

Political Opportunity

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Political opportunity theory, sometimes also known as the political process theory or political opportunity structure, is a theory of social movements heavily influenced by political sociology. It argues that success or failure of social movements is primarily affected by political opportunities.

Theory

Three vital components for movement formation are:

Insurgent consciousness. Certain members of society feel deprived, mistreated, and have grievances directed at a system that they perceive as unjust (see also deprivation theory). When a collective sense of injustice develops, it motivates people to become movement members. Movement activists do not choose their goals at random, it's the political contexts which stress certain grievances around which movements organize.

Organizational strength. Similar to the main argument of the resource mobilization theory, the argument here is that the social movement must have strong and efficient leadership and sufficient resources. The political opportunity theory has much in common with the related resource mobilization theory, particularly when it is seen as focusing on mobilization of resources external to the movement.

Political opportunities. If the existing political system is vulnerable to a challenge, it creates an opportunity for others - like the movement members - to issue such a challenge and try to use this opportune time to push through a social change. This vulnerability can be the result of:

Increasing political pluralism

Decline in repression

Division within elites (particularly when it grows to a point where some support organized opposition)

Increased political enfranchisement

Political opportunity theory argues that the actions of the activists are dependent on the existence - or lack of - of a specific political opportunity. There are various definitions of political opportunity, but Meyer (2004) stresses that of Tarrow (1989):

"consistent--but not necessarily formal or permanent--dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics".

Meyer (2004) credits Eisinger (1973) with first use of the political opportunity theory framed in such a way (traces of which, of course, go further back). Eisinger asked why in 1960s the level of riots about race and poverty varied between different places in the United States and notes that lack of visible openings for participation of repressed or discouraged dissident made riots more likely. Thus the inability to legally air grievances was the political opportunity which led to organization and mobilization of movements expressing their grievances by rioting.

Meyer (2004) in his overview of political opportunity theory noted that this broader context can affect:

"mobilizing",

"advancing particular claims rather than others",

"cultivating some alliances rather than others",

"employing particular political strategies and tactics rather than others", and

"affecting mainstream institutional politics and policy".

A key advantage of the theory is that it explains why social movements emerge and/or increase their activity at a given time. When there are no political opportunities, simply having grievances (organizational consciousness) and resources will not be enough. Only when all three of these components are present, the movement has a chance to succeed.

Political structure vs. political opportunity

Within the structure and agency debate, actions of activists (agents) can only be understood when seen in the broader context of political opportunities (structure). The term structure has been used to characterize political opportunities in older scholarship. A political opportunity structure has been defined as the circumstances surrounding a political landscape. However, Tarrow - who has used this term in his earlier publications himself - now argues it is misleading, as most opportunities need to be perceived, and are situational, not structural. Political opportunity structures are prone to change and can alter in days (or last for decades). Demographics and socioeconomic factors create "structure" which affects political actors.

Political mediation model

One side model based on the political opportunity theory is known as the political mediation model. The political mediation model focuses on how the political context affects the strategic choices of the political actors. This model goes beyond looking at whether the movements just succeeded or failed, and analyzes other consequences, including unintentional, as well as collective benefits.

Opposite of political opportunity is a political constraint.

Criticism

Critics point out the theory ignores cultural factors.

In response to some criticisms, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly proposed the Dynamics of Contention research program, which focuses on identifying mechanisms to explain

political opportunities, rather than relying on an abstract structure.

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