Why Do Some Social Movements Succeed While Others Fail?

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CAYLA BLEOAJA, DEC 19 2023

Social activism is defined as instances when individuals mobilize through organizational channels and collective action to compel or counter change. This essay examines the factors determining the success or failure of a movement along two distinctions observed in the literature: types of activists (insider or outsider) and effects of activism (direct and indirect). The primary site of inquiry will be movements addressing social issues in relation to organizations, where activists target the attention and influence of corporations in the interest of stakeholders and the larger public. First, I will make a distinction between different types of activists, defined in terms of their relationship to their targets. Subsequently, I will look at the mechanisms of their tactics and success, mainly persuasive and disruptive mechanisms. Secondly, I will make a distinction between direct and indirect effects of activism, examining the various outcomes of activism — such as legislative behavior and public opinion — and their interactions.

The literature on social movements addresses a variety of social activists which can be situated on a spectrum from “insiders” such as employees and “outsiders” such as independent organizations according to their knowledge of and resource dependence on their target (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Insiders are distinguished by high levels of knowledge and dependence and vice versa. This is a salient distinction because an activist’s perceived position determines their tactical efforts, resource mobilization, and network behavior (Walker, Martin, & McCarthy, 2008). For instance, employees or shareholders are more likely to experience behavioral constraints or lack of bargaining power due to their reliance on an institution for social and material assets (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). Strikes do not always culminate in collective bargaining negotiations, such as in 1988 when the Writers Guild of America strike, which lasted five months, cost approximately $500 million in lost revenues and wages (Morphis, 2012). Protestors without risk of reprisal are more likely to engage in tactics that are disruptive or threatening to the target, as in the sit-ins of the civil rights movement (Biggs & Andrews, 2010). In summary, the insider-outsider continuum recognizes the role of local knowledge in activists’ ability to mobilize and influence decision-making.

Research that has distinguished between primary and secondary stakeholders has found that the former can more easily obtain attention and influence (Vasi & King, 2012; Weber et al., 2009; Yaziji & Doh, 2013). The LGBT workplace movement serves as a prominent example. Notable features of insider activism include tailored framing (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002), leveraging networks (Raeburn, 2004), and influence tactics that repurpose organizational processes and utilize decision makers’ personal values and political coalitions (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). In the LGBT rights movement, employees advocated for equal rights such as partner health insurance and anti-discrimination protection from their companies (Creed & Scully, 2000). This was accomplished first by framing efforts to align the addition of anti- discrimination clauses with ethical institutional commitments to fairness, dignity, and respect (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), or by arguing that equality of sexual orientation was ‘good for business’ (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002, p. 492). Secondly, employee activists developed inter- and intra-organizational channels which linked networks across organizations to share information and strategies (Raeburn, 2004). Lastly, internal activists had access to knowledge concerning the values and ideology of their organization’s leaders, by which they could assess the conditions for opportunity structures, identify allies, and leverage support from decision-makers (Briscoe et al., 2014). The effectiveness of insider activists is subject to their use of influence tactics to persuade and educate in light of the burden of resource dependence.

Outsider activists lack internal knowledge of the organization. Without the access and resources to directly affect organizational structure, outsider activists rely on activities like protests and boycotts to derive media attention (Eesley, Decelles & Lenox, 2015). Such external activists are usually societal constituents or community members mobilizing to oppose social movements by disrupting institutional resources, routines, or reputations (Baron & Diermeir, 2007). They tend to derive their effectiveness from costly and disruptive courses of action which act on an institution's fear of negative social evaluation (Luders, 2006), although such tactics are not always instrumental towards the activists' cause (Rojas, 2006). In sum, activists vary in their capacity to harness resources and networks depending on their social positions and relationship with the target organization. As a generalization, insider activists tend to utilize persuasion tactics while outsider activists tend towards disruption tactics.

Research has identified a range of direct and indirect effects of social activism to measure how movements influence change beyond the organizations they directly target. Direct effects are activists' goals and ambitions, such as attaining concessions (King, 2008) or instituting policy change (Lounsbury, 2001). The earlier analysis of literature suggests that direct effects depend on the type of activist, because different forms of activism depend on varying influence mechanisms and tactics. For instance, protest can exert influence on legislative behavior through public opinion. In the Black Lives Matter movement, the message magnified by mobilized protestors had an "opinion-mobilizing effect" (Reny & Newman, 2021) which informed the electorate through public support (Gillion, 2020). This "agenda-seeding" effect is evident also in the 1960s black protest movement, in which various protest tactics advanced minority agendas. Protest tactics influence how news organizations frame demands, in that non-violent protest positively influenced the valence of media coverage and voting behavior towards civil rights whereas violence had the opposite effect (Wasow, 2020). In fact, while extreme protest actions that are highly disruptive can heighten pressure and awareness towards a cause, they also reduce public support for and undermine identification with a social movement (Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2020). Overall, activism legitimatizes a social movement by driving media coverage, framing, political discourse, and public attention on an issue.

Activist presence can also have indirect effects, such as the further mobilization of activists, the altering of market opportunities, and unanticipated effects on other organizations. First, this process of diffusion can stimulate further mobilization efforts through spillovers across geographic locations, institutional domains, networks, and channels (Strang & Soule, 1998). This hinges on the number, proximity and recency of prior events (Rao & Dutta, 2012; Polletta, 1998) and visible activist successes (Greve, 2005; Kim & Miner, 2007). Secondly, indirect effects are evident in the creation and destruction of market opportunities, such as when the temperance movement opened opportunities for soft-drink manufacturers (Hiatt, Sine, & Tolbert, 2009) or the anti-corporate movement created a market for grass-fed meat and dairy products (Weber, Heinze & DeSoucey, 2008). Their educative and persuasive tactics altered the norms and beliefs of consumers and provoked the development of infrastructure to support a new industry. Lastly, activists can indirectly change or constrain other entities in the field. For example, in the anti-Walmart movement, local activism not only impeded the opening of Walmart stores (Ingram et al., 2010) but also of Target, a rival company (Yue, Rao, & Ingram, 2013). Such an information spillover points to a broader diffusion of influence. Done intentionally, this is "proxy targeting" (Walker, Martin, & McCarthy, 2008): student movements on college campuses, for instance, target universities and their practices as proxy platforms (Briscoe, Gupta, & Anger, 2015). Insider activists are less likely to precipitate such an effect since their threat-based tactics are less visible and disruptive.

Other factors crucial to the efficacy of a social movement include communication and context. Such macro-level predictors conditions interact with the micro-level predictors of protest activity (Dalton, Van Sickle, & Weldon, 2010). This is evident in how the dynamics of organizing and participating in social protests have changed because of rapidly developing online infrastructure. The means by which activists leverage information and communication technology can generate significant yields, such as lowered participation costs, more channels for information sharing, and reduced need for physical infrastructure (Earl & Kimport, 2011). However, while online activism can generate rapid awareness through increased channels for dissemination and dialogue, it does not produce the same levels of commitment and involvement as offline efforts (see Lewis, Gray & Meierhenrich, 2014). Also important to the success of a movement is its regional and national context. The behavior of actors and the political opportunities available to them are dependent on conditions that determine outcomes such as degree of bargaining power (Terchek, 1974) or threat of reprisal (Nikolayenko, 2021). Macro-level contextual changes such as economic and

political development provide more resources to the public, which results in increased protest activity (Dalton et al., 2010).

In summary, the factors determining the success of a social movement can be understood by distinguishing the kinds of effects that result from distinct activist actions. Recent research points to the role of resource dependence and local knowledge in activists' success, and their engagement in either persuasive or disruptive tactics. The opportunity structures available to social activists depend on such factors. First, we distinguish between insider and outsider activists, and the implications of their corresponding contexts. The high dependence of insider activists (full members of the target organization, such as employees, shareholders, or university students) implies higher barriers to voicing grievances, recruiting participants, and deploying disruptive tactics as opposed to outsider activists (non-members of the target organization, such as social movement participants). However, the high knowledge level of insider activists suggests a more focused lobbying and effective framing of claims and goals towards the values and culture of an organization. The mechanisms invoked by insider activists include persuasion and education (Briscoe et al., 2014; Creed et al., 2002; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Raeburn, 2004). Outsider activists, lacking the structural power and access to channels for change, are more dependent on media coverage to drive public opinion and draw the establishment's attention. Such movements that have been successful invoked disruption of reputation and resources as the mechanism whereas outsider activists engage the disruption of reputations and resources (Luders, 2006; Ingram et al., 2010). Other factors like the methods of communication and sociopolitical context are salient to the efficacy of a social movement (Dalton et al., 2010).

In the process of targeting organizations, activists bring about a range of direct and indirect effects. Protest tactics move news agendas, frames, and discourse either by amassing public support towards facilitating social and political change (Gillion, 2020; Reny & Newman, 2021) or fostering public fear that has the opposite effect (Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2020; Wasow, 2020). Their spillover effects can extend to other mobilizations, markets, or organizational entities. This conceptualization illustrates the interplay of context and the strategies, resource mobilization, networks, and collective behavior of a social movement. The influence of such cases of organization-driven activism is most evident in the adoption of changes in higher education, LGBT employee policies, widespread environmental conservation practices, and corporate social responsibility initiatives.

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