

**It Happened Here: Political Opportunity, the New Institutionalism, and the Townsend Movement**



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## IT HAPPENED HERE: POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY, THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISM, AND THE TOWNSEND MOVEMENT\*

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*The Townsend movement, which sought pensions for the elderly in the Great Depression, was much larger in some states than others and its size fluctuated in the 1930s. Frustration or grievance theory predicts that the movement would be stronger when and where old people suffered more. The challenger perspective expects greater growth when and where indigenous organizations of the aged already existed. Political opportunity theories expect challenges to flourish when and where openings are provided by members of the polity or by related challenges. We supplement these theories by exploring the concept of political opportunity from an institutionalist perspective, assessing the model by comparing it to the other perspectives to account for longitudinal and cross-sectional differences in the movement's strength. Although some support for each perspective was found, the movement was spurred most by indigenous organizations and different forms of political opportunity. We suggest an expansion of Tilly's polity model, to recognize that the political party system can influence challenges and that the structure and policies of the state can aid challenges as well as hinder them.*

The largest and most ambiguous American social movement of the Great Depression was led not by a menacing demagogue, but by a somewhat befuddled gray-haired doctor, Francis E. Townsend. The Townsend movement seems to fit conflicting views on social movements and thus presents a puzzle for social theorists.

The Townsend movement fits the imagery of "frustration" or "grievance" theories, which are based on anti-democratic movements of the 1930s (Cantril 1941). It was launched in hard times and propelled by a charismatic leader. A migrant to California, Townsend lost his job in the Depression and apparently suffered the rootlessness and despair imputed by grievance theorists to adherents of movements. He also sported a Hitler mustache. The movement reveled in the "hundred percent" Americanism that George Orwell felt might form the cultural basis of totalitarianism in the United States; club meetings often opened with a Pledge of Allegiance and closed with a corruption of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" that equated the passing of the Townsend plan

with the coming of the Lord. In 1936, Townsend allied with Father Charles E. Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice and the late Senator Huey P. Long's Share Our Wealth movement in a failed bid to unseat President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Brinkley 1982). If fascism were to "happen here," as Sinclair Lewis ([1935] 1970) put it, men like Long and Coughlin might lead the way. Critics feared Townsend's followers would vote anti-democrats into power and ridiculed the Townsend plan, which demanded from the national government \$200 per month for persons 60 years old and older. The utopianism of the plan — whose eschatology portrayed a this-worldly paradise without unemployment, crime, or alcohol — suggested that the Townsendites were a cult of personal salvation rather than a movement for social change.

Aspects of the movement also fit Tilly's (1978) "challenger" or "mobilization" model, which emphasizes the rationality of collective action and the influence of previous organization on social movements (see also McCarthy and Zald 1977). The bulk of the movement's resources

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came from dues and, later, from sales of its newsletter, the *Townsend National Weekly*. The movement did not submit to the whims of some impulsive autocrat, but adhered to a program addressing both the insecurities of the aged and the Depression. It was not unthinkable that some version of it might pass, as its opponents feared well into the 1940s (Witte 1943; Altmeyer 1966). The religiosity of the movement suggested that it used Protestant churches and recruited their members in blocs. Many contemporaries and scholars claim the movement provoked the passage of the Social Security Act and its amendments (Amenta, Zylan, and Carruthers 1989); maybe because the movement happened here the aged were better off than they otherwise would have been.

Finally, the movement may have flourished not because of the economic crisis or the movement's ability to mobilize resources, but because of new "political opportunities" for the aged and other challengers to the social order (Kitschelt 1986). A pre-Townsend reform movement to provide compulsory pensions to the indigent aged had begun a string of successes in 1930. Many states passed pension laws, and pensions may have enabled aged volunteers to work for the Townsend cause. In 1933, Roosevelt took office and encouraged the organization of many relatively powerless groups. Economic orthodoxy was broken as the administration embarked on deficit spending for relief. Thus, a salubrious political climate may have enabled the movement to thrive when and where it did.

We extend the concept of political opportunity and Tilly's well known "polity" model (see below) by examining them from an institutionalist perspective, which focuses on the structure of political institutions and the state. We argue that the polity model typically represents political parties as electoral outcomes and the state as a tool of repression. However, the political party system may shape opportunities for challenges, and the state, through its structure and its policies, may aid challenges as well as repress them. We find support for these ideas by relating the strength of the movement across time and space to indicators based on our model and on other movement theories.

#### THE CHALLENGER AND POLITY MODELS

Following Tilly (1975, 1978), challenger or mobilization theorists see the roots of movements in

institutionalized power arrangements. Power is distributed unequally, and movements enable the less powerful to seek redress. The challenger perspective focuses on large-scale social changes: the rise of the state and capitalism. Over time, collective action becomes "associational" rather than "communal," "proactive" rather than "reactive." Large "collective actors" demand new rights and resources, such as the franchise or wage increases, rather than contest state-building and capitalism. Challenger theorists also usually subscribe to Tilly's polity model, which is a conceptual and definitional scheme rather than a causal framework. According to the polity model, a group that is a "member" of the polity has low-cost access to the resources of the "government," and "challengers" do not. The government controls the main means of coercion, and coalitions often form among contenders for power. From this point of view, movement activities are seen as rational responses to the costs and benefits of alternative lines of political action and the collective action of movement organizations is intended to win collective benefits. The mobilization or challenger model emphasizes the role of interests of group members, their previous organization, the mobilization of resources by movement organizations, collective action, and political opportunities for challenges in explaining the emergence and success of movements (Tilly 1978; cf. Marwell and Oliver 1984).

Common interests do not necessarily lead to the formation of movement organizations or to collective action. Challenger theorists typically agree, however, that strong and closely knit *indigenous organizations* containing members of a subordinate group are crucial for generating challenges (Oberschall 1973). A dense network of communication within such a group is likely to produce an organization with challenging goals (Freeman 1973). In contrast, non challenging organizations do not have political or redistributive goals as their central mission and do not threaten or engage in disruptive activity. Once a movement organization forms, the resources it can mobilize are proportionate to the degree of previous organization within the group. For instance, the civil rights movement organizers relied on southern black churches (Morris 1984; McAdam 1982). Challenger researchers dodge the free-rider problem by arguing that organizers stage challenges from previously organized groups, but must decide which organizations are susceptible to being "co-opted."

### POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY: THE POLITY MODEL AND THE INSTITUTIONALIST CRITIQUE

In the challenger and polity models, political opportunities to mobilize and take collective action also play a key role; specific aspects of the political context may promote or discourage challenges. Opportunity is typically found in a movement's organized allies and opponents. *Social movement organizations* which demand the political or economic betterment of a disadvantaged group through disruption or threats of it may aid one another (Tarrow 1988) or merely demonstrate the possibility of change. A movement organization's fate may be influenced by opponents; for instance, U.S. capitalist organizations dampened unionism (Griffin, Wallace, and Rubin 1986). The standard polity model also emphasizes opportunities based on *partisan politics*, notably through realignments of the electoral system. Members of the polity may ally with challengers when the polity is evenly divided. If the coalition wins, challengers can more easily pursue collective action. For instance, Jenkins (1985) argued that U.S. social movements in the 1960s were aided by a center-left Democratic coalition.

Focusing on the structure of political institutions, the "new institutionalism" (March and Olsen 1984) suggests new types of political helps and hindrances to social movements. The political party system, reflecting the way members of the polity are organized, may discourage challenges. Patronage-oriented or *traditional parties*, to use Mayhew's (1986) term, give benefits selectively and avoid programmatic principles. Shefter (1983) argued that the mobilization of voters into traditional parties prevents "third-party" and ideological challenges, for people mobilized into traditional politics are inoculated against challenger politics. Thus, in areas where traditional Democratic and Republican parties in the late 19th century had mobilized voters, the Progressive party did not challenge. Similarly, Valelly (1989) argued that a lack of strong traditional parties permitted the organizational breakthrough at the state level of radical "third parties" in the 1930s. An institutionalist corollary to the polity model suggests that left or center parties will aid challenges only in non traditional or *open party systems*.

The polity model is also limited in that it constrains the state to be a ready instrument of repression controlled by members of the polity. By contrast, the institutionalist perspective sees the

state playing a key role in shaping political activity and in *aiding* social movements. First, movements may be aided if state political institutions promote and protect basic *democratic rights* and freedoms, like voting rights and competing candidates. Such democratic institutional politics may activate non institutional challenges aimed at influencing elected politicians (Gamson 1975). They may also be necessary for the rise to power of regimes favorable to challengers.

Second, as Skocpol (1985) has argued, state bureaucrats have their own interests or pursue what they perceive to be the public interest. The greater their autonomy, the more likely that state actors will pursue their own agendas, including the support of like-minded challenges. As bureaucrats try to expand the powers of state institutions, they may encourage movements with similar goals. Moreover, challengers hoping to increase public spending for their members may coalesce if the state is fiscally strong to capitalize on such resources. Thus, movements may be aided or encouraged where state members have unencumbered *fiscal and bureaucratic capacities*.

Third, the state's *policies* may also shape challenges. Challenges may be spurred if state actors and politicians fashion specific policies to promote challenges and thereby increase the power of bureaus running such programs or the electoral prospects of the politician. Moreover, movements may also be encouraged when and where spending policies benefiting the members of a group are strong, even if the policy was not designed to encourage a challenge. Policies may unintentionally provoke challenges. Like the party system, the state, in the guarantees of its political institutions, in the autonomy of its bureaucracy, and in its policies, may shape the timing and course of social mobilization.

### THE GRIEVANCE MODEL

In contrast, the frustration or grievance perspective typically sees social movements and collective behavior as responses to strains in the social structure, which lead individuals to become frustrated and discontented or to suffer "normative ambiguity" (Smelser 1962). This discontent might include immiseration (Marx and Engels [1848] 1978), atomization (Kornhauser 1959), relative deprivation (Merton and Rossi 1968), status inconsistency (Hofstadter 1952), or pecuniary setbacks (Davies 1962). Discontent leads to aggression, which in turn is released in collective behavior—the collective action of movements is

often viewed not as political action, but as a way to deal with personal discontent. Movements sometimes advance what are labeled “utopian” goals, and movement adherents are claimed to embrace irrational “generalized beliefs” (Smelser 1962). The strong version of this model has had little empirical support. For instance, labor strikes usually occur during times of high employment (Tilly 1978). American students (Perrow 1979) and women (Freeman 1973) were more active in the 1960s than in the 1950s, even though their circumstances were no worse. Little empirical backing is found in studies of right-wing movements, supposedly the “best” case for the model. Neither Hitler (Oberschall 1973) nor McCarthy (Rogin 1967) was sustained by the least attached members of society.

Recent researchers have incorporated insights from the grievance model into the challenger model. Walsh (1981) focused on the *intensification of grievances* in the generation of insurgencies, and Barnes (1984) argued that grievances shift the cost-benefit calculus of potential participants in movements. Dryzek and Goodin (1986) argued that crises and the uncertainties that accompany crises shift the interests of individuals. When individuals are unsure of their future economic status, it is in their interest to back social spending to aid the poor; the further a crisis reaches into the middle class, the more likely the middle class will support social spending. Although Dryzek and Goodin argued that World War II directly increased social spending, their model applies more readily to economic crises and the interests of individuals in supporting movements devoted to redistributive goals.

Crises may forge another potential link between grievance and challenger models by creating political opportunities for challenges. Large-scale challenges are aided when a regime loses a major war (Skocpol 1979). Smaller challengers may succeed following crises, if the challenger was previously mobilized (Gamson 1980). Piven and Cloward (1977) argued that crises promote electoral instability, which aids challenges. Thus, the influence of crises on challenges may be indirect.

Did the Townsend movement flourish when and where economic discontent was greatest? Was the strength of the movement related to the presence of “co-optible” organizations? Were some organizations more co-optible than others? Did the movement respond to political opportunities? If so, was the movement aided by like-minded movements or by polity members? Did

the party system shape the movement? Did the configuration or strength of state institutions or their policies encourage the Townsendites?

### THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TOWNSEND MOVEMENT

The Townsend movement centered on a plan that Dr. Townsend first made public in September, 1933: All Americans 60 years of age and older should be given \$200 at the start of each month if they refrained from work and spent the \$200 by the month’s end. The plan, officially termed Old-Age Revolving Pensions, had a dual purpose: It would halt the pecuniary troubles of the aged, and the Depression would lift as the old stopped competing with the young for work and as spending stimulated the economy. In January, 1935, the plan was converted into a bill. To pay for the pensions, estimated initially at about \$24 billion a year, the McGroarty bill called for a two-percent national tax on transactions, a kind of “multiple” sales tax. The bill was widely criticized. The left disliked the regressive tax, and the right objected to the amount of spending, fearing that high taxes might cut profits. Moderate policy advocates also disliked the plan — their insurance and assistance proposals were finally being backed by a president! Academic economists of all political persuasions thought it unworkable.

Simple as the plan was, its witnesses — Townsend especially — were unequal to defending it before Congress. Particularly damning were Townsend’s admission that \$200 per month was more than the tax would bear, that 75 years of age was a more viable retirement age, and that the transactions tax was merely a sales tax by a different name (U.S. Congress Senate Committee on Finances 1935, pp. 1019-23, 1126-27). Townsend’s performance compared unfavorably to the well prepared depositions for the administration’s Economic Security bill. The McGroarty bill was soon amended to pay only as much as its tax collected, but the House rejected it, mainly along partisan lines with Democrats opposed, 206 to 56; western Democrats feared going on record. The Social Security Act passed in August, 1935. When a modified Townsend bill came before Congress in 1939, the results were similar: Townsend witnesses were flustered, the bill was amended, and the House rejected it even more decisively. Instead, Congress improved old-age insurance and assistance. Although the Townsend plan was introduced in Congress throughout the 1940s, it never again escaped committee.

The history of the organization is more complicated than that of the plan. In January, 1934, the not-for-profit Old-Age Revolving Pensions, Ltd. (OARP) was incorporated. Its officers were Townsend, his brother Walter, and the real estate agent Robert E. "Earl" Clements. A former employer of Townsend, Clements led the organization and referred to himself as the "co-founder." The first Townsend club was founded in August, 1934 in Huntington, California. Local clubs were formed once local organizers, sometimes volunteers but often paid by commission, had amassed 100 members. In the late 1930s, this requirement was lowered to 30 members. The clubs had no official voice in OARP, but usually met weekly, heard speakers, and pressured the unconvinced. Initially a kind of tax-farming operation, OARP soon comprised four regional directors, one or two directors for each state, and many congressional-district and club organizers. The membership "contribution" was a quarter. From this, the national took a dime; the other three levels each took a nickel. OARP also solicited donations, organized fund-raising rallies, and sold paraphernalia.

The numbers of Townsendites are hard to ascertain because of a lack of data and exaggerations by movement leaders, but also because there is no easy way to define a movement member. In February, 1935, Townsend claimed 20 million adherents, that is, everyone who allegedly signed petitions calling for the enactment of the Townsend plan (U.S. Congress House Ways and Means Committee 1935, p. 752). However, these petitions were not presented to the bi-partisan House Select Committee Investigating Old-Age Pensions Organizations (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, p. 584) until May 1936, and by then Townsend claimed only 10 million signatures, which were never counted. Most signers attended no club meetings or activities and were not aged, unlike almost all club members.

In February 1935 Townsend estimated that there were approximately 3,000 clubs with 150 members each — a total of 450,000 club members (U.S. Congress Senate Committee on Finances 1935, pp. 1047-48). In April, 1936, during the Congressional investigation of the movement, Clements estimated membership at two million: approximately 7,000 clubs with 300 members (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, p. 208). In the same testimony, however, Clements admitted that membership might be as low as one million. He never revealed the bases for his estimates. Regional organizers prevented state organizers from cataloging members, presumably

Table 1. Paid Membership and Receipts of the Townsend Movement, 1934-1953

Year	Paid Membership (in 1000s)	Gross Receipts (in \$1000s)	Membership as Percent of population 65 years and older
1934	NA	84	NA
1935	NA	905	NA
1936	NA	562	NA
1937	NA	NA	NA
1938	612.5	453	7.20
1939	761.6	622	8.69
1940	646.9	689	7.16
1941	468.7	636	5.05
1942	297.6	486	3.11
1943	271.8	424	2.75
1944	269.6	628	2.66
1945	234.8	512	2.23
1946	173.6	519	1.60
1947	134.3	418	1.20
1948	92.7	353	.80
1949	52.8	328	.44
1950	57.4 <sup>a</sup>	391 <sup>a</sup>	.46
1951	56.7	407	.44
1952	31.1	381	.23
1953	22.1	306	.16

<sup>a</sup> Data for 1950 are extrapolated to a yearly basis from data on seven months.

Sources: Holtzman 1963, pp. 48-49, 172; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975, p. 10; U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936.

to prevent rival pension groups from raiding Townsendites (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, p. 431). Aged husbands and wives often joined together — the plan benefited both men and women — and would often enroll and pay for family members with no part in the movement. But who counted as a member in good standing? After the initial 25-cent "contribution," members were expected to pay the club 10 cents monthly — the "quota" as it was called for legal reasons — to be forwarded to the state office. Yet clubs and members not meeting quotas went unpunished. If members are defined as active "contributors" paying the "quota," membership was doubtless less than one million.

However membership is defined, the evidence indicates a leap in the movement's membership in the last quarter of 1935, *after* the initial failure

of the Townsend plan. (See Table 1.) The movement did not spread beyond the West until the summer of 1935, when regional organizers were chosen. The movement's finances, relying on dues, also took off. OARP received only \$84,000 in revenue in 1934 (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, p. 76), most of it in the last quarter of the year. OARP had gathered approximately \$555,000 in the first three quarters of 1935, bringing the total revenue to approximately \$640,000. By April 1936, the total was more than \$1,000,000, including about \$350,000 for the last quarter of 1935 and \$180,000 for the first quarter of 1936 (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, pp. 65, 82). Because the movement relied so heavily on dues, its membership probably peaked at the end of 1935.

In 1936, the movement was investigated by the House of Representatives. Although the only charges brought were for Townsend's contempt of Congress — he walked out while being questioned — testimony proved disquieting. It was an unhappy revelation to many that the *Townsend National Weekly* was run by a for-profit concern, the unfortunately named Prosperity Publishing Company, which was owned by Townsend and Clements. Enormous commissions were pocketed by some state organizers and Clements, who cleared \$70,000. Also, the northern California organizer had been indicted for bootlegging and pimping. In April, 1936, Clements resigned, membership drives stalled, and OARP's income plummeted (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, p. 445). By summer 1936, the cash on hand at OARP had dropped to about \$30,000 from \$130,000 in April.

Yet the movement soon rejuvenated, better records were kept, and membership reached a recorded maximum in 1939 when more than 750,000 people were affiliated with the renamed Townsend National Recovery Plan, Inc. The organization peaked in recorded revenues the next year at about \$700,000, and the number of clubs increased to about 12,000. In the 1940s, however, the movement declined, and by 1942 membership had fallen below 300,000. After stabilizing during the war years, membership deteriorated after the war, dropping to 53,000 in 1949 and 22,000 in 1953; political purpose was lost (Messinger 1955). The historical trajectory of the movement suggests a number of questions: Why did the movement arise when it did in 1934? Why did it take off in the latter part of 1935? Why did it decline in 1936, only to recover and gain until 1939 or 1940? Why did the movement

degenerate in the 1940s, especially after 1945? Can grievance, challenger, or political opportunity theories answer these questions?

#### AN ANALYSIS OF THE TOWNSEND MOVEMENT ACROSS TIME

With respect to grievance theories, the evidence is mixed. The movement began after the Depression had passed its low point, in early 1933. Unemployment peaked at 25 percent that year and gradually fell to 14 percent in 1937 (Chandler 1970, p. 5). So the movement began during a period of slow, but steady growth, although unemployment was still extremely high in the middle of the 1930s. Moreover, the movement had a resurgence of strength in the late 1930s, perhaps in response to the "Roosevelt Depression" of 1938, when the economy went into recession and unemployment jumped to 19 percent. It also fits the grievance perspective that when the onset of war ended the Depression — unemployment fell from about 15 percent in 1939 to almost nothing in 1943 — the movement suffered losses. Perhaps declines in economic grievances in themselves did not prompt the decline of the movement, for movement adherents claimed that the plan would end the Depression and thus help everyone. In the 1940s, the movement shifted its discourse and claimed, doubtless unconvincingly, that the plan would end war. By comparison, the war did not dampen the labor movement, which continued to grow in the 1940s (Edwards 1981). Yet it is hard to deny a connection between Townsendism and the Depression; without it, the movement may not have happened.

That the movement did not spiral upward until the worst economic conditions were over fits the challenger perspective, which predicts that a movement's ability to challenge increases when the potential resources of a movement rise. The challenge got going only when people began going back to work. The Townsend movement may also have benefited from the fact that Long's Share Our Wealth movement suddenly found itself leaderless in the middle of 1935. Perhaps this helps to account for the tremendous gains the Townsend movement made later that year. In addition, the fortunes of the movement seemed to follow successes in its political endorsements. Against long odds, a Townsend candidate in Michigan, Verner Main, won an election in fall, 1935 for a vacated House seat; movement gains followed. The third-party debacle of 1936, in which the movement contested the Roosevelt

landslide, may have kept the movement in its post-investigation slump. After 147 victories by Townsend candidates in the 1938 congressional elections, the movement peaked in revenues.

The movement's main period of growth coincided with the improvement in political opportunities for challenges and the rise to power of the progressive wing of the Democratic party. The Townsend movement did not emerge until after Roosevelt's victory in 1932 and did not take off until after the 1934 elections, which boosted left-wing Democrats. Indeed, the strongest left-wing Democratic coalition was in place from 1935 to 1939, the period of peak activity for the movement. During that time, the Democratic margin in the House was well over 200, and the Democratic margin in the Senate ranged from 44 to 60 seats (Congressional Quarterly 1985). The administration did not encourage the Townsendites. Roosevelt refused to meet Townsend in December, 1934 when the Economic Security bill was being drafted, and Roosevelt had the Post Office investigate the movement in 1935. Though bipartisan, the House investigation was seen by Townsend as Roosevelt's attempt to discredit him. Thus opportunities for mobilization brought about by a new political coalition were partly offset by the administration's harassment of the movement.

Policies to aid the aged and to promote organizing in general also spurred the movement. Movement gains followed spending policies for the aged. The drive for compulsory old-age pensions had its biggest year in 1933 when 12 states passed legislation (Amenta and Carruthers 1988; Quadagno 1988), and the movement was inaugurated soon afterwards. The movement took off after the passage of the Social Security Act, with its benefits for the aged. As for policies to organize in general, the movement did not start until after the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, which encouraged workers to form collective bargaining units. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which guaranteed trade union organization coincided with the take-off phase of the movement. Thus, the policies of the coalition to incorporate new groups generally and the aged in particular fed the Townsend challenge.

Our examination of the movement's historical rhythm of growth and decline shows each perspective has some support. The Depression may have been necessary for the movement; it certainly would have been a vastly different movement without the Depression. But the movement's history did not follow the pattern of economic activity. Instead, short-term surges in movement

strength seemed to follow perceived successes of the movement in Congressional endorsements. From a long-range viewpoint, the movement's success in organizing would have been unlikely without a new political regime and its policies to encourage challenges and the aged.

These theories aim to explain movement strength both over time and across states. Each has some effectiveness in explaining the key events in the historical trajectory of the movement. Next we address the spatial strength of the movement by examining state-level data with multiple regression techniques, a methodology that allows one to appraise the perspectives with greater rigor.

### EXPLAINING THE STRENGTH OF THE TOWNSEND MOVEMENT ACROSS THE COUNTRY

#### *Early Explanations and Theories of Social Movements*

To measure the strength of state-level Townsend organizations, we computed the per capita number of *Townsend clubs* in existence from 1934 to 1950, using the only available systematic state-level data on the movement (Holtzman 1963, pp. 50-51). (See Table 2.) The total number of clubs over this period was more than 12,000, and the vast majority of these were in existence by 1939, when the recorded paid membership reached its peak, or 1940, when the revenues of the movement peaked. (See Table 1.) For these reasons, we divide the number of clubs by the population of states in 1940. Although we cannot determine precisely when clubs came into existence, our search through the *Townsend National Weekly* indicates that few clubs were begun in the 1940s, when the movement declined. As a check, we averaged the percentage of a state's House of Representative candidates endorsed by the movement in five elections (*Townsend National Weekly* 1938, 1940, 1942, 1944, 1946). This measure is a further indication of the movement's presence, for its political action centered on endorsements. This measure correlates very highly, .83, with the number of clubs per capita.

The Townsendites were strongest in the West, weakest in the South, and stronger in the Midwest than in the Northeast. Oregon had the most clubs per 100,000 persons, 38, whereas eight of the 11 former states of the Confederacy had less than two. Nevertheless, the movement reached out to the whole country. With 22 clubs per



Table 2. Townsend Clubs per 100,000 Persons, by State

Rank	State	Clubs per 100,000 Persons
<i>Extremely strong presence</i>		
1.	Oregon	37.99
2.	Wyoming	31.11
3.	Colorado	29.91
4.	Washington	26.15
<i>Very strong presence</i>		
5.	S.Dakota	23.80
6.	Montana	22.88
7.	Maine	22.07
8.	Idaho	21.91
9.	Florida	21.61
10.	New Hampshire	19.74
11.	Minnesota	19.16
<i>Somewhat strong presence</i>		
12.	Indiana	17.62
13.	Kansas	17.32
14.	Vermont	16.70
15.	Michigan	16.44
16.	N.Dakota	16.36
17.	Arizona	16.02
18.	California	15.53
19.	Wisconsin	15.52
20.	Iowa	14.61
21.	Nebraska	14.52
22.	New Mexico	12.79
23.	Ohio	12.19
<i>Somewhat weak presence</i>		
24.	Nevada	9.98
25.	Pennsylvania	9.56
26.	Missouri	8.83
27.	Utah	7.45
28.	W.Virginia	7.31
29.	Illinois	6.93
30.	Massachusetts	6.88
31.	Oklahoma	6.81
32.	New York	6.17
33.	Arkansas	5.95
<i>Very weak presence</i>		
34.	Maryland	5.05
35.	Connecticut	4.20
36.	Delaware	4.13
37.	Kentucky	3.83
38.	New Jersey	3.77
39.	Texas	2.96
40.	Alabama	1.98
41.	Georgia	1.95
42.	Tennessee	1.92
<i>Extremely weak presence</i>		
43.	Louisiana	1.10
44.	Mississippi	1.05
45.	N.Carolina	0.95
46.	Rhode Island	0.84
47.	Virginia	0.78
48.	S.Carolina	0.58

Note: For the construction of this measure, see text.

100,000 residents, Florida ranked ninth, for instance, and the northeastern states of Maine and New Hampshire were more strongly represented than California, the birthplace of the movement. Early discussions about the movement's geographical spread sometimes had to do with each of the different theoretical perspectives we are considering.

In the most complete study of the Townsend movement, Holtzman (1963, pp. 53-55), offered several hypotheses for the regional dispersion of clubs. He speculated that the geographical pattern was due to regional differences in the severity of the Depression and asserted that rural areas and the South in particular escaped the worst effects. Thus, Holtzman seems to support the grievance perspective in his claim that the movement was weak where grievances were apparently lacking.

By contrast, Neuberger and Loe (1936, pp. 20, 258), early chroniclers of the movement, provided an explanation relying on indigenous organizations incorporating the aged. They noted that the Townsend membership included aged members of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a Civil War veterans' organization that was successful in promoting pensions. Indeed, they labeled the movement *An Army of the Aged*. The GAR was almost nonexistent in the South, and its presence was stronger in the West than in the Northeast. Neuberger and Loe also noted that Protestant churches may have aided the movement; they refer to Townsendites as "Methodist picnic people." Townsend himself often emphasized that he was raised as a Methodist. Temperance societies may also have been co-opted by the movement, which shared their distaste for alcohol; a reporter at a Townsend convention referred to members as "WCTU types" (Bennett 1969, p. 175). Neuberger and Loe (1936, p. 77) also claimed the movement recruited leaders and followers from various religious cults. The movement's geographic spread may be due to configurations of voluntary organizations and churches that included large numbers of the aged and were susceptible to the multi-vocal appeals of the movement. Such organizations may have provided recruits and meeting places.

Holtzman also conjectured about political opportunities. He hypothesized that Republicans may have promoted the movement. The relative strength of the political parties, a measure of polity-based political opportunity, might explain where the movement prospered. The strength of Republicans in the West and Midwest and of Democrats in the South adds weight to this spec-

ulation. Yet Holtzman also argued, like Shefter (1983), that traditional political parties discourage challenges, noting that parties in the West were more open. Where patronage organizations were weaker, more people may have been drawn into movement politics.

Holtzman noted with considerable understatement that blacks in the South were prevented from exercising political rights. This was especially apparent in "rotten boroughs" dominated by plantation owners, whose profits might be threatened by the disincentives to menial labor inherent in generous old-age pensions or by other political activity. Democratic political institutions, a key element in the structure of the state, may have been necessary for sustained movement activity. Moreover, Townsend (1943) appealed to a statist political opportunity explanation in his autobiography. He claims that the movement relied on volunteers, who in turn often relied on "relief" payments for economic support. Compulsory old-age pensions may have encouraged the movement — a 1939 survey found that relief and pension recipients were more likely than others to favor the Townsend plan (Cantril 1941, pp. 192-93). These observations suggest that the movement was influenced by the structure of political institutions and by state policies.

Finally, Holtzman argued that variations in the strength of the movement may be due to its pattern of organizing. Theories of social movements tend to assume that *organizers* are constant and focus on opportunities for organizers — grievances, previous organization, or politics. Yet the strength of American movements has depended on the presence and spread of organizers across states, notably in the case of the populist movement (Goodwyn 1978, chap. 4). As Clements testified during the Congressional investigation, the Townsend movement was divided into four regions according to the timing of organizing efforts: the West region was created first, the Midwest second, the Northeast third, and the South last (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, p. 17). An analysis of the movement's strength across states must consider organizers (McAdam, McCarthy, Zald 1988, pp. 715-16).

#### *Measuring The Grievance Approach*

Four measures test the grievance approach. The measure *depression in manufacturing* operationalizes the degree of economic decline in industry and incorporates two components. The first is wage-earner employment in manufacturing at the

Depression's low point (1933) as a proportion of employment in the last year of economic growth before the Depression (1929) (U.S. Bureau of Census 1938, pp. 765-69); the second is the average rate of unemployment from 1930 to 1933 (U.S. Social Security Board 1937, pp. 58-59). We use a scale based on the mean of these two measures, after both are normalized (i.e., a sum of "z-scores"). The measure *depression in farming* is average gross farm income in 1932 through 1934 divided by the same measure from 1924 through 1928 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1932 p. 608; 1935, p. 589). Data on farm income are more extensive than data on manufacturing and total income (see Amenta and Carruthers 1988). Depressions in manufacturing and farming are treated separately because the aged may have been affected differentially by them. The measures are not strongly correlated (.11). The grievance model predicts that the worse the depression, the stronger the movement.

Movement activity may also correspond to long-term employment patterns among the aged; the measure *aged employed* is the percentage of those 65 and older gainfully employed in 1930 (Conyngton 1934, p. 6). The grievance model predicts that the greater the employment among the aged, the fewer the grievances, and the weaker the movement. Employing the strongest version of the theory, we measured the prevalence of the group most implicated in "status inconsistency" theories, the percentage of *native whites of native parentage* in 1930 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1942, p. 18). The theory predicts the greater the presence of native whites, the stronger the movement.

#### *Measuring Indigenous Organization*

To measure the potential impact of indigenous organizations, we considered only organizations that were long-standing, that did not have political activity as their central mission, or that did not threaten disruption in the 1930s. To be included they also had to include aged members and their principal goals had to match appeals made by movement organizers: temperance, Americanism, utopianism, pensions. We estimate *Methodist Episcopal Church* membership, which was often mentioned as a source of movement strength in historical studies of the movement (Neuberger and Loe 1936), averaging per capita members in 1926 and 1936 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1941, pp. 407, 415). The movement may also have been aided by organized religious cults of personal

salvation. The largest such organization of this era and one correlating closely with others was the Church of Christ, Scientist (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, chaps. 8, 11). We average the per capita number of *Christian Scientists* in 1926 and 1936 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1941, p. 383). In addition, we include the average per capita dues of state-level *Woman's Christian Temperance Unions* (WCTU) for 1926-29 (Woman's Christian Temperance Union 1927, 1928, 1929). We also calculate the average per capita (1920 and 1930) *Grand Army of the Republic* (GAR) posts in the 1920s (Grand Army of the Republic 1921, 1931); the GAR grew in the 1880s advocating veterans' pensions. These measures are expected to have positive effects on movement strength; the movement may have recruited members in blocs and employed their resources.

### *Measuring Political Opportunity*

We first examine the positive influence of movements on one another. Social movement organizations are defined as those that have political or redistributive goals as their central mission, had begun in the 1930s or had changed in size or character during the 1930s, and threatened or engaged in disruptive activities. *Union density* is calculated as union members in 1939, the earliest data available, divided by the nonagriculturally employed (Troy and Sheflin 1985, p. 7-3; U.S. Bureau of Census 1948, pp. 194, 196). We also computed the percent *support for Huey Long* in public opinion polls taken by Emil Hurja (1935) for the Democratic National Committee (Brinkley 1982, pp. 207-9; 284-86). Roosevelt was opposed by an unnamed Republican and Long. Roosevelt won handily, but Long captured about 11 percent. We use this measure as a proxy for Share Our Wealth clubs. Because unions and Share Our Wealth clubs were not in direct competition with pension movements, had similar general goals, and cooperated locally with the Townsend movement (Holtzman 1963, chap. 8), these two measures are expected to have a positive effect.

We also examine opportunities provided by political parties. *Republican strength* — states traditionally controlled by the Republican party (states known as “one-party Republican”) are scored 1 and zero otherwise (Hansen 1983, p. 158). Republicans may have encouraged the movement because Townsend frequently supported them.

The institutionalist critique suggests that electoral partisanship is not all that matters. Many

states were dominated by patronage-based political parties, a situation dating from the late nineteenth century “third party system.” Following Shefter, we expect movements to be discouraged by the mobilization of voters into traditional parties. We use Mayhew's (1986, p. 196) ranking system, based on his examination of nominating processes in all states. *Traditional party organization* strength ranges from 5 in states where such organizations monopolized nominations to a low of 1 in states where they exerted little influence. The Roosevelt administration and its left-wing Democratic allies spurred challenges of all kinds. Thus Townsend clubs may have been encouraged where *Democrats in open, competitive party systems* held power during the 1930s. We use this measure rather than Democratic voting because states dominated by one party or by patronage parties may be immune from the ideology of the presidential party. States with a competitive party system, without dominant traditional party organizations, and where Democrats controlled the government for at least four years in the 1930s are scored 1; others 0 (see Hansen 1983, p. 158).

One statist view of political opportunity concerns the construction of electoral institutions. We expect that democratic political institutions and citizenship rights would aid the development of movements. *Voting rights* are measured by the natural logarithm of the percentage of eligible voters voting in the 1932 presidential election (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975, pp. 1071-72). We take the logarithm because we expect a curvilinear effect. At high levels, differences in voting indicate relative enthusiasm rather than rights; the effects of differences in participation are expected to decline in proportion to its level. Voting rights were lowest in the South, where blacks and poor whites were systematically disfranchised at the turn of the century (Key 1949; Kousser 1974).

A second statist view of opportunity focuses on state autonomy. Our measure of *state capacities* combines a fiscal component, per capita state revenues in 1932 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1935, pp. 200-2), and a bureaucratic component that scores 1 for each year until 1929 that the state labor commissioner had rule-making authority in the administration of safety laws (Brandeis 1935, p. 654). These bureaus promoted social spending in the 1930s (Amenta and Carruthers 1988). Scores for each component were standardized and summed. The result captures the capacities of state executive institutions

Table 3. Standardized Regression Coefficients: Per Capita Townsend Clubs and Selected Independent Variables for Partial Models, 48 States

Independent Measure	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Frustration/grievance model:</i>				
Depression in manufacturing	-.148 (-1.19)	—	—	—
<i>Challenger model:</i>				
Indigenous organizations				
Per capita WCTU dues	—	.304** (3.07)	—	—
Per capita Christian Scientists	—	.687** (6.04)	—	—
Per capita Grand Army of the Republic posts	—	.444** (3.16)	—	—
Political opportunity (Polity)				
Union density	—	—	.256* (2.31)	—
Traditional party organization	—	—	-.338** (-2.75)	—
Democratic control in open, competitive system	—	—	.126 (1.13)	—
Political opportunity (Statist)				
Voting rights	—	—	—	.163 (1.05)
State capacities	—	—	—	.196 (1.48)
Adoption of old-age pensions	—	—	—	.334** (2.70)
<i>Controls:</i>				
Regional organization	.541** (4.65)	.271** (2.89)	.309** (2.51)	.380** (2.76)
Percent aged, 1935	.479** (3.88)	-.323 (-1.83)	.405** (3.62)	.307* (2.35)
Per capita income, 1929	-.342* (-2.55)	-.401** (-4.00)	-.115 (-0.85)	-.576** (-3.92)
Number of Cases	48	48	48	48
F-statistic	11.84	22.37	12.22	10.87
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.480	.732	.589	.558

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

One-tailed tests, except for per capita income.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are t-ratios.

and should be positively associated with movement strength, which should thrive in a state environment supportive of its goals.

The third statist measure is the timing of the *adoption of old-age pension* legislation. It scores 10 for California, which adopted the first compulsory old-age pension plan in 1929 and lower

for others according to the number of years later such laws passed (Epstein [1938] 1968, pp. 534-35; U.S. Social Security Board 1937, pp. 161-62; U.S. Social Security Board 1938). This measure correlates closely with average pension expenditures (Amenta and Carruthers 1988) and provides a critical test: The frustration model holds that a lack of pensions would fuel grievances and promote the movement; the opportunity model predicts that the sooner pensions are adopted, the stronger the movement because pensions aid potential aged activists.

### Control Measures

One key control measure concerns the strength of organizers across states. Although there are no data on the amount of time organizers spent organizing, the movement divided states into four regions defined by the timing of organization. Thus, the ordinal measure *regional organization* scores 4 for states in the West region, 3 for the Midwest, 2 for the Northeast, and 1 for the South. The West includes the 12 states that Clements testified were organized first (U.S. Congress House of Representatives 1936, p. 31); other regions are defined as in Holtzman (1963, pp. 53-55). We also include the average of the percentage of *aged* people 65 years and older in 1930 and 1940 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1942, p. 43). This measure may indicate the human resources available for mobilization or potential discontent and is expected to have a positive effect. *Per capita income* in 1929 is a third control measure. A 1939 public opinion poll indicated that public support for the Townsend plan increased as one moved down the economic ladder, regardless of age (Cantril 1941, pp. 192-93).

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We regress per capita Townsend clubs on independent measures from each of the four theoretical groups, separating statist from polity-based political opportunity, and including the three control measures. We eliminated measures that did not add to the overall explanatory power of the models and then fit models using the surviving measures and the control measures.

Initial regressions in which each perspective is examined alone show some support for each view (Models 1 through 4). Including the best independent measures from each group and the control measures, the indigenous organization model (Model 2) explains the strength of the

Table 4. Standardized Regression Coefficients: Per Capita Townsend Clubs and Selected Independent Measures for Full Models, 48 States

Independent Measure	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Grievance model:</i>				
Depression in manufacturing	.038 (0.41)	—	—	—
<i>Challenge model:</i>				
Indigenous organizations				
Per capita WCTU dues	.163 (1.61)	.172* (1.77)	.133 (1.42)	.120 (1.12)
Per capita Christian Scientists	.679** (4.78)	.668** (4.85)	.508** (4.56)	.426** (3.19)
Per capita Grand Army of the Republic posts	.539** (3.41)	.515** (3.57)	.275** (2.99)	.281** (2.55)
Political opportunity				
Union density	.070 (0.70)	.062 (0.64)	.105 (1.14)	.122 (1.11)
Traditional party organization	.170 (1.13)	.159 (1.09)	—	—
Democratic control in open, competitive system	.101 (1.16)	.100 (1.16)	.098 (1.14)	.104 (0.97)
Voting rights	.089 (0.70)	.091 (0.72)	.095 (0.76)	—
State capacities	.265* (2.10)	.261* (2.10)	.176* (1.76)	.172 (1.44)
Adoption of old-age pensions	.254** (2.49)	.248** (2.49)	.218* (2.27)	.256* (2.17)
<i>Controls:</i>				
Regional organization	.075 (0.65)	.070 (0.62)	.111 (0.96)	.159 (1.16)
Percent aged, 1935	-.354 (-1.98)	-.329 (-1.98)	—	—
Per capita income, 1929	-.712** (-4.10)	-.720** (-4.23)	-.623** (-5.32)	-.598** (-4.65)
Number of cases	48	48	48	37
F-statistic	13.37	14.82	16.27	9.87
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.774	.779	.765	.689

\*p < .05    \*\*p < .01  
(One-tailed tests, except for per capita income.)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are t-ratios.

Townsend movement best. This model explains about 73 percent of the variance in Townsend clubs per capita and coefficients for the organization measures are positive as expected. The measure of Methodist membership is highly correlated with that of WCTU dues (.79), but does not perform as well as the latter measure and therefore is eliminated from Model 2.

The two political opportunity models (Models 3 and 4) are also well supported. For the polity-based opportunity measures (Model 3), our best fitting model explains about 59 percent of the variance. The measures for Republican strength and support for Long lowered the explained variance when the lost degree of freedom is taken into account, and therefore we omitted them from the model. Results for the statist model of opportunity are similar (Model 4). The three statist measures and the control measures explain about 56 percent of the variance, and all coefficients are in expected directions.

The best fitting grievance model (Model 1), which includes only the measure of depression in manufacturing and the controls, accounts for only about 48 percent of the variance in per capita Townsend clubs. When entered, the measures of the depression in farming, the aged employed, and native whites lower the adjusted R<sup>2</sup>, indicating that their inclusion does not justify the degrees of freedom lost. Because of the insignificance of the native white measure, the strong form of the frustration perspective finds no support. The coefficient for depression in manufacturing, though not significant, is in the expected direction, indicating some support for the grievance model.

To compare the performances of each of the models we enter all of the measures from the models in Table 3 (Model 1 of Table 4). The model, with adjustments, explains approximately 77 percent of the variance in per capita Townsend clubs. Many coefficients, however, are not significant. Model 2 omits the measure of manufacturing depression from the grievance perspective, which adds little to the explanation provided by opportunity and organization measures.

Model 2 still includes measures not meeting the .10 level of significance. Following stepwise elimination procedures, we entered the nine social movement theory measures and the three control measures. Measures that added nothing to the adjusted explained variance and uninterpretable measures were eliminated, producing Model 3. Of the 10 measures in that model five are drawn from opportunity models: union density, open Democratic control, voting rights, state capacities, and the timing of adoption of old-age pensions all have coefficients in expected directions. Some of the coefficients are not significant, in part because the degrees of freedom are few. In addition, voting rights and regional organization are highly correlated (.59), as the South was organized last and had the weakest democratic institutions. Perhaps few organizers were sent to

or were supported in the South because movement leaders did not see it as fertile soil for Townsendism.

To check the robustness of the results, we ran a regression of Model 3 omitting the southern states (Model 4). Even without the South, Model 4 explains 69 percent of the variance. The main difference is that the coefficient for voting rights becomes negative, though not significant, and is eliminated from the model. This is not surprising because the missing states of the South were the states that denied voting rights. Relative voter enthusiasm had no influence on the strength of the movement. In short, the spread of the challenge was due mainly to political opportunities and like-minded indigenous organizations.

The grievance perspective is only mildly supported. The models and measures having to do with short-term grievances due to the Depression receive only minor backing in the regressions. Depression in manufacturing added nothing to the final 48-state models; other grievance indicators were eliminated in the initial trials. Perhaps the severity of the Depression induced the short-term political openings. But depression in manufacturing is only mildly, negatively correlated with the two short-term opportunity factors: Democratic control in open, competitive systems (-.05), and the adoption of old-age pensions (-.05). However, when Model 1 is calculated without these short-term opportunity measures, the depression in manufacturing measure still does not increase adjusted explained variance. Still, the fact that per capita income in 1929 has a strong negative effect provides some support for the grievance perspective.

## CONCLUSION

These findings help to solve the theoretical paradox of the Townsend movement and have several important implications for social movement theory.

Grievances due to crises can augment challenger theories and require more consideration. These grievances are not constant and may influence the development of insurgencies consistent with the challenger perspective in at least two ways. Crises can breed uncertainty in people that may change their perceived long-term interests and the parameters of the free-rider problem. The Depression may have been necessary for the movement, and an economic crisis may activate people with pre-existing economic grievances. Moreover, crises may shift political opportuni-

ties in favor of challenges, although we find no strong evidence of this.

A second implication concerns the range of indigenous organizations that might sustain a challenge. On the one hand, the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization whose main goal concerned economic security in old-age was positively associated with the Townsends. The GAR mobilized to agitate for veterans' disability benefits, including old-age benefits. It may also have helped that by the middle of the 1930s the GAR had largely achieved its goals and lacked focus. On the other hand, groups more distantly related to the spending plans of the Townsend movement still were positively associated with it and perhaps provided considerable support. The WCTU was related to the movement only in that both groups denounced alcohol. The movement was also stronger where Christian Scientists were prominent. This suggests that the way that ideas of rights are embedded in a movement's rhetoric and the movement's use of symbolism may draw supporters from groups otherwise unrelated to the beneficiary group. Utopianism may purchase organizational advantages.

Our analysis shows that political opportunities play a positive role in promoting movements, as suggested by the polity model. The standard polity model emphasizes aid from social movements and polity members, and we found that where the labor movement was strong, the Townsend movement also flourished.

However, the results support alterations of the standard polity model along the lines of the new institutionalism. Research must examine how members of the polity are organized, especially the structure of the party system. The patronage orientation of parties influenced whether or not partisanship would matter in supporting challenges. It was not merely where Democrats were strong that the Townsends were aided, but where Democrats gained power in non traditional, competitive party systems. Where Democratic patronage organizations won office, the challenge was not aided.

Our analysis also suggests a recasting of the polity model in a more fundamental respect. The Townsend movement profited from a type of political opportunity not embraced by the polity framework: opportunities provided by state institutions, actors, and policies. Challenger theorists need to take a more sophisticated view that considers states as more than tools of repression. State structures, actors, and policies can shape movements both through restraints and encouragement.

States and policies can promote movements in two ways. First, the structure of state political institutions is important. The extension of democratic rights to citizens influenced where the movement mounted a challenge. Although movements work outside the bounds of institutional politics, the existence of such institutions promotes movements rather than discourages them. Second, executive bureaucratic and policy developments may drive challenges. State civil servants can be seen as members of the polity interested in expanding their own power as well as advancing their ideas of the public interest. To promote their goals, state actors may selectively spur challenges. The fiscal and administrative strength of the state promoted the Townsend challenge. The longer old-age pensions were in existence, the mightier the bureaucratic forces operating such programs. The financial aid such programs provided was important. In democratic politics, state structures and actors shape movements with inducements, as well as with repression.

Finally, the policy "successes" of a challenger may be due not to its collective action, but to the circumstances that made it possible for the group to challenge in the first place. The concept "political opportunity" can create a wedge, theoretically speaking, between the activities of a social movement and policies to benefit its constituents. The same opportunities that propel a movement may by themselves cause what are perceived to be victories won by the movement. Political developments may spur a challenge and may also lead to passage of laws favoring the group. Polity members may encourage the rise of a movement to gain a coalition partner — perhaps by introducing spending policies aiding the challenging group. The rise of a social movement may be epiphenomenal — indicating that policies may soon change rather than constituting the reason for changes. This possibility should not be ignored in studies of the purported "successes" of social movements.

The strength of political opportunity explanations begs the question of whether the Townsendites influenced spending policies. The Townsend movement happened when and where it did mainly because of indigenous organizations and political opportunities, but it may not have helped the aged.

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