

9 Opportunity Knocks

The Trouble with Political Opportunity and What You Can Do about It

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THE CONCEPTS “political opportunity” and “political opportunity structure” and their allied theoretical claims have caused much trouble among scholars of social movements. On the one side are those who hope to shore up the concepts by forging a consensus on a few opportunities (McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1996) or by developing well-ordered lists of opportunities (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). On the other side are those who argue that the concepts and their theoretical claims are overblown, overly structural, and contain unrealistic assumptions about the knowledge and sophistication of movement activists (Goodwin and Jasper 1999/2004a).

We have colleagues and friends on both sides and have learned a great deal from all of them; for that reason should probably duck this debate, but that is not an option. Our own work focuses mainly on the influence of political contexts on the mobilization and, especially, the consequences of social movements (see, for example, Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999; Amenta 2006; Halfmann, forthcoming). We typically avoid the term *political opportunity*, for reasons that we outline below, yet even this often gets us into trouble. Reviewers and editors inquire: “Aren’t you really talking about political opportunity

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structure here?” And, “why use other terms when *POS* is already available?” We typically reply that other terms have specific meanings but we are less certain what *political opportunity* means and what it is supposed to explain, that we prefer more specific, better defined terms such as *states, bureaucracies, electoral systems, policies, political parties, and interest groups*.

In this chapter we assess the utility of the political-opportunity concept for research on social movements. Our criticisms are somewhat different than those of other scholars. If the concept is structural, that is no indictment in our view (more on this later). Nor do we think that the concept implies unrealistically sophisticated and knowledgeable actors. Still, we argue that the concept is far less useful than it might be.

The main problem is that scholars often conceptualize “political opportunities” in ways that are essentially ambiguous and peculiarly disconnected from other conceptual developments in social science.¹ In addition, they often fail to theorize connections between “political opportunities” and the phenomena they are supposed to explain. Finally, the concept of “political opportunities” allows for almost endless hypotheses and is employed in widely varying ways by researchers, making it difficult to appraise the theoretical arguments associated with it. Political opportunity is not so much a snarling vine, as Goodwin and Jasper (1999/2004a) suggest, as it is a long string of loopholes. Below, we first address general difficulties surrounding the concept and then criticize its allied theoretical claims. We finish by offering suggestions for research on the effect of political contexts on social movements and discuss the ways in which our own work implements these suggestions.

1. To ensure clarity, by “challengers” or “social movements” we mean politically disadvantaged groups engaged in sustained collective action to secure their claims (Jenkins 1995). In order to publicize their cause and gain support and influence, challengers in democratic polities typically mobilize participants more so pecuniary resources. We are less certain what it means for a social movement to “emerge.” “Social movement mobilization” is the amassing of resources by challengers to engage in collective action; that is, action intended to gain collective benefits. Given their outsider status, challengers are likely to engage at least occasionally in collective action that is “unconventional” (Kriesi et al. 1995; Clemens 1997) as well as “non-institutional” (McAdam 1996) or “disruptive” (Kitschelt 1986), but they do not need to do so to fit this definition. The types of action themselves require explanation. By “social movement impact” we mean those collective goods—(group advantages or disadvantages from which nonparticipants in a challenge cannot be easily excluded)—for the group represented by the social movement that are achieved by the movement. These collective goods can be tangible or intangible and need not be anticipated by social movement actors (Amenta et al. 2010; cf. Gamson 1990).

The Trouble with the Terms *Political Opportunity Structure* and *Political Opportunity*

First things first: the terms *political opportunity structure* and *political opportunity* are too confusing to be useful. The first term fails on basic grounds. With all due respect to Merton, who originated the concept “opportunity structure,” no concept should include both *opportunity*, which implies something happening in the short term, and *structure*, which implies aspects of a context that are slow to change. The term allows those who focus on short-term fluctuations in political contexts to close ranks with those who focus on long-standing and relatively unchanging aspects of political contexts. Though this may promote fellow feeling among scholars, it does not serve clarity.

Partly for this reason, scholars often employ the shorter alternative, “political opportunity.” But this term has its own problems. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, *opportunity* means “a favorable or advantageous circumstance or set of circumstances.” *Circumstance* means “a condition or fact attending an event and having some bearing on it,” and this is usually “outside of willful control.” Given these meanings, some have criticized “political-opportunity” arguments for implying that movement actors are on the lookout for opportunities and are thus likely to perceive them. If challengers do not react in a savvy manner, according to critics, then political-opportunity arguments are not supported.

Let us consider the words of the political operator George Washington Plunkitt, a minor cog in the nineteenth-century Tammany Hall patronage machine in New York City. Plunkitt said, “I seen my opportunities and I took ‘em,” (Riordan 1963, p. 3), referring to what he called “honest graft”—technically legal, but morally doubtful windfalls based on political-insider information. For example, he would learn of the city’s plans to build on a parcel of land, purchase it cheaply from its unsuspecting owners, and later sell it to the city at a steep profit.

We parse Plunkitt’s boast because he uses the term *opportunity* in a more defensible way than most social movement scholars. Plunkitt implies that money-making situations were created by others, not by him. His statement also implies that he perceived (or “seen”) those chances. He might have missed them had he not been privy to useful information and known what it meant. The statement also indicates that he acted on his opportunities, or “took ‘em.” In other words, he acted in a way that produced favorable results for himself. He might not have acted quickly or effectively enough to get what he wanted, but he did.

Among scholars, however, the terminology of opportunity has prompted an odd debate about whether “opportunities” can be “missed.” Critics of the concept (Goodwin and Jasper 1999/2004a) and supporters of it (Gamson and Meyer 1996) agree that if opportunities are not seized, they are not opportunities. Neither Plunkitt nor we agree with this position. If opportunities, as hypothesized and stipulated beforehand, do exist, then they of course can be missed. If Plunkitt had neglected to purchase the soon-to-be-valuable land after having learned of the city’s plans, that would not mean the opportunity had never existed. If you did not invest in housing from 1997 to 2005, that does not mean the opportunity to do so did not exist. An opportunity implies only the potential to take advantage of it. Like anyone else, social movement actors might miss opportunities to mobilize. For our purposes here, “opportunity” is a concept invoked in causal statements about social movements. Thus any claim about the effectiveness of any specific hypothesized opportunity requires empirical demonstrations to ascertain its plausibility. In that way it is not any different from other hypothesized relationships.

A greater problem with the terminology is that the analytical possibility of missed opportunities offers an easy way out for scholars who employ political-opportunity arguments. Generally speaking, there is only one credible interpretation when a scholar hypothesizes that some factor has a causal effect but empirical research finds no such effect: that the causal claim is exaggerated. For an opportunity argument, however, there is a second possibility: that the opportunity would have mattered had it been correctly perceived. Such a claim might be supported by circumstantial evidence; for example, showing that a similar challenger took advantage of the postulated opportunities, or that challengers in similar circumstances at other times or places were able to take advantage of them. Then again, the claim might merely be asserted.

Another problem with opportunity arguments is that they typically do not address the question of what they provide opportunities for. Do activists mobilize because they perceive increased opportunities for mobilization or increased opportunities for impact on public policy and public opinion? These motivations are often conflated (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). The term *opportunity* is also lacking in what might be called conceptual range. As generally conceived, opportunities can “open” or “close,” “expand” or “contract,” implying that there can be anything from no opportunity to endless amounts of it. As employed in theoretical claims about the emergence of movements, the concept suggests that the polity is generally closed off to movements, but occasionally not. Yet

for a concept meant to be translated into a theoretical independent variable, *opportunity* does not have enough room on its negative side. Conceiving of opening and closing of opportunities makes it difficult to think of the political context as having effects that are adverse to challengers.² Also, if “open” means merely the likelihood that movement activity is not going to be repressed, then it may mean little in most democratic societies, for which repression of most forms of citizen mobilization is not the norm.

The term *threat* (Tilly 1978; Koopmans 1997) is sometimes posed as the opposite of opportunity, but using it that way also seems troublesome. The dictionary suggests that the term means “expressing the intention to inflict harm or punishment.” Its opposite would be closer to “safeguard” than “opportunity.” Another uneasy opposite to *opportunity* is *constraint* (McAdam 1996). This term implies a threat to restrict as well as actual restrictions. All in all, this means that using political opportunity as a causal term requires a parallel set of causal terms to distinguish aspects of the political context that discourage aspects of movements. Each of these terms, however, has conceptual range problems similar to those surrounding *opportunity*.

We advocate a substitute term, one we have been using already and that has been employed by others, who, perhaps to their advantage, are nonnative English speakers (see Rucht 1996; Kriesi 1996). Instead of political opportunities, it seems far better to speak of political contexts. From there it might be claimed, by those who want to make such arguments, that aspects of the political context encourage or discourage the mobilization of challengers, their forms, their types of action and the impact of their collective action, etc. (These influences are likely to differ according to the outcome being considered.) The advantages of this alternative are many: it is not particularly confusing; it does not indicate either long- or short-term aspects of situations, or, more important, both; and it leaves it up to the scholar to define these contexts—what they are expected to influence and why. It seems less likely to provoke needless debate over ontological issues.

Another advantage of using the term *political contexts* over *political opportunities* is that the former does not imply much specifically about social movement activity other than that it is likely to occur for any number of reasons. Although a few assumptions still prevail, there is no need to assume that social movement actors are Plunkitts with a cause. Political contexts can be seen as

2. This is analogous to the problem with using “success” and “failure” as standards to judge the impact of social movements. Movements can gain without succeeding and have effects that are worse than merely failing (Amenta and Young 1999b).

setting off selection processes in which some forms of activity—not necessarily initiated by the political context in the first place—are encouraged or discouraged by the political context. Employing the term and concept in this way does not make assumptions about the rationality of social movement actors. They do not have to perceive and seize opportunities. Instead, political contexts would have the influence of channeling activity that is constantly occurring or likely to occur on its own (Amenta and Young 1999a). It can be argued that those forms and types of activity that fit the political context will be encouraged by a cycle of increasingly productive collective action; those actors engaged in unproductive collective action will be discouraged by a process of defeat and discouragement or redirected elsewhere. Although this does imply that actors will notice whether their action is working and to what degree, they need not be particularly savvy to do so. All that is required of scholars is to specify important aspects of the political context and the aspects of social movements that they might affect.

The Trouble with Theories of Political Opportunity

Changing the term will not solve all its conceptual and theoretical difficulties. Some argue that political opportunity as a theoretical perspective is too structural to be able to explain social movement phenomena. But this is not the main problem. Many theoretical arguments, especially of the middle-range sort, are one sided or have specific emphases. If a political structural theory can explain a great deal of social movement phenomena that scholars deem important, what would be wrong with that? A complete account of any movement will no doubt need to go beyond structural explanations, but social scientists and their theories need not explain every single aspect of individual movements or movement organizations.

The problem with the concept is not that it is too structural, but that it is unclear whether it is structural or not. The concept is ambiguous in two main ways. The first is that political opportunity is seldom well defined and the set of factors deemed to constitute political opportunity are typically defined broadly. There is much discussion of factors such as institutional political systems, authorities, elites, input, and output structures but not enough discussion about narrower factors such as states, bureaucracies, political parties, and the like. Political sociologists and political scientists have offered refined distinctions about various aspects of democratic polities, such as party systems, the concentration of authority, and the capacities of state bureaucracies, but these are mainly ig-

nored by political-opportunity theorists, making it difficult to connect studies of social movements to other work in political sociology or political science.³

The second ambiguity centers on what political opportunity is supposed to influence about social movements and why. Political opportunity has been claimed to explain the timing of the emergence of movements, their growth, decline, their level of mobilization, the form of mobilization, movement strategies and actions, movement “behavior,” and the impact of movements. We see nothing inherently wrong with such ambition. If one theoretical argument explains much of what scholars want to know about a set of related phenomena, the argument is powerful. Yet scholars have not given enough thought to why political contexts would influence all these different types of outcomes, nor have they adequately conceptualized the outcomes themselves. Scholars have also failed to connect the various lists of opportunities to specific dependent variables or objects of explanation, ignoring the possibility that different outcomes may require different explanations (Amenta et al. 2010).

Ambiguities in the political-opportunity concept lead to several problems in empirical research. Translating the concept into specific causal statements and hypotheses susceptible to empirical analysis is not easy. Because researchers can define political opportunities as almost any aspect of the political context, they can apply the concept in various ways to multiple outcomes. Scholars claim that opportunities matter in many studies (see reviews in McAdam 1996 and Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Yet they cite opportunities that are often only loosely related to the conceptual categories that supposedly undergird the term “political opportunity.” For that reason, such studies can be only remotely connected to one another. Because political opportunity is not connected to other conceptual developments in political sociology it is difficult for those working in the area of social movements to relate their own findings to studies of related phenomena.

Early articulations of the political-opportunity thesis (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982), and many subsequent ones (Meyer 2004), argued that there is a curvilinear relationship between political opportunities (however defined) and protest frequency (and a variety of other outcomes). Theorists have also argued that political opportunities predict protest better than other factors such as resources or grievances. Empirical tests of this thesis have been mixed at best. Meyer (2004) suggests that this may stem from variations in the ways that po-

3. Perhaps this is because opportunity arguments were initially designed to explain both revolutionary movements and the typically more limited movements that appear in democratic polities (Tilly 1978).

political opportunities are conceptualized and operationalized as well as the failure of scholars to distinguish between different types of outcomes. We agree, while doubting the existence of any consistent relationship between “open” political contexts and protest. It might be possible to identify such relationships between specific aspects of the political context and specific types of outcomes (such as party control of the government and the birth of new movement organizations), but it seems unlikely the thesis will hold in general. And we also doubt that it will hold for the policy impacts of social movements, because (as we argue below) these depend on an interaction between movement tactics and specific aspects of the political context.

What You Can Do about It

We believe that it is worth theorizing about the effects of political contexts on social movements, but we have a few suggestions for doing so:

Avoid the terms “political opportunity structure” and “political opportunities.” The former term can be read as internally contradictory. The latter implies that actors perceive and seize opportunities and that political contexts are merely open or closed to movements rather than damaging to them. If you must employ the term, make sure that the political opportunities that you specify are in fact *political*. Also, bear in mind that in using the term you are implying something about the nature of social movements and the way in which they react to aspects of the political context. The more neutral term “political contexts” does not carry this baggage.

Don’t worry about consensus. Some scholars hope to better specify the political opportunities by agreeing on a particular set of factors that constitute them (such as McAdam’s “openness” of the political system, elite alignments, movement-elite alliances, and the repressive capacities of the state). This search for consensus is premature given the underdeveloped state of the concept and its allied theoretical claims, and the likelihood that different movement outcomes are affected by different elements of the political context. Such consensus will also be difficult to achieve, given the significant differences in the theoretical claims of scholars who use similar terms. Finally, any consensus on specific factors that make up the broader concept will do nothing to resolve the basic problems of the concept itself.

Be conceptually clear. It is probably best to stay away from vague terms such as “institutional political structure,” “access,” “elites,” and the like—the terms

most closely associated with the concept political opportunity. If you feel the need to use these terms, specify what you mean by them. In conceptualizing the political context it is probably best to start with terms already current in political science or sociology. That makes it possible to employ the conceptualizations, arguments, and research findings of scholars studying similar or related phenomena. This means referring to the state, political party systems, interest groups, constitutions, bureaucracies, policies, and so on. Also, make sure to distinguish factors that are structural or long term from those that are dynamic or short term and factors that are systemic from those that are local.

Theorize specifically and precisely. That is, connect your concepts in precise ways to important social movement outcomes and be specific about what you are claiming—on both sides of any causal statements. We are well past the point where it would be useful merely to list potentially important political contexts or to list yet more categories of social movement outcomes. Instead, more specific theorizing is needed about issues that have already received a lot of attention, such as the mobilization of movements, their character, and their potential impact. It seems likely that different aspects of the political context influence different social movement outcomes in different ways. It is also helpful to specify mechanisms for any theoretical argument: indicating why you think aspects of the political context are likely to have the postulated effects. It is worthwhile as well to set boundary limits for any theoretical claims, or at least to think about them. The vagueness of the political-opportunity categories possibly results from the necessity of applying them to any instance of collective action at any place or moment of history.

Appraise your claims as exhaustively as possible. In most social movement research, it is not easy to appraise claims in a rigorous way, as most studies are case studies. But even case studies can be expanded in ways that make it possible to appraise theoretical arguments (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). If you cannot devise ways to appraise your claims, it is possible that they are not appraisable and thus may need reformulation.

Political Mediation and Political Institutional Models

In recent work, we have each explained aspects of social movements, notably their impacts on public policy, by reference to particular political contexts, in ways that reflect our suggestions. Amenta's "political mediation model" explains the political impacts of movements in terms of the interaction between move-

ment tactics and political contexts (see Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999; Amenta, Caren, and Olasky 2005; Amenta 2006; Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su 2010). He argues that the effects of particular movement tactics on political outcomes are mediated by long- and short-term contexts. To be effective, collective action must change the calculations of relevant institutional political actors, and movement organizations must match their tactics to political contexts.

The political mediation model specifies that combinations of political contexts and tactics are expected to lead to influence. Long-term political contexts include underdemocratization that produces elected officials with little motivation to aid have-nots, patronage parties that produce elected officials who deflect programmatic policies, political fragmentation that offers numerous veto points to powerful minorities, and a winner-take-all electoral system that makes it difficult to build third parties. Short-term political contexts include professional and powerful state bureaucrats with expansive domestic missions and control of the government by political parties supportive of social spending. Amenta arrays a series of tactics from highly assertive (electoral challenges) to unassertive (public information). When both elected officials and state bureaucrats are supportive, minimally assertive tactics are sufficient, but when they are not supportive or hostile, more assertive tactics are necessary. Moreover, if elected officials are supportive but bureaucrats are hostile, or vice versa, movement organizations need to assertively target the hostile parties. The model indicates the conditions under which policy influence is possible and when it is possible, which combinations of contexts and strategies will produce influence, as well as the combinations expected to lead to extreme influence.

In each instance, the concepts are readily operationalized, and Amenta and his coauthors appraise their arguments empirically, mainly by way of the Townsend Plan and the old-age pension movement of the 1930s and 1940s. This direct appraisal contrasts with the standard way the social movements literature deals with politics: identifying influence and working backwards in search of a political opportunity. The proving grounds include large-scale regression analyses across all states over time, across counties in California, and across members of Congress; some small-N “most similar” comparisons across a few states in which one tactic or short-term context varies slightly at different times (such as before and after the Social Security Act and in the early and late New Deal); comparisons across policies (the movement-contested old-age assistance program versus the non-movement-contested aid to dependent children program); and comparisons across challengers with different approaches

(veterans and Huey Long's Share Our Wealth). Further, to address the combinations of characteristics leading to influence, Amenta et al. (2005) deploy fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analyses to identify which states and legislators took the most radical approaches to the old-age policy; these analyses appraise the combinational aspects of the model and advance theory regarding the conditions under which extremely high influence is likely.

Most movement scholarship deems all movements to be alike and thus suggests that claims or findings for one movement should apply to all of them, regardless of context or movement characteristics. Although the political mediation theory was meant to apply widely, it remains unclear whether some conditions specific to the United States are scope conditions of the theory. For instance, there is no real variation in the electoral system either across units or time, and political fragmentation is fairly constant. Similarly, not all movements are the same. The Townsend Plan and the old-age pension movement sought far-reaching policy changes. The movement was highly influential but unsuccessful, and later took new organizational forms. In these ways, it bears a resemblance to several other movements of the mid-twentieth century, notably the anti-alcohol, anti-war, (first) feminist, and nativist movements. It was less similar to several other movements that not only gained influence, but sustained long-term leverage and a continuous organizational presence, for example, the civil rights, environmental, (second) feminist, and labor movements. Perhaps generalizations from the mediation theory may apply best to far-reaching, influential, short-lived movements and require modification to apply to influential movements that sustain consistent and long-term leverage.

Halfmann's (forthcoming) book takes a stronger political institutional position and seeks to explain both the demands of social movements and their policy impacts. This work also addresses conditions that vary cross-nationally, in its focus on abortion politics and policy in the United States, Britain, and Canada. The main explanatory political contexts are two medium-term characteristics of national political institutions: the concentration of decision authority in particular policy areas (federalism) and the nature of electoral systems. These conditions influence both the demands and the results of movements. Halfmann appraises these arguments by examining variations in tactics and political contexts across countries, policies, policy-making episodes, and stages of the policy-making process.

Halfmann shows that federalism initially confined abortion policy making in the United States to the subnational level. The result was prolonged

and dispersed policy making that encouraged new constructions of the abortion issue in terms of women's rights. First, activists radicalized their demands after witnessing the disappointing results of early state-level reforms, and second, the prolonged process provided time and opportunity for the emerging feminist movement and civil liberties lawyers to join the debate and advocate abortion on demand as a right. By contrast, British and Canadian activists defined abortion as a medical necessity appropriately under the control of doctors and did not assert the rights of women to privacy or bodily autonomy. Abortion reforms occurred quickly, and closed out the issue before alternative constructions gained prominence. Britain and Canada allowed abortions only if doctors or hospital committees certified that pregnant women met requirements of medical or economic necessity, while the United States allowed pregnant women to obtain an early abortion for any reason as long as a doctor agreed to provide it. The United States, with a history of Puritanism and weak social policy, had established the most liberal abortion reform in the West.

After these reforms, sizable anti-abortion movements tried to roll them back in all three countries. Halfmann shows that American political parties were especially vulnerable to pressure from newly organized movements. Decentralized parties, candidate-centered elections, and weak party discipline provided multiple points of access; intra-party democracy allowed movements to help choose party leaders and policies; low-turnout elections enhanced the power of small, well-organized groups; expensive campaigns created demand for movements' money and labor; and coalitional parties included a broader array of social groups. In Britain and Canada, differences in these political contexts deflected the efforts of well-organized anti-abortion organizations. Parties and politicians successfully avoided the abortion issue, and abortions became more accessible as the result of increased public funding and reduced medical gatekeeping. In the United States, by contrast, the anti-abortion movement had a much larger impact. It moved abortion to the center of politics, and abortions became less accessible as the result of cuts in public funding, parental consent requirements, waiting periods, and mandatory anti-abortion counseling. Halfmann shows that American political parties were especially vulnerable to pressure from newly organized movements while British and Canadian parties were largely insulated from such pressure.

These analyses of the consequences of old-age and abortion movements reflect the suggestions above. They substitute the terms *political context* or *po-*

litical institutions for *political-opportunity*, and specify and clearly define the contextual factors that are relevant as well as the particular outcomes they are meant to explain. They also elaborate the mechanisms by which those factors affect outcomes; identify both short- and long-term factors; specify which factors apply to movements in general and which apply solely to the movements at hand; and suggest which processes may be limited to cases with circumscribed political parameters. The studies appraise theoretical claims over multiple and wide-ranging circumstances. While political-opportunity arguments typically focus on broad factors that comprise a still broader concept of political opportunity, and often make little effort to relate these factors to other work in political sociology and political science, these studies focus on narrower, more specific factors that have already been the subject of extensive social scientific analysis, such as underdemocratization, patronage parties, electoral systems, the separation of powers, federalism, and electoral systems.

Conclusion

Should we abandon or reform the political-opportunity concept and its allied theoretical claims? We call for abandoning the term, but harnessing part of the analytical impulse behind it. Reforming the *political opportunity* term is not possible and, it should be replaced by the term “political context.” At the same time, we acknowledge that attention to political contexts is crucial for analyses of social movements, especially regarding their political campaigns. But we want more than a rebranding. Scholars of social movements must do better at relating relevant aspects of the political context, including the mechanisms of their effects, to specific aspects of social movements and their potential political consequences. The starting point is not the various vague concepts of the political-opportunity model, but aspects of the political context that have been conceptualized and theorized in depth within political sociology and political science. Scholars should also specify the scope of their claims and attempt to appraise them in as many different ways as possible. And one last thing: Next time you send out a paper making political contextual theoretical claims and the review comes back saying, “Aren’t you talking about POS?” please say that you are not.