CHALLENGERS AND STATES:
TOWARD A POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY
OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Edwin Amenta
Neal Caren
Tina Fetner
Michael P. Young

New York University, Department of Sociology, 269 Mercer Street, New York, NY 10003

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we employ research and thinking in political sociology regarding states to issues in the analysis of social movements. Social movements are often defined with respect to their challenge to states, yet social movement theory rarely relies on political sociological insights into the state. We redress this balance by providing a discussion of the process by which states influence social movements and social movements attempt to influence the state. We begin by providing criticism of how states are conceptualized through the concept of political opportunity. From there we discuss the likely impact of different aspects of states on different social movement outcomes. These influential aspects of states include the structure of authority in the polity, democratization, electoral rules, bureaucratization, and state policies. We conclude by discussing conceptual issues regarding the impact of social movements on states. We suggest that scholars need to think in terms of challengers seeking to gain collective goods through states and provide some methodological insights about how to trace these processes.
Social movements and challengers are often defined by their relationship to the state. They make claims on the state on behalf of groups or issues which are disadvantaged in politics. Yet scholars of social movements do not adequately conceptualize the state and employ these conceptualizations in their analyses. This is true when the state is argued to be part of the explanation of aspects of social movements, such as their rise, organization form, and types of collective action. This is also true when states constitute the object of explanation, when scholars address the potential impact of social movements on states.

One of the reasons for this lack of attention is conceptual. Scholars of social movements take a wider focus and typically address the “political opportunity structure” rather than the state and other political institutions. But political opportunities are often conceptualized in ways that are essentially ambiguous and disconnected from other conceptual developments in social science, especially those regarding the state. Another problem is theoretical. Although scholars often agree that for state-oriented movements the political context is important, there is often insufficient theoretical connection made between specific aspects of these contexts and the aspects of social movements that they are supposed to explain. Political opportunity structures are claimed to explain a great deal, but the reasoning is often unclear. It does not help that the objects of analysis—various outcomes and processes associated with social movements—are also usually conceptually underdeveloped. Under the circumstances, the political opportunity thesis is not easily rejected as empirically implausible. For a researcher hoping to appraise theoretical arguments based on it, political opportunity provides a long string of loopholes.

Similarly, scholars who examine the consequences of social movements are also centrally concerned with state outcomes and processes, as states are often the targets of collective action. Scholars working in this area, too, have an underdeveloped conception of the state, in part
because this literature is less well developed. However, as far as it goes the literature mainly addresses issues other than alterations in states. One line of thinking and research has focused on the success or failure of challengers in achieving their stated goals. A second line of research and thinking concerns the gains in power that social movements may achieve. Neither systematically theorizes or examines the issues specific to impacts on states, despite states being a central target of social movement influence.

In what follows we address the potential applicability of state concepts current in the political sociology and relevant political science literatures to theory and research on social movements. We do not reject claims about the important influence of political contexts on social movements—the key insight in the political opportunity literature. We argue instead that if scholars making these claims would invoke concepts regarding the state, it would be easier to specify arguments and to see whether they had empirical credence. There are many state concepts appropriate to the study of social movements, as the academic literature on comparative social policy indicates. We employ some of these in our discussion of issues surrounding the impact of states on social movements and the impact of social movements on states.

We see the impact of states on social movements as a recursive process: States influence social movements, which always are begun in a political context that favors action in some times and places rather than others, that favors certain forms of organization and lines of actions over others and certain types of political identities over others. States tend to dwarf social movements in terms of size, resources, and power. States influence social movements, especially those oriented toward altering states or making claims through states, because the structure and activities of states make some lines of organization and action more likely to be productive than others. Needless to say, states are not the only influence on social movements
and outcomes related to them and may not typically be the main influence. Because many social movements seek to influence states at least sometimes and because states are organized in different and changing ways, however, states are likely to influence social movements. We address a number of these aspects of states, including the structure of authority in the polity, democratization, electoral rules, bureaucratization, and state policies. In thinking through the impact of these aspects of various social movement outcomes, we work from the premise that challengers’ mobilization, forms of organizations, and lines of action will be influenced to the degree that aspects of states make them likely to be productive. In this process we often derive expectations that veer from those employing political opportunity concepts, but have some currency in studies of social movements.

Social movements in turn attempt to influence states by mobilizing people and resources and claims around specific strategic lines of action. Challengers contest state policies, laws, bureaucracies, rules, and institutions in order to make gains for those whom they represent. This collective action in turn often influences the state. Although we do not address theoretical arguments about the impact of social movements on states, we provide a framework for understanding the potential impact of social movements on states—a necessary condition for addressing and appraising theoretical arguments. Our main call is for scholars to examine the same main aspects of states that are deemed important by political sociologists and make connections between them and collective benefits sought by social movements. In this way, it would be possible to analyze the degree of impact made by state-oriented challengers.

FROM POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES TO STATES

Before going further it is worth saying a little bit about states and social movements. By “social movements” or “challengers” we mean politically disadvantaged groups engaged in sustained
collective action to secure their claims (Jenkins 1995). Following Tilly (1978), we distinguish them from “members of the polity.” In democratic polities challengers typically mobilize participants, to publicize their cause and gain support and influence, more so than by mobilizing pecuniary resources. “Social movement mobilization” or social mobilization is the amassing of resources by challengers to engage in “collective action”--action intended to gain benefits from which members of the intended beneficiary group cannot be readily excluded. Given their outsider status, challengers are likely to engage at least occasionally in “unconventional” (Dalton 1988; Kriesi et al. 1995; Clemens 1997) as well as “non-institutional” (McAdam 1996) or “disruptive” (Kitschelt 1986) or “transgressive” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) collective action, but the choice of different forms of collective action is itself important to explain (McAdam et al. 1996).

We define “states” as sets of political, military, judicial, and bureaucratic organizations that exert political authority and coercive control over people living within the borders of well-defined territories. States engage in action or “policy,” including taxation, social spending, and regulatory policy, that is official, legitimate, binding, and backed by the aforementioned organizations. “Democratic states” are defined as those states whose leaders, forms, and policies are decided with key participation and input from everyday people. In such a state, suffrage is relatively inclusive, citizens have rights to associate, and the state is significantly responsible to elected officials (Dahl 1971).

Political Opportunities as Terminology and Concept

The literature on social movements rarely refers to states as such, and rarely to political parties, interest groups, and other political sociological concepts, but instead focuses on the “political opportunity structure” or political opportunities. Political opportunities are seen as key
determinants of the rise of social movements and various outcomes related to social movements, such as the form they might take and the types of action they might engage in, the political identities that form from them. As a term, however, political opportunities is not well suited for analysis. The concept of “opportunity” is troublesome, for it suggests a specific image of social movements and lacks conceptual range. Even if one changes the wording, however, the ways that political opportunities have been operationalized by its proponents are ambiguous and do not lead to easily appraisable propositions. Notably, the concept merges aspects of the state with other aspects of political contexts, as well as different political actors.

One problem with the terminology of political opportunity is that the analytical possibility of the missed opportunity provides an easy way out for someone arguing for the causal effectiveness of a postulated opportunity. To put it another way, the assumptions behind the argument provide plausible deniability for a causal argument that finds itself unsupported by evidence. Generally speaking, there is only one credible interpretation when a study indicates no effect for conceptualized phenomena postulated to have causal power: that the causal claims are greatly exaggerated. For an opportunity argument, however, there is a second possibility if the stipulated causes were demonstrated not to have an impact: that the postulated opportunity would have had an impact had it been perceived. Such a claim might be supported by circumstantial evidence, such as 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.

More important, the term “opportunity” is also lacking in 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. Using the term opening and closing of opportunities makes it difficult to think of the political context as having effects that are adverse to challengers. Also, if “open” means merely the likelihood that movement activity is not going to be repressed, then it may not have a great meaning in most democratic societies in which repression of most forms of citizen mobilization is unusual.

The term “threat” (Tilly 1978; Koopmans 1999) is sometimes posed as the opposite of opportunity, but using it that way also seems problematic. The dictionary suggests that the term means something like “expressing the intention to inflict harm or punishment.” Its opposite would be something like “safeguard” rather than “opportunity.” Another uneasy opposite to opportunity is “constraint” (McAdam 1996). For this term includes a threat to restrict as well actual restrictions. All in all, this means 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.”

A preferable substitute term that has been employed by others, who, perhaps to their advantage, are non native-English speakers, (e.g., Rucht 1996; Kriesi 1996) is political contexts. Those who want to make such arguments can claim 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., with the influences are likely to differ according to the outcome being considered. The advantages of this alternative are that it does not indicate either long- or short-term aspects of situations, and leaves it up to the scholar to define these contexts,
what they are expected to influence and why. Another advantage of using the term “political contexts” over “political opportunities” is that the former does not imply anything much about social movement activity--except that it is likely to occur for any number of reasons. Although there are still a few assumptions involved, there is no need to assume that social movement actors are opportunistic. Political contexts can be seen as 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.

According to this way of thinking about it, 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 in fitting with 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, savvy does not much play into it. All that is required is to specify what constitutes important aspects of the political context and what about social movements these contexts might be plausibly said to effect.

**Political Opportunities in Theory and Research**

Changing the name of the term will not solve all of its conceptual and theoretical difficulties, however. Those who employ the idea of political opportunity do not often define what they mean by it, and the set of concepts deemed to constitute political opportunity are typically defined in an ambiguous fashion. This hinders their utility in analyzing social movements
contending in relatively democratic political systems. For these polities political sociologists and political scientists have made far more refined distinctions about aspects of the polity, which are mainly ignored. Thus it makes it difficult as well to connect studies of social movements to political sociology or political science. Perhaps this is because opportunity arguments were initially designed to explain revolutionary movements and revolutions as well as the more limited movements that appear in democratic polities (Tilly 1978; cf. Tarrow 1996). Those arguing about the importance of political opportunities or political contexts to social movements do not take them seriously enough. There is much discussion of broad categories such as “institutional political systems,” “authorities,” “elites,” “input” and “output” structures. But there is not enough about states, bureaucracies, political parties, and the like (for some critiques of the concept, see Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Polletta 1999).

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, and decline, their level of mobilization, the form of mobilization, movement strategies and actions, movement “behavior,” and movement “outcomes,” or the impact of movements. If one theoretical argument explains much of what scholars want to know about related phenomena, there is more power to it. Yet there has not been enough thought given to the reasoning for why political contexts would influence all these different types of outcomes. Also, the different phenomena to be explained are often not conceptualized well enough. In addition, the various lists of overarching opportunities have not been connected to specific dependent variables. Scholars in this literature have not adequately addressed the possibility that these different sorts of results might require different explanations.
These ambiguities lead to several problems in scholarship. Translating the political opportunity concept into specific causal statements and hypotheses susceptible to empirical analysis is not easy to do rigorously. Because researchers can define political opportunities to be almost whatever they want about political contexts facing challengers, in practice they can apply the concept in highly varied ways to various outcomes. As a result such opportunities are claimed to matter in many studies (see review in McAdam 1996). Yet the opportunities cited are often only loosely related to the conceptual categories that supposedly undergird the term. For that reason, such studies can be only remotely connected to one another. Because as conceptualized “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 make sense of their findings with regard to studies of related phenomena.

McAdam’s (1996) influential review of political opportunity does well to distinguish political influences on social movements from other sorts of influences, notably cultural ones. He also provides a thoughtful list of what he calls the “dimensions” of political opportunity, based on the careful reading of the work of like-minded scholars (Brockett 1991; Kriesi et al. 1992; Rucht 1996; Tarrow 1998a). These dimensions include the following: the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; the stability of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; the presence of elite allies; the state’s capacity and propensity for repression. An advantage of McAdam’s four-part definition is that it might be considered to constitute a parsimonious theory or sub-theory to explain important aspects of movements. McAdam suggests the four dimensions might influence a number of dependent variables, including the timing of the emergence of social movements and their impacts as well as social movement forms, although he backtracks on the first one by arguing that opening political
opportunities are more likely to have an influence on “initiator” movements than “spin-off” movements. He adds that these political opportunities designed are likely also to influence movement form. McAdam (1996: 31) notes that it is critical for any political opportunity theory (or any theory for that matter) to be explicit about “which dependent variable we are seeking to explain and which dimensions of political opportunity are germane to that explanation [original emphasis].”

McAdam does make a few specific claims about the influence of a few of the dimensions on types of movements. He argues that elite allies more likely spur reform movements, while divisions among elites and declines in repressive capacities or abilities will encourage revolutionary movements. Otherwise, though, he does not specify linkages between the specific opportunities and outcomes, or indicate reasoning for why the political opportunities might influence the specified outcomes. Assuming that political opportunity means only these four dimensions does not make the situation measurably better, because McAdam does not go far in saying what each of the large categories implies or linking the four opportunities to specific outcomes. This general issue is sometimes posed as the question of “opportunity for what--mobilization or impact” (Meyer 1999; Koopmans 1999). Even if one rephrases the question as asking what about political contexts influences aspects of social movements’ mobilization or impact, the dependent variables—the outcomes political contexts are supposed to explain—are less well conceptualized than the independent variables. It is left up to others to interpret the categories, make the linkages to dependent variables, and provide the reasoning for the linkages. But as outlined the four dimensions are open to many interpretations and provide an uncertain guide to researchers who might be seeking to develop such a theory. It is even more difficult to see how one might go from this conceptual discussion to appraise these theoretical claims.
In *Power in Movement* (1998a), Sidney Tarrow provides an explicit definition of political opportunities, which also has the advantage of indicating a specific outcome. It relies, however, on an opportunistic conception of social movements that sees them as being able to react to “signals.” Tarrow indicates that opportunities can open or narrow, suggests some similar conceptual categories to those of McAdam, and also discusses other dependent variables that they might explain. But he devotes only two pages to conceptualizing the opportunities and makes no real attempt to link them to what they might explain about social movements aside from their formation. Tarrow’s conceptualization of opportunity is “proximate” and “dynamic.” His line of argumentation is neither structural, in the sense of indicating slow-to-change aspects of the political context, nor “systemic,” in the sense of indicating political contexts that influence all social movements. Tarrow holds that the most important social movement variation is over time and not between places. Because social movements appear at specific points in time, they must accordingly result from short-term changes in something—in this case, political opportunities. He criticizes Kitschelt (1986) and others who rely on systemic logic or argumentation as being unable to explain variation across movements or over time.

The dimensions of political opportunity employed by McAdam and Tarrow that involve aspects of the state share the problem, however, of being difficult to appraise in research. Two of McAdam’s four dimensions, for instance, refer explicitly to the state. The first dimension, the “institutionalized political system” is a relatively inclusive category that might conceivably incorporate any and every aspect of the state or polity, as well as the political party system. States and parties and everything to do with them are merged into one catch-all concept that might refer to constitutional strictures, electoral rules, laws or practices concerning political association or the franchise, rules or practices surrounding legislative bodies, the permeability of
executive institutions by groups, the existence of different sorts of executive institutions, laws concerning the rights of political parties, political constraints on creating political parties, the nature of the party system, policies in existence, and no doubt other things. This concept would also include the international equivalents to these domestic features, as both McAdam (1996) and Tarrow (1996) argue that international contexts are important aspects of political opportunities.

What it means for institutionalized political systems to be open or closed is left open to interpretation. Given the number of phenomena that might fall under this concept, it would be difficult for a researcher to start with this idea and try to show that in any case of a mobilization or potential impact of a movement that some aspect of the political system was not open or opening up. Those studying movements in relatively democratic political systems may have a specific difficulty in employing this concept. Such political systems are in a basic sense open all of the time. At least there is no formal bar to social movement activity. The situation is no doubt different in non-democratic and under-democratized polities, where even relatively well off groups may have little access to politics. Even there the idea might be drawn out further than it is. In short, it is not clear what political phenomena, aside from social movements, stand outside the institutionalized political structure and what important openings and closings in it might be.

Similar concepts by other scholars do not fill in the blanks. Kitschelt’s (1986: 63-64) idea of political opportunity or contexts notably focuses on “system-wide political properties” and indicates what he means by them in his designation of “political input and output structures.” These are pretty widely drawn terms, however, including many aspects of states and political parties, and each structure is conceptualized in a way that is somewhat murky. Political input structures refer to the “openness of political regimes to new demands” and includes four
components. The first comprises the number of political parties, factions, and groups that articulate demands in electoral politics, with greater numbers meaning more openness. The second is the degree to which legislatures are autonomous in policy-making. The greater the autonomy, the more access to movements, because legislatures are more electorally accountable than the executive. The third concerns patterns of intermediation between interest groups and the executive branch; the more fluid the connections the more open the political system. The fourth concerns “mechanisms that aggregate demands,” which are not delineated, but could include a wide variety of actors and organizations. In short, openness includes a whole host of characteristics involving state authority, state actors, parties, interest groups, which may not hang together in given cases at different times, and some may stand in in causal relation to others.

To return to McAdam’s model, the fourth dimension concerns repression. The issues here are mainly operational, but they bleed into the conceptual. Repression presumably works against the possibilities of social movements. Combined, the capacity and propensity for repression can be seen as the components of the expected value of repression. The capacities for repression constitute something like the total amount of repression available and the propensity to engage in repression is analogous to the probability that the state will engage in repression. Operationally speaking, the capacity for repression would no doubt depend on any number of matters, including people, materiel, and technology. How much repression might exist at any place or time would be difficult to specify, though, a problem analogous to what constitutes a resource in resource mobilization theory. In most current democratic political systems, the capacity for repression no doubt is greater than ever before.

The propensity for repression is more difficult to get a handle on, however. It doubtless depends at least partly on issues regarding the access of the political system. As political
systems become more democratized, presumably, this propensity decreases. However that may be, in most democratized polities over the last two centuries, the two components seem to be going in opposite directions historically speaking. To ascertain whether this conceptual variable is moving one way or another would depend on what matters more—the capacity or propensity. Is there any way to tell for sure, for instance, in the United States over the last century, whether the capacity for repression has increased in ways that outstrip the decline in the propensity to employ repression? But if an analyst waits until repression is actually employed this would mean a retrospective analysis. And even then there is a large loophole. If repression is employed, but not to the point of halting mobilization, it could easily be claimed that the propensity to repress was not great enough. In short, it would be helpful to provide some theoretical guidelines about which matters more and the likely conditions that spur the use of repression.

**Moving Beyond Political Opportunity**

Some of these scholars have advanced the project, and there as been a number of helpful developments, such as in the recent work by Charles Tilly (2001) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001). In this work they address aspects of the state, such as democratization and state capacities. Tilly (2001) is concerned with the connections between regime type and contentious politics. His analysis goes beyond the claim that states affect the likelihood or the character of popular mobilization. Tilly sketches out several components of a regime which combine to create the character of a given regime. These components are intended to be used as a standard against which regimes can be compared. They can also be a common starting ground for social movements scholars to measure the impact of mobilization on the state.
The first of the five elements Tilly (2001) identifies is state capacity, which is defined as the impact of the state on activities and resources. The second element, breadth of the polity membership, ranges from a single ruler as polity member to the case in which each person under the state's jurisdiction belongs to a polity member. The third, equality in polity membership, is a measure of the distribution of access to the governmental agents and resources. Fourth, the strength of collective consultation among polity members combines how binding the consultation of polity members is, and how effectively it controls policy and resources. The final element is the amount of protection provided from arbitrary actions by governmental agents, which ranges from no protection, to complete protection. These five components, and the various combinations that can be derived from them are an attempt to represent the entire range of regime types, from dictatorships and military rule, to various forms of democracy and constitutional governments. This theoretical framework can then be applied to Tilly's agenda of understanding the impact of contentious politics on the state.

The last four of Tilly's five elements combine to form a composite measure of democratization. Thus, the two important factors for Tilly are state capacity on the one hand, and democratization on the other. These elements allow the comparative analysis of regimes and the amount and type of contention that occurs within the various regime types. For example, more democratic states may encourage the formation of alliances between polity members and non-members; states that are not democratized may encourage revolutionary struggles. These large-scale conceptualizations of regime types and contention map out the entire spectrum of contention and states. This is useful for global comparisons, as well as a key analytical tool for understanding processes of shifting regimes. However, the broad scope of this approach makes it difficult to address factors that may be important in understanding those aspects of the state
which impact contention in states with relatively similar regime types. Thus, this model does not shed much light on which aspect of democratic states impact the social movements which emerge within them, nor on the ways that we might address the impact of these movements on these states.

In *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) employ Tilly's concept of the state as having two key dimensions: state capacity and democratization. They further clarify the concept "state capacity" by breaking it down into a combination of four dimensions: direct rule, penetration of geographic peripheries by central states, standardized state practices and identities, and the means of implementing policies. States are brought into focus as important objects of study, a significant improvement over standard political opportunity structures approaches. They discuss regimes as both targets of movements and as actors which construct opportunities. Democratization is a spectrum along which states rest, and sometimes, through processes of contention, they change their place on the scale. But when discussing social movement interaction with the state, these authors revert to vague concepts of weak vs. strong states, assistance from elites, and trust networks. Whereas McAdam and his colleagues refine the notion of opportunity to demonstrate that the events which alter political contexts are not arbitrary structural shifts which are to be noticed and acted upon by contenders, they stop short of providing a clear conceptualization of those aspects of the state which are important to social movement analysis.

These works indicate that the social movements literature is pushing toward more conceptual clarity. Each of these works identifies elements of the state that are can be useful in both comparative and historical accounts of social movements' impact on the state. They also provide a set of concepts that can be seen as a useful common ground for scholars of
mobilization to begin to test their claims. These recent developments in the social movements literature are promising, and their claims that states influence the character of mobilization are convincing. The great variation in state capacities, political participation, polity membership which these models capture emphasize the differences in the nature of social mobilization between states that have different levels of development. However, even among democratic states with high capacities there is a great deal of variation in states that is likely to influence social movements. It is helpful, but not enough to say that overall changes in states toward democratization and greater capacities have led to different sorts of challengers that are broadly similar across states. Scholars need to go further in identifying the elements of the state which influence social movements' emergence, forms, lines of actions, identities, and claims.

THE IMPACT OF STATES ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The institutional turn in political sociology began in the 1980s and has focused on the role of states and other political institutions on political outcomes of importance (reviews in Skocpol 1985; Steinmo et al. 1992; Thelen 1999; Clemens and Cook 1999). As with other emphases in political sociology, including various Marxist, cultural, and rational choice approaches, the theorizing and research is uneven and has gone further in some subfields rather than others. The institutional literature on the impact of states and political institutions has gone fairly further in explaining the development of social policies and or what are sometimes called “welfare states” (see review in Amenta forthcoming). Aside from some of the work noted above, there has been much less work in the area of social movements.

In what follows we discuss some of the political sociology literature on the state and make suggestions concerning their implications for state-oriented challengers, under circumstances where states have been largely democratized and have developed capacities. Our
treatment addresses states not as arenas in which actors neutrally battle, nor as a set of political actors or governments which gain control over various parts of the states through election, appointment, or other means. Instead we are concerned with states as political contexts, sets of institutions and organizations and people engaged in specific lines of action, which is legitimated as being official policy among citizens and backed by a peculiarly strong combination of ceremony and force. We do not mean to suggest that states are the only important parts of political contexts facing social movements, but they are important.

They are important because states are central to social movements that seek concessions or benefits from the state or those that use the state to influence other targets—which probably includes most challengers. And so it is useful to make conceptual distinctions and theorize about the likely impact of state institutions, rules, organizations, policies, and processes on challengers. Many social movements attempt to gain collective benefits through the state, and so variations and changes in important dimensions of the states are likely to have systematic influences on important aspects of social movements. This holds good whether one is trying to explain all manner of long-term differences in forms or amounts of social movement activity in all times across all places or whether it is one is devising explanations for the most historically contingent of path-dependent processes within specified polities, or something middle-range in between.

In what follows we discuss aspects of states as political contexts and relate them to outcomes of interest in the study of social movements, taking up the challenge to think through how political contexts are likely to influence challengers. We explicitly address authority in state political institutions, the democratization of state institutions, electoral rules and procedures in choosing state political personnel, state bureaucracies, and state policies. Each of these has had impact on lines of action of concern to social movements and thus are likely to influence
movements themselves. Despite increases in state capacities and the democratization of states everywhere, these contexts are likely to vary quite a bit even among well developed states in advanced capitalist countries. These aspects range from the structural to the dynamic, in terms of their susceptibility to change, and from the systemic to the local, in terms of whether they would influence all challengers and potential challengers or only specific ones.

Because these aspects of states are likely to make some forms of mobilization and lines of social movement action more productive than others, states are likely to influence the gamut of social movement outcomes, though not necessarily evenly. To the extent that these concepts have been employed in the social movement literature they result in hypotheses that seem contrary to our expectations. Largely, the literature has focused on state contexts that are claimed to spur mobilization. But if one considers whether state contexts are likely to aid challengers in their bids for state action, most hypotheses would concern more specific social movement outcomes, such as the forms challengers are likely to take, their lines of action, and political identities.

**Polity Structure: Centralization and Divided Authority**

States are at the center of politics and how they are structured likely influences political activity of whatever variety including, social movement activity. Political systems are defined as the manner in which authority is organized in states. One key aspects of the states and polities generally is the degree to which authority is centralized in it. Authority can be centralized or dispersed in two main ways (Huntington 1968; Pierson 1994, etc.). It can be vertically dispersed throughout the polity in the manner of federalism. In such instances, state units aside from the central one have considerable power over state functions and vie with national state authorities for control over similar functions or divide functions among the polities. Authority can be
horizontally dispersed as well, with different institutions at the central state level vying for authority over different functions and responsibilities of states. These sorts of differences in state political systems are systemic in that the context influences all politics within states and thus social movements. These aspects of political systems are also among the most impervious to rapid change, as functional divisions of authority are often written into constitutions and reinforced through laws and the actions of courts.

The issue of the impact of vertically centralized authority has frequently been discussed in the literature on social movements that refers to political opportunities. Tilly (1986: 395-98) notably argues that the process of state-making throughout the last several centuries has meant that challengers have increasingly turned from local concerns and have focused on the national polity or central state. All the same, this argument does not fully address the impact on challenger activity of the substantial differences in centralization in state political institutions that have remained over the last century or so. According to most hypotheses concerning current polities, federal or decentralized polities encourage challengers’ mobilization generally, because they multiply the targets for action (Meyer 1993; Kriesi 1995; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). McCarthy and Wolfson (1992) argue, though, that “conflict movements” are likely to be hindered when states lack centralization, because these movements are likely to be stymied by a variety of other state actors. In a more centralized state, local official and agencies can be overruled, limiting their influence.

However, federalism in itself does not necessarily increase the chances of winning collective benefits for challengers, and so we would not expect it to increase their mobilization overall. That said, if subnational polities have power and vary among themselves in how and the degree to which they are susceptible to the goals of challengers, they provide a variety of
incentives to mobilize in them and about them. In more centralized polities, the mobilization of
challengers is likely to be less diverse because they face limited targets of action. Collective
action is likely to be fragmented, as suggested by Kriesi (1995). Kitschelt (1986) argues that
multiple points of access in federal polities lead to assimilative strategies by social movements,
as they are more likely to find at least one receptive state actor. And so, whether a polity is
vertically centralized or federal will have a greater impact on the forms of mobilization and
action than on its overall level.

There is some suggestive evidence for this claim. Rucht (1989) analyses the
environmental movements in centralized France and federalist West Germany. Although he
does not specifically address the influence of centralization of authority on forms of
mobilization, he finds that the French environmental movement is characterized by two
internally “homogenous” and “compact” camps, while the three networks of the German
movement exhibit a wider variety of forms and interconnections.

A second important aspect of the political system concerns the functional divisions of
powers in the national government. Authority over different legislative, executive, judicial, and
policing functions of the state may be more or less centralized or decentralized. Parliamentary
political systems notably tend to combine legislative and executive functions, whereas
presidential systems keep these separate. Similarly courts and judicial institutions have more or
less autonomy in different political systems.

The political opportunity literature on social movements has not ignored functional or
“horizontal” divisions in authority. Kitschelt (1986) and Kriesi (1995) have both posited notably
that these divisions promote the mobilization of challengers. Autonomy in courts and
legislatures, they argue, makes a polity generally more “open” to mobilization, as challengers
can target different political institutions. The possibility for judicial veto of the legislative or executive branches of government will lead to increased social movement activity, as this opens an additional front for social movement organizations. Kriesi et al (1995, pp. 38-39) discuss “possibilities for juridical appeal” as an important facilitator for mobilization because it provides a “direct channel of access to decision making.” That said, Kitschelt argues that independent courts decrease the state’s implementation capacities, lowering the prospects of making gains and thus having the likely effect of discouraging challengers (Kitschelt 1986).

A polity with separated powers in itself does not automatically aid the mobilization of the politically disadvantaged. The standard finding in the political sociology literature runs in the opposite direction: that a political system with greatly separated powers provides various “veto” points over new state initiatives (Skocpol 1992; Huber, Ragin and Stephens 1993). The executive can thwart the legislature and vice versa, and both can be thwarted by the judiciary. Thus the bias in such a system is for inaction rather than action, despite the various points where contention can take place. The outcome here is not obviously encouraging for the actions of challengers.

If the goal of challengers is to prevent a new policy from being enacted, or possibly to place legal hurdles in front of actions, a political system with divided authority provides incentives for such action. Yet what typically differentiates members of the polity from challengers are the routine workings of politics, which generally redound to the advantage of polity members, even if they are not acting. Polity members in turn typically need to take only defensive actions to retain privileges. Similarly everyday politics typically works against the claims of state-oriented challengers, who seek to establish new laws, programs, bureaucracies, and so forth to realize their claims or to gain leverage over non-state actors. In a highly
fragmented system, the ease with which new initiatives can be vetoed likely works against the aspirations of challengers. In Skocpol’s (1992) analysis of U.S. social policy at the turn of the 20th century, only those groups, such as veterans’ and women’s organizations that were able to organize successfully across the entire country had great sway over policy. In Hattam’s (1993) analysis of U.S. unionization in the late 19th century suggested that after unions’ efforts at labor legislation were struck down repeatedly by the judiciary, they focused mainly on economic gains or business unionism.

Although radical separations of power likely dampen overall movement mobilization, then, these divisions likely encourage a wider variety of collective action—including suing through courts, proposing new legislation, attempting to influence bureaucracies concerned with the enforcement of laws. The profusion of different sites of potential collective benefits means that challengers with different strategies of action might plausibly have an impact. Specifically, we expect that the degree to which courts are autonomous, challenger action will take legal turns, and the degree to which legislatures and executive bureaus are autonomous, we would expect greater lobbying activity. Because divisions of powers make it easier for political actors to block new policy, moreover, collective actions will focus more on preventing policy than on initiating it.

There is suggestive evidence in favor of these claims about the forms of mobilization and types of action. Powers in the American national government are greatly separated and are more so than most other western democracies (Pierson 1994, p. 32). The judiciary and legislature have autonomy, the legislature is subdivided into committees and subcommittees, each partially autonomous, and these separations of powers are multiplied throughout the federal political system (Amenta 1998). Feminist mobilizations, which have spanned across many nations, had a
variety of forms and targets in the American setting, as compared to European ones (Katzenstein 1987). The women’s movement in the United States has employed a multi-front strategy, and the abortion rights movement also has had a wide variety of forms and targets (Costain and Costain 1987; Staggenborg 1991: chaps. 3, 4). Collective action with many targets was characteristic of the U.S. civil rights movement (McAdam 1982; Burstein 1985), which was perhaps the most momentous U.S. challenger of the 1950s and 1960s.

**Democratization, Rules and Rights, and Electoral Procedures**

For the most part the literature on political opportunity has addressed processes of democratization only in highly under-democratized polities, and in largely democratized polities this literature refers mainly to other aspects of electoral systems. However, the degree to which formally democratic institutions are bound by democratic procedures is more important to mobilization than usually appreciated, even within polities that are already largely democratized. By the extension of democratic rights we mean the lowering of legal restrictions on institutional political participation for everyday people. These rights include the ability to assemble and discuss issues. A highly democratized polity is also characterized by meaningful choices among parties or factions. An under-democratized polity is one in which political leaders are chosen by way of elections, but in which there are great restrictions on political participation, political assembly and discussion, voting, and choices among leadership groups. In the long run, the progress of political rights through the society increases social demands (Marshall 1963). As democratic rights spread, the state becomes increasingly a target, as challengers hope to establish claims directly through it (Tarrow 1998a, chap. 4).

The extension of democratic rights is likely to influence many different outcomes of interest to those who study social movements. It should influence the level of challenger
mobilization, the types of collective action chosen by challengers, as well as influence politically important identities. When new groups are added to the electorate, the bids to gain representation of those remaining on the outside become more credible. The process of democratization also encourages the further mobilization of those who have gained rights to participate, but have not yet secured policies in their favor. Moreover, when everyday people cannot vote, political leaders and state officials have no fear of electoral reprisals from them, and so it seems plausible that movements of everyday people are more easily ignored or repressed.

A second impact has to do with the type of activity in polities that are underdemocratized. A relative lack of rights to participate in formal political institutions also suggests that institutional action may be less worthwhile than non-institutional action. There are fewer reasons to work through institutional processes. Finally, because the extension of political rights is central to the outcomes of the political process, it seems likely it will have additional effects on social mobilization. The configuration and evolution of rights will influence how groups will politically identify themselves and thus mobilize.

The United States provides an interesting case for this line of argumentation, as it has been characterized by a highly uneven historical, geographical, and group-wise pattern of democratization. Suffrage for white males effected relatively early, in the 1830s. But the enfranchisement of black men after the Civil War in the 1860s was followed by their disfranchisement in the South by the end of the century (Kousser 1974), with significant restrictions placed on voting in many states in the North in the 20th century (Burnham 1970), rendering the United States a democratic laggard for most of the 20th century. Despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, there remain differences in obstacles to voting that serve to mute the political voices of Americans--typically poorer on average--
nominally granted the suffrage (Piven and Cloward 1989). Variation in voting is significant among rich, capitalist democracies (Hicks and Misra 1993), due in part to laws about registration and voting periods by which citizens are able to exercise the franchise (Lijphart 1997), and the United States ranks low. The implication is that the relatively restrictive practices of the American polity to have discouraged social mobilization for most of the 20th century and that the greatest discouragement would appear in the most restrictive parts of the polity. Also, we would expect collective action in the American setting and, historically, in the more under-democratized parts of the American setting, to be weighted more toward non-institutional forms than would collective action in other settings, other things being equal. Currently we would expect U.S. social mobilization to be discouraged by voting regulations and would expect challenger collective action to take non-institutional forms. What is more, group-wise mobilization would be expected to be influenced by which groups are excluded and included in the exercise of the franchise and other democratic rights.

Some historical evidence supports our contentions about the impact of democratic rules and practices on the levels of social mobilization. In the 1880s, as the Populist movement emerged, voter turnout in the South remained relatively high and opposition to the Democratic Party there could still win the vote of blacks and lower-class whites. In 1887, before many of these restrictions were in place, the Populist movement spread from Texas across the former Confederacy (Goodwyn 1978, pp. 56-8), culminating in the 1892 electoral insurgency of the Populist Party. From 1892 to 1895 the movement’s electoral mobilization proved more successful in those states where voter restriction had not yet taken hold (Kousser 1974, p. 41). By the end of the century, as voting restrictions became solid across the South, the movement collapsed. In cross-state studies that control for other macro-social determinants of social
mobilization and for region, moreover, 1930s American challengers, such as Huey Long's Share Our Wealth and the Townsend Movement were significantly influenced by the degree to which voting rights were extended (Amenta and Zylan 1991; Amenta, Dunleavy, and Bernstein 1994).

Other evidence provides support for the claim that differences in democratization influence types of collective action. Cross-national studies using the World Values Survey have shown significant variation across national settings between “conventional” and “unconventional” action (see Halman and Nevitte 1996; Dalton 1988). Although unconventional political participation is not the same as non-institutional interaction within the political system, evidence concerning unconventional action seems to work in the direction we suggest. Dalton (1988, chapter 4) finds that the “level of unconventional activity is generally highest in France and the United States,” as compared to West Germany and Britain. Still, given the limitations of the survey and the fact that relevant data are unavailable, his study cannot control for other macro-social influences on the form of action.

The ways that democratic rights were distributed across groups also appears to have had an impact on the group-wise mobilization and political identities of challengers. American workers were granted the vote without having to contend for it as workers. Perhaps as a result they were less successfully politically mobilized as workers throughout the 19th century than were their European counterparts, who had to fight as a group to win the franchise (Katznelson 1981; Shefter 1986; Oestreicher 1988). By contrast, partly because of their exclusion from the franchise, American women in the late 19th century and early 20th century formed political identities and organizations as women (Skocpol 1992). The same is true for African Americans in the middle 20th century (McAdam 1982), as they formed organizations based partly to gain the rights to vote. While the Brazilian women’s movement was active in the early democratic
elections and forged alliances with political parties, the Peruvian women's movement was not active in agitating for democracy, and remains distinct from both mass politics and the state. Additionally, the form these movements took during democratization process influenced the relationship between social movements and states after rights were achieved (Ray and Kortweg 1999).

How legislative representatives are chosen and other electoral rules governing direct democracy are also likely to influence challengers, but more so regarding forms of mobilization and lines of action than overall mobilization. In electoral systems, there are basic differences between winner-take-all and proportional representation. Winner-take-all electoral systems make it difficult for any group to form a political party or to threaten plausibly to form one (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Thus this type of electoral system diminishes the potential of party movements (Schwartz 2000), challenger organizations that contest elections, an important means for challengers to gain influence in politics. And the support that new parties can provide for other forms of challenges will also be lessened in a winner-take-all electoral system. These electoral rules make it more likely that challengers--and polity members--will devise strategies to attempt to influence the existing parties and political representatives.

Winner-take-all voting systems in the America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom seem to discourage challenger party formation. Although there were many influences on the formation of “left-libertarian” parties in the 1970s and 1980s (Kitschelt 1988), no country with a winner-take-all electoral system was host to a significant one. The American party system was set in the 19th century with two “non-ideological” parties (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Burnham 1970). Populists, Socialists, and Progressives, as well as advocates of states' rights, prohibition, and the environment among others, all have failed to gain a secure footing in
the American political system despite great support at one time or another. In Gamson’s (1990: pp. 277-85) historical study of American challengers through the middle of the 20th century, no new party challengers that appeared in his sample won “new advantages” and four of five suffered “collapse.” All of this suggests that social mobilizations in America and places with similar electoral rules are more likely to focus on influencing political party actors than on creating parties. Along these lines, U.S. women, farmer, and labor organizations abandoned strategies to form parties at the turn of the 20th century and instead turned to lobbying activity, which proved to be more productive (Clemens 1997).

A second important set of electoral rules concerns whether “direct democracy” devices, such as the initiative and referendum, are in existence. Such direct electoral procedures make it possible for challengers under some conditions to forgo standard institutional politics and appeal directly to the electorate. Kriesi (1995) suggests the initiative stimulates mobilization by the politically disadvantaged and of an assimilative sort. But the stimulating part seems unlikely. Because this option is not limited to the politically disadvantaged and because of high requirements of publicity to press successful initiatives and referendums, it seems likely that these rules would favor polity members. Also, the impact that direct procedures have on the focus of social mobilization is likely to go beyond inducing assimilative action to influencing action of a particular sort–activity on specific issues. Other things being equal, single interest mobilizations will be spurred by direct techniques, because these techniques make their achievement more likely.

The initiative is available in some U.S. western states, and some evidence suggests that mobilizations around specific issues are more frequent there. In U.S. old-age politics, the Townsend Movement, based on the “Townsend Plan” and state-level “baby” Townsend Plans in
the 1940s, did better in these Western states (Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999). Other issues have received national prominence by winning state-level initiatives. Moreover, the politically advantaged can also use this mechanism; California’s Proposition 13 was orchestrated by real-estate interests to lower taxes (Lo 1990). Recent mobilizations around affirmative action and the rights of immigrants have worked in the same direction. Opposing movements, too, can negate the gains of challengers by using the initiative process. In the United States in the late 1970s, several lesbian and gay rights ordinances were repealed via initiative campaigns sponsored by counter-movement organizations (Fetner 2001).

**State Bureaucracies and Repressive Capacities**

Another set of state factors, more in the middle-range and varying in terms of their systemic qualities, concern the abilities to make policies and enforce them. State bureaucracies are organizations within the executive of the state that have defined missions, as well as personnel and revenue to carry out those missions. When scholars speak of state capacities, they frequently refer to bureaucratic capabilities, as well as fiscal ones. The infrastructural power of states (Mann 1984) is often related to their bureaucratic abilities. Although the more developed states have bureaucracies and bureaucratic capacities far in excess of those in the past, they also vary quite greatly among themselves in the amount and nature of their state bureaucratic infrastructures.

Some scholars have argued that state bureaucracies have important influences over social movements. As noted above, Tilly (2001) argues that as states have gained in capacities across the centuries, challengers have become more national. In work on more recent social movement activity across countries, Kitschelt (1986) refers to state policy bureaucracies as “implementation capacities,” and suggests that they are relevant not to mobilization, but to the
consequences of protest. Kriesi (1995) argues that the more professional and coherent the bureaucracy the less likely it will spur social mobilization. According to his conceptualization, states can be designated “weak” or “strong,” with strong states, including professionalized bureaucracies, discouraging mobilization and weak states encouraging it. Since domestic state bureaucracies across capitalist democracies have become more coherent, professional, and larger throughout the 20th century, these developments would constitute increasing hindrances to social mobilization. Yet it is unclear why bureaucracies without the capacity to implement policy would spur social mobilization, as they would minimize the chances of a movement achieving its goals.

If strong bureaucracies increase the chances that challengers will win substantive gains, they should spur movement mobilization. More important, because domestic bureaucracies vary in strength and form, they make some lines of future state action more likely than others with more specific consequences for challengers. Domestic bureaucracies are typically launched with missions to provide services and relieve socially and politically defined problems, and those with careers in such bureaus are typically committed to their missions. Similarly, regulatory bureaucracies are designed to enforce directives from legislatures, often with great autonomy in deciding rules. For these reasons, a state's executive bureaucracy is likely to promote challenges along the lines in which bureaucracies are already working (Nagel and Olzak 1982, pp. 136-37; Orloff and Skocpol 1984). Members of these bureaucracies, state actors in the standard sense, may also aid challengers whose goals dovetail with the cause of the bureau, and the greater the administrative powers of the bureau, the more support they may be able to provide (Amenta and Zylan 1991). The environmental movement in Western Europe sought to influence policy through direct lobbying of state bureaucracies (Rucht 1999).
Given the many possible differences in bureaucracies, any arguments about their impact on challengers are difficult to appraise outside specific areas of activity. That said, postwar European bureaucracies may have discouraged the “new” social movements examined by Kriesi (1995) because the missions of these bureaucracies did not favor the issues pressed by these movements. In U.S. states in the 1930s, where comparative analyses with control variables are possible, states with more powerful industrial commissions tended to have larger Townsend Movement mobilizations (Amenta and Zylan 1991). Walton (1992, chapter 8) argues that sustained and successful mobilization over water rights by Owens Valley, California residents could not occur until after the 1930s when coherent state agencies began to provide the tools for efficacious political action. Women's Bureaus were an important resource during the early stages of the women's movements, providing both legitimation and a communication network for feminists in the 1960s (Duerst-Lahti 1989).

Since Weber, states are often defined by their monopoly of legitimate violence regarding their subjects or citizens, and all states have policing organizations that are designed to maintain internal order. In contrast to state domestic bureaucracies, bureaucratic state capacities for the maintenance of order and possible repression are less clearly connected to social movements. Certainly the propensity to repression is at least as important as the capacity for it, perhaps more so, and bureaucracies of order often have little autonomy in making decisions about the deployment of repressive measures. It seems obvious that the vigorous use of repression on challengers would dampen overall social mobilization. Such repression would be likely to result as well in the use of disruptive tactics and the development of challengers designed to work against the state instead of through it. It has been argued that forgoing repression increases the likelihood that movements will adopt peaceful tactics (della Porta 1996). This hypothesis might
be made more concrete by arguing that the greater the autonomy of policing organizations, the more likely they are to employ repression, and thus dampen mobilization and change the forms and tactics of protesters.

There is some evidence for these speculations regarding the results of repression, though it is not clear whether repression resulted from the autonomy of the repressive bureaucracies or for other reasons. High levels of repression may be effective at preventing protest, but the impact of low level repression is unclear (Kriesi et al. 1995). Local governments that choose to oppose the civil rights movement with legal means usually succeeded, while those that relied upon repression were more likely to fail (Barkan 1984). **State Policies**

State policies are authoritative and consistent lines of action undertaken by states, backed by laws and the legitimacy of states. Policies can often be broken up into different sorts of programs and can range from the shortest term action, such as an official apology to highly institutionalized versions with many laws and bureaucratic structures surrounding them, such as social security or imprisonment programs. Although scholars of social movements have not much addressed policies, they can encourage, discourage, shape, or transform challengers because policies influence the flow of collective benefits to identifiable groups. In addition, by designating officially sanctioned and legitimated beneficiaries and by power of categorization, policies also help to define and redefine social groups. Although they are often the easiest to change and most focused activities of states (Gamson and Meyer 1996), policies and programs are typically developed prior to challenges can influence their formation. Moreover, existing challengers may be encouraged inadvertently by programs--developed for other reasons--that benefit its followers. Politicians might do so to increase their electoral prospects. New
programs may also aid potential activists by freeing their time for movement work or by providing resources for movement organizations.

Along these lines, labor movements in capitalist democracies have been able to survive better recent capitalist initiatives to demobilize them where state policy supports a Ghent-type unemployment insurance system, one in which unions control unemployment funds (Western 1993). A number of programs of Franklin Roosevelt's Second New Deal, created partly in response to social mobilizations, also encouraged social mobilization (Amenta and Zylan 1991; Skocpol 1980). The “water wars” in California between communities in Owens Valley and Los Angeles (Walton 1992) began in earnest with the 1902 Reclamation Act, which provided for government participation in western water projects and established the Reclamation Service.

Other evidence from U.S. history suggests that policies can help to transform the struggles and focus of challengers. The unemployed workers movement of the early 1930s was a wide-ranging assortment of groups and individuals connected to various political organizations and was in decline by 1935. By the late 1930s, after the adoption of the WPA, the movement was confined almost exclusively to WPA workers (Valocchi 1990). In California, the Townsend Movement was replaced as the main old-age organization in late 1940s by a group consisting of those receiving Old-Age Assistance (Putnam 1970; Pinner, Jacobs, and Selznick 1959). Although no challenger demanded Aid to Dependent Children when it was created in 1935 (Cauthen and Amenta 1996), after a generation of operation the National Welfare Rights Organization mobilized the program’s recipients to struggle to liberalize it (Piven and Cloward 1977). In Germany, the structure of state welfare policies influenced the women’s movements to advocate for childcare and maternity leave programs rather than civil rights as in the United States and Britain (Ferree 1987). Specific state policies may frame a debate such that social
movement actors are forced to fighting over the implementation of a specific policy. Narrowing the definition of "economic justice" to "equal employment opportunity" in the American 1960s meant that affirmative action became the main means of achieving economic civil rights (Quadagno 1992).

In short, scholars who are concerned about the impact of political contexts on social movements would do better to think about the impact of specific state contexts on specific social movement outcomes. It seems likely that differences in these contexts will likely influence social movement outcomes, including their forms of organization and action. States are likely to matter even in instances where they are relatively democratized and well developed in their capacities. It is also worth thinking through the impact of these contexts on different sorts of outcomes for challengers, beyond whether they merely aid the mobilization of challengers, as most arguments in the political opportunity structure tend to do. As we have seen, if one examines state contexts with respect to whether they would facilitate the impact of the collective action of challengers, many aspects of states have few implications for overall challenger mobilization, but major implications for their forms, lines of actions, identities, and . In the next section, we discuss the potential impact of social movements on states.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ON STATES

Despite the fact that challengers are mainly state-oriented or have some goals or issues that involve state action, states are not typically conceptualized well in this literature as a target of social movement activity. For the most part, the literature concerns either the successes or failures of challengers, as they perceive them, or the amount of power they achieve in an abstract sense. Yet the successes and failures often refer to how they succeed or fail with respect to the state, and power is understood as gaining leverage within or through the state.
A better understanding of states are needed to develop arguments regarding the state-related consequences of social movements and to be able to assess these arguments. Because this literature is somewhat less developed than the literature on the rise, mobilization, forms, and identities of social movements, we do not discuss theoretical arguments about the impacts of social movements (for a review, see Giugni 1999). Also, we understand that social movements have goals and consequences that do not have to do with the state. But the state is often a key target of social movements who seek to influence it directly or in order to apply pressure on other targets. And so we focus on how states can be better conceptualized as targets of state-oriented challengers. In doing so we address some of the same aspects of states we discuss above, but connect them to the issue of collective benefits for challengers.

**The Limits of Success and Power**

As far as the literature has gone in designating the consequences of social movements, the focus has been on their “success” in winning new advantages and access or in their achieving gains in “power.” In his famous study, William Gamson (1990) posited two types of success for challengers: winning new benefits and winning some form of acceptance from the target of collective action. To ascertain what constituted new advantages, the more influential of his two types, Gamson focused on the challenger’s program. For him, this sort of success meant the degree to which a challenger’s stated program was realized. Correspondingly, if a challenger’s program or demands were not mainly realized, the challenger was considered a failure on this dimension. Paul Burstein and colleagues (1995) also make a strong case for understanding new advantages by way of a close analysis of the degree to which a challenger’s program is achieved. Examining success and defining it by way of the challenger’s program provides a sharp focus and draws attention to specific ends of collective action and the means devoted to attaining them.
However, the standard definition also has liabilities, especially in placing limits on the consideration of possible impacts of challenges. Most of all, it may be possible for a challenger to fail to achieve its stated program--and thus be deemed a failure--but still to win substantial collective benefits for its constituents. An alternative is to start with the concept of collective goods--those group-wise advantages or disadvantages from which non-participants in a challenge cannot be easily excluded (Olson 1968; Hardin 1982). Collective goods can be material, such as categorical social spending programs, but can also be less tangible, such as new ways to refer to members of a group. Social movement organizations almost invariably claim to represent a group extending beyond the leaders and adherents of the organization and most make demands that would provide collective benefits to that larger group. According to the collective benefit standard, a challenger can have considerable impact even when it fails to achieve what it is seeking. It is often premature or erroneous, moreover, to assume that the formal discourse and plans of social movement organizations represent the scope of the desires for change represented by a social movement (Amenta and Young 1999b). Although the collective goods standard addresses some of the problems of the success standard, it does not provide clear guidelines for understanding collective benefits gained through the state.

Some scholars of the impact of social movements have addressed the state explicitly. They do so by addressing gains in power, an important development given that political sociology is centrally concerned with power through the state. For the most part, however, these do not go beyond the limited ideas of new benefits and access. Craig Jenkins (1982) suggests a three-part scheme based on short-term changes in political decisions, alterations in decision-making elites, and long-term changes in the distribution of goods. The first and third are different forms of new benefits, while the second is a general idea of access or acceptance.
Herbert Kitschelt (1986) argues social movements can achieve substantive, procedural, and structural gains, with the first two analogous to Gamson’s categories. The third type is a “transformation of political structures,” which suggests more fundamental change, but is not well specified. These formulations do well in suggesting levels and types of collective benefits and address the state and political institutions. But if one is referring to state power, the ideas need to be better connected to specific state structures and processes to make sense of the impact of challengers on the state.

**State-Related Collective Benefits**

Like Jenkins and Kitschelt, we employ a three-level approach, but with each level referring ultimately to collective benefits through the state. From this perspective, the greatest sort of impact is the one that provides a group, not necessarily organizations representing that group, continuing leverage over political processes. These sorts of gains increase the returns to routine collective action of a challenger. These gains are usually at a structural or systemic level of state processes. Most collective action, however, is aimed at a more medium level--benefits that will continue to flow to a group unless some countering action is taken. These generally involve major changes in policy and the bureaucratic enforcement and implementation of that policy.

The most minor impact is to win a specific state decision with no long-term implications for the flows of benefits to the group. In each case, new legislation is required to secure the benefits. The difference is in the content of the legislation and what it means regarding the flow of collective benefits to groups represented by challengers. Although collective action in practice may be aimed at different levels simultaneously, these distinctions offer a basis for analyses of state-related gains.
These levels of collective benefits can be related back to the characteristics of states discussed above. Social movements may have an impact on the structure of the polity, on the degree to which authority is centralized or divided among levels of government or according to functions at the central and other levels of government. Social movements may also contest other system-wide or nearly systemic features of states, such as their democratic practices, and electoral features of political systems. At a more middle level, both in terms of the likely stability of the change and its effects across groups are changes in state bureaucracies. Finally, there are state policies. These can range quite dramatically, however, from those which are short-term and apply to few people and at one point in time to others which may apply to large numbers of people and groups and backed with legislation and bureaucratic authority. The levels of influence do not line up neatly with the most structural and systemic aspects of the state, but there is a rough correspondence.

At the highest level, a challenger may gain structural reforms of the state that give the represented group increased influence over political processes. These gains are a kind of meta-collective benefit, as they increase the productivity of all collective action. Only rarely do challengers contest the structure of authority in polities, which have become increasingly centralized over time, though with large differences remaining among them. In some ethnic mobilizations, however, it is useful for ethnic and linguistic groups that are territorially concentrated to demand devolution of authority (Lijphart 198x).

By contrast gains in democratization of state processes are among the most important that can be won through social movements and have the greatest systemic effects. Winning the right to vote or the protection of that right for low-income or other disfranchised groups increases the productivity of future collective action by such groups. The winning of such rights would
increase the likelihood of gaining future pecuniary and other collective benefits through state action. Needless to say many of the most important social movements and challengers have sought this basic goal, including movements of workers and women. In the United States, the civil rights movement made the enforcement of the right to participate in electoral politics an important goal.

It seems less likely that struggles over other aspects of electoral processes would increase the leverage of groups in the way that the devolution of authority can aid territorial minorities or that democratization can aid disfranchised and under-represented groups. For instance, challengers seeking to gain direct democratic devices, such as the initiative, referendum, and recall, would not automatically provide groups a greater likelihood of achieving collective benefits through the state. Whatever gains that might be made along these lines would likely be situational. In the U.S. case, these reforms were designed to break the power of the major political parties over political processes and their control over the development of state bureaucracies and policies. American parties were hierarchically organized and more oriented toward patronage and economic advantages than to issues, which were kept off political agendas (Mayhew 1986). The results of these mobilizations were uneven, with some western states and scattered municipalities gaining reforms (Shefter 1973; Finegold 1995; Clemens 1997) The advantages of such mobilizations for groups would seem to come only where patronage-oriented parties had a stranglehold over politics; mobilizations over electoral processes otherwise would not seem likely to provide political leverage for politically uninfluential groups.

At the middle level are institutionalized benefits that provide collective goods in a routine fashion to all those meeting specified requirements. Once enacted and enforced with bureaucratic means, categorical social spending programs, notably, provide benefits in such a
manner (Amenta 1998). The beneficiaries gain rights of entitlement to the benefits, and legal changes and bureaucratic reinforcement of such laws help to ensure the routine maintenance of such collective benefits. Under these circumstances, the issue is privileged in politics and the political system becomes biased in favor of the group. The issue is effectively removed from the political agenda in favor of the group. For the situation to change it is incumbent on some other person or group to challenge the institutionalized benefits. A bureaucracy would have to be targeted and captured, or new legislation would have to be passed rescinding benefits. Yet taking away benefits to defined groups becomes more difficult over time, especially as bureaucracies are created and reinforced and people in other ways organize their lives around the existence of the programs (Pierson 1994). Regulatory bureaucracies that are products of challenger mobilizations may push on their own to advance mandates in the absence of new legislation, as in the case of affirmative action (Bonastia 2000).

Alternatively, collective action may be intended to win or may result in winning higher-order rights through the state that advantage a group in its conflicts with other groups (Skocpol 1985). The state may be used as a “fulcrum” in this sense (Tarrow 1998a) by groups not mainly state-oriented. The general way to differentiate this sort of benefit from the other types is that it increases the probability of the impact of collective action by a group with regard to its targets outside the state. Labor movements, notably, often focus on the state to ensure rights to organize and engage in collective bargaining with businesses and business associations.

Struggles over the rights of labor to bargain collectively were at the center of conflicts by U.S. worker organizations in the 1930s and 1940s, and they ended with very uneven results as gains made in the 1930s through the Wagner Act were partly undone in the 1940s by the Taft-Hartley Act (Plotke 1996). Equality employment opportunity laws provided advantages for the
civil rights movements in fighting discrimination by private corporations (Burstein 1991). By outlawing a set of practices and providing a legal remedy for class of employees, they created another channel for protest, and by creating a bureaucracy that has influenced the outcomes of these legal cases, they have provided additional resources and legitimation for the movement.

It should be noted that through their policies states can ratify or attempt to undermine potential collective identities or help to create ones. To be valuable a new identity should aid in elevating and defining group members, in relation to other members of the group and those outside, and the identity must receive a kind of societal endorsement or recognition. Insofar as a challenger constructs a new collective identity that extends to a beneficiary group and provides psychological rewards such as pride, winning affirmations of this identity is a potentially important accomplishment (for a review, see Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Although the state does not hold a monopoly on recognizing new identity claims, states do provide many influential communications, some of them authoritative. Politicians and state actors are often in the vanguard of recognizing new identity claims and often recognize these claims by way of changes in policy (Amenta and Young 1999b). A challenger may gain results ranging from greater respect through official governmental representations to having the group represented by the challenger recognized in state policies. The state's role in defining racial categories, for instance, has been at times the target of social movements. For example, in the United States, activists attempting to legitimate a multiracial identity were successful in having the census bureau accept more than one answer on racial questions in the 2000 census. Similarly, black activists in Brazil fought successfully for the inclusion of racial questions, rather than questions based on color, in the 1991 census in the hopes of achieving greater recognition of the special status of black Brazilians (Nobles 2000). However accomplished, gains in collective
identity may influence attempts to gain collective benefits taking other forms, such as pecuniary rewards or legal rights, or may reinforce existing ones.

At a lower level, challengers may win something specific and minor for their constituency group without implications for identities, such as a short-run or one-time pecuniary benefit. The attempt of American veterans’ organizations to win the early payment of their World War I “bonuses” in 1936 (instead of 1945) constitutes a case in point. These bonuses went to all who qualified for them, but had no implications for these veterans in the future or for the veterans of future wars (Daniels 1971). The one-shot brand of benefit, however, has often been criticized as insubstantial (Lipsky 1968). Piven and Cloward (1977) argue along these lines that the first response of political leaders to unruly protests will be to “remedy some of the immediate grievances.” These programs may be designed mainly to assure a broader public audience that something has been done about a problem. Such benefits imply a limited conception of rights for the categories of citizens to which the benefits pertain.

**Methodological Benefits to Thinking about Collective Benefits through the State**

Analyzing the consequences of social movements often provide a series of methodological problems that can hinder empirical appraisals of theoretical claims. To determine why a movement had consequences means determining first whether it had any consequences and which ones—not at all an easy task. Often more than one set of actors is pressing in the same direction as a social movement, and sometimes similar actions by a social movement at different times and places result in different effects. This problem is aggravated by the fact that scholars typically study individual movements or organizations. In such a situation competing arguments may seem equally plausible. No one has followed Gamson in examining a random sample of
movements. For all these reasons, it is difficult to devise compelling analytical strategies to appraise arguments about the consequences of social movements.

Analyses of the political process in the development of legislation, for example, can help to overcome these problems, particularly in ascertaining whether a challenger had an impact or not. To make a convincing claim, any historical analysis would need to demonstrate that the challenger achieved one or more of the following: changed the plans and agendas of political leaders; had an impact on the content of the proposals as devised by executives, legislators, or administrators; or influenced disinterested representatives key to the passage of proposed legislation. Making such a case would require understanding political leaders' agendas and the content of legislative programs prior to the challenge as well as assessing how legislators might have voted in its absence. New legislation must also be implemented, and movements can influence the speed and nature of this process as well.

Dividing the process of creating new laws containing collective benefits into the agenda-setting, legislative content, passage, and implementation of legislation simplifies analysis and makes it easier to judge the impact of challengers. If a challenger, for instance, inserts its issue onto the political agenda, it can be seen as having increased its probability of winning some collective benefits for its larger constituency. The value of the benefits would be unknown, however, until legislative alternatives had been developed. As far as legislative content is concerned, a challenger can work to increase the value of collective benefits included in any bill that makes it onto the agenda. Although it is difficult to gauge exactly the amount and type of collective benefit in a bill’s content, it can be done in a rough way. Once the content has been specified, moreover, challengers can influence individual legislators to vote for the bill and thus influence the probability of gaining specified collective benefits. From there the program must
be implemented, and the more secure the implementation the greater the probability of collective benefits over the long run. To put it another way, if a challenger has an impact on any one of these processes it would increase the expected value of collective benefits for the beneficiary group.

Unless all three processes are negotiated successfully—placing the issue on the agenda, writing a bill with collective benefits, and passing the bill—no collective benefits will result. Influence in implementation depends on successfully negotiating these other steps. It seems that it will be only very rarely that a challenger can influence all of these processes. That said, for a challenger to influence the placement of an issue on the agenda, to increase the collective benefits in legislation, to affect the probabilities that elected officials might support such legislation, or to reinforce the implementation of legislation—each of these is a kind of beneficial impact in itself. In short, state legislative processes can be broken down in ways that are useful for examining challengers in action and for addressing some of the methodological difficulties of ascertaining the impact of movements on states. CONCLUSION

Although the idea of political opportunities is appealing and has led to some important gains in understanding social movements, political opportunity is often too vague in its conceptualization and in the theoretical claims made for it. One important step toward clarity would be for scholars of social movements to employ in their analyses understandings of states current in political sociology. After all, social movements are often defined by their attempts to influence states and state processes. And much writing and research in political sociology and political science addresses the importance of states in influencing political participation and group formation. As we have seen, it seems worth thinking through the likely impact on social movements of different aspects of states, such as structures of authority, processes of
democratization, electoral rules, bureaucratic forms, and policies. This exercise has helped in providing specific theoretical connections between cause and outcome that are often lacking in political opportunity formulations.

It seems likely that the ways that states are structured channel social movement in certain important and systematic ways. But we do not mean to suggest that social movement analysts should be static and focus on the broadest and most systemic influences of states on movements. As we have seen, state factors range from relatively structural and systemic aspects of polities to relatively short-term changes in policies and actions. What is more, overarching contexts are often employed in historical analyses to place scope conditions over theoretical arguments that may be conjunctural or configurational in character (Ragin 1987). That is to say, one might argue that specific causes will likely work only under certain sorts of overarching contextual conditions, such as a democratized political system or a programmatic political party system or with a favorable state bureaucratic authority. Similarly, theoretical arguments in historical and comparative analysis are often made by way of multiple causation. Long-term factors such as systemic properties of states can be combined with more short-term factors such as changes in policy and the application of social movement strategies to help explain social movements outcomes, such as their potential impacts on collective benefits (Amenta 1998). In short, paying greater attention to aspects of states will aid in developing appraisable propositions of whatever sort: whether one is proposing explanations of large-scale processes of change in characteristics of movements, to the most contingent sequences of events in the rise of movements, to more middle-range theories working largely at the meso level of analysis.

Understanding states in the ways we suggest may also lead to more plausible and usable heuristic models of collective action. In Tilly’s (1978) influential three-member polity model,
for instance, there are members of the polity and challengers, who contend for power and engage in collective action. A member has routine access to the resources of the government, the third player, whereas challengers do not. In this model the government is the organization that controls the principle means of coercion—an organization nowadays mainly conceptualized as the state. Using a more variegated conception of the state, however, might improve heuristic modeling. For instance, one might bring into the model state bureaucratic actors as contending with members of the polity and challengers. One might also see polities as being not neutral arenas, but slanted toward the making of new claims or against them, as is the case in which authority in the polity is greatly divided, or against some forms of actors or claims and in favor of others.

Although we have focused on states and social movements, the idea of political opportunity needs to be unpacked further by political sociologists. The next moves would be to make better sense of political parties and interest groups. It would be worth treating them in their own right, rather than seeing them as part of a larger structure or as part of an undifferentiated group of “elites,” as political opportunity structure theorists sometimes have it. These institutional aspects of political life vary greatly across places and times and have been studied by political sociologists with respect to their influence on state policies. They could also be employed to construct theories of different social movement outcomes, including the consequences of social movements.

Finally, it is important to understand the impact of social movements on states. Although social movement activity is often aimed at states, the way that scholars of social movements tend to conceptualize the potential consequences of this collective action has not been connected to conceptualizations of states, and instead has focused on success defined movement by movement
or on overly broad understandings of power. Making sense of the different possible impacts of movements on states, as we have done above, will make it easier to construct theoretical arguments and help to address some of the methodological difficulties that have constrained research in this growing area of study.
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