

"Left Behind" Social Movements, Parties, and the Politics of Reform

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ABSTRACT

How does social reform occur in America? Is it through major public policy innovation? Is it through periodic partisan or electoral alignment? Or is it through moments of popular mobilization we call social movements? Can we explain the origin, development, and legacy of the civil rights movement by focusing on Brown v. Board of Education, Little Rock, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, bussing and affirmative action? Do we focus on the electoral dynamics, the liberal revolution in Congress in 1958, and the landslide reelection of the president in 1964? Or do we start with the Montgomery bus boycott, the sit-ins, SCLC, SNCC, CORE, the freedom rides, the marches, and other forms of direct action?

In this paper I argue, first, that institutional constraints built into our electoral system inhibit the formation of social reform initiatives from the "inside" – government officials, elected officials, or parties. Social reform initiatives are initiated, however, but from the "outside", as social movements.

Second, these social movements unfold in a uniquely American way. They make moral claims. They employ organizational forms to strategically link local action with national goals in intense, outcome focused, campaigns. And they develop leadership skilled in arts of collective action – what de Tocqueville called "knowledge of how to combine."

Third, as social movement leaders find that achieving their goals requires new public policy, they gain leverage by engaging in electoral politics, most often aligned with a political party, which they may well transform in the process.

Fourth, although social movements form and reform around fault lines in the American polity of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and generation, in the last 30 years this dynamic has produced far more change on the right than on the left. One reason is that the right has made more robust linkages among its social movement base, its partisan politics, and public policy than the left. Explaining how this process works – and why the left lost its movement - may help explain why this has occurred and clarify options available to those who would change it.

American Political Institutions:

Resisting Reform

The crafters of American political institutions designed them to avoid concentrations of control that would allow private "factions" to monopolize public power. ¹¹ Unlike unitary parliamentary systems in which a change in government gives a single party control over the major levers of power, our three branches of government interact with three semi-autonomous levels of jurisdiction to make this very rare. And even when a single party controls the presidency and both houses of Congress, a differently oriented Supreme Court can have a profound influence, as reformers in every era, such as the late 19th Century, have learned. ⁱⁱⁱ

Single member "first by the post" legislative districts both amplify the voice of local majorities and curb the influence of regional or national majorities. Thus 51% of the votes in any one district wins 100% of the voice and 49% of the votes wins 0% of the voice. This makes the odds that minority voices can organize to be heard in a legislative body remote indeed. And in the presidential elections, the Electoral College has a similar effect. In the last two elections, neither major candidate campaigned in the nation's two most populous states – New York and California.

These mechanisms also make it very unlikely a third party can sustain itself, unless it can supplant one of the two major parties. And even when a third party succeeds regionally, it lacks a cross-jurisdictional support to exercise any real influence.

This institutional configuration that dampens the electoral voice of local minorities and national majorities, leaves those advocating change without clear venues within which to mobilize support for those changes. Political scientist E.E. Schattschneider's observation that "elites always try to localize conflict" reflects this bias in American political institutions. VI In addition, of course, our campaign finance regime systematically devalues the more widely distributed resource of "time" and overvalues the more narrowly held resource of "money." VIII

On the other hand, social reform has occurred in America and it has entailed action by legislatures, the executive, and the courts. The Jacksonians expanded the franchise and created the Democratic Party. Viii The Abolitionists won, contributing to the birth of the Republican Party. The Temperance movement made alliances with Know-Nothings, formed its own Prohibition Party, allied with elements of both major parties, and established one of the first modern "interest groups". Women did win the right to vote, a struggle replete with partisan and non-partisan electoral alliances. Unions won legal guarantees of the right to organize, a key factor in forging the "New Deal" Democratic Party. The Civil Rights Movement reformed the Democratic Party once more, won major judicial, executive, and legislative victories, but also laid groundwork for Republican renewal. Although the ERA failed, many of its objectives were realized as the women's movement asserted politically as well as in other ways. The environmental movement was launched not only by Earth Day (1970), but also by the Clean Air Act (1963), Wilderness Act (1964). And the Conservative Movement's drive to reform redistributive

government, expand the role of markets, reassert traditional gender practices, and police private morals has dramatically shifted the nation's political agenda, much of by capturing the Republican Party organization. xi

So, if it is so hard for insurgents to be heard, under what conditions can they make themselves heard?

* * *

American Social Movements

Moral Claims, Organization, Leadership

At the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC a number of years ago their principle display on American politics documented presidents, parties, and elections. In the next room, however, labeled "we the people", the displayed artifacts, accounts, and images of abolitionism, the temperance movement, the women's movements, populism, the labor movement, civil rights, environmentalism – in a word, the social movements through which challengers without a base on the "inside" made themselves heard from the "outside." Those that were successful did not stay on the outside. They found ways not only to be heard on the "inside", but also to reshape it. It is to that dynamic that we now turn.

The work of successful social reform in the U.S. has been initiated by social movement organizations that make claims, mobilize participation, and develop leaders. They make

claims in moral terms, often linking their claims to broader moral narratives. They mobilize by linking localities together, developing national strategy, that can be acted upon locally through intense, focused, and outcome oriented campaigns. They develop a core of highly committed leadership skilled in the democratic arts of engaging others in collective action. Although this organizational form was forged in part by political leaders to advance their agendas in a decentralized federal system, iii a distinct, equally important foundation was in the popular mobilizations rising from the religious ground of American life, for example, the second Great Awakening of the 1830s.

Finally, American social movements have learned how influence public policy not only through direct action, but also through direct participation in electoral politics. Although scholars have noted the relationship of social movements to the emergence of nonpartisan interest groups^{xv}, social movement leaders have found engagement in partisan politics has allowed them to take advantage of relatively porous party organizations to leverage their influence at local, state, and national levels.^{xvi}

Moral Claims

The moral content of American social movements is rooted in the religious foundation of claims being made – the values, the language, the tradition. The abolitionists for example, based their claims on Scripture, as did their opposition. Populists heard William Jennings Bryant describe their predicament as one of being "crucified on a cross of gold." And Dr.

Martin Luther King concluded describing his dream with "Great God almighty, I'm free at last!"

Social movements are also, almost by definition, "moral projects" in that they couple new individual and collective identities with demands for institutional reform that recognizes the legitimacy of those claims. *vii The women's movement forged new self-understanding, a new communal understanding, and made new resource and process claims on political, economic, and cultural institutions. This "moral" or transformational dimension of social movements distinguishes them from transactional "insider" interest group politics. At the same time, in a democratic polity, no matter how constricted, numbers do count so those seeking change must learn to express the compelling nature of the changes they seek in a broadly accessible moral framework or public narrative.

Social movements not only assert values, but they enact them. Motivating a person to act in a new way is more challenging than persuading a person to change their opinion. And mobilizing from the "outside" - without the authority, legitimacy, or resources of the "inside" - can impose very high personal costs. Because risks of physical, economic, or social loss are real, it takes real courage to act. **xviii** And the conventional resource deficit experienced by most social movements – money, connections, and legitimacy - can only be compensated for by the commitment, experience, and imagination of their participants. **xix** But "self-interest" alone is rarely enough to motivate the kind of courage or commitment demanded of organizers and participants, especially at the beginning. **x

And the sources of our courage and commitment reside in our understanding of who we are, what we are called to do, and why, in relation to others – our moral identities. xxi

Organization

Social movement organizers adapt organizational forms and processes available to them. On the one hand, as de Tocqueville noted, the rich associational life of early America was modeled on political organizations, including parties, that were crafted to influence the decentralized American polity – most often three tiered federated associations. *xxii* At the same time organizers drew on processes of Protestant religious organization: a focus on individual transformation mediated by group participation, the celebratory dimension of meetings, gatherings, and rallies and the intensity, focus, and momentum generated by popular mobilizations – their "awakenings" or "revivals." *xxiii*

The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), for example pursued national goals, but mobilized local chapters by recruiting leaders to take the personal "pledge", to persuade others to join the cause, and to secure ordinances (or take direct action) to close bars and taverns. Chapter meetings had the character of a worship service, more than that of a business meeting, fueling the moral energy driving the movement. *xxiv*

And because these local groups were federated, they could coordinate state and national strategy, engage in learning, celebration, and relationship building at state and national conventions, and take advantage of resources a national organization made available to

them. This allowed them to reconfigure their "turf" so as to avoid dead-ends implicit in Schattschneider's warning about the power of local elites to resist change. One could describe the Civil Rights Movement or Right to Life movement in much the same way

Leadership

Because they are launched "outside" formal electoral politics, social movements are the work of highly motivated leaders skilled in the art of engaging others in collective action – "organizers." Leadership is especially important for social movements because of the uncertain, ambiguous environment within which they operate. To engage successfully with that environment movement not only must leaders be unusually adaptive, they must also rely more on people's time than their money; their commitment than their convenience; and their hopefulness than their habits. *xxv*

Identifying, recruiting, and developing social movement leaders to scale is one of the major challenges organizers face. Institutional incubators – while not social movement organizations themselves – can serve as the "schools" in which new leaders can develop. Religious organizations, the military, fraternal associations, labor organizations, economic associations, and colleges and universities have all played this role.

In 1910, for example, one major fraternal, the Odd Fellows, with 1.5 million members and 16,245 chapters recruited people to serve in 276,813 leadership positions of which 276,165 (99.8%) were local, 637 at the state level and 11, national. *xxvi* Ambitious men

and women mobilized constituents and collaborated with peers as they climbed to local, state and national office. The first rung on the ladder was winning the support of an organized constituency to do the work, pay the bills, and elect you to office. Local chapters required – and nurtured – leaders who had to learn to conduct meetings, oversee programs, and to recruit members whose commitment of time, money and effort provided the resources the organization needed to do its work.

Another major source of social movement leadership – for both Civil Rights Movement and Conservative Movement, for example, are churches. Clergy whose effectiveness in their calling requires they organize their own congregations – as in the Baptist tradition – have been key movement organizers. And the infrastructure of church associations – boards of deacons, missionary societies, sisterhoods, brotherhoods, etc. – schooled much of the local civil rights leadership in particular. XXVIII Many of the leaders of the early Mexican-American civil rights movement, on the other hand, came from the ranks of veterans, who had learned arts of motivational leadership in war. XXVIII

Social Movements, Parties and Politics

The relationship of American social movements to partisan politics grows out of the role of parties as "bridges" between the electoral apparatus and organization of government and civil society. Although American parties, especially in their modern form, are often described as weak, it may be this weakness day to day that makes them available to serve as important mechanisms through which social movements on the "outside" can leverage their motivational, organizational, and leadership resources into political power on the

"inside." For a well organized social movement to mobilize participation in the partisan elections or caucuses that choose delegates to conventions, influence endorsements, and do the work of elaborating platforms is not a challenging task. The rewards, however, can be substantial. The history of the last 30 years certainly suggests this to be the case.

* * *

The Conservative Turn

Although social movements form and reform around persistent political fault lines – race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and generation – for the last 30 years, they have been a far more potent source of reform from the right than from the left. One reason is that the right has maintained far more robust linkages among its social movement base, partisan politics, and public policy than the left.

For the last 30 years, public moral claims have been made principally from the right. These include claims that not only place value on "private morals", but also on liberty, opportunity faith, family and patriotism and that have supported public policy on guns, taxes, national security, the economy, the environment and more.

A variety of locally rooted, nationally coordinated, social movement organizations have pressed these claims. They include anticommunist, anti-tax and anti-civil rights groups that converged in the 1964 Goldwater Campaign. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Eagle Forum, Moral Majority, National Right to Life Committee, National Righe Association, and Christian Coalition, the National Right to Life Committee, mobilized successfully at

local, state, and national levels. **xx** And they often used electoral campaigns – ranging from Pat Robertson's run for President that became the foundation of the Christian Coalition to local school board campaigns, often a "first step" in launching a local organization. **xxi*

Although limited data has been gathered as to whom the local leaders are, most seem to have emerged from churches, small business, veterans' organizations, gun clubs, and local politics. But the numbers are impressive. The 4 million member NRA, although founded in 1871, was "born again" in the 1970s when its gun clubs became a base for opposition to gun control. In 2003, 50,000 people attended the NRA's national convention in Florida, representing 14,000 local clubs and 54 state organizations. As many as 140,000 local leaders— or one out of every 25 members— are involved in its work. *xxxii*

This was the movement that over the course of the last 30 years – with allies, to be sure, successfully organized the Republican Party in the South, radicalized it in the West and Midwest, and turned it into the mechanism of Conservative social change it has become.

Whatever Happened to "The Movement"?

Republicans and Democrats experienced similar losses when "movement" candidates won nominations for president – Goldwater in 1964 and McGovern in 1972 – and both moved sharply in a more "pragmatic" direction afterwards. But the movements of the

right came back to fight another day, while the movements of the left seemed to atrophy. In fact, while Democratic political leaders shed their movement base, the movement itself fragmented into advocacy firms, local community groups, and social service agencies, and, until recently, shunned moral claims and partisan politics, except, perhaps, on matters of gender and sexuality.

During the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement made the strongest public moral claims since economic justice claims of the 1930s -- claims echoed by the women's movement, opponents to the war in Viet Nam, the environmental movement and others. Movement organizations peaked in their partisan political influence in 1972, when, despite a deep split with the labor movement over Viet Nam, they won the Democratic presidential nomination for their candidate, Sen. George McGovern. The subsequent devastating loss at the polls persuaded many party leaders that the path to victory lay through a politics of "self-interest" that would give them an advantage over Republicans. And a candidate's "electability" trumped his or her vision. This reaction was not unlike that of Republican leaders after the 1964 Goldwater debacle, most of who saw Richard Nixon as their "electable" candidate. It was the reaction of movement leaders that differed. The conservative movement regrouped, elected Ronald Reagan California governor two years later, organized all through the 1970s, and elected their first President in 1980. But after the McGovern defeat in 1972, the social movements of the left took a different turn.

Moral Claims

To begin with they focused on "issues", refraining from expressing themselves in the terms of broad moral frameworks shared by other Americans. **xxxiii** This choice was not so much pragmatic as a consequence of identity conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s that made debate about "issues" less controversial than debate about "values", a kind of "political correctness" standoff. The difficulty was that although "cutting an issue" is a key tactical choice, it is not a substitute for expressing the values that give an issue its significance. It is true that the Montgomery bus boycott was about public transportation policy. But as the participants understood, articulated, and celebrated, its significance was as a "handle" on the broader – and far more motivational – fight against segregation and for freedom.

When social movement organizers replace values with issues as to what they mobilize around, they find it harder to motivate participation or, if they can motivate, they may have so narrowed their constituency as to lack the base to be successful, similar to the way commitment to a single tactic can undermine strategy the tactic was meant to serve. Among environmentalists, for example, the "tree" people may find it hard to collaborate with the "bird" people, when a focus on shared values could facilitate the unity needed to advance either of their concerns. On the right, however, although different voices can be heard, the relative homogeneity of the movement sets it off sharply from that of the left.

Organization

Left movement organization fragmented into advocacy firms, local community groups, and social service agencies, most of which avoid moral claims and partisan politics. **xxiv* This abandonment of the traditional forms of social movement organization was the consequence of three factors. **xxv**

First, the proliferation of identities and issues, referred to above, encouraged formation of many "niche" groups, each focused on their unique concerns.

Second, new technologies of direct marketing enabled professional advocates to fund their issue campaigns by targeting discrete niches of individual contributors. This kind of "market differentiation" is also encouraged by dependence on foundation grants, often based on how "different" what one group does than another.

Third, an egalitarian, participatory, and libertarian critique of hierarchy undermined the legitimacy of multi-tiered representative organizations, made it difficult to coordinate strategy and eliminated deliberative venues in which leaders of local groups could develop common – and broader - interests. xxxvi

When national groups required the mobilization of local residents, perhaps to pressure a member of Congress on a particular issue, canvassers could be deployed to "deliver the message" reliably and "make the ask", in lieu of organizing locally rooted groups *xxxvii*

And to the extent that foundation grants edge out direct marketing as a major funding source, it can still be more "efficient" to use canvassers than to build local organization. **xxviii*

Groups organized locally often eschewed regional or national strategy, especially if tied to electoral politics, in part for ideological reasons; in part, in an effort to professionalize their field in ways that discouraged taking risks; and in part, due to reliance on funding sources that imposed tax related limits on partisan activity. *xxxix*

Fourth, organizations of the left that have both retained their traditional structures and their political influence, no longer act as social movements. The National Education Association, for example, boasts 2.7 million members, organized in 13,000 local chapters, represented by 10,000 delegates who meet at annually to make "national policy. One out of every 27 NEA members serves in one of its 97,488 leadership positions, of which 91,000 are local. Nhile a powerful force within the Democratic Party, the organization hardly plays the role of a social movement in a politics of reform.

Leadership

In terms of leadership, the "job descriptions" at the national or state level have become those of recruiting boards, hiring staff and finding a fund raiser rather than organizing local chapters, electing local leaders, and mobilizing them to work together. Valued skills are those of marketing, rather than organizing - targeting, message design, and list

development, rather than building constituency, developing leaders, and motivating collective action. At a local level, on the other hand, a premium is placed either on young people able to devote day after day to the door-to-door canvassing required to generate funds or on "mature professional organizers" whose quite valuable leadership development work is too often dissipated by a lack of the urgency and aversion to risk on which social movements thrive. This kind of leadership, in turn, is far more likely to come from colleges or universities than churches, community groups, or unions.

The overall impact of these developments has been to cede social movement advantages of commitment, organization, and leadership to the right. Those on the left who wanted to "get involved" enjoyed he option of contributing money, making a phone call or sending an email, or participating in a local group with little or no interest in engaging in critical regional and national concerns.

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So What Does It Mean?

This paper began by posing the question of how social reform occurs in America. I have argued that one way to answer this question is by focusing on the particularly important role of social movements in mobilizing on behalf of reform agendas outside the domain of electoral politics. Translating these agendas into public policy, however, has required making movement claims on the electoral system, leveraged by engagement with the partisan system.

I further argue that the success of conservatives in moving public policy sharply to the right is rooted in the fact they have sustained a movement base since the 1960s, while that of the left has atrophied, at least since the 1970s. Because of the influence of that movement – and the absence of a left counterpart – the right has monopolized public moral discourse, can count on the participation of a highly motivated grassroots, and use their control of party mechanisms to make dramatic public policy gains. To be sure, the challenge of sustaining a movement politics of the left, given its heterogeneity, was far greater than that faced by the right.

Where could a new social movement of the left come from? Prediction is hazardous at best, but consider this. In the past 6 years, despite war, growing economic disparity, ongoing "crises" in education, housing, elder care, child care, and health care; and continuing environmental degradation, the most significant popular mobilization was that on behalf of immigrant rights in which millions of people across the country took part.

It would not be the first time immigration has fueled a social movement in the US – both of progressive reform as in the late 19th century or of nativist reaction as in the 1920s - overlapping as it does with matters of race, ethnicity and class.. This immigrant wave is especially significant because it drives a demographic transformation of our nation from "majority white" to "majority minority" in which the old racial divide is being resituated within a diverse mosaic in which Latinos have begun to play a major role. This also creates an opportunity through which organized labor may rediscover its mission -

particularly as unions like SEIU with 1.8 million members pursue aggressive organizing strategies, having broken with the more encumbered AFL-CIO. And although the political impact of this transformation is most visible in cities like Los Angeles where movement groups coalesced across racial lines to elect a new mayor, it is only a matter of time until the political demography of states like North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia is transformed as well. **Ii Could it be that the most memorable expression of moral vision at the 2004 Democratic Convention, that of Barack Obama, who, echoing Mario Cuomo 20 years ago, found in his immigrant experience the urgency, solidarity, and hope that could inspire a civil rights movement for our time?

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