

## Elections and social movements

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Social movements are organized efforts to bring about change in public policies and/or society. Elections are a mechanism whereby citizens decide collectively who occupies positions of responsibility in government. These two phenomena are reciprocally interrelated with one another (McAdam & Tarrow 2010). By affecting who wins elections, social movements may be able to influence changes in public policies and/or society. The outcomes of elections may affect the motivations of individuals to devote their time and energy to social movements. The interactions between electoral actors and movement activists are sometimes cooperative, and at other times conflictual, depending on the strategies employed by these actors (Schwartz 2010).

### MOVEMENTS AFFECT ELECTIONS

Movements have the potential to affect elections in a variety of ways. First, social movements may play a vital role in pressuring non-democratic governments to allow democratic elections. Indeed, movements to legitimize democratic participation in government have been among history's most successful movements. For example, during Mexico's transition from an authoritarian political system to a more fully democratic system in the 1980s and 1990s, social movement organizations (such as pro-Zapatista organizations in Chiapas) helped to support minority parties that would eventually challenge the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) successfully (Cadena-Roa 2003). Such movements generally do not settle all questions of legitimate participation, but they do promise to amplify citizens' voices within the halls of government.

Second, social movement strategies may make a difference in extending voting rights to previously disenfranchised groups. Social movements have long fought to incorporate women, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, and other excluded groups into the electoral process. Banaszak (1996) demonstrates that the actions of movement groups help to explain why the United States granted universal voting rights to women in 1920, while Switzerland delayed extending the franchise to all women until 1990. In particular, the confrontational tactics employed by women's groups in the United States promoted movement success, while Swiss women's groups were relatively stymied by their unwillingness to resort to confrontational tactics. What social movements do or fail to do makes a difference in accessing the franchise.

Third, over time, social movements may grow into political parties that become challengers in elections. Goldstone (2003) points out that the Republican Party in the United States, the Nazi Party in Germany, and the Democratic Russian Party were all outgrowths of social movements that eventually became governing parties. Electoral systems are more likely to accommodate a role for movements as parties if they allow relatively proportional representation in the legislature than if they have majoritarian rules for selecting representatives (Kriesi et al. 1995). For example, Germany's proportional electoral rules accommodated the environmental movement's participation in the federal government through the Green Party more easily than did the United States, where majoritarian electoral rules were a major factor preventing the Green Party from electing its members to federal offices.

Fourth, social movements may affect the outcomes of elections by influencing the balance of support received by different electoral coalitions. Movements may have these effects because they influence the salience of issues,

encourage changes in parties' platforms, or cultivate a readily mobilizable constituency that can influence the outcome. For example, the coordinated worldwide protests against the invasion of Iraq on February 15, 2003, affected the distribution of support among electoral coalitions in nations where the Iraq War was a highly salient issue (Rudig 2010). This effect was felt most strongly in Spain, where the Socialist Party's 2004 electoral victory was facilitated by its alignment with the antiwar movement, the realignment of issues around the Iraq War, and the 2004 Madrid train bombings. Even if movements are not decisive in determining the victor of an election, they may matter for the distribution of vote shares among parties.

Fifth, social movements may shape the personal identities of activists and their orientations toward the political system, thus altering the terrain in which elections take place. In her study of Brazilian youth movements, Mische (2008) documents how movements educated activists about political parties and partisanship, which encouraged their participation in demonstrations for direct elections, the impeachment drive against President Collor, and election campaigns. If movements are able to mold the ways in which activists think of their place in the political world, then movements' impacts may be felt for years after collective action dissipates.

Finally, movements may introduce new forms of collective action, which may be used by candidates in elections. In the United States, Democratic Party candidates for President (most notably, Howard Dean and Barack Obama) adopted social movement styles of campaigning in the 2004 and 2008 Democratic primaries. In the 2000 presidential election in the United States, online activists created trading schemes to allow voters to exchange votes for Al Gore and Ralph Nader across states. Internet technology was used to match voters, who would make mutual commitments to one another, so that Nader supporters could see that votes were cast for their preferred candidate without increasing the likelihood

that the conservative candidate, George W. Bush, would prevail. By helping to transform *how* election campaigns work, movements may redirect *what* they do.

## ELECTIONS AFFECT MOVEMENTS

On the other side of the reciprocal relationship, elections have the potential to affect movements in several ways. First, the timing of elections alters the opportunity structure of movements. In an ethnographic study of social movement groups in Pittsburgh before and after the 2004 presidential election in the United States, Blee and Currier (2006) found that most groups had little interest in participating in elections at the beginning of the study. However, as the date of the election neared, the groups were presented with opportunities to use the election as a platform for their issues. Thus, the groups and their members sometimes jumped into the electoral process. Elections generate events, shape issues, and direct citizens' attention in ways that social movements may not be able to ignore.

Second, the decision to participate or not in electoral activities may cause conflict within social movements. In the context of the antiwar movement in the United States of the 2000s, Heaney and Rojas (2007) point to substantial divisions between partisans – who wanted the antiwar movement to engage in electoral politics – and nonpartisans – who wanted the antiwar movement to avoid electoral politics. Partisans argued that participation in elections is the only way to have any real influence on the outcomes that social movements care about. However, nonpartisans argued that participation in elections forces movements to make unacceptable compromises on their core values. These divisions complicate the abilities of social movement actors to reach decisions on the structure of coalitions, the framing of issues, the endorsement of events, and other strategic choices.

Third, participation in the electoral process may cause movements to moderate their positions. Since social movements rarely comprise

a majority in a democratic society, obtaining the numerical support needed to win elections requires that movements attract other interested groups to their cause, which requires them to broaden their positions. In a study of electoral socialism in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, and Sweden, Przeworski and Sprague (1986) found that the inability to gain majorities through the votes of working-class citizens alone forced socialist parties to reach out to broader segments of their electorates, thus changing the issue focus and principles of the socialist movement. Movements may no longer be what they once were after engaging with elections.

Fourth, the outcomes of elections may affect the motivations of citizens to participate in social movements. In a study of 17 democracies around the world, Anderson and Mendes (2005) demonstrate that groups that are in the minority after an election are more likely to be mobilized to protest than are groups that are in the majority, with minorities in emerging democracies more likely to protest than minorities in established democracies. Heaney and Rojas (2007) show how the antiwar movement in the United States demobilized after the election of President Barack Obama, despite the fact that President Obama continued many of the war policies of his predecessor, President George W. Bush. Conversely, the election of Obama prompted the mobilization of a conservative countermovement, known as the Tea Party, which took a strong stand against excessive government spending and debt, despite the fact that its participants had ignored spending and debt during the administration of President Bush (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin 2011). These results are consistent with the proposition that losers turn to protest as a way to regain their political voice when their opponents win elections.

Finally, elections may shape the identities of citizens, which may open opportunities and erect barriers to social movements' efforts to mobilize constituencies. Aminzade's (1993) analysis of the French presidential election of 1848 showed how the Republican Party helped

to construct working-class solidarities by forging bonds among workers. These party-based identities would provide a foundation for the French socialist movement for years to come. By defining the conflicts that help to forge identities, elections may set the parameters within which social movements must navigate.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

A substantial body of research has accumulated on the relationship between elections and social movements. The emphasis of this research has been on one direction or the other of this relationship, rather than on its reciprocal nature (but see McAdam & Tarrow 2010; Schwartz 2010). Greater attention could be devoted to analyzing feedback effects between these phenomena. One avenue for evaluating this dynamic would be to investigate the biographies of activists who move back and forth between movements and elections over the course of their political careers. Another avenue would be to trace the diffusion of innovations between movements and elections. Examining the emergence of social networking technologies, and other interactive Internet technologies, may be an especially fruitful way to observe the co-evolution between elections and movements.

SEE ALSO: Activism; Antiwar and peace movements; Identity politics; Internet and social movements; Outcomes, political; Political opportunity/political opportunity structure.

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