

Public opinion and movements

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Although public opinion would seem to be a crucial factor for achieving a large-scale mobilization and impacting politics and public policy, it has not yet received much attention in the social movement literature. There are probably a number of reasons for this lack of attention: (1) data on public opinion suitable for social movement scholars are not usually covered in publicly available opinion surveys and to gather them is costly; (2) requirements for data gathering would be even more demanding than for standard surveys because more developed research designs going beyond one survey at one time, such as public opinion across geographical units or longitudinal data, are needed; (3) public opinion is frequently studied by political science, while social movements are a primary focus of sociology. The following will first define what public opinion is, and how social movements can influence it, and then present two ways in which public opinion can play a significant role for social movement activism.

Public opinion can be defined as a distribution of opinion statements regarding a given issue in a society (Zaller 1992: 36). It is closely related to the way it is measured, in opinion polls. Public opinion researchers point out that public opinion, the results from opinion surveys, should not be understood as an aggregation of people's pre-existing "true attitudes" towards a particular issue. Actually, people very rarely have fixed attitudes that they would reveal when responding to a survey question. Rather, individuals balance various considerations and, as a result, public opinion is a count of a "range of reactions" rather than stable "true attitudes" (Zaller 1992: 34). Nevertheless, this is not to say that public opinion

expressed in opinion surveys is inauthentic or not perceived as real by political actors. It is only to say that public opinion is permanently reconsidered, open to change and unstable.

Also, the social movement literature has long ago acknowledged that identities, interests, and attitudes toward specific policy issues are not fixed and that only a few people are able to transform their grievances into political consciousness. Together with other political actors social movements play an active role in mobilization of public opinion. They can put a completely new issue on the public agenda, as women's movements did with issues that were until that time considered only personal. Social movements can bring new perspectives on already existing issues, reframe them, and try to influence the direction of public opinion towards particular issues. For example, protests against the war in Vietnam tried to change the direction of public opinion towards it. Lastly, social movements can make an already existing favorable general opinion of their issue more salient. There are many issues that almost always receive majority public support such as human rights, environmental, and health issues. However, they are often buried among issues perceived as more important at a given time and social movements can help increase their visibility. For instance, civil rights protests in the US managed to increase public attentiveness to African American civil rights during the heyday of the movement in the 1960s (Burstein 1985).

Social movement literature has paid a lot of attention to the process of how social movements can influence public opinion, interpretative schemata, identities, and political consciousness by providing identification and interpretation of social problems through framing processes (Snow et al. 1986), which can lead to consensus mobilization (Klandermans 1984). However, acknowledging that social movements mobilize public opinion is

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not to say that they would or could completely manipulate people's minds. There always has to be a resonance between existing prior values in the population and a mobilizing issue. That is why the existing public opinion and generally shared values can be regarded as the cultural opportunity structure (Gamson & Meyer 1996; McAdam 1996) that puts external constraints on how movements can be successful and what persuading strategies they can use. In order to be successful in their consensus mobilization, social movements' framing should resonate with generally shared values and opinions (Snow et al. 1986). For social movements it is easier to shape public attitudes towards specific policy issues that are unstable and vulnerable to persuasion strategies of political elites, including social movements, than to change deeply rooted core values that are fairly stable over time (Zaller 1992). For this reason, when social movements want to influence public opinion towards a specific political issue, they strategically frame it and link to the cultural opportunity structure represented by the generally accepted value structure in the society.

Public opinion is important to social movements for two reasons. First, supportive public opinion is a necessary precondition of larger protest events. If people do not support the goal of social movement activity they are unlikely to take part in it. People having sympathetic views towards a social movement and its goals constitute the so called "specific action potential" from which social movements can draw the actual participants of their protest events (Klandermans 1984). This reservoir of supportive people sets limits within which an action mobilization can succeed. When it is small, social movements cannot hope for a large-scale popular mobilization. At the same time, by shaping public opinion, social movements actively help establish constituencies of people supporting their political views, from which they can later recruit individual participants (Klandermans 1984). Changes in public opinion can be fast and substantial in both directions and significantly influence the scope

of individuals mobilizable into action. For example, the longitudinal study of activist mobilization by the Dutch peace movement done by Oegema and Klandermans (1994) shows that the loss of support and sympathy for the movement was one of the two most important accounts of why people originally supporting the movement and planning to sign its petition against cruise missiles did not end up doing so.

However, not all social movement organizations intend to follow consensus mobilization with action mobilization. For some social movements public opinion is a more important goal than the action itself. As the director of the Greenpeace European Unit put it "we are less interested in having tens of thousands of people in Brussels, although we have also participated in mass demonstrations, but it is much more about creating an image . . . that can catch people's attention and that can illustrate the problem" (Cisak 2010: 740). Similarly, collective action itself can be used to shape public opinion. Some action repertoires of social movements are primarily focused on influencing public opinion and are not based on mass mobilization such as happenings, political theatres, hunger strikes, and terrorist attacks. These repertoires are intentionally focused solely on influencing public opinion where ordinary citizens play only the spectator role and do not act themselves.

Second, large-scale protests or supportive public opinion are usually not the ultimate goal for the majority of social movements. Rather, they mobilize public opinion and individuals into protest action because they want to pursue policy changes. In the literature there is no general agreement on how social movements, public opinion, and policy outcomes are related, and therefore several theories exist. One group of researchers argues that it is primarily public opinion that matters for policy change and not the activity of social movements. Social movements can influence policy outcomes only when their action is mediated by public opinion (Burstein 1985, 1999). This means that social movements can have only an indirect impact on

policy outcomes and that public opinion functions as the intervening variable. But, still, it is primarily public opinion that influences policy outcomes and can do it independently of social movements. The theory explains that without the support of a wider public, political leaders, who seek re-election, do not have any reason to positively respond to the requirements of social movements because they do not represent the majority of society. Politicians will change the policy only if they think that the demands of social movements are supported by the majority of citizens and are important enough for people to base their vote on them. For example, Costain and Majstorovic (1994) show how the American women's movement mobilization increased the public awareness of gender issues that consequently influenced the legislative action in this area. Burstein (1985) shows that the civil rights movement had an impact on policy changes through heightening the salience of the issue of African Americans' rights.

Some other studies give support to a different relationship. They show that both social movements' activism and favorable public opinion have their independent impact on policy outcomes. In other words, public opinion is not necessary to mediate the effect of social movements that can influence politics directly. For instance, McAdam and Su (2002) show how different types of protests influenced congressional voting on the war in Vietnam in conjunction with changes in public opinion on the issue.

A third group of studies suggests a more complex perspective on the relationship between social movement activism and public opinion. According to these authors, public opinion and social movement protests have a combined effect and interact together to increase the likelihood of policy change. The studies show that social movement activism moderates the influence of public opinion on policy changes (e.g., Agnone 2007). They explain that in addition to the independent effect of both public opinion and protests, protest mobilization increases the saliency

of supportive public opinion that leads to a higher likelihood of policy impact. For example, Agnone (2007) shows how the effect of favorable public opinion on the number of passed federal laws supportive of the environment was increased when accompanied by more protests by the US environmental movement.

SEE ALSO: Consensus and action mobilization; Culture and social movements; Discursive opportunity structure; Framing and social movements; Outcomes, cultural; Resonance, frame; Survey research.

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