MECHANISMS OF COALITION FORMATION: VENUE SHIFTING IN THE ABORTION RIGHTS MOVEMENT BEFORE ROE V. WADE

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Research suggests that coalitions between social movement organizations (SMOs) are more likely under conditions of perceived political opportunity. But what are the mechanisms of this effect? Extant research suggests resource-need, collective-benefit, and emotional mechanisms. Here, I theorize a venue-shifting mechanism. When an SMO switches to a new political venue to pursue a perceived political opportunity, it lacks the specific resources necessary for success in that venue and seeks them from another SMO. Drawing on primary and secondary historical data, the article demonstrates this mechanism in the coalition behavior of the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) before the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalized early abortion on request in the United States.

Research has found that coalitions among social movement organizations (SMOs) are both ubiquitous and consequential. They can help SMOs to recruit members, acquire resources, take collective actions, and achieve their goals (McCammon 2003; McCammon and Moon 2015; Staggenborg 1986; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). Given this, researchers have sought to understand the factors that promote coalition formation and identified five main ones: (1) pre-existing ties between SMOs; (2) shared characteristics such as ideologies, frames, tactics, and organizational forms; (3) abundant or scarce resources; (4) political threat; and (5) political opportunity (Brooker and Meyer 2019; McCammon and Van Dyke 2010; Van Dyke and Amos 2017).

But what are the mechanisms by which these factors affect coalition formation? In this article, I theorize and provide evidence for a venue-shifting mechanism that links perceived political opportunity with coalition formation. In this mechanism, an SMO moves into a new political venue to pursue a perceived political opportunity, but because it is new to the venue, it lacks specific resources necessary for success there and seeks them from another SMO, often one with experience in the venue. I demonstrate this mechanism in the coalition behavior of the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) between its founding in 1969 and the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalized early abortion on request. I examine seven of NARAL’s twelve major campaigns during the period, showing that NARAL switched venues in response to perceived opportunities and then chose to form alliances with partners chosen in part for their ability to provide venue-specific resources. I also show that NARAL’s venue shifting lead it to ally with a diverse set of allies in terms of their members, policy concerns, radicalism, and prior alliances with NARAL. I suggest that this diversity occurred because NARAL’s need for venue-specific resources overrode its preference for allies that were similar to itself.

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Causal Mechanisms

In recent decades, social scientists have increasingly sought to identify not just causal effects—the effects of causal factors on outcomes—but causal mechanisms—the processes and steps that link causes to effects or, in other words, the cogs and wheels of causal relationships. The identification of causal mechanisms offers several important benefits. Inferences about causal effects are stronger when researchers can provide evidence for each step of a causal process. Tracing causal mechanisms also allows researchers to better understand how a cause leads to an effect (Elster 1989; George and Bennett 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2015; Beach 2016). And by identifying mechanisms that may be portable to other cases, researchers can “generalize beyond atheoretical descriptions of a single case but without necessarily making claims about universal laws” (Campbell 2005: 43). Social movement scholars, too, have theorized mechanisms of movement mobilization and outcomes (Andrews 2001; Campbell 2005; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Halfmann 2021) but few have explicitly theorized and demonstrated mechanisms of coalition formation, and especially, political-contextual ones (Staggenborg 2010).

Mechanisms of Coalition Formation

Scholars suggest various mechanisms by which the factors mentioned above might shape coalition formation. Existing ties and shared traits between SMOs may increase trust, reduce conflict, and improve communication (Beamish and Luebbers 2009; Van Dyke and Amos 2017; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). On the other hand, dissimilar allies may offer a broader range of unique resources and signal the breadth of support for a cause (Mahoney 2007; Phinney 2017). High-resource SMOs may be better able to afford the costs of forming a coalition, but low-resource SMOs may be especially in need of the resources that allies might provide (McCammon and Campbell 2002; Staggenborg 1986). Resource scarcity within a given movement encourages SMOs to pool resources (Staggenborg 1986) but can also discourage coalitions by increasing resource competition (Hathaway and Meyer 1993; Staggenborg 1986).

Political threat may help SMOs to overcome differences in ideology, identity, or strategy (Borland 2010; Okamoto 2010; Staggenborg 1986, Zald and McCarthy 1979) by increasing movement grievances (Almeida 2010; Meyer and Corrigan-Brown 2005), increasing the perception of common interests (Borland 2010); providing common enemies (Meyer and Corrigan-Brown 2005, Van Dyke 2003); increasing the number of SMOs in a movement (and thus the number of potential allies); or making it easier for SMOs to raise funds for forming and maintaining coalitions (Hathaway and Meyer 1993, Staggenborg 1986). But political threat may also increase ideological distance among potential partners because movements are more likely to utilize ideological appeals when threatened (Della Porta and Diani 2006) or because selective repression makes radical groups even more radical (Koopmans 1993).

Political Opportunity Mechanisms of Collective Action

A discussion of the mechanisms by which political opportunities encourage coalition formation should start more generally with the mechanisms by which political opportunities encourage collective action. In Tarrow’s (1994: 85) famous formulation, political opportunities are “elements of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure.” This definition suggests both a causal relationship between political context and collective action and mechanisms of that relationship: (1) an SMO perceives a positive political context for a given action; and (2) the SMO’s expectation of success motivates it to act (all else equal). McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001: 43) describe this first mechanism as the attribution of opportunity, arguing that a given element of the political context will only invite action if it is “(a) visible to potential challengers, and (b) perceived as an opportunity” (also see Gamson and Meyer 1996). Note that this does not require
that SMOs correctly estimate opportunities. Koopmans (1993: 656) describes the second mechanism (that expectations of success motivate action) as the success chances mechanism (also see Kriesi 2007). Finally, Meyer and Minkoff (2004) offer an alternative “structural” mechanism that includes the “success chances” mechanism but not the “attribution of opportunity” mechanism: SMOs that engage in actions for reasons other than the perception of political opportunity will continue them if they seem to be succeeding. This means that the political context can incentivize an SMO’s action even when the SMO does not perceive a political opportunity.

It is important to note that some studies utilize the term “political opportunity structure” as a synonym for “political environment” or “political context” without specifying mechanisms of “attribution of opportunity” or “success chances.” In these instances, Amenta and Halfmann (2012) suggest that “political context” is a better term than “political opportunity” because the former does not imply a particular set of mechanisms while the latter does.

Political Opportunity Mechanisms of Coalition Formation

For the purposes of this study, I only examine mechanisms by which perceived political opportunities (contra Meyer and Minkoff) affect coalition formation. I examine instances in which the “attribution of opportunity” and “success chances” mechanisms are present, and then theorize how these combine with other mechanisms to encourage coalition formation. Extant research explicitly or implicitly suggests three such mechanisms: resource-needs, collective-benefit, and emotions. To these, I add a fourth: venue shifting.

In the resource-needs mechanism, an SMO that hopes to seize a perceived political opportunity determines that it needs additional resources to do so and seeks SMO allies to provide them (Corrigall-Brown and Meyer 2010; Hathaway and Meyer 1993; Mahoney 2007; Zald and McCarthy 1979). Such resources may be material, human, social-organizational, cultural, or moral, and include such things as money, labor, protestors, expertise (e.g., legal, media, scientific or organizational), cultural products, media attention, celebrity, reputation, status, legitimacy, information, or mobilizing structures. They may also include network connections to allies in the media, interest groups, or government (Cress and Snow 1996; Edwards and Kane 2014; Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Edwards, McCarthy, and Mataic 2019). Note that an SMO’s decision to seize a perceived opportunity and its assessment of ally resources may occur simultaneously.

In the collective-benefit mechanism, an SMO that hopes to seize a perceived political opportunity estimates that the achievement of collective benefits for its constituency has become more likely, and as a result, the potential benefits of an alliance now outweigh its expected costs and risks (Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005; Hojnacki 1997; for work on the valuation of collective benefits, see Amenta and Young 1999a; Goldstone and Tilly 2001). An SMO hoping to seize a perceived political opportunity may also be more perceptive and attentive to the potential benefits of particular allies (Zald and McCarthy 1979). Such benefits include resource acquisition, increased political influence through displays of numbers and unity, and the ability to engage in a broader range of activities (Hathaway and Meyer 1993; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005; Staggenborg 1986, 2010). Costs include the resources, time, and energy necessary for establishing, maintaining, and contributing to an alliance. Risks include the possibility that partners might distort the SMOs message, steal credit, compete for resources, take over its leadership, force it to moderate its goals, or provoke countermovements or state repression (Hula 1999; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005; McCammon and Van Dyke 2010; Staggenborg 1986, 2010).

In the emotional mechanism, when an SMO decides to seize a perceived political opportunity, its members experience emotions such as hope, confidence, anticipation, excitement, energy, or positive mood. Such emotions are implied by McAdam’s (1982) concept of “cognitive liberation” (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000). These emotions, and their sharing among potential allies, can reduce an alliance’s estimated costs and risks. Positive emotions can help potential allies overcome differences in ideology, identity, or strategy. They can also increase trust, reduce conflict, improve communication, and promote shared goals and frames (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000; for similar arguments about political threat, see McCammon and Van Dyke 2010; Whittier 2021).
Venue Shifting

To these three mechanisms, I add a fourth. In the venue-shifting mechanism, an SMO perceives a political opportunity in a venue where it is not currently contending and decides to act in that venue, or it moves away from a venue where political opportunities appear unfavorable. As it enters a new venue with a unique political context, it needs a different set of resources than it did in its old venue. It considers the costs, risks, and benefits of generating these resources itself, obtaining them from patrons, or acquiring them from another SMO (Edwards and Kane 2014; Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Edwards, McCarthy, and Mataic 2019). It is likely to choose another SMO for two reasons. First, it may lack some of the necessary resources because it did not need them and thus did not develop them in the old venue. Second, though patrons can readily provide fungible resources such as money, they may be less able to supply the specialized resources required for the new venue. A venue shift also changes the SMO’s pool of potential allies. Though the SMO is likely to continue some of its existing alliances in the new venue, some of those allies are likely to be absent or relatively useless in the new venue. At the same time, it now has access to a new set of allies in the new venue. The venue-shifting mechanism is based on three premises.

1. SMOs often shift political venues based on their perceptions of political opportunity. These shifts may be either political-institutional (i.e., between executive, judicial, legislative, or electoral venues) or geographic (i.e., between subnational units or between subnational, national, and supranational units). Extensive research on venue shopping shows that political venues vary in terms of their decision-making procedures and players and that political actors often gravitate to advantageous venues while avoiding or escaping less-promising ones, though they may choose venues for non-strategic reasons as well (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kitschelt 1986; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Pralle 2003, 2010; Schattschneider 1975). Research on how SMOs and interest groups choose venues suggests many of the same factors that are mentioned in studies of movement mobilization: the SMO’s resources and organizational structure, the political fragmentation and electoral rules of each venue, the openness of political institutions at each level, the strength of opponents, partisan control of the government, and the presence of governmental allies. Another key factor is the importance of a particular venue within the broader political system (Constantelos 2010). For example, a victory in a large state may be more likely to influence actors in other venues than one in a small state. Venue shopping is especially prevalent in the politically decentralized American polity, where “empirical evidence and theoretical models suggest that venue-shopping is the norm, not the exception” (Pralle 2010:192).

Though extant research finds that political fragmentation and venue shopping shape SMO perceptions of political opportunity (McAdam and Tarrow 2019) and identifies a scale shift mechanism that captures one type of venue shopping—a shift from lower to higher levels of governmental authority (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), researchers have not theorized the implications of venue shifting for coalition behavior. (Here, I use the term “shifting” rather than “shopping” to recognize that SMOs shift venues not only for strategic reasons but also cognitive, emotional, normative, and ideological ones.)

2. When SMOs shift venues, they often lack the resources required for success in the new venue. Venue shifting incorporates a special case of the resource-needs mechanism. SMOs seek resources to pursue a perceived political opportunity, but because venues differ in terms of their players, rules, and processes, different venues call for different tactics and resources. Judicial venues require, at a minimum, lawyers, while legislative ones may require lobbyists, protestors, voters, and network connections. An SMO that enters a new venue often lacks the specific skills, experience, local knowledge, and network connections that are necessary for success there. Moreover, the SMO’s existing resources and organizational structures, which were developed for other venues, may hinder its ability to develop resources appropriate for the new one (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Obach 2010; Rohlinger 2015). For example, at its founding, NARAL decided to solicit non-tax-deductible contributions to engage in lobbying and electoral campaigns otherwise prohibited by tax law. But because such contributions were
emotional mechanisms are only analytic because cognition and may address multiple goals at the same time. In addition, distinctions between calculative and inherently subjective, contains high levels of uncertainty, is often unsystematic or implicit emotions, identities, and histories (Jasper 1997, 2006; Larson 2013). Decision decisions are often strategic and instrumental, they are also guided by norms, beliefs, ideas, not examine its succe

SMOs’ desire to seize a perceived political opportunity with its decision to SMOs often match their tactics to their political context (Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999). They also match their alliances to their political context and to the activities they hope to pursue. SMOs prefer alliances with organizations that can provide them with appropriate resources for their activity and venue, for example, allies with experience and public influence in a given issue area, local knowledge of the political context, and organizational skills and knowledge that are useful in that context (Diani 1990; Edwards, McCarthy and Mataic 2019; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005). Not all resources are appropriate to given contexts. Money is the most fungible (context-independent) resource, but it can’t buy everything, especially moral resources (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). And human capital and social-organizational resources are especially context-dependent. For example, the ACLU’s expertise and personnel are more useful in courts than in legislatures, while the disruptive capacity and counter-cultural self-presentation of radical youth may be more useful for New York protests than Des Moines lobby days (Meyer and Corrigall-Brown 2005; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996).

In addition, SMOs often specialize in particular venues to build on their strengths or avoid resource competition with other SMOs. Reduced resource competition may encourage cooperation. And specialization may produce an explicit or implicit division of labor that makes it possible for SMOs entering new venues to obtain resources from partners that are already specialists there. It may also reduce the number of venues for which SMOs develop resources and make it more likely that they will lack necessary resources when they enter new ones (Downey and Rohlinger 2008; Hathaway and Meyer 1994; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Zald and McCarthy 1979). Divisions of labor between SMOs may be especially likely in politics with many venues because individual SMOs lack the resources to contend in all of them. Finally, SMOs that contend in multiple venues will likely be exposed to a greater number of potential partners with a broader range of resources, which may also increase their desire and ability to form coalitions.

To demonstrate the importance of venue shifting for NARAL’s coalition behavior, I utilize two counterfactuals based on theories of homophily and tactical inertia. As mentioned above, many studies find that SMOs are more likely to ally with partners that share their ideologies, tactics, frames, etc. (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). At the same time, some scholars argue that SMOs demonstrate tactical inertia. They are averse to changing tactics that are familiar and reflective of their history and identity (Jasper 1997; McCammon and Campbell 2002; Tilly 1978). Given this, Holly McCammon and Karen Campbell (2002) argue that SMOs will typically form coalitions only after one of their initiatives fails or if they believe they cannot succeed without allies (in other words, if they perceive unfavorable political opportunities).

These two propositions—coalitional homophily and coalitional inertia—suggest that SMOs will be reluctant to recruit new partners and especially ones that are different from themselves. All things equal, SMOs can be expected to ally with the same partners and the same types of partners across political venues and over time. The venue-shifting mechanism has the potential to override such tendencies. It suggests that an SMO is likely to change alliances when it changes venues because each venue contains different SMOs and because the SMO’s resource needs vary across venues. In addition, SMOs may be willing to choose partners that are ideologically or tactically different from themselves if these partners can offer needed venue-specific resources.

A few caveats are in order. First, the venue-shifting mechanism that I theorize here links an SMOs’ desire to seize a perceived political opportunity with its decision to seek an ally but does not examine its success in obtaining one (a subject for another paper). Second, though SMO decisions are often strategic and instrumental, they are also guided by norms, beliefs, ideas, emotions, identities, and histories (Jasper 1997, 2006; Larson 2013). Decision making is inherently subjective, contains high levels of uncertainty, is often unsystematic or implicit, and may address multiple goals at the same time. In addition, distinctions between calculative and emotional mechanisms are only analytic because cognition and emotions are mutually constitutive.
Finally, the various mechanisms by which perceived political opportunities shape coalition formation should not be viewed as competitors. They can occur together, and the relative importance of each is likely to vary situationally.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY AND DATA

Case-study and historical methods are especially well suited to investigating causal mechanisms (George and Bennett 2005; Mahoney and Rueschmeyer 2003). Here, I engage in “theory-building process tracing,” which uses empirical evidence to “build a midrange theory describing a causal mechanism that is generalizable outside of the individual case to a bounded context” (Beach and Pedersen 2013:16). The method involves investigating empirical material in instances for which X and Y co-vary to look for clues to possible causal mechanisms for that covariation, and then inferring the existence of those mechanisms from the clues. The method combines induction and deduction. In addition to searching for clues in the empirical material, the analyst draws inspiration from existing theoretical and empirical work on the causal relation under investigation and on analogous phenomena, empirical contexts, and causal relations. The method is also iterative. Hunches “are investigated systematically, with the results of this search forming the background for further searches” (Beach and Pedersen 2013:18).

I examine multiple instances of the venue-shifting mechanism to increase the number of empirical observations and provide “parallel demonstrations of theory” (George and Bennett 2005; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Skocpol and Somers 1980). But I rely mainly on within-case rather than cross-case evidence. I attempt to demonstrate that the causal mechanism is present in multiple instances of coalition formation and suggest that it may be generalizable to others.

I focus on seven of NARAL’s twelve major campaigns between February 1969 and January 1973. I focus on campaigns because SMOs often form different coalitions for different campaigns. I chose these seven campaigns because they included both attempts to seize perceived political opportunities (X) and coalition formation (Y). Examining instances in which X and Y were not present would not allow me to theorize the causal mechanism of their association. I also chose these campaigns because they all involved venue shifting. Examining instances in which venue shifting did not occur would not allow me to explore and probe the plausibility of the proposed mechanism but would merely demonstrate that there are other mechanisms by which perceived political opportunities can affect coalition formation, which I don’t dispute (for guidelines on case selection for process tracing, see Beach and Pedersen 2013; Goertz 2017; Saylor 2020).

For each campaign, I describe NARAL’s political context, perceptions of political opportunity, venue shifts, resource needs, and attempts to acquire resources from partners. I investigate several empirical implications of the venue-shifting mechanism. If the mechanism is present, NARAL can be expected to: (1) shift to new venues after changes in the political context; (2) perceive such changes as political opportunities; (3) determine that it lacks resources for new venues; (4) choose partners, at least in part, for their ability to provide resources appropriate to the new venue; (5) choose partners that specialize in a particular venue; (6) seek or form coalitions when shifting venues and (7) contrary to theories of homophily and coalitional inertia, establish coalitions that vary across venues in terms of the specific organizations involved and their membership base, policy concerns, radicalism, and previous cooperation with NARAL.

I chose NARAL for investigation because it was the largest of the two national, single-issue abortion organizations during the pre-

Roe period (the other was the Association for the Study of Abortion (ASA)) and because it frequently demonstrated the perception of political opportunities, venue shifting, and coalition formation, providing many instances from which to build theory. I also chose it because its organizational characteristics and practices facilitated process tracing. It was a formal organization with bylaws, newsletters, and written meeting minutes that provided an ample record of its activities. In addition, its small executive committee made the most important decisions and usually focused on only one or two projects at a time. All of these factors
made it easier to track the organization’s decision-making processes. I chose the period before *Roe v. Wade* because during that period, states, rather than the federal government, still had primary responsibility for abortion law, and this facilitated venue shifting.

Data sources include the records, reports, correspondence, and newsletters of NARAL and other SMOs, as well as newspapers, magazines, professional journals, and secondary works on abortion politics and policy. I also utilized the memoirs of movement leaders and interviews with them conducted by Suzanne Staggenborg. I collected data from the archives of NARAL, California’s Society for Humane Abortion (SHA) (a NARAL affiliate), and the papers of Ruth Proskauer Smith, a founder of NARAL—all at the Schlesinger Library of Women’s History, Harvard University. I also examined the papers of Alan Guttmacher, a founder of the Association for the Study of Abortion (ASA), at the Countway Medical Library, Harvard University, as well as the archives of the California Committee for Therapeutic Abortion (CCTA) in the Special Collections of the UCLA Library.

In what follows, I describe abortion politics and policy of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and NARAL’s organizational characteristics, major campaigns, political venues, and coalitions. I then demonstrate the venue-shifting mechanism in NARAL’s coalition behavior in the medical sectors of Washington, D.C., and New York, in Midwestern legislatures, and constitutional courts. I end by discussing some implications of my findings and areas for future research.

**ABORTION POLITICS AND POLICY BEFORE ROE V. WADE**

In 1950, abortion was a criminal offense in every state, but physicians could legally provide “medical-necessity” abortions if childbirth would threaten a pregnant woman’s life or, in a few states, her physical health. But the vast majority of abortions were provided by nonphysicians or were self-induced. In 1955, Planned Parenthood organized a national conference that asked the American Law Institute (ALI) to add abortion to its model penal code and to define medical necessity broadly to include physical and mental health, rape, incest, underage pregnancy, and fetal abnormality. Soon after, the first abortion reform organizations, composed mainly of lawyers, physicians, academics, and clergy, began pushing for ALI-style reforms. Between 1962 and 1972, every state considered such reforms, and ten states, mainly on the coasts and in the South, enacted them (Burns 2005; Garrow 1994; Halfmann 2011; Luker 1984). But the reforms did little to expand abortion access because the vast majority of abortions did not meet statutory requirements of medical necessity. Activists then began to call for the *repeal* of all abortion laws, establishing the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL) in February 1969 (Garrow 1994; Lader 1973).

A year later, abortion law “repeals” were enacted in New York, Alaska, Hawaii, and Washington State. These were not full-scale repeals because they included restrictions related to residency, gestational time limits, and provision by physicians, but they did allow early abortions “on request” (i.e., without statutory requirements of medical necessity). Those were the last repeals to occur in legislatures. The following year, a growing antiabortion movement defeated repeal bills in twenty-six states and medical-necessity bills in ten (Burns 2005). The following year, only a single abortion bill was enacted in Florida, and it was a medical-necessity reform rather than a repeal. That same year, the “right-to-life” movement fell only one veto short of rolling back New York’s 1970 repeal. Though the “abortion movement” (as it was then called) was now routinely failing in legislatures, it was more successful in state and federal courts. The courts legalized early abortion on request, *de jure* or *de facto*, in California (1969), Wisconsin (1970), Washington, D.C. (1971), Kansas (1972), Vermont (1972), New Jersey (1972), and finally, the nation, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1973 that states could not regulate abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy (beyond physician requirements) but could regulate it to protect women’s health in the second trimester, and fetal life in the third trimester, as long as those regulations did not threaten women’s health (Garrow 1994; Joyce, Tan, and Zhang 2010; Rubin 1987).
NARAL’S ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

NARAL was both a national organization headquartered in New York City and a loose coalition of national, state and local affiliates, most of which were state or local single-issue abortion repeal organizations. The national office provided some support to its affiliates but mainly focused on projects of its own. Affiliates were autonomous from the national organization and planned and executed their own activities. They were not bound by national NARAL’s decisions, nor did national NARAL take responsibility for their actions. The affiliates did not see themselves as chapters of the organization and typically referred to NARAL as an organization apart from their own. For its affiliates, National NARAL acted mainly as a clearinghouse, providing information, training and networking opportunities, and occasionally small grants, but little additional assistance, except when it concentrated its efforts “on the most likely targets” (Lader 1973:89). Executive Director Lee Gidding’s correspondence shows that NARAL rarely participated in its affiliates’ decisions and sometimes lost track of what they were doing.

NARAL’s board met only once per year and was usually asked to vote only on matters of general policy. As a result, its fifteen-person executive committee, which met monthly in New York City, made most decisions. Lawrence Lader, the chairman of the board and one of three founders of the organization, was by far its most influential member because he was a skilled and charismatic activist, worked for NARAL almost full-time without pay, and had consistent support from a majority voting bloc. Executive Committee Member, Bernard Nathanson, referred to NARAL’s leadership as “Ladership” (Nathanson and Ostling 1979:154).

NARAL had strong resources of expertise, social capital, and connections (especially to the birth control movement) but fewer resources of money and members. Lader was a well-connected freelance journalist whose background made him adept at gaining media attention. He had become a close friend of Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger while writing her biography and had also written a bestselling book on abortion. He had previously served in the leadership of the Association for the Study of Abortion (ASA), the Association for Voluntary Sterilization (AVS), and Zero Population Growth (ZPG). Another founder, Lonny Myers, a physician, and the founder of the Illinois Citizens for the Medical Control of Abortion (ICMCA) had also been active in the birth control movement. A third, Ruth Proskauer Smith, had previously served as executive director of Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts, the Human Betterment Association for Voluntary Sterilization, and the ASA.

NARAL’s executive committee included other prominent members as well: Betty Friedan, the founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), New York City Councilperson Carol Greitzer, and Richard Bowers, the founder of Zero Population Growth (ZPG), as well as other leaders of birth control, religious, feminist, social service, and abortion repeal organizations. The board was similarly composed of prominent professionals, as were its legal and medical committees. It also had an advisory committee of prominent national politicians (Staggenborg 1991). Its budget was approximately $500,000 per year (in 2020 dollars), and it had only one full-time professional staff member. It had forty organizational affiliates (nine national and thirty-one state or local) and a mailing list of about 1,000 people and organizations. It raised most of its money from wealthy individuals or foundations that were also funders of the birth control movement, most notably the Hopkins Foundation, the Lalor Foundation, and philanthropist Stewart Mott (Staggenborg 1991).

NARAL’s board and members were diverse in their organizational affiliations and ideological radicalism, but the powerful executive committee was controlled by a relatively radical faction, which Lader labeled “the activists.” This faction held ten of the fifteen seats on the executive committee. Five were leaders of feminist organizations. NOW’s Friedan represented the feminist movement’s liberal women’s rights stream, which, except for NOW’s New York chapter, was mainly focused on the ERA and was only minimally involved in the abortion issue until after Roe (Staggenborg 1991). Friedan, however, was more radical on the abortion issue than many NOW members. The remaining four feminist board members, Lucinda Cisler, Patricia Maginnis, Lana Clarke Phelan, and Connie Bille Finnerty represented the more radical...
women’s liberation stream of the feminist movement, hailing from such organizations as New York NOW (the most radical NOW chapter), New Yorkers for Abortion Law Repeal (a spinoff of New York NOW), California’s Society for Humane Abortion, Redstockings, and Philadelphia Women’s Liberation.

Andrews (2001) describes three main mechanisms of movement impact: disruption, persuasion of third parties, and routine access and influence. NARAL engaged in all these activities, though the “activist” group favored what Lader called “confrontation”—civil disobedience (through abortion referral and provision), provocative media events, and protest. In addition, some members of the activist faction, especially the feminist ones, were less willing than other leaders to compromise on the goal of total repeal (Lader 1973).

**NARAL’S VENUES AND COALITIONS**

Table 1 on the next page lists NARAL’s twelve major campaigns between February 1969 and January 1973, along with their venues, changes in political context, and types of SMO partners. Campaigns that are shaded in the table involved both venue shifting and coalition formation. The names of NARAL’s campaign partners are listed below the table. NARAL’s first major campaign focused on legislative change in New York. This was because the organization’s headquarters and seventy percent of its executive committee were located there and because its leaders saw the state as a national bellwether.11 Given this initial focus, I classify the New York legislature as NARAL’s home venue (geographic and institutional) and classify campaigns either outside of New York or in non-legislative venues as venue shifts. I define a coalition as an instance in which two or more SMOs share decision-making authority in planning an action.

For the reasons mentioned above, I do not examine the five (unshaded) campaigns that did not include either venue shifting or coalition formation. These included two instances where NARAL stayed in its home venue—the campaign to repeal New York’s abortion law in 1969-70 and the defense of that repeal in the spring of 1972—and three instances where NARAL contended outside of its home venue but did not form a coalition. In 1970 and 1971, it worked to establish its own abortion clinic in New York City and organized a symposium for physicians on outpatient abortion techniques. In March 1972, it initiated a challenge to state abortion laws based on a recent court decision by the Vermont Supreme Court.

The remaining seven campaigns (shaded) included both venue shifting and coalition formation. Lader, who proposed almost all the campaigns considered by the executive committee, often spoke in the language of opportunity: he tried to “grasp any opening quickly and to expand it on a national scale” (Lader 1973:112). As he presented new proposals, he typically summarized recent favorable developments in the political context and then outlined a plan for exploiting them. In 1969, NARAL responded to a new federal court decision legalizing abortion in Washington, D.C., by moving to a new institutional and geographic venue, that city’s medical sector. It pressured the local public hospital to provide abortions and tried to establish its own abortion clinic. After both efforts failed, it moved to another venue by suing the hospital in federal court. After New York repealed its abortion law in April 1970, NARAL moved into New York’s medical sector because it saw an opportunity to massively expand national abortion access as women and other pregnant people traveled to New York for abortions. But it also responded to an unfavorable context of hostile regulators and reluctant hospitals that had the potential to produce a disastrous implementation of the New York law that would discredit the repeal movement nationally. In 1971, NARAL shifted to Midwest legislatures after its 1970 victory in New York, near wins in other states, promising allies, and a desire to establish a Midwestern abortion hub so that abortion patients from the region would no longer have to travel to New York. In late 1971 and early 1972, NARAL shifted to state and federal courts to take advantage of new legal precedents but also to avoid the growing power of the antiabortion movement in state legislatures, as represented by a series of defeats in the states that it had targeted in the Midwest.
Table 1. NARAL’s Major Campaigns, Venues, Political Contexts, and Coalition Partners, 1969 to 1973

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Campaign</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Favorable Political Context Change</th>
<th>Unfavorable Political Context Change</th>
<th>Partner Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb 1969-Apr 1970</td>
<td>Repeal abortion law</td>
<td>NY legislature</td>
<td>DC federal court decision</td>
<td>Hospital reluctance</td>
<td>Abortion/birth control, medical, legal, religious, civic, women's liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1969-May 1970</td>
<td>Pressure hospital</td>
<td>DC medical sector</td>
<td>DC federal court decision</td>
<td>Hospital reluctance</td>
<td>Medical, women's liberation, “black militant”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1969-Apr 1970</td>
<td>Establish abortion clinic</td>
<td>DC medical sector</td>
<td>DC federal court decision, modeling potential</td>
<td>Hospital reluctance</td>
<td>Medical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 1970-May 1970</td>
<td>Sue hospital</td>
<td>DC federal court</td>
<td>DC federal court decision</td>
<td>Failed pressure campaign</td>
<td>Legal, women's liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1970-Feb 1971</td>
<td>Establish abortion clinic</td>
<td>NYC medical sector</td>
<td>NY repeal, NYC abortion hub</td>
<td>Hospital reluctance</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1970</td>
<td>Nonhospital abortion symposium</td>
<td>NYC medical sector</td>
<td>NY repeal, NYC abortion hub</td>
<td>Hospital reluctance</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 1971</td>
<td>Legislative strategy workshop</td>
<td>Midwest legislatures</td>
<td>NY repeal, near wins in some states, political allies, chance to increase access</td>
<td>Hospital reluctance</td>
<td>Birth control, medical, legal, religious, civic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul 1971-Oct 1971</td>
<td>Constitutional litigation</td>
<td>Federal court (Detroit)</td>
<td>DC federal court decision, judicial victories of other SMOs</td>
<td>Pro-life legislative strength, Midwest defeats</td>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1972</td>
<td>Constitutional litigation</td>
<td>State courts</td>
<td>Vermont Supreme Court decision, judicial victories of other SMOs</td>
<td>Pro-life legislative strength, Midwest defeats</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1972-May 1972</td>
<td>Protect NY abortion law</td>
<td>NY legislature</td>
<td>Pro-life legislative strength</td>
<td>Pro-life legislative strength, Midwest defeats</td>
<td>Abortion/birth control, medical, legal, religious, civic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1972</td>
<td>Litigation strategy workshop</td>
<td>State, federal courts</td>
<td>Vermont Supreme Court and DC federal court rulings, other SMO's judicial victories</td>
<td>Pro-life legislative strength, Midwest defeats</td>
<td>Birth control, legal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: a Shaded rows indicate campaigns that involved both venue shifting and coalition formation. b Cook-Leichter Committee, Association for the Study of Abortion (ASA), Planned Parenthood, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Clergy Consultation Service (CCS), Episcopal Church, Unitarian Church, Council of Churches, League of Women Voters (LWV), New York NOW, New Yorkers for Abortion Law Repeal, Redstockings. c Women’s Medical Society, Women’s Liberation Front, “black militant.” d D.C. Medical Society, Medical Committee for Human Rights, Johns Hopkins physicians e ACLU, Women’s Liberation Front. f Population Council, CCS, women’s liberation groups. g In Iowa: Zero Population Growth (ZPG), Iowa Medical Society, CCS, Council of Churches, Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, American Association of University Women (AAUW), Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), LWV. In Illinois: Planned Parenthood, ZPG, ACLU, Illinois Medical Society, CCS, American Friends Service Committee, mainstream women’s organizations. h In Minnesota: mainline Protestant churches, Catholics for Abortion Repeal. In Michigan: ACLU, Michigan Medical Society, CCS, Protestant clergy, AAUW, other mainstream women’s organizations. i Michigan CCS. j ZPG, ACLU, James Madison Constitutional Law Institute.
NARAL’s coalitions varied across these venues. Though it allied with women’s liberation organizations in the legislative and health care venues of New York and Washington, D.C., it did not do so in Midwestern legislatures or constitutional courts. It mainly relied on pro-fessional, religious, and civic organizations in the Midwest. And in constitutional courts, it primarily relied on legal and medical organizations. Below I trace the venue-shifting mechanism of coalition formation in these contexts.

**THE MEDICAL SECTORS OF WASHINGTON, D.C., AND NEW YORK**

In 1969 and 1970, NARAL responded to a change in the political context by shifting to the medical sectors of Washington, D.C., and New York and recruiting allies appropriate to those contexts. This was a new institutional venue and in the case of Washington, D.C., a new geographic venue. The Washington action responded to a federal district court ruling, *United States v. Vuitch*, that struck down the District’s abortion law, pending a Supreme Court appeal. In a letter to the executive committee proposing action in the District, Lader declared that NARAL had been “hit with the best piece of news that I believe the movement has received.”

NARAL initiated a two-part campaign, led by executive committee member Dr. Don Harting, a physician and executive director of the American Public Health Association (APHA). First, NARAL pressured the public hospital, D.C. General, to ease excessive restrictions on mental-health abortions, which the hospital only permitted if a patient had been previously diagnosed with a mental illness. Second, NARAL worked to establish an outpatient abortion clinic. The executive committee believed that the clinic might encourage D.C. General to provide more abortions to avoid being upstaged by New Yorkers. It also might impact courts and legislatures in other states by demonstrating the safety of outpatient abortions and the benefits of abortions for the poor.

NARAL had not previously targeted hospitals or sought to establish abortion clinics. As it entered this new venue, it lacked local troops but could draw on the connections of Harting, who lived in D.C., and Dr. Milan Vuitch, a NARAL Board Member whose prosecution for providing abortions had prompted the court decision. Vuitch also donated approximately $40,000 (in 2020 dollars) towards the clinic effort. In its hospital campaign, NARAL allied with establishment and radical grassroots organizations that could pressure D.C. General. Immediately after the *Vuitch* decision, NARAL organized a press conference where Vuitch appeared alongside “prominent” physicians and urged them to perform abortions under the new law. To pressure the hospital, Harting organized an advocacy organization, the Medical Committee for Safe Abortion, which he described as “quite a mixed power group ranging from Black militants to the Women’s Medical Society.” It also included the Washington Women’s Liberation Front, which protested at the hospital. After D.C. General proved unresponsive, NARAL successfully sued the hospital in March 1970, collaborating with the ACLU, which filed the case, and the Washington Women’s Liberation Front, which recruited the plaintiff (Lader 1973).

For the clinic initiative, Harting worked with a more professional coalition: a special committee of the D.C. Medical Society, the Medical Committee for Human Rights, and physicians from Johns Hopkins University. These groups helped him solicit physicians to staff the clinic. Bernard Nathanson of NARAL’s Executive Committee noted that the clinic would be under heightened regulatory scrutiny, so it would be crucial to have expert providers and prominent supporters. For the clinic’s board, NARAL sought “prominent residents and a few NARAL officers.” But most physicians were hesitant to perform abortions outside of hospitals or to be associated with the “abortionist” Vuitch. NARAL then proposed a Saturday clinic where Vuitch would provide the abortions, but NARAL would run the clinic. But it abandoned this initiative after New York’s abortion law repeal so that it could turn its attention to establishing a clinic in New York City. In addition, Harting reported that some allies were worried that the NARAL clinic might let D.C. General off the hook. Here, NARAL drew on allies that could offer the right resources for the venue at hand: establishment and radical groups to pressure the hospital and participate in protests; prominent medical professionals to provide expertise, legitimacy, and
licensed services; prominent residents for the clinic’s board; and the legal expertise and resources of the ACLU to sue D.C. General.

The repeal of New York’s abortion law in 1970 was an enormous victory that dramatically increased abortion access for women and other pregnant people throughout the country. It suggested that the national tide was turning in favor of the repeal movement. It also offered an opportunity to demonstrate the safety and efficacy of dedicated outpatient abortion clinics. But there were risks. As thousands traveled to New York, this might overtax the capacities of hospitals and perhaps lead to provision by underqualified or exploitive providers (Lader 1973; New York Times, June 28, 1970; Pakter and Nelson 1971; Halfmann 2021). In response, New York City health officials proposed a residency requirement and a prohibition on abortions in nonhospital clinics and doctor’s offices. NARAL opposed these restrictions, arguing that they would dramatically reduce nationwide abortion access and might “set a pattern for the rest of the country” (NARAL News, Summer 1970). It also fought to ensure that reluctant hospitals did their fair share of abortions.

This was a familiar geographic venue for NARAL, but a new institutional one, municipal medical regulation, and the executive committee debated whether NARAL should enter it. Some members argued it should focus on legislation rather than improving abortion services, but Lader’s activist faction prevailed.19 It formed a coalition that defeated the restrictions, except for the prohibition on office abortions (Lader 1973; New York Times, 28 Jun 1970, 25 Oct 1970; Pakter and Nelson 1971). Its main ally was the Clergy Consultation Service (CCS), a nationwide organization of prominent clergy that provided abortion referrals. It was an especially effective ally because it had opened a New York City abortion clinic in July 1970 (eventually run by NARAL Executive Committee Member Bernard Nathanson) and could thus provide evidence for the safety of outpatient abortions. It released a report on the 4,000 abortions performed at the clinic and collected data on hospital provision that revealed long waiting lists and delays (Carmen and Moody 1973; Dirks and Relf 2017). Dr. Christopher Tietze, a prominent epidemiologist from the Population Council, also presented evidence of the positive safety record at the CCS clinic.

NARAL created and distributed a brochure describing the health benefits of New York’s law and distributed it “over the signatures of an impressive list of physicians (medical school professors or heads of hospital departments of obstetrics and gynecology).”20 NARAL also organized a public hearing at which CCS and other groups testified against the City guidelines, and it worked with women’s liberation activists on protests.21 In this campaign, NARAL combined pressure and persuasion, organizing protests, accusing regulators of representing medical interests, and attempting to embarrass the hospitals by publicizing their low levels of abortion provision. But it also sought to persuade sympathetic city officials. It drew on allies appropriate to the venue and to particular campaigns: abortion providers and medical professionals for persuading City regulators and women’s liberation groups for protesting at hospitals and city hall (Carmen and Moody 1973).

MIDWESTERN LEGISLATURES

After the April 1970 victory in New York, Lader looked for new opportunities and found them in Midwestern legislatures. He wrote the board, “If we can win in five or six states in the next half year—and this is entirely possible—we can break the back of the resistance.” NARAL chose Colorado as the site of its September 1970 Annual Meeting “because a number of central and western states, such as Washington, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Arizona, are key targets.”22 And in January 1971, NARAL held a conference to provide training and discuss strategy with activists and legislators from Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, and Minnesota. I focus on those four states in the discussion below.

NARAL had high hopes for these states during the 1971 legislative session. Though repeal bills had failed in all four states the year before, the repeal campaign seemed to be gaining momentum and had strong support from professional elites and government officials. Medical
societies supported repeal legislation in all four states (Halfmann 2019). The Republican governors of Iowa and Michigan supported repeal, as did the Democratic-Farmer Labor governor of Minnesota. In Iowa and Minnesota, both major parties officially favored repeal (Williams 2015). Public opinion strongly favored repeal in Iowa and Michigan (Garrow 1994; Mohr 1989). The Illinois context was less propitious (Staggenborg 1991). Its state affiliate was likely invited to the conference mainly because it agreed to host it. In addition to their favorable political contexts, NARAL targeted these states because of their location in the center of the country. Repeal in any one of those states would allow Midwesterners to obtain abortions without traveling to New York or California. As mentioned above, NARAL’s “activist” faction gravitated towards radical tactics, included members of the Women’s Liberation Movement, and had previously collaborated with women’s liberation activists and “Black militants” in New York and the District of Columbia. But at the strategy conference, NARAL acknowledged that the Midwestern context would require more moderate positions and tactics. Three months before, the NARAL board had debated whether to support state bills that fell short of full repeal by restricting provision to physicians or imposing gestational time limits. Board members from Minnesota and Iowa insisted that such restrictions, and perhaps even parental consent requirements, would be necessary in their states. Bob McCoy, the leader of Minnesota’s repeal organization, stressed that “practical politics demand leeway for negotiation.” At the Midwest strategy conference, the Midwestern delegations all agreed “that some time-limit would be essential to passage in their own states.” Though Lader continued to urge total repeal, Nathanson, his close ally on the executive committee, acknowledged that a twenty-week time limit would be crucial for gaining medical support in the Midwest. As the Iowa repeal organization put it, “Ideally, we too favor total repeal of all abortion laws; however, we do not feel that repeal is politically feasible in Iowa at this time.”

The more conservative climate in Midwestern legislatures shaped NARAL’s advice on coalition building, a major topic of the conference. In the minutes of the conference and a set of three training documents on “How to Win Repeal,” feminist groups were only occasionally suggested as potential allies. Though these documents sometimes mentioned “women’s organizations,” the sum of materials suggests that this referred to more traditional organizations such as the YWCA and the League of Women’s Voters. Feminist organizations were not mentioned as allies in the minutes of the conference:

Enlisting the aid of other organizations, such as the Council of Churches, Clergy Consultations [sic] Services, Women’s organizations, Planned Parenthood, American Assn. of University Women, etc., is essential. . . . Repeal organizations should seek endorsement of state, county and local medical organizations, and having them, should publicize that support.

Nor were they mentioned in the first training document, “Organizing a Repeal Group”:

Get the cooperation of your nearest Planned Parenthood affiliate. If they will not support you as an organization, individual members will join. The American Association for University Women and the YWCA are likely allies, and you can count on help from the Unitarian Universalists. Contact groups with a particular stake in abortion law repeal: doctors, nurses, lawyers, social workers, clergymen, legislators, women, college students. Nursing and medical students are often strong for repeal and action-oriented. Try to involve community leaders from other social action causes. Get in touch with women’s organizations and civic leaders. If there is a Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion in your area, you’ll find them a reservoir of ideas and information.

They were not mentioned either in the second training document, “Pushing the Bill into Law”:

[Legislative] Committee Members are impressed by the appearance at hearings of conservative-looking people and such front-line troops as [Parent Teacher Associations, the American Association of University Women, and the League of Women Voters] and other women's clubs.
NOW was mentioned, however, in the third training document, “Building a Solid Base of Support,” which advised activists that they could find organizers for local branches “through such groups as Unitarian Universalists, Planned Parenthood, Council of Jewish Women, National Organization for Women, Zero Population Growth, etc.” It also urged activists to establish a relationship with “every national organization with a repeal position located in your state—Planned Parenthood, Women's Liberation, YWCA, American Friend's, etc.” Attendees were also provided with a list of approximately fifty organizations that had endorsed repeal. Though most were fairly mainstream, it also listed NOW and “Women’s Liberation.”

As state affiliates pursued repeal in Midwestern legislatures, their main activities included lobbying, writing letters to state legislators, and speaking to women’s and religious groups (Staggenborg 1991). As a result, they sought resources of expertise and legitimacy rather than disruptive capacity. The minutes for the NARAL conference noted, “Although no legislator present specifically urged massive demonstrations, all recognized that such demonstrations would occur. It was mentioned that the initial reaction of legislators to militant groups is negative, but eventually, the militant refusal to accept NO for an answer registers Yes. *That opinion was by no means unanimous*” [emphasis added].

Professionals led all five NARAL affiliates in these states. Four were headed by male ministers, physicians, or lawyers. One had led Iowa’s Planned Parenthood and its Clergy Consultation Service, and another was an official in Michigan’s Republican party (Frank 2014; Staggenborg 1991; Wambeke 2016). Only Iowans for Medical Control of Abortion (IMCA), one of two organizations in Iowa, was led by women. Though not doctors, lawyers, or clergy, they were still professionals—the legislative chair of AAUW, a Planned Parenthood board member, and the executive director of a United Way childcare center (Mohr 1989).

The state organizations strove to present themselves as moderate and respectable. Though abortion SMOs in many states had recently changed their names to include the word “repeal,” the affiliates in Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan had not, keeping the words “medical control” in their names (e.g., Illinois Citizens for the Medical Control of Abortion). The Minnesota affiliate did not even use the word abortion, calling itself the “Minnesota Council for the Legal Termination of Pregnancy” until 1972, when it became the Minnesota Organization for Repeal of Abortion Laws (MORAL) (Mohr 1989; Staggenborg 1991). The Iowa affiliates framed their calls for abortion repeal in terms of population control to appeal to the Republican-controlled legislature (Mohr 1989). And the executive director of the Illinois affiliate, Helen Smith, began her public appearances by saying, “I have three children, I’ve been married to the same man for twenty years, and I’ve never had an abortion” (Staggenborg 1991: 32).

As Table 1 shows, the Midwestern affiliates collaborated with birth control, medical, legal, religious, and civic organizations (Mohr 1989; Frank 2014: 359; Wambeke 2016; Staggenborg 1991). Many of these organizations resembled NARAL’s allies in New York, but because these were different contexts with a different slate of players, they were from a different set of organizations. For example, while NARAL relied on religious allies in both New York and Iowa, in the former, the main ally was the Episcopal Church, while in the latter, it was the United Methodist Church (Bohlen 2016; Danielsen 2014; Lader 1973; Nossiff 2001). Sometimes NARAL allied with state or local affiliates of the same national organizations in multiple states, such as the ACLU in New York, Illinois, and Michigan. But these were still new alliances because the state and local chapters were different organizations from the national one and had their own personnel and organizational characteristics. Moreover, in the case of the ACLU and ZPG, the local organizations were relatively autonomous from the national ones.

Before late 1971, the Midwest affiliates largely avoided collaborations with women’s liberation organizations (Freeman 1973). The state affiliates, along with other noncoastal NARAL affiliates, complained that the demands, tactics, and appearance of women’s liberation groups hurt their cause in state legislatures (Garrow 1994; Staggenborg 1991). Though the Illinois affiliate joined a coalition organized by the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union (CWLU) in October 1970, it quickly ended its active participation (Staggenborg 1991). A female affiliate leader complained that women’s liberation groups often “did more harm than good” in Springfield and critiqued their
slogan, “free abortion on demand.” “When you use phrases like that,” she said, “it only helps the opposition” (Staggenborg 1991:40). Iowans for Medical Control of Abortion was led by women but hoped to avoid association with the women’s liberation movement. A 1970 newspaper profile said the Iowa organization spoke in the “persistent but quiet voice of practiced motherhood; virtually every member has children, and many (maybe most) are homemakers.” One founder declared that “a hostile, feminist movement is what we don’t want to be” and said that she and the other founders were “distressed at being misidentified in print following a Statehouse appearance as members of one of the ‘women’s liberation’ groups.” Women’s liberation activists at Iowa’s Grinnell College complained that they had been discouraged from direct action tactics “by local groups who told them to ‘write letters and be quiet.’” Even NARAL’s president Carole Greitzer questioned the value of “young blue-jeaned women who scream stridently at demonstrations and move ineffectually through legislative corridors.” Some state affiliates also worried that women’s liberation activists might alienate physician allies. Though medical associations favored abortion on request, they did not support total repeal. In particular, they objected to calls for “abortion on demand,” which implied that individual physicians would be forced to provide abortions or would be unable to exercise medical discretion/control. They also resented feminist demands that mostly male physicians be replaced by female lay or para-professional providers (Halfmann 201; Murphy 2012; Ruzek 1978; Schoen 2005).

The initial reluctance of Midwestern affiliates to collaborate with women’s liberation organizations may have been more tactical (and venue-based) than ideological. Once it became clear, in late 1971, that legislative repeals were unlikely, all of the organizations participated in protests with women’s liberation organizations. The Illinois and Minnesota NARAL affiliates collaborated on protests with state affiliates of the Women’s National Abortion Action Coalition, which was founded by the Socialist Workers Party and composed mainly of women’s liberation organizations (Staggenborg 1991). And after its 1971 legislative loss, NARAL’s Michigan affiliate launched a referendum campaign that included women’s liberation groups who “mobilized speakers to testify about their own experiences seeking abortions” (Frank 2014: 359; Karrer 1996). While mainstream professional, religious and civic organizations had been more useful for legislative campaigns, women’s liberation organizations were a valuable asset in a referendum campaign that relied on large numbers of activists to solicit signatures and votes.

**CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS**

In late 1971 and 1972, a combination of favorable and unfavorable changes in state political contexts led NARAL to enter judicial venues. The legislative path had largely closed. “Those of us on the inside know what a beating the opposition dealt us this year,” said Executive Director Lee Gidding. The right-to-life movement was growing and many legislators, hoping to avoid the growing controversy of abortion, refused to consider new legislation until the Supreme Court ruled on the issue. The courts offered new opportunities. Several abortion SMOs other than NARAL had recently succeeded there, and the right-to-life movement was weaker there than in the legislatures. NARAL had also developed two new legal strategies based on recent court decisions (Garrow 1994; Karrer 2011; Staggenborg 1991; Williams 2015). In a July 1971 memo to the executive committee, Lader announced that an “exciting approach has surfaced” that would “inject new life” into a movement at a “standstill.” In Washington, D.C., the Supreme Court had broadened the criteria for mental health abortions and moved the burden of proof from physicians to prosecutors. NARAL hoped to apply that decision in other states and gain media attention while doing so: “Our plan is to find a minimum of three physicians from three different states who will perform an abortion on mental health grounds, without [psychiatric] consultation…they will fly to D.C. for our annual meeting press conference and announce what they have done.” NARAL lawyers would provide the legal justification and request a decision from the federal courts. Lader hoped that this would “encourage other doctors to follow suit in other states.” NARAL eventually settled on a single doctor, choosing a Michigan physician because victory there would
increase abortion access in the center of the country and might aid the state’s referendum campaign (Garrow 1994).

Constitutional litigation was a new venue for NARAL (its 1970 suit against D.C. General had not raised constitutional issues). Most constitutional litigation to that point had been filed by other organizations such as the ASA, the ACLU, the James Madison Constitutional Law Institute (JMCLI), the Center for Constitutional Rights, ZPG chapters, and women’s liberation groups (Epstein 1981; Faux 2001; Garrow 1994; Rubin 1987). In part, this was because NARAL had difficulty raising funds for litigation. Because it engaged in political lobbying, it could only solicit taxable donations, and because such donations were rare, many donors opposed spending them on activities that tax laws treated as nonpolitical, such as litigation. As a result, NARAL left most litigation work to the ASA. As Gidding explained, “ASA subsidizes court cases and organizes amicus briefs; NARAL initiates court action when it is strategically crucial—but it does so by identifying and persuading organizations and individuals to undertake, carry out, and pay for the operation. We are never financially involved.” When NARAL did engage in litigation, it either partnered with the ACLU, obtained pro bono work from board members, or solicited contributions that bypassed NARAL and went directly to lawyers.

In addition to these philanthropic barriers, some of NARAL’s leaders believed that legislation, rather than litigation, offered the best opportunity for broad, durable changes in law and public opinion. Gidding wrote that legislative campaigns “are the best ways of educating the public on the issues involved, and only an educated public will demand full and effective implementation when the laws are changed.” Similarly, Lucinda Cisler, one of the women’s liberation members of NARAL’s executive committee, said that “We can never formulate judicial decisions, and even the most favorable tend to be ambiguous, narrow in scope, and avoid women’s rights. . . . But we can draft our own repeal legislation quite precisely, and actively seek out legislative sponsorship of what we want” (Quoted in Staggenborg 1991: 41). When NARAL did engage in litigation, it mainly did so to convey political messages or to put pressure on abortion providers rather than to establish new constitutional precedents. Lader wrote to a board member, “While it is true that ordinarily we don’t initiate court suits ourselves, there have been occasions where the legal and political goals are so intertwined that it is necessary to combine both actions.” NARAL’s entry into a venue that it had previously avoided suggests that the unfavorable outlook in state legislatures played a role in its choice.

As NARAL entered this new venue, it needed a physician willing to risk prosecution, a publicist to attract media attention, lawyers to file suit and community supporters. For the physician, it recruited NARAL board member Dr. Edgar Keemer, who had both establishment and radical credentials. He had served as an officer of the Detroit Medical Society and the ACLU but was also a Black rights activist, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, and had served prison time for providing abortions. Lader handled publicity while two members of NARAL’s board provided the legal expertise. Michigan’s CCS provided community support by announcing that it would openly provide referrals to Keemer. Lader said he had chosen the CCS because it could use its high status to protect Keemer from prosecution. He noted that the 300 members of Michigan’s CCS “made up one of the country’s most prestigious referral groups” (Lader 1973: 179–80). The CCS was a high-status organization because its members were clergy and because it only made referrals to high-quality, licensed physicians and conducted its activities openly and without a fee. CCS participation helped to legitimate Keemer’s claim and likely influenced the decision of Michigan authorities not to prosecute him. This was a case, then, of NARAL choosing a venue both for its political possibilities and because it contained allies with the right resources.

A few months later, NARAL responded to another court decision that “opened up a great opportunity for NARAL action” and would “put the movement, long at a standstill, on the offensive again.” The Vermont Supreme Court had declared the state’s abortion law invalid, arguing that because it applied criminal penalties to physicians but not to patients, it permitted women to obtain abortions but forbade them from obtaining safe ones. NARAL hoped to gain similar rulings in other states. It saw state constitutional courts as especially promising because
their decisions could not be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Initially, it pursued this new legal strategy on its own, raising funds from donors for a suit to be filed by the chair of NARAL’s legal committee, Cyril Means, but once it turned most of its attention to defending New York’s abortion law in 1972, it decided to convince other organizations to take up the campaign. Lader proposed a symposium that “would demonstrate the techniques of exploiting” recent court decisions and stressed that it should be held quickly in order “to take advantage of the court breakthroughs.” The May symposium included participants from the JMCLI, ACLU, and ZPG. The presence of Roy Lucas, the founder, and director of JMCLI, was notable because a year before, Lader and Means had ousted him from NARAL’s board in a nasty and personal dispute over his representation of commercial abortion referral agencies (Garrow 1994). But now they needed him. Once again, NARAL drew on allies that could provide resources for the venue at hand. In Michigan, it recruited a radical but respectable doctor to risk prosecution and the CCS to legitimate his challenge. At the legal symposium, it sought organizations such as ACLU and JMCLI to carry out its new judicial strategies. Women’s liberation groups were not part of either of these efforts.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Here, I theorized a venue-shifting mechanism that links perceived political opportunity to coalition formation. I traced its workings as NARAL shifted venues to the medical sectors of New York and Washington, D.C., Midwestern legislatures, and state and federal constitutional courts. I provided evidence that NARAL: (1) shifted venues after changes in political contexts; (2) perceived such changes as “opportunities”; (3) determined that it lacked resources for new venues; (4) chose partners, at least in part, for their ability to provide venue-specific resources; (5) chose partners that specialized in particular venues; (6) sought or formed coalitions when shifting venues, and (7) contrary to theories of coalitional homophily and inertia, chose allies that varied across venues in terms of the specific organizations involved, their policy concerns, their membership base, their radicalism, and their previous cooperation with NARAL.

NARAL changed venues frequently, both institutionally and geographically, when it perceived political opportunities in a new venue or when unfavorable changes in its current venue made other venues more attractive. NARAL, and especially Lader, explicitly framed venue shifts as responses to changes in the political context and often in the language of political opportunity. He prefaced his proposals with descriptions of political changes that had “opened up a great opportunity,” or offered “likely targets,” or could “break the back of the resistance,” and he spoke of “grasping,” “exploiting” and “taking advantage” of political “openings.” NARAL often chose partners for their ability to provide the resources necessary for the venue at hand.

NARAL changed partners frequently and often did so in response to perceived political opportunities. It formed new alliances with many different organizations, including those with ideological and tactical orientations quite different from its relatively radical leaders. This was because the menu of potential allies varied across venues and because some allies were more useful in a given venue than others. In addition, NARAL sometimes excluded radical allies from its coalitions to prevent conflict with moderate ones.

As it tried to pressure D.C. General, NARAL allied with professional women’s liberation, and “black militant” organizations. When it tried to establish a D.C. Clinic and fought new clinic regulations in New York, it relied mainly on professional allies that could help it recruit physicians, legitimate its clinic, and persuade New York City health officials. In Midwestern legislatures, it collaborated with professional, religious, and mainstream civic organizations because it believed that such moderate, traditional groups would be more influential with legislators than women’s liberation organizations—a view shared by state affiliates. And when it moved to constitutional courts, it collaborated with legal organizations such as the ACLU and the JMCLI that specialized in the venue and thus had the appropriate skills and experience. It also worked with a clerical organization, the Michigan CCS, with the reputational clout to legitimate
legal challenges and the referral networks to make those challenges credible. Even when NARAL allied with similar allies in different venues, for example, religious organizations, it worked with different denominations in each one and with different branches of federated organizations, many of which were quite autonomous (e.g., ACLU and ZPG).

Scope Conditions

NARAL had several characteristics that may limit the scope of the findings here. It may have been especially predisposed to venue switching and coalition formation. It formed coalitions for most, though not all, of its campaigns and was aided by its extensive connections, federated structure, and internal ideological and occupational diversity. NARAL was also part of a shared “movement community” unique to the 1960s protest wave that may have increased its propensity to form coalitions (Staggenborg 1998). Its formation of alliances may also have been motivated by its limited financial resources. Finally, NARAL’s focus on changing policies rather than culture may have made it more likely to engage in compromises and strange-bedfellow collaborations. Venue shifting and its impact on coalition formation may be more likely for some types of SMOs and policy domains than others. National SMOs are more likely to switch geographic venues than subnational ones, though subnational ones can still switch institutional venues. Low-resource SMOs may have more difficulty shifting venues and more difficulty contending in multiple ones but may have a greater need for resources when they do shift.

Implications

The venue-shifting mechanism of coalition formation has implications for SMO and movement diversity, the prevalence of coalition formation in decentralized politics, coalition formation in the absence of perceived political opportunity, and contemporary abortion politics. As I note above, SMOs that shift venues may be more likely to cooperate with a more diverse set of partners than SMOs that contend in a single venue. And because allies influence each other, SMOs with diverse allies may also have more diverse ideologies, goals, tactics, resource channels, and policy domains and experience change along those dimensions more frequently. This is important because research suggests that social movements and SMOs that are diverse in these ways are more adaptive, successful, and long-lived (Andrews 2001, 2004; Armstrong 2002; Ganz 2000; Olzak and Ryo 2007).

Venue shifting also has implications for the prevalence of coalition formation among SMOs in decentralized politics or policy domains, who tend to contend in more venues than those in more centralized systems (Amenta and Young 1999b; Beyers, Eising, and Maloney 2008; Constantelos 2010; Halfmann 2011). Because different venues require different resources and allies, these SMOs can be expected to form more coalitions and do so more often. These cross-case hypotheses should be evaluated through additional large and small-n research.

The venue-shifting mechanism of coalition formation may also be present in cases where perceived political opportunity is absent. SMOs may choose venues for reasons other than perceived political opportunity: to confront threats (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996) or to contend in venues that fit their collective identity, frames, policy goals, tactical preferences, resources, or past experiences (Pralle 2003). NARAL, for example, initially favored legislative over judicial venues because court victories were likely to be narrow, unstable, and utilize medical or privacy-rights frames rather than feminist ones. An SMO may also choose a venue, even an apparently unfavorable one, because a victory in that venue might improve its chances in other venues. Finally, it is likely that SMOs often choose venues through trial and error (Pralle 2003). Regardless of the reason behind them, venue switches are likely to demand new resources that allies can provide. Research on the venue-shifting mechanism of coalition formation should be conducted for these types of cases as well.

Finally, the venue-shifting mechanism has implications for contemporary abortion politics. Now that the Supreme Court’s conservative majority has overruled Roe, contention is increasing
in other venues, including Congress and the executive branch, state legislatures and state constitutional courts, ballot initiatives, interstate networks for abortion services, and the policies and practices of medical associations, universities, and employers (Center for Reproductive Rights 2022). As abortion rights SMOs increase their activities in these venues, they will likely seek allies that can provide resources appropriate to them.

This may produce increased cooperation between federal, state, and local SMOs, between “mainstream” (mainly national) and radical (mainly local) ones, and between SMOs that focus on different domains of abortion, such as law and elections, cultural change, or abortion access. In recent years, state-level SMOs have criticized national “mainstream” organizations such as Planned Parenthood and NARAL on ideological, financial, and tactical grounds. They argue that national organizations have utilized conservative messaging; ignored the concerns of people of color (Luna 2020; Ross and Solinger 2017); soaked up a disproportionate share of resources; de-emphasized disruptive tactics, grassroots organizing, and state legislation; and allowed themselves to be captured by a Democratic party that only reluctantly protected abortion rights and ultimately failed to do so (Solis 2021; Littlefield 2022; Marcotte 2022; Neuman 2022). The shift to sub-national venues or those outside formal politics may force national organizations into closer cooperation, and perhaps resource sharing, with state and local ones. Increasingly diverse coalitions may increase the effectiveness and adaptability of both individual SMOs and the movement as a whole as they undertake a long, arduous battle to restore abortion rights.

In conclusion, researchers have found that coalition formation is a major activity of SMOs and may be an important determinant of their impacts. As such, SMO coalitions warrant sustained scholarly attention--more than they have received thus far. But such research should theorize and evaluate not only the causal factors promoting coalition formation but the mechanisms by which they do so. The case examined here suggests that venue shifting is a key mechanism by which perceived political opportunities encourage coalition formation.

NOTES

1 For other definitions of political opportunity, see Kriesi 1995; McAdam 1996; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; and Tilly 1978.
2 Illinois Citizens for Medical Control of Abortion Newsletter, January 1972.
4 Ruth P. Smith Archive, Folder 8: NARAL Correspondence. Memo from Lawrence Lader to Lolly Myers, Don Shaw, Bea McClintock, Ruth Smith, January 21, 1969.
5 NARAL, MC 313, Cartons 2, 5, and 6: State Correspondence.
9 NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Director Reports.
12 NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings. Memo from Lawrence Lader to Executive Committee, November 20, 1969.
13 NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings. Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, January 20, 1970.
14 NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings. Memo from Lawrence Lader to Executive Committee, November 20, 1969.
15 NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings. Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, April 30, 1970.
21NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings. Memo from Lawrence Lader to Executive Committee, April 17, 1970.
22NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1 (Minutes, Reports), Executive Director Reports, October 6-8, 1972.
25NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings. Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, April 12, 1971.
26Despite NARAL’s high hopes, the Iowa and Michigan bills passed the Senate but not the House, while the Illinois and Minnesota bills failed to reach the floor in either house. Sioux City Journal, February 12 1971; Lansing State Journal, December 1, 1971; Minneapolis Star May 28, 1971; Chicago Tribune March 17, 1971.
30NARAL, MC 313, Box 1: Member Materials, Agenda, January 9, 1971; NARAL MC 313, Box 1: Member Materials, Folder 10: Midwest Strategy Conference Minutes, January 9, 1971.
33Despite NARAL’s high hopes, the Iowa and Michigan bills passed the Senate but not the House, while the Illinois and Minnesota bills failed to reach the floor in either house. Sioux City Journal, February 12 1971; Lansing State Journal, December 1, 1971; Minneapolis Star May 28, 1971; Chicago Tribune March 17, 1971.
34NARAL Newsletters Archive, PR-5, States, Newsletter of Iowans for Medical Control of Abortion, October 1972.
35Despite NARAL’s high hopes, the Iowa and Michigan bills passed the Senate but not the House, while the Illinois and Minnesota bills failed to reach the floor in either house. Sioux City Journal, February 12 1971; Lansing State Journal, December 1, 1971; Minneapolis Star May 28, 1971; Chicago Tribune March 17, 1971.
37Despite NARAL’s high hopes, the Iowa and Michigan bills passed the Senate but not the House, while the Illinois and Minnesota bills failed to reach the floor in either house. Sioux City Journal, February 12 1971; Lansing State Journal, December 1, 1971; Minneapolis Star May 28, 1971; Chicago Tribune March 17, 1971.
38Despite NARAL’s high hopes, the Iowa and Michigan bills passed the Senate but not the House, while the Illinois and Minnesota bills failed to reach the floor in either house. Sioux City Journal, February 12 1971; Lansing State Journal, December 1, 1971; Minneapolis Star May 28, 1971; Chicago Tribune March 17, 1971.
39Despite NARAL’s high hopes, the Iowa and Michigan bills passed the Senate but not the House, while the Illinois and Minnesota bills failed to reach the floor in either house. Sioux City Journal, February 12 1971; Lansing State Journal, December 1, 1971; Minneapolis Star May 28, 1971; Chicago Tribune March 17, 1971.
40ICMCA activist, Interview by Suzanne Staggenborg, 1983, personal communication.
41Leader of Illinois Citizens for the Medical Control of Abortion, Interview by Suzanne Staggenborg, 1983, personal communication.
42NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings, February 24, 1970.
47NARAL, MC 313, Carton 1: Minutes, Reports. Folder: Executive Committee Minutes, Mailings. Memo from Lawrence Lader to Executive Committee, July 28, 1971.
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