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Conceptualizing Political Opportunity*

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Abstract

This article reviews central problems in political opportunity theory and explores the implications of adopting certain conceptualizations of political opportunities for explaining the emergence, development, and influence of protest movements. Results from multivariate analyses of civil rights protest, organizational formation, and policy outcomes indicate significant variation depending on (1) whether the political opportunity structure is conceptualized broadly or narrowly, (2) the dependent variable concerned, and (3) the underlying assumptions about the mechanisms through which opportunities translate into action. We argue that the variation in results can best be understood by adopting a broader understanding of protest and the political process and that theory development requires more careful and more explicit — although not necessarily more uniform — conceptualization and specification of political opportunity variables and models.

"Political opportunity structure," applied to the world outside a social protest movement, has been the appropriate focus of much of recent theory and research on political protest. The basic premise is that exogenous factors enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization, for particular sorts of claims to be advanced rather than others, for particular strategies of influence to be

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exercised, and for movements to affect mainstream institutional politics and policy. This is a great deal of weight for any concept to bear. Social movement researchers in both sociology and political science have continued to add new tasks and mechanisms to the concept, such that, as Gamson and Meyer (1996: 275) warn, "The concept of political opportunity structure is . . . in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment." To avoid this fate, we need to pay much more systematic attention to questions of operationalization of this concept and specification of political opportunity models, synthesizing and cumulating the research done under its rubric.

We begin by offering an overview of the political opportunity approach, noting the variety of outcomes that analysts use different conceptualizations of political opportunity to explain. Using data on the civil rights movement, we then demonstrate the consequences of different strategies of conceptualization and model specification in analyzing the relationship between political opportunities and protest, organizational formation, and policy outcomes. We are particularly concerned with three key issues: (1) distinguishing between general openness in the polity and openness to particular constituencies, that is, issue-specific opportunities; (2) distinguishing between models that emphasize formal structural aspects of political openings and those that emphasize the perceptual elements of opportunity; and (3) assessing the effects of different elements of political opportunities on different outcomes. Our goals are primarily methodological and theoretical; we are less interested in explaining the particular case of the civil rights movement with political opportunity theory than in demonstrating the need for more careful and more explicit conceptualization and specification of political opportunity variables and models, and for a broader and more nuanced understanding of the relationships among institutional politics, protest, and policy.

Political Opportunity Theory: Problems and Prospects

Political opportunity theory promises a means to predict variance in the periodicity, style, and content of activist claims over time and variance across institutional contexts. Explanations emphasize the interaction of activist efforts and more mainstream institutional politics. The premise underlying this approach — that protest outside mainstream political institutions is closely related to more conventional political activity within — was hardly completely novel to political science or sociology (e.g., Lipset 1963), but its systematic application to the analysis of protest politics represents an important step toward greater coherence and comparability in understanding a range of social protest movements.

Eisinger's (1973) effort to explain why *some* American cities witnessed extensive riots during the late 1960s, the first explicit use of a political opportunity framework, focused on the openness of urban governments to more conventional means of making claims. By inviting conventional means of participation to redress grievances, Eisinger found, some cities preempted protest. In contrast, cities without visible openings for participation repressed or discouraged dissident claims and organization to the extent that protest did not emerge. Subsequent cross-sectional comparisons employed different models of political opportunity to explain variance across states and nations as well (e.g., Amenta, Dunleavy & Bernstein 1994; Amenta & Zylan 1991; Banaszak 1996b; Joppke 1993; Kitschelt 1986; Snow, Soule & Cress 2003; Van Dyke & Soule 2002).

Temporal and sectoral variations in political opportunity have been most extensively explored in longitudinal studies of single movements that focus on a movement's trajectory. McAdam's (1982) treatment of the civil rights movement in the U.S., conceptualized as an examplar of a larger theoretical orientation (see Tilly 1978), was particularly important. For McAdam, changes in demography, repression, migration, and political economy contributed to a climate in which African Americans *could* organize collective action, and claims about racial justice *would* be more readily received by at least some governmental institutions. To some extent, McAdam's work serves as a model for longitudinal studies of particular movements (e.g., Cooper 1996; Costain 1992; Meyer 1990, 1993b) and protest movements more generally (e.g., Clemens 1997; Rucht 1996; Tarrow 1989).

The challenge facing researchers concerned with political opportunity and protest is explaining which aspects of the external world affect the development of social movements and how this development is affected. Synthesized in numerous versions, analysts generally refer to the world outside the social movement as the "structure of political opportunities." Tarrow (1994:85) offers a succinct and helpful definition: "consistent — but not necessarily formal or permanent — dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure." Predictably, analysts concerned with different kinds of movements and different questions about the same movement identify different factors as political opportunity. In general, those seeking to explain how and why seemingly similar movements differ emphasize more stable aspects of states and societies, essentially holding them constant for cross-sectional comparisons. Those conducting longitudinal studies to explain the stages and cycles of social protest movements tend to neglect the constants used in cross-sectional analyses to focus on more volatile aspects of political opportunity, such as public policy and political alignments. This diversity of approaches may provide credible answers to particular problems, but it also produces a situation in which the same terms are used to describe completely different factors.

Some of the obstacles to the accumulation, testing, and development of concepts across problems and circumstances can be overcome with greater theoretical clarity and conceptual specificity. Presently, there is no shortage of conceptual statements of political opportunities. Beginning with Eisinger's (1973) focus on the "openness" of government as the key factor in opportunity (also see Koopmans 1996), scholars have proffered different visions of the number and content of essential political opportunity components. Kitschelt (1986) added state capacity to openness, proposing two variables; Clemens (1997) employs two similar dimensions, although operationalized differently, and Esman (1994) uses two slightly different dimensions, both addressing openness. Others have offered conceptualizations that employ three (Costain 1992; Jenkins & Klandermans 1995; Kriesi 1996; Kriesi et al. 1992; Kriesi et al. 1995; Tarrow 1989), four (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996; Rucht 1996; Tarrow 1994), and five elements of political opportunity (Tarrow 1988, 1998). Despite overlapping concerns, scholars use different terms for the same phenomena and offer different understandings of which phenomena are relevant altogether.

Moreover, there is often incongruity between conceptual statements (e.g., Tarrow 1998; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996; Gamson & Meyer 1996), which essentially leave the specification to later analysts, and analytical examinations of cases. Both Eisinger (1973) and Kitschelt (1986) urge the reader to inquire privately about operationalization. Kriesi (1996) examines a number of elements of governance structure to generate a 2×2 table of state strength (weak versus strong) arrayed against the "dominant strategy" of political management (inclusion versus exclusion), but it is not clear how another analyst would apply those categories to other cases. Rucht (1996) disaggregates conceptually cultural, political, and social elements of what he describes as the "context structure." In examining political context, he makes judgments about a challenger's access to the party system, the state's policy implementation capacity, "alliance structure," and "conflict structure," though his specification and coding is unclear. Clemens (1997), in explaining policy innovation across U.S. states, uses the number of Progressive reforms effected by 1913 as a measure of openness and the value added to productivity by manufacturing as a measure of capacity. Costain's (1992) three dimensions include mobilization of indigenous resources (not generally considered external to the movement); consciousness raising of potential supporters; and government action. Only the last of these components gets much weight, and Costain considers a wide range of factors as specific to women, such as presidential appointments, legislation, and presidential rhetoric. McAdam's (1982) treatment of political process emphasized factors particularly germane to African Americans in the U.S. during the period of his study, including the collapse of the cotton economy, resultant black migration and voting, an electoral shift of blacks to the Democratic

party, the development of the U.S. as a global power, and a number of favorable government actions. All these factors suggest an orientation to understanding a movement, but not variables easily transferable to other causes or constituencies.

To sort out the conceptual challenges facing analysts employing political opportunity frameworks and work toward building a larger understanding of the concept, we identify three areas that demand more conceptual attention. First, analysts are not clear about the importance of general political opportunities relative to issue- or constituency-specific factors. Second, analysts use different dependent variables, looking to political opportunities to explain outcomes that are likely to respond differently to the same factors. Third, analysts offer different conceptions about how political opportunities work, that is, the mechanisms by which conditions in the polity can translate into collective action. We address these issues in sequence.

Political Opportunities for Whom?

The sets of factors relevant to social protest vary across issues and constituencies, although much of the literature focuses on general elements in the political system, regardless of constituency (e.g., Oberschall 1978; Rucht 1996; Tarrow 1989). What provokes mobilization for one movement or constituency may depress mobilization of another, and be completely irrelevant to a third. The decline in the number of lynchings in the U.S., which McAdam (1982) credibly argues provided a political space for African Americans to organize to act collectively, is unlikely to be relevant to other significant movement actors in American politics. Similarly, Costain's (1992) focus on federal government action against discrimination against women, itself an odd product of the civil rights movement, had no appreciable influence on opportunities for environmental or peace activists.[1] And advocates concerned with spending on social welfare, for example, are unlikely to be planning their activities in response to foreign policy or environmental regulations.

The critical analytical work to be done is to parse out the relative weight of issue- or constituency-specific factors and broader changes in the political context, including economic and political instability writ large. In doing so, we can begin to assess which aspects of political opportunity theory, honed mostly in advanced industrialized nations, can be applicable to other contexts.[2] These steps will allow us to build a fuller, more robust, and still more finely tailored conception of political opportunity.

Political Opportunity for What?

Analysts also use political opportunity structure to explain different outcomes, which produces some amount of frustration and constitutes an obstacle to the

cumulation of knowledge (McAdam 1996). Although the political opportunity or political process approach presumes that protest can sometimes affect changes in public policy, social movement analysts have yet to develop a comprehensive and generalizeable framework for assessing the impact of social protest on policy. The factors that give rise to social mobilization are also those that give rise to policy change, and disentangling the independent role of protest is no simple matter.[3] Tracing the two together, analysts run the risk of making two very different, but serious errors: either factoring out the role of social protest altogether; or ascribing all policy changes to movement activism, without allowing for the influence of broader social changes that create the conditions for movements.

The difficulties of sorting out these phenomena have led to confusion and conflation of opportunities for social mobilization and opportunities for policy change. Landmark longitudinal studies of particular movements (see especially Costain 1992; McAdam 1982) confuse the broader issue because in the case of certain movements, opportunities for mobilization appear to move in concert with those for formal policy change. Advocates mobilizing inside and outside the political system for both African Americans and women moved roughly in concert, with ostensibly opposing strategies converging to produce a synergistic effect.

This is not the case for all movements, however; unfavorable changes in policy may also spur mobilization, even when mobilization is unlikely to have much noticeable effect on policy. In tracing antinuclear mobilization over time in the U.S., Meyer (1993b) found that activists are most likely to succeed in reaching broader audiences and mobilizing extrainstitutional support when government policy appears particularly hostile and bellicose, and when institutional routes for political influence appear foreclosed — precisely those times when they are unlikely to get the policies they want. We can see a similar pattern for environmental activists (Schlozman & Tierney 1986), for anti-intervention activists (Smith 1996), and for abortion rights and anti-abortion activists (Staggenborg 1991).

Only by separating the analysis of opportunities for policy reform from those for political mobilization can we begin to make sense of the relationship between activism and public policy. Additionally, because policy itself is multidimensional, analysts must choose an operational definition from many possibilities that do not necessarily move in concert, including formal recognition versus new advantages for a constituency (Gamson 1990; Santoro 2002; Strong et al. 2000), introduction and adoption of discrete policy changes (Banaszak 1996b; Burstein 1991; McCammon et al. 2001; Soule et al. 1999; Van Cott 2001), levels of appropriations (Amenta, Dunleavy & Bernstein 1994; Button 1978), policy implementation (Andrews 2001), or actual practices (Einwohner 1999; Krain 1997). Core elements of political opportunity, such as political openness, are likely to operate differently for these distinct

dependent variables — and for different sorts of claims. Changes in policy, for example, may alert citizens of the need to act on their own behalf (Opp 2000) or may cause elite actors to try to activate a largely disengaged public (Meyer 1993a).

As with policy, scholars differ in both conceptualizing and operationalizing mobilization. Eisinger's (1973) formulation was designed to explain only one form of behavior — riots — and other studies of the same period focused on unruly and disruptive activism (e.g., Button 1978; Lipsky 1970; Piven & Cloward 1977). Other scholars have looked at mobilization through organizations, through the formation of interest groups (Minkoff 1994) or political parties (Lucardie 2000; Redding & Viterna 1999), through membership in dissident organizations (Amenta & Zylan 1991), through running identified candidates for office (Button, Wald & Rienzo 1999), or through development and deployment of particular identities (e.g., Bernstein 1997; Gotham 1999; Schneider 1999). More recent studies using event data consider the wide variety of activities in which dissidents engage, ranging from forms of action that in liberal polities are relatively orderly and nondisruptive such as petitions and permitted demonstrations — to strikes and to political violence (see Jenkins 1985; Kriesi et al. 1995; Maney 2000; McAdam 1982; Roscigno & Danaher 2001; Tarrow 1989; Tilly 1995). Clearly, a polity that provides openness to one kind of participation may be closed to others, and employing a unidimensional conception of openings will lead to misunderstandings.

How Do Political Opportunities Work?

Although changes in political opportunity correlate with changes in the volume and tactics of social mobilization, we know less about how opportunities translate into collective action. Clearly, understanding the relationship between context and action is critical to tackling the larger theoretical question of the relationship between structure and agency. The literature is unclear on this critical issue. Some studies emphasize factors completely outside the control of activists, such as population growth (Goldstone 1991), while others suggest perceptions of opportunity are far more important to collective action than the actual strength of a regime (Kurzman 1996). Analytically, we want a robust theory that allows us to separate the relative weight of strategic choices and contextual constraints, one that allows us to see opportunities not only in retrospect as evidenced in mobilization but also opportunities prospectively and opportunities missed retrospectively (Sawyers & Meyer 1999).

Analysts are divided on the degree to which activists are cognizant of changes in political opportunity. In some versions of the theory (e.g., Tarrow 1996, 1998), activists are relatively rational entrepreneurs waiting for signals from the state and the larger society about what claims to lodge and how. Others

are agnostic about the cognizance and intentionality of political actors. Gamson and Meyer (1996) suggest that activists are by disposition unduly optimistic about opportunities, and do not necessarily calculate with any rigor the likely prospects for successfully mobilizing or generating policy reform; they just keep trying and *sometimes* succeed in engaging a broader public. It seems most likely that social movements are composed of coalitions of more or less rational, entrepreneurial, and perceptive organizers, who are consequently more or less responsive to changes in political opportunity.

Although we can correlate changes in political opportunity with changes in mobilization or policy change, it is not clear whether the signals sent by elite actors encourage mobilization, or whether structural changes in opportunity effectively allow ongoing efforts at mobilization to proceed further than it would under other circumstances. Examining this issue will help us to understand the mechanisms by which changes in opportunity translate into changes in mobilization, organizational formation, or public policy.

Specifying Political Opportunities

Taken together, the diversity of approaches to using political opportunity theory presents a challenge to researchers. Rather than abandoning the concept or the pursuit of a broader understanding of the politics of social protest altogether (see Goodwin & Jasper 1999), we think it is productive to use the disputed issues in the field that we have identified to structure research. In this spirit, we examine different visions of political opportunity to explore their effects on different dependent variables: mobilization, organizational development, and policy change. We are particularly interested in two basic issues that cut across these dependent variables: (1) the effects of structural changes in opportunities as differentiated from effects of signals sent by the political system and (2) the relative weight of issue-specific versus general openings in the polity. Our analytic strategy is to differentiate what we denote as a "structural" model from a "signal" model and then to explore the variable effects of issue-specific and general political opportunity factors on key mobilization-related outcomes.

Our overarching objective is to analyze a particular case to explore conceptual disputes in order to further the goal of building theory that will cross cases. We therefore chose a case on which there is an extensive literature: African American political mobilization. The civil rights movement, operating in a range of venues over a long period of time, provides a good case for developing and testing theories about the relationship between movements and context. We assume that the basic structures and rules of U.S. politics are essentially constant over the period under study, with a few dramatic exceptions. In choosing variables, we have sought to find readily available data

representing elements of political opportunity likely to be relevant to civil rights advocates, although not necessarily those things of which activists would be aware.

Measures and Model Specification

Dependent Variables

We examine the effects of political opportunities on three dependent variables: civil rights protest mobilization, organizational formation, and policy outcomes between 1955 and 1985. The measure of civil rights protest refers to the total number of black-movement-initiated events, including protest and unruly actions but excluding more routine action such as lobbying and electoral campaigning (see Jenkins & Eckert 1986). To index organizational formation, we use a measure of the total number of civil rights and black protest and advocacy organizations formed each year (see Minkoff 1995).[4] As a measure of civil rights policy, we use the annual outlays for the Commission on Civil Rights (*Budget of the United States Government*, in 1982 constant dollars). Funding appropriations were initiated in 1957 and provide a concrete indicator of the federal commitment to protect and advance the civil rights of black Americans.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 present time-series graphs of the three dependent variables. Figure 1 includes data on civil rights protest, Figure 2 on social movement organization (SMO) founding, and Figure 3 presents civil rights budget data (1982 constant dollars). Figure 1 confirms McAdam's description of the period 1961–65 as the heyday of black insurgency, with much of the action taking place through the mid-1960s and declining gradually throughout the following decades. The peak in organizational formation (Figure 2) follows the peak of the civil rights protest, providing some descriptive evidence that protest activity spurs new SMO formation as suggested by Tarrow (1994) and suggesting a process of institution building and, possibly, strategic shifts from protest to more institutional politics.

Figure 3 depicts the relatively slow growth in funding for civil rights beginning with the first appropriations in 1957. The early years indicate growth in tandem with protest mobilization between 1960 and 1965, with a steeper increase immediately following the mid-1960s protest peak (and a slight decline between 1968 and 1970, which corresponds to Nixon's election and reactions to the urban riots of that period). Outlays for civil rights increase substantially from 1970 to 1978, despite the decrease in protest and organizational mobilization. Federal funding for civil rights declines after 1978, with a possible reversal in the last year of this study.

FIGURE 1: Civil Rights Protest (1955-85)

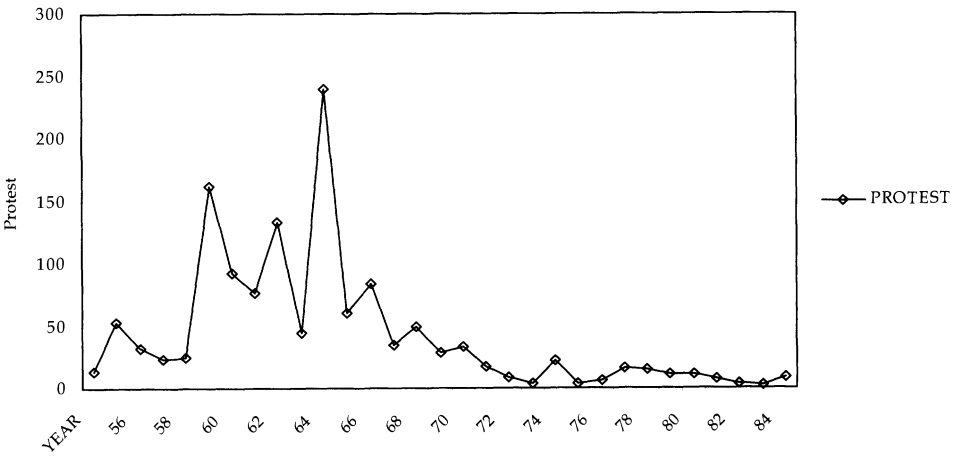


FIGURE 2: Civil Rights SMO Formation (1955-85)

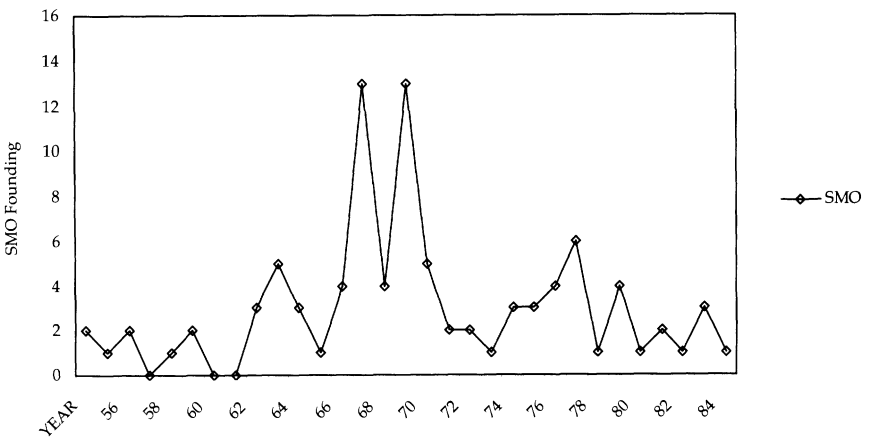
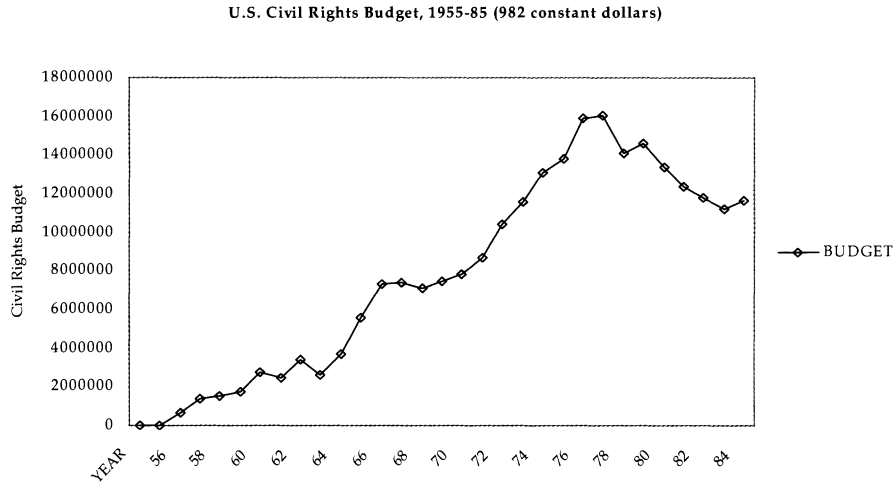


FIGURE 3: Civil Rights Policy Outcomes (1955-85)



Independent Variables and Model Specification

We specify two distinct political opportunity models for each of the dependent variables: one model emphasizes *structural changes* in political alignments and policies; the second uses more *visible signals* of such changes in the political environment, which may have greater symbolic than substantive import. Of course, the assignment of any variable to one category of another is a potential matter of dispute, as certain variables could conceivably operate as both structural openings *and* signaling mechanisms. We have, nonetheless, tried to assess both the visibility of a particular variable to the relevant constituency and the practical consequence — apart from signaling — of each variable. Sometimes signals and structures will be aligned, but such alignment shouldn't be assumed. Each model includes measures that index general openness in the polity and openness to particular constituencies, examining the effects of each dimension of the political opportunity separately. We also provide a full model combining *issue-specific* and *general* political opportunity factors. Table 1 details the variables included in each of the models; Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for these measures.

Structural Model

The structural model includes variables that track formal changes in rules and policies affecting political access, as well as the changed practices that follow

TABLE 1: Variables Included in Structure and Signal Model Specifications

	Structure Model		Signal Model[a]	
	Issue-Specific	General POS	Issue-Specific	General POS
Post-1965	X			
Black voter registration rate	X			
Civil rights budget	X		X	
Civil rights protest	X		X	
Number of blacks in Congress			X	
Supreme Court rulings			X	
Presidential attention			X	
Media attention			X	
Democratic advantage in Congress		X		X
Congressional turnover		X		
Contested election		X		X
Election year		X		
Democratic president		X		X

[a] All variables in signal model lagged one year except presidential attention (measured at time $_t$) (see text).

from them. We conceptualize the post-1965 period, the black voter registration rate, and federal appropriations for civil rights as issue-specific structural opportunities. Years after 1965 are represented as a dummy variable coded 1 for those years following the passage of such critical legislation as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which marked a significantly more open political and legal environment for civil rights activism. This legislation legitimated black activism as well as grassroots mobilization by diverse marginalized groups (Oberschall 1978). The black voter registration rate (percentage of eligible African Americans registered to vote; Horton & Smith 1990) is conceptualized as a measure of access to participation.[5] Annual outlays for the Commission on Civil Rights (*Budget of the United States Government*, calculated in 1982 constant dollars) is included as a measure of policy influence. In modeling social movement organization (SMO) formation and social movement outcomes we also consider the level of civil rights protest as a movement-specific form of political leverage (a measure of prior protest is included as a control variable in the protest event analysis).

Our first measure of the general political opportunity structure is Democratic advantage in Congress, measured as the difference between the numbers of Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives (*Congressional Quarterly*, various years). Partisan control of the legislature is a critical feature of the U.S. policy-making structure, and a stronger Democratic majority should improve the prospects of certain challenging groups mobilizing

TABLE 2: Means and Standard Deviations

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Number of cases
Civil rights protest	42.77	53.10	2	240	31
SMO founding	3.00	3.09	0	13	31
Civil rights budget	778,0572	5,205,092	0	16,050,613	31
Post-1965 period (1 = yes; 0 = no)	.65	.47	0	1	31
Black voter registration rate	50.05	14.10	25.1	66.9	31
Annual change in civil rights budget	.105	.236	–.297	.236	31
Number of blacks in Congress	10.74	6.30	3	21	31
Positive Supreme Court cases	3.16	2.53	0	10	31
Presidential attention (State of the Union)	.52	.51	0	1	31
Democratic advantage in Congress	78.35	42.26	29	155	31
Congressional turnover	260.90	21.36	232	295	31
Contested election year (1 = yes, 0 = no)	15.58	16.27	0	47	31
Democratic president (1 = yes, 0 = no)	.39	.50	0	1	31

and exercising influence.[6] Short-term changes in the political environment are indexed by variables that capture national level political uncertainty. Piven and Cloward (1977) argue that movements are most likely to effect policy change in times of electoral volatility. We use the absolute value of change in number of Democrats in Congress to capture such volatility. A second variable is the number of closely contested congressional elections, operationalized as the number of elections decided by a 4% margin or less (*Guide to U.S. Elections*, 1985). A final measure of political turbulence is a dummy variable indexing presidential election years, which can direct activist efforts away from issue-based advocacy to campaign work (see Meyer 1993a). Finally, to capture the availability of support from authorities, we include a dummy variable coded 1 during years that coincide with Democratic presidential administrations, presumably more open to civil rights claimants (see Soule et al. 1999).

Because the structural model is premised on the vision of activists constantly trying to mobilize and succeeding more or less according to changes in political institutions, the independent variables included in the structural model are measured contemporaneously with the dependent variable. Table 3 presents Pearson correlation coefficients for the continuous variables included in the structural model.

Signals Model

The logic of this model is that activists and officials monitor changes in the political environment, looking for encouragement for mobilization and for advocating policy reforms. The model includes issue-specific and general opportunity variables that savvy activist entrepreneurs could read as invitations to mobilize. We include a number of measures that are specifically relevant to the civil rights movement. Annual change in civil rights funding at the federal level (derived from the federal budget measure described above) is included as an indicator of short-term gains and losses in movement success; our assumption is that changes in federal effort are more visible to activists than an absolute measure. The number of black members of Congress (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1978: U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1989:244) is conceptualized as a signal of governmental openness.[7] We also explore the effects of the number of U.S. Supreme Court decisions (see Barnes & Connolly 1999) in favor of black civil rights (compiled yearly from *Congress and the Nation,* vols. I-VIII and calculated as the total number of decisions minus the number of negative or neutral rulings). We also include a dummy variable coded 1 if there was any positive mention of civil rights in the yearly State of the Union address by the president (*Public Papers of the President*, 1955–85). This address, as an annual ritual statement of the president's agenda, sends a message about executive priorities (Meyer 1995). A final issue-specific indicator of political opportunities is the extent of media coverage of civil rights, measured as the total number of mentions of civil rights activity in the *New York Times Index* minus the number of protests and unruly activities. This net measure captures media attention to more routine forms of political challenge, such as lobbying and electoral campaigning.[8] In estimating models of SMO formation and outcomes we also include a measure of civil rights protest to capture the "demonstration effect" (Tarrow 1994) of protest.

We think that three general opportunity variables are plausible perceptual indicators of a favorable environment for activism: Democratic advantage in Congress, the number of contested elections, and whether there is a Democratic president (see above for descriptions). Note that the structural and signal models include both these measures, since they have both substantive and symbolic importance. Democratic advantage in Congress or the incumbency of a Democratic president may represent both an actual increase in elite support and a signal that opportunities for activism are favorable.

Because a signaling approach implies a different understanding of how, and how quickly, changes in the environment translate into protest, we have lagged almost all the measures one year to account for the time necessary for information about perceived changes to be translated into action. The presidential attention variable is not lagged because the State of the Union address, delivered each January, is a regularly anticipated event. Table 4 presents

TABLE 3: Pearson Correlation Coefficients — Structure Model

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Civil rights protest	1.00							
2. SMO founding	−.04	1.00						
3. Civil rights budget	−.51	.15	1.00					
4. Black voter registration	−.31	.39	.79	1.00				
5. Democratic advantage	.24	−.04	.35	.20	1.00			
6. Congressional turnover	.22	−.04	.01	.05	.36	1.00		
7. Contested election	−.08	.09	−.11	−.10	−.05	−.06	1.00	
8. $\text{Protest}_{(t-1)}$	.33	.02	−.48	−.23	.09	.04	.21	1.00

Pearson correlation coefficients for the continuous measures included in the signal models.

Methods

We model protest and founding rates between 1955 and 1985 using Poisson regression analysis, appropriate for use with count data. The Poisson model estimates the probability of protest and organizational formation each year, assuming that the probability of event occurrence is constant over the year and independent of all previous events (King 1992). One limitation of the Poisson formulation is that it fails to account for overdispersion and can result in spuriously small standard errors of the exogenous variables (Barron 1992). A common correction is to estimate the event count using negative binomial regression, which is a generalization of the Poisson model. Choice of the model is based on standard tests of fit for nested models (King 1992). In the analyses discussed below, the negative binomial specification is more appropriate for estimating yearly protest; in the analysis of SMO founding rates, the Poisson model provides the best fit to the data. Poisson and negative binomial regression analyses were carried out using LIMDEP 7.0 (Greene 1991).

We use time series regression to estimate the relationship between political opportunity variables and movement outcomes between 1955 and 1985. Since observations in time series data drawn from different time points are routinely related to each other in a systematic way, OLS regression is not appropriate because the assumption of independence of the error terms is violated. Violation of this assumption can bias significance tests by underestimating the error variance (see Ostrom 1990). To take account of autocorrelation in the dependent variable, we estimate autoregressive time series models (also known as Box-Jenkins models). This is a maximum likelihood method that specifies the autoregressive parameter p. Based on exploratory analysis, we specify a

TABLE 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficients: "Signal" Model

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Civil rights protest	1.00									
2. SMO founding	−.04	1.00								
3. Civil rights budget	−.51	.15	1.00							
4. Percent budget change$_{(t-1)}$	−.17	−.15	−.35	1.00						
5. Blacks in Congress$_{(t-1)}$	−.60	−.04	.92	−.39	1.00					
6. SC rulings$_{(t-1)}$	.04	.12	.37	−.33	−.36	1.00				
7. Media attention$_{(t-1)}$	.57	.34	−.34	.01	−.48	.26	1.00			
8. Democratic advant$_{(t-1)}$	.12	−.07	.40	−.11	.27	.17	.11	1.00		
9. Contested election$_{(t-1)}$	.28	−.21	−.06	−.16	−.10	−.02	.12	−.06	1.00	
10. Protest$_{(t-1)}$	.33	.02	−.48	.24	−.55	−.04	.66	.24	−.10	1.00

second-order autoregressive model, AR2. This model implies that the current disturbance is made up of portions of the previous two disturbances or, in other words, that the series value is affected by the preceding two values (independent of one another). Maximum likelihood estimation was conducted using the ARIMA procedure in SPSS version 10.0.5 (SPSS 1989–99).

Results

Our analyses address the following questions: How complete is our understanding of political mobilization if we conceptualize political opportunities as issue-specific or more general features of the political system? What are the implications of our specifications of political opportunity models? And how do the observed effects vary by outcome or dependent variable? We offer this analysis in order to provide an empirical corrective to debates over the analytic utility of political opportunity concepts and models (e.g., Goodwin & Jasper 1999), with the intent of improving theories about political opportunity and social movements.

Civil Rights Protest

Table 5 presents the results from a series of negative binomial regression analyses of civil rights protest between 1955 and 1985. The first three columns represent our attempt to specify a structural model, distinguishing between conditions particularly relevant to the civil rights movement (issue-specific) and more general features of the political environment; the third column presents

TABLE 5: Negative Binomial Regression Estimates of Civil Rights Protest, 1955-1985

	Structure Model			Signal Model		
	Issue-specific	General POS	Full Model	Issue-Specific	General POS	Full Model
Post-1965	−1.106†		.021			
	(.619)		(.882)			
Black voter registration	.035†		.014			
	(.019)		(.022)			
Civil rights budget	$-.144e^{-2}$**		$-.212e^{-2}$**	.153		−.166
	($.056e^{-2}$)		($.059e^{-2}$)	(.201)		(.352)
Number of blacks in Congress				−.121**		−.166**
				(.029)		(.030)
Supreme Court rulings				−.030		−.002
				(.070)		(.048)
Presidential attention				.684**		.130
				(.263)		(.350)
Media attention				$.269^{e-2}$†		$.125^{e-2}$
				($.156^{e-2}$)		($.151^{e-2}$)
Democratic advantage in Congress	$-.266^{e-2}$	$-.563^{e-2}$		$.160^{e-2}$		$.629^{e-2}$*
	($.647^{e-2}$)	($.461^{e-2}$)		($.462^{e-2}$)		($.246^{e-2}$)
Congressional turnover		.017	$.570^{e-2}$			
		(.016)	($.955^{e-2}$)			
Contested election		−.005	−.010		.016	.008
		(.020)	(.013)		(.010)	(.006)
Election year		.199	-.062			
		(.671)	(.439)			
Democratic President		.928†	.569†		−.027	.324
		(.514)	(.312)		(.349)	(.346)
Protest	$.178^{e-2}$	$.097^{e-2}$	$.135^{e-2}$	$-.352^{e-2}$	$.928^{e-2}$*	$-.386^{e-2}$
	($.310^{e-2}$)	($.346^{e-2}$)	($.166^{e-2}$)	(0.284^{e-2})	($.491^{e-2}$)	($.366^{e-2}$)
Alpha	.404**	.803**	.241*	0.201*	.818***	.147*
	(.154)	(.318)	(.101)	(0.089)	(.276)	(.071)
Constant	3.429**	3.11**	3.534**	4.033**	2.843***	4.123**
	(.066)	(.583)	(.911)	(0.393)	(.549)	(.477)
Log-likelihood	−131.459	−142.794	−123.904	−121.321	−143.12	−118.047

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

[a] Variables in structure model measured at $time_t$, except protest (measured at $time_{(t-1)}$); variables in signal model lagged one year, except presidential attention (measured at $time_t$).

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

estimates from a model that combines both sets of factors. The same logic of analysis applies to the final three columns of the table, in which we conceptualize political opportunities as signals of opportunities for protest mobilization.

Turning first to the structure model, the measures included in the baseline issue-specific model appear to be correlated with protest activity. The variable indexing the post-1965 period is marginally significant and it appears that the probability of protest diminished after the passage of critical civil rights legislation that shifted the balance of power in favor of blacks. Increases in federal funding for civil rights have an even more significant negative effect on protest. As others have suggested, these institutional responses may have channeled black insurgency to more conventional means of making claims (Jenkins & Eckert 1986). At the same time, increases in the black voter registration rate, which we conceptualize as a measure of black political access, is positively correlated with protest activity. Tentatively, this suggests that, although protest tends to fall off with formal legislative gains, the more tangible disruptive potential (Piven & Cloward 1977) of the black vote has a synergistic effect with political activism. Perhaps most striking, there does not appear to be a statistically significant relationship between the number of prior and current protests (a result that holds when the civil rights budget, which is significantly correlated with lagged protest, is excluded from the model).[9]

The second partial model, which isolates general structural opportunities, provides very little insight into the process of protest mobilization. Neither partisan control of the legislature nor a measure of political uncertainty significantly affects the protest rate. In fact, the only general feature of the U.S. political system that appears to promote protest is the incumbency of a Democratic president, which we conceptualize as a measure of government support.

The third column of Table 5 includes both issue-specific and general political opportunity variables. When controlling for both sets of factors, there is no longer a significant difference in the probability of protest after 1965 nor a statistically significant increase in protest with a gain in voter registration.[10] In this model, the two main factors influencing civil rights protest over the 1955–85 period are incumbency of a Democratic president, which tends to increase the protest rate as predicted by political opportunity models, and increase in funding for civil rights, which tends to decrease the protest rate.[11] This latter finding suggests that movement outcomes are themselves a significant feature of the political environment and may hinder a continued mobilization.

Conceptualizing political opportunities as influencing protest through a perceptual mechanism provides a rather different picture of civil rights protest. The issue-specific signal model appears to do a fairly good job of explaining protest activity, with three of the five variables included in this partial model

reaching statistical significance. The impression of greater political access, measured by the number of blacks elected to Congress, is significant and negatively associated with the protest rate — contradicting expectations drawn from a model of expanding political opportunities (e.g., McAdam 1982). However, presidential attention to civil rights and media coverage of institutionally oriented civil rights activity significantly increase the rate of protest, whereas the number of favorable Supreme Court rulings is not statistically significant.[12] This suggests that activists take advantage of what they perceive to be a favorable climate of political support and public opinion. Despite the importance of federal levels of civil rights funding in the structural model, annual percentage change in budget appropriations does not significantly influence protest activity. Nor are levels of prior protest significant in this partial model.

None of the variables in the partial model of general opportunities is statistically significant (column 5).[13] However, once all factors are included in the fully specified signal model (column 6), the measure of Democratic congressional advantage becomes significant and has a clear positive effect on civil rights protest. Also noteworthy is the substantial effect of the number of blacks elected to Congress: the addition of one representative diminishes the protest rate by 15%. Symbolic openness, not necessarily connected with legislative capacity, appears to discourage extrainstitutional efforts at influence.

What can we take away from this analysis? First, issue-specific variables tend to be more relevant for civil rights protest than more general features of the political environment, regardless of whether we posit structural or signaling mechanisms. Second, the influence of structural and symbolic factors do not always follow the expected positive association between openings and activism. To illustrate, in the partial models, increases in potential black electoral leverage, positive presidential attention to civil rights, and greater media emphasis are positively correlated with the protest rate, whereas prior movement gains and black congressional representation tend to offset activism. One possible interpretation of these results is that these latter two factors may represent changes in the political structure that make institutionally oriented activities more attractive as a strategy for influence than protest. This would support a curvilinear understanding of the relationship between openness and protest (e.g., Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978). This finding also suggests the need to examine broader processes of institutionalization (Meyer & Tarrow 1998) in understanding the political trajectory of protest movements.

Finally, we see that structural and signal models provide distinctive accounts of the civil rights movement. Had we approached this analysis only from a structural perspective we would argue that the key factors influencing the movement's protest activity are prior movement gains — which diminish further activism— and the presence of elite support as measured by a

Democratic president in power. Alternatively, had we emphasized the symbolic dimension to the exclusion of structure we would have emphasized the offsetting effect of institutional access and the facilitative influence of Democratic control of the legislature. But if we understand political opportunities more broadly, we can see complementary aspects of these accounts. If, for example, we reconceptualize the number of blacks in Congress as a measure of movement outcomes and realize that partisan advantage may be an indicator of elite support equivalent to the incumbency of a Democratic president, the story is substantially the same: controlling for other factors, the (actual or perceived) presence of supportive allies in government improves the prospects of insurgency, whereas (actual or perceived) institutional gains diminish incentives for further extrainstitutional mobilization.

Social Movement Organization Formation

The next set of analyses addresses a different dependent variable, the founding of social movement organizations. Although there is reason to expect that the factors influencing organizational dynamics differ from those promoting protest (Piven & Cloward 1992), researchers tend to employ similar models of explanation uncritically (e.g., Minkoff 1997). Here, we assess such differences, concentrating on the variable effects of model specification.

Table 6 presents Poisson regression estimates of civil rights SMO formation (measured as the founding of black protest and advocacy groups). We follow the same logic employed in the protest event analysis but also include civil rights protest as a predictor of SMO formation in the issue-specific models.[14] We focus on the findings from the full models; results from the partial specifications of both the structure and signals models are substantially the same.

The first four variables in the full structure model (column 3) reference issue-specific factors. There is a marginally significant positive effect of increases in African American electoral strength on the SMO founding rate (each percentage increase in registered voters increases the founding rate by slightly less than 4%), but no evidence that new SMO activity is higher after 1965 or in response to movement protests. This latter finding suggests that organizational mobilization takes place independently of protest mobilization, challenging Tarrow's (1994) protest cycle model and confirming Minkoff's (1997) analysis of the feminist and civil rights movements over the same period. In contrast with the protest analysis, the measure of social movement outcomes is significant only in the partial model, with a similar negative association with the founding rate.[15]

The remaining variables in the structure model are intended to capture the more general political opportunity structure facing movement organizers. Political uncertainty, indexed by congressional turnover and the number of closely contested congressional elections, does not appear to be a relevant fac-

TABLE 6: Poisson Regression Estimates of Civil Rights SMO Formation, 1955–1985

	Structure Model			Signal Model[a]		
	Issue-specific	General POS	Full Model	Issue-Specific	General POS	Full Model
Post-1965	.302		.876			
	(.668)		(.700)			
Black voter registration	.030*		.036+			
	(.020)		(.020)			
Civil rights budget	$-.788^{e-3}$*		$-.661^{e-3}$	−.006		−.016*
	($.396^{e-3}$)		($.504^{e-3}$)	(.006)		(.007)
Civil rights protest	$.035^{e-2}$		$.315^{e-2}$	$-.178^{e-2}$		$-.922e^{-2}$**
	($.291^{e-2}$)		($.417^{e-2}$)	($.230^{e-2}$)		($.395^{e-2}$)
Number of blacks in Congress				.013		.044
				(.039)		(.037)
Supreme Court rulings				−.009		−.074
				(.032)		(.053)
Presidential attention				−.811**		−.975**
				(.263)		(.330)
Media attention				.004**		.005**
				(.001)		(.001)
Democratic advantage in Congress		$-.336^{e-2}$	$-.279^{e-2}$		$-.216^{e-2}$	$-.578^{e-2}$
		($.295^{e-2}$)	($.388^{e-2}$)		($.255^{e-2}$)	($.394^{e-2}$)
Congressional turnover		$-.281^{e-2}$	−.012			
		($.676^{e-2}$)	(.008)			
Contested election		$-.374^{e-2}$	$.253^{e-2}$		−.015*	−.028**
		($.814^{e-2}$)	($.874^{e-2}$)		(.007)	(.009)
Election year		.563*	.551*			
		(.278)	(.276)			
Democratic President		.458*	.496*		.018*	.162**
		(.228)	(.248)		(.008)	(.059)
Constant	−.974	1.144**	−.976	.907*	1.504**	1.857**
	(.703)	(.291)	(.827)	(.421)	(.257)	(.488)
Log-likelihood	−67.085	−73.331	−61.270	−64.648	−74.999	−56.725

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

[a] Variables in structure model measured at $time_{(t)}$; variables in signal model lagged one year, except presidential attention (measured at $time_{(t)}$).

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

tor in SMO mobilization. Nor is partisan advantage a significant predictor of organizational founding. However, organizers do appear to respond favorably to two general political conditions: They are more likely to establish new SMOs

during national election years and when there is a Democrat in the White House. Taken together, these findings suggest that movement entrepreneurs are more likely to establish new organizations when they can capitalize on improvements in their constituency's political access and when there are predictable opportunities for action offered by electoral campaigns. Given the more institutional nature of organizational formation, this is not surprising, a point we take up again below.

The results from the full signal model (column 6) offer a contrast. First, two issue-specific factors that were not significant in the structural model appear to play an important role: change in federal budget appropriations and prior protest levels. Both features of the opportunity structure — the first indexing prior movement gains and the second demonstrating the extent of political openness to group claims — significantly *lower* the SMO founding rate. Presidential attention to civil rights also appears to significantly depress the incentive for SMO formation, which contrasts with the positive influence of this variable on the protest rate (as indicated by the partial results presented in Table 3, column 4). Alternatively, media attention to civil rights promotes the SMO founding rate, apparently signaling an opportune moment for committing resources to ongoing organizational activities.

The final three variables in the full signal model reference general features of the political opportunity structure. Democratic advantage in Congress, which promoted civil rights protest, is not significant, but two other general opportunity measures have a statistically significant relationship with SMO formation. The number of closely contested congressional elections, an indicator of electoral instability, is negatively correlated with the founding rate. This provides some indirect confirmation of the point made above that organizers appear more likely to respond positively to relatively predictable changes in the political system and to be more cautious when the balance of power is less certain. Alternatively, the presence of a Democratic presidential administration signals an opportunity for SMO formation.

To summarize, these results suggest that if we conceptualize political opportunity operating as a structural mechanism, organizers appear more responsive to general factors in the political environment than to issue-specific conditions. Both the presence of potential allies in power and the opportunities presented by routine shifts in the balance of power promote the SMO founding rate; although improvements in African American political access also increase the founding rate, this effect is only marginally significant statistically. Such factors as positive gains of the movement and levels of insurgency, as well as political uncertainty and improvements in political access, do not appear to play a significant role in generating new organizational activity.

Conceptualizing political opportunities as signals modifies our understanding of the process of SMO formation in important ways. First, organizers appear to respond to movement outcomes and recent protests, but such factors

tend to inhibit the creation of new movement-affiliated groups. In addition, to the extent that movement concerns appear to be a presidential priority, organizers seem less likely to invest in organization building, as is also the case in responding to electoral instability. Importantly, had we limited ourselves to a more structural perspective, we would have overlooked this factor's significance. Offsetting such constraints, both general increases in media attention to civil rights and the presence of a Democratic president promote the SMO founding rate. Notably, the presence of a Democratic president, which indexes allies in power, is significant in both model specifications. As a final point, on balance it appears that both issue-specific and general political conditions are relevant predictors of the SMO founding rate when the opportunity structure is conceptualized as operating through a signaling effect.

Movement Outcomes

The final set of results (Table 7) examines the relevance of political opportunity models for explaining policy gains.[16] Three of the variables included in the full structure model are statistically significant, while none of the variables in the signaling model is significant. From the coefficients presented in column 3, our account is relatively straightforward: controlling for a range of issue-specific and general features of the political environment, and taking into account the temporal interdependence of the budget process, federal appropriations for civil rights are significantly higher after passage of key civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s, increase when the Democratic party has control of the White House, and increase in response to extrainstitutional political pressure.

Simply put, protest matters, along with the development of a new legislative framework and elite support for movement objectives. These influences on policy outcomes are direct and immediate, a claim that is supported by the finding that neither of the lagged controls for protest or elite support are significant in the signal model. And there is no indication that political authorities respond to the same opportunity signals that invite organizers' efforts.

Political Opportunity for What?

Table 8 summarizes the results discussed above and provides an opportunity to consider the implications of assuming that the political environment provides a consistent set of opportunities and constraints for different forms of mobilization and for policy influence. These results highlight the importance of carefully theorizing the role of political opportunities in terms of the specific outcome of interest. By paying too little attention to the different effects of political opportunities on different outcomes, while often conflating structural

TABLE 7: Time Series (AR) Regression Estimates of Civil Rights Budget, 1955–85

	Structure Model			Signal Model		
	Issue-Specific	General POS	Full Model	Issue-Specific	General POS	Full Model
Post-1965	2075265.33†		2439777.45*			
	(1204707.89)		(1099542.00)			
Black voter registration	18404.98		25506.56			
	(57861.78)		(55063.80)			
Civil rights protest	3854.52		5565.96*	189.72		669.58
	(3026.91)		(2656.96)	(2561.45)		(3118.28)
Number of blacks in Congress				−75833.67		−13239.62
				(150714.91)		(169347.27)
Supreme Court rulings				13390.52		24754.38
				(67845.23)		(90387.95)
Presidential attention				11010.50		−19110.49
				(316472.19)		(411171.84)
Media attention				−814.89		−1034.09
				(2945.30)		(3923.82)
Democratic advantage in Congress		1981.68	−1570.02		2054.30	970.40
		(4365.03)	(4546.27)		(4598.30)	(15647.03)
Congressional turnover		−6743.58	−4623.81			
		(9575.01)	(9459.05)			
Contested election		−131.62	−2049.24		4345.88	5143.90
		(6414.14)	(6549.32)		(4452.81)	(6444.34)
Election year		−224863.29	−111534.65			
		(309543.73)	(303482.72)			
Democratic President		945369.45*	1248114.69*		−224450.45	−143237.70
		(440282.84)	(447262.88)		(480830.15)	(740460.40)
AR1	1.32**	1.48**	1.48**	1.44**	1.40**	1.41**
	(.17)	(.16)	(.17)	(.175)	(.17)	(.18)
AR2	−.35*	−.51**	−.51**	−.46*	−.42*	−.43*
	(.17)	(.17)	(.17)	(.17)	(.17)	(.18)
Constant	4642806.19	6492906.77	6492906.77	7469873.22	6484425.10	6583687.64
	(4560207.59)	(5034790.72)	(5034790.72)	(6077410.62)	(4892314.91)	(5911488.50)
Log-likelihood	−470.022	−466.888	−463.410	−457.162	−456.41	−456.95

Note: 1982 constant dollars; standard errors in parentheses. Variables in structure model measured at $time_t$; variables in "signal" model lagged one year, except presidential attention (measured at $time_t$).

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

and perceptual mechanisms in model specification, social movement researchers risk developing incomplete or even misleading understandings of the relationship between context and protest.

TABLE 8: Summary of Results

	Structure Model		
	Protest Mobilization	SMO Mobilization	Policy Outcomes
Issue-specific			
Post-1965	(-)		+
Black voter registration	(+)	+	
Civil rights budget[a]	–	(–)	
Number of blacks in Congress			
Supreme Court rulings			
Presidential attention			
Media attention			
Protest			+
General POS			
Democratic advantage			
Congressional turnover			
Contested election			
Election year		+	
Democratic president	+	+	+

	Signal Model		
	Protest Mobilization	SMO Mobilization	Policy Outcomes
Issue-specific			
Post-1965			
Black voter registration			
Civil rights budget[a]		–	
Number of blacks in Congress		–	
Supreme Court rulings			
Presidential attention	(+)	–	
Media attention	(+)	+	
Protest	(+)	–	
General POS			
Democratic advantage	+		
Congressional turnover			
Contested election		–	
Election year			
Democratic president		+	

+ denotes a significant positive coefficient

– denotes a significant negative coefficient. Results summarized in parentheses indicate that the variable is significant in partial model only.

[a] Civil rights budget not included in policy outcomes model; see note 17 in text.

First, note that there is only a small overlap in the *consistent effects* of the political opportunity structure on the three dependent variables studied here: protest, SMO formation, and policy influence. The most striking finding is that Democratic presidential administrations consistently promote movement mobilization and outcomes. This effect is significant in each of the structural models, which implies that government support effectively alters the balance of power in favor of the movement and its chances for success. The lagged measure is significant in the signal model of SMO formation, suggesting that it also represents an important cue for activists interested in establishing organizations. There is also evidence that both protesters and organizational entrepreneurs are influenced by movement gains, but improvements in the policy arena tend to diminish both routine and institutional collective action.[17] There is also some tentative evidence that African American electoral access is a structural facilitator for protest and SMO formation and that attention from the mainstream media signals favorable opportunities for both kinds of activity.

Second, elements of the political opportunity structure exercise *differential effects* on protest mobilization and other outcomes. Notably, protest pressures public officials to respond to movement claims but also diminishes the rate of new organizational activity. This latter finding lends credence to the idea that there is a trade-off between protest and organization building, as Piven and Cloward (1977) contend. However, as Minkoff (1997) has documented, an organizational infrastructure is a critical feature in the development of subsequent protest. To the extent that movement actors choose protest over organizational formation, they may be opting for shorter-term mobilization at the expense of longer-term institutional building that supports greater policy influence, albeit over a longer period. This is one possible interpretation of the decline in protest, SMO formation, and funding levels after 1976 documented in Figures 1-3.

Two other, more tentative, differential effects are worth comment. First, when there is some indication that movement concerns are a presidential priority, activists are less likely to establish new organizations and more likely to press their claims using protest. Evidence for the influence of presidential attention on protest is provisional, but it is worthwhile to think more about what is going on. One plausible hypothesis is that a signaled shift in the political environment may be interpreted as a potentially time-limited opening of a "policy window" (Kingdon 1984; Meyer 1993a) that activists seek to exploit. Given the costs and time horizon of organization building, activists may choose to exert what influence they can immediately, rather than establishing new foundations for subsequent action, effectively piggybacking on institutional initiatives (Minkoff 1995).

The final differential effect we want to comment on is the influence of legislative openings on mobilization and policy outcomes. Whereas the post-

1965 period is clearly marked as a favorable context for civil rights outcomes, the results from the partial structural model of protest suggest that activists may have been less interested in — or capable of — staging protest after passage of the Voting Rights Act. McAdam's (1982) historical account of the shift to more institutional strategies by the integrationist wing of the civil rights movement at this juncture — and the division this created within the movement leadership and base — supports this interpretation. Again, although these results are provisional, our point is simple: clarifying "political opportunity for what" is as essential for theory development as is providing a clear specification of the mechanisms by which opportunities translate into action.

Conclusion

The political opportunity perspective has come to structure increasing amounts of research on social protest, dissidence more generally, and even policy reform. From its earliest uses, employed in analysis of dissent in liberal western polities, the approach has been extended back in history (e.g., Amenta & Zylan 1991; Clemens 1997; Tilly 1995) and to other sorts of political contexts (e.g., Boudreau 1996; Brockett 1991). The promise of the approach is accompanied by substantial challenges for researchers. Although the approach can surely explain a great deal, it is less important to run opportunity approaches against alternatives (see Snow, Soule & Cress 2003; Van Dyke & Soule 2002) than to discover the relationships of particular variables to the outcomes examined.

Our contribution here has been to consider the implications of developing models of protest, organization building, and policy outcomes that correspond to whether political opportunities are theorized as influencing action through relatively consistent and enduring aspects of the political structure (Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986) or via a signaling effect (Tarrow 1996), distinguishing between issue-specific opportunities (not translatable across social movements) (Banaszak 1996a; Meyer 1993a) and more general elements of the political system. Researchers not only make different assumptions about the mechanisms through which opportunities translate into action or outcomes, but they also employ different concepts and measures of political opportunity that follow from these assumptions.

Our results strongly suggest that we need to consider more seriously how political opportunities operate through different causal mechanisms that depend on the political process. Movement-related policy outcomes are unequivocally determined by structural elements in the polity (see also Amenta 1998). In contrast, the dynamics of SMO formation are most closely linked to a signaling process, especially with respect to issue-specific conditions, but also

in terms of the general component of the opportunity structure. Protest dynamics are more difficult to evaluate in this regard, since very few of the selected variables were significant. However, these results suggest that the issue-specific models we examined have greater explanatory power than general dimensions of the political system. This is somewhat surprising, given the attention paid to establishing the relevance of formal features of the political system for explaining both movement-specific and society-level protest potential (Jenkins & Klandermans 1995) or broad structural changes that accompany a cycle of protest (Tarrow 1989).

In addition, much current work posits a simple, positive relationship between openings in the political structure and mobilization, providing little theoretical leverage to explain ostensibly contradictory results of the sort that we encountered. Instead, we think it will be much more productive to think more carefully about what might lead to such different effects — on the same dependent variable as well as across different outcomes. For example, we have suggested distinguishing between what can be considered more enduring and positive changes in the political structure that diminish the incentives for extra-institutional action and conditions that seem immediately relevant or amenable to intervention. Activists and political officials make decisions about when to capitalize on political change and when to be cautious — and such decisions are themselves likely to depend on the form of the action to be taken. More generally, we need to develop a more nuanced understanding of the possibly contradictory influences of what are currently conceived of as straightforward openings and closings of the political opportunity structure and to be concerned with the question of "political opportunity for what" — recognizing that the political environment provides both consistent and variable influences across outcomes.

This article is a first step toward untangling the wide range of exogenous factors often grouped under political opportunity, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship of these aspects of opportunity on the politics and development of dissident protest. It seems worthwhile to build on these efforts to develop a fuller, curvilinear model of political opportunities and protest, building on this analysis and earlier conceptions of political opportunity structure (e.g., Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978). In the case of African American activists, both from these findings and from broader historical accounts, we conclude that that insurgents responded to both structural changes in the polity and signals from particular institutional actors to mount protest campaigns in the 1950s. Political figures signaled a willingness to respond, and activists formed organizations, making inroads into institutional politics, to some degree turning from protest to more conventional ways of making claims. Activist efforts contributed to structural changes, which led to changes in policy. Within the polity, not all doors and windows are opening simultaneously, but

in a sequence dependent upon a pattern of institutionalization (Meyer & Tarrow 1998), one that is likely to depend upon the initial positioning of the movement constituency. These broader patterns are worth establishing and then comparing across cases and contexts.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, we need to understand the interplay of opportunity, mobilization, and political influence. It is important, both as both scholars and citizens, to understand how activists can make the most of their opportunities and maximize their influence under particular historical circumstances.

Notes

1. This is not to suggest that social movements operate in isolation from each other. Recent work points to the ways that the protest activities of other actors may also influence the mobilization of a new constituency through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., McAdam 1995; Meyer & Whittier 1994; Minkoff 1997). Such indirect intermovement effects require greater theorization to describe their influence on political opportunities. Our purpose here is to focus on more proximate or direct effects. In this respect, the civil rights movement that is the focus of our empirical analysis is least likely to be influenced by other social movements that followed it (Minkoff 1997).

2. Party systems, for example, are critical for understanding protest politics in European countries but less relevant in states where parties exercise less influence and do less of the mobilizing. Boudreau (1996), in seeking to apply opportunity theory to less-developed nations, suggests that the scope and strength of the state are critical dimensions that must be added and reconfigured to any conception of political opportunity drawn from "northern theory" (see also Almeida & Stearns 1998; Brockett 1991; Schock 1999; Van Cott 2001).

3. This subject has properly been the matter of some debate. See particularly the disputes reprinted in Gamson (1990) and discussions in Amenta, Dunleavy, and Bernstein 1994; Amenta and Zylan 1991; Burstein 1991, 1999; Burstein and Linton 2002; Giugni, Tilly, and McAdam 1999; Meyer & Marullo 1992. Cross-sectional studies that examine the effects of comparable movements on policy (e.g., Amenta, Dunleavy & Bernstein 1994; Joppke 1993) implicitly assume that factors that give rise to movements are roughly comparable across the units sampled.

4. Craig Jenkins generously provided protest event data. Organizational data were collected from the *Encyclopedia of Associations* and include national membership associations that promote African American civil rights through the use of extrainstitutional protest or institutional policy advocacy (see Minkoff 1995).

5. The Voting Rights Act did not affect the number of eligible black votes, but did affect resources to increase actual registration. Our use of the voter registration rate as a variable demonstrates the complications inherent in this enterprise. We could consider the black voter registration rate as an outcome variable — if our purpose had been to examine multiple political outcomes. There is also some contention about the implications of an increase in voter registration as a measure of participation itself. Higher registration rates

do not necessarily lead to increases in voting, and there is no evidence that it leads to other forms of participation — despite the hopes of registration advocates (e.g., Bennett 1990; Gans 1990; Piven & Cloward 1988, 1989, 1990; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993).

6. It is important to acknowledge that Democratic majorities for much of this period were composed to a substantial extent of representatives elected from the South who were often hostile to the cause of civil rights. The measure of advantage, however, still reflects the capacity of government to act when pushed to do so. It is critical to remember that Congress passed major civil rights legislation in the middle 1960s when organized by very large Democratic majorities, including a large number of conservative southern Democrats.

7. Because policymaking in the U.S. is heavily constrained by partisan alignment, the ethnic background of elected officials is more important as a signal of openness than as an actual measure of either the capacity or willingness of Congress to act.

8. Our view is that media attention to such nondramatic, intrinsically less disruptive forms of protest offers a more valid indicator of a perceived opening of the opportunity structure in that such reporting legitimates the issue of civil rights in the public domain. This measure is also expected to be less sensitive to the documented biases in reporting protest events, both with respect to frequency and content (e.g., McCarthy, McPhail & Smith 1996; Oliver & Maney 2000; Oliver & Myers 1999; Olzak 1989; Rucht & Neidhardt 1999). The initial data set of protest events were checked and corrected for double-counting (see Jenkins & Eckert 1986), which would otherwise artificially deflate the measure of attention to nondramatic forms of collective action.

9. Minkoff (1997) found a significant positive relationship between prior and current protest but used a broader measure that included both conventional and contentious events — pointing again to the importance of conceptualization and measurement in systematic analyses of political opportunity theory.

10. This result also holds with the exclusion of the budget measure, which is strongly correlated with the black voter registration rate, suggesting that the lack of statistical significance is not the result of multicollinearity (results available from authors).

11. The protest rate is expected to be 76% higher when a Democrat is in the White House. This figure is based on the multiplier of the rate: $100[\exp(b) - 1]$ where b is the coefficient of an independent variable x. This gives the influence of a 1-unit change on the protest rate.

12. The strong correlation between Supreme Court rulings and black congressional representation could be suppressing statistical significance in this case; in supplementary analysis the measure of Supreme Court rulings is significant at the 0.01 level when number of blacks in Congress is omitted from the model. The coefficient is negative, again suggesting that gains in the political-legal arena might diminish protest odds.

13. The control for prior protest reaches statistical significance at the 0.10 level, but this effect diminishes when all variables are included in the fully specified signal model.

14. We do not control for prior SMO founding, since it is not significant in any of the models and its omission does not change the observed pattern of results (results available

from authors). We also excluded this variable from the models of policy outcomes presented below.

15. Given the strong bivariate correlations between budget levels and the black voter registration rate and protest events, we also separately examined models omitting each of these variables. When protest is excluded from the full model, the civil rights budget becomes marginally significant (.10 level); omitting the voter registration rate does not influence the results. The protest variable does not attain statistical significance when either budget levels or voter registration rates are omitted. This suggests that the statistical significance of the civil rights budget might be suppressed by multicollinearity, but we have elected a more conservative interpretation of these results.

16. These results are based on second-order autoregressive time series regression estimates, which take into account the correlation between the civil rights budget in the current year and outlays in the two preceding years. Our decision to include two autoregressive parameters was based on the significant improvement in fit over first-order autoregressive models, as indicated by the significant *t*-ratio for the AR2 parameter, and the significant difference in log-likelihood functions. In each of the models, the AR1 parameter is positive and the AR2 parameter is negative. Although we are not directly interested in the temporal correlation in the budgetary process, one possible interpretation of these effects is that when the budget is large there is not likely to be much increase in outlays in the subsequent two years — or else the rate of growth is dampened by appropriations in the preceding two years.

17. Prior budget is not included in the models of policy outcomes, and a significant result for this variable is statistically not possible given the models we estimate. However, as indicated in note 17, the significant autoregressive parameters can be interpreted as demonstrating that current budget appropriations are contingent on previous gains.

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Kent Redding; Jocelyn S. Viterna

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