in aiding the group the challenger represents. To secure new benefits, challengers will typically need help or complementary action from like-minded state actors, including elected officials, appointed officials, or state civil servants. And so challengers need to engage in collective action that changes the calculations of relevant institutional political actors, and challengers need to adopt organizational forms that fit political circumstances.

Political mediation arguments do not identify individual organizational forms, strategies, or long-term or short-term political contexts that will always or usually help challengers to win collective benefits. Instead the idea is that certain organizational forms and collective action strategies will be more productive in some political contexts rather than others. In her examination of organized groups throughout US history, Skocpol (1992) argues that to have influence the forms of challengers and other mass-based interest organizations need to fit the divided nature of the American political context, a systemic condition. US organizations need to have a wide geographical presence to influence Congress, which is based on district representation. The most extensive discussion of this sort suggests that challengers need to moderate strategies and forms to address political circumstances. The standard distinction between disruptive and assimilative strategies is dropped in favor of addressing variations in assertiveness of action (Amenta 2006), with assertive meaning the use of increasingly strong sanctions, something akin to Gamson's "constraints." If the political regime is supportive and the domestic bureaucrats are professionalized and supportive, limited protest based mainly on the evidence of mobilization is likely to be sufficient to provide increased collective benefits. By contrast, achieving collective benefits through public policy is likely to be more difficult if neither a supportive regime nor administrative authority exists.

Although this understanding of the political context is a dynamic one that takes into account changes in political contexts, it can also be related back to systemic and structural characteristics of political systems, notably political institutional conditions that make the establishment of a reform-oriented regime or bureaucratic capacities difficult. When the regime is opposed to the challenger or sees no benefit in adding its beneficiary group to its coalition and when state bureaucracies in the area are hostile or absent, the sorts of limited protest listed above are likely to be ignored or have a limited effect. As political circumstances become more difficult, more assertive or bolder collective action is required to produce collective benefits. Sanctions in assertive institutional collective action threaten to increase or decrease the likelihood of gaining or keeping something valuable to political actors – often positions – or to take over their functions or prerogatives. The institutional collective action of challengers works largely by mobilizing large numbers of people behind a course of activity, often one with electoral implications. This collective action may be designed to convince the general public of the justice of the cause and influence elected and appointed officials in that manner, but may also demonstrate to these officials that a large segment of the electorate is willing to vote or engage in other political activity mainly on the basis of a single key issue.

SEE ALSO: [Collective Action](#); [Framing and Social Movements](#); [Political Opportunities](#); [Political Process Theory](#); [Political Sociology](#); [Resource Mobilization Theory](#); [Social Movement Organizations](#); [Social Movements](#); [Social Policy, Welfare State](#)

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