

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLICY CHANGE: UNDERSTANDING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ACTIVISM AND LEGISLATION

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Abstract

Social movements have long played a pivotal role in advocating for social, political, and economic change, often serving as a catalyst for policy reform. This paper examines the relationship between activism and legislation, focusing on the processes through which social movements influence policy change. By exploring key theoretical frameworks, such as Resource Mobilization Theory, Political Process Theory, and Framing Theory, the paper highlights how social movements mobilize resources, create political pressure, and shape public discourse to achieve legislative outcomes. Case studies, including the Civil Rights Movement, feminist movements, LGBTQ+ rights activism, and climate change advocacy, illustrate the practical implications of these theories. This study discusses the factors that impact the success of movements, including media influence, political environment, and leadership. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between social movements and legislative change, contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of activism in shaping public policy.

Keywords: *Social Movements, Policy Change, Activism, Legislation, Resource Mobilization Theory, Political Process Theory, Framing Theory, Civil Rights Movement, Feminist Movement.*

Introduction

Social movements have long been critical drivers of societal change, challenging established power structures, advocating for justice, and influencing the development of public policies. These movements are collective, organized efforts by individuals or groups to promote or resist specific social, political, or cultural changes. Over time, they have addressed a wide range of issues, from civil rights and gender equality to environmental sustainability and labor rights. The relationship between social movements and policy change is both complex and multifaceted, and understanding how activism leads to tangible legislative reform remains an essential topic of inquiry. Historically, social movements have been instrumental in effecting major shifts in legal and political frameworks. One of the clearest examples is the American Civil Rights Movement, which led to the passage of significant legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Similarly, the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s achieved major legal victories regarding workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, and gender equality (Fraser, 2009). More recently, the LGBTQ+ rights movement has succeeded in advancing marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws (Rupp & Taylor, 2012). These instances highlight the potential for social movements to influence the political agenda and affect legislative change. However, the mechanisms through which social movements accomplish these changes remain complex and varied.

Social movements, as the literature shows, do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they interact with the political, economic, and social environments in which they are situated. Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) emphasizes that the success of social movements is largely dependent on the availability of resources such as money, labor, and access to influential networks. A well-funded and well-organized movement can exert greater influence on political structures, mobilize large segments of the population, and apply sustained pressure on policymakers. Political Process Theory, developed by Tilly (1978), argues that the political opportunities available to movements such as shifts in public opinion, elite allies, or changes in government composition are critical to their success. Movements thrive when they can take advantage of favorable political contexts, such as during times of political instability or when a sympathetic party is in power.

Framing Theory (Snow & Benford, 1988) suggests that the way social movements define their goals and the narratives they construct play a significant role in their ability to mobilize public support and influence policymakers. Framing issues in ways that resonate with the broader public, align with national values, or emphasize moral imperatives can amplify the movement's appeal and make its demands more difficult for policymakers to ignore. These theoretical perspectives underline the importance of strategic mobilization, political context, and effective framing in translating grassroots activism into formal legislative outcomes. Despite these insights, understanding the conditions under which movements successfully influence policy remains an ongoing challenge. Scholars have pointed to various factors that impact the effectiveness of social movements, such as the media's role in shaping public perception and the political landscape's responsiveness to social change (Cohen & Arieli, 2020). The increasing importance of social media in contemporary activism has reshaped how movements operate, enabling them to bypass traditional media channels and reach a global audience (Tufekci, 2017). Similarly, the political environment, including institutional structures, party politics, and elite resistance, can either facilitate or hinder policy change (Tarrow, 1998).

The dynamic between social movements and legislation is not always linear, and not all movements lead to immediate policy changes. For example, the environmental justice movement has struggled with securing large-scale legislative change despite decades of advocacy and growing public concern over climate change (Bulkeley & Newell, 2010). This indicates that while activism can influence political discourse, achieving policy change often requires sustained efforts, coalition-building, and aligning with political opportunities. This paper aims to offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between social movements and policy change. It will explore how movements use resources, engage in advocacy, frame their demands, and navigate political landscapes to achieve legislative reform. Through an examination of key case studies, such as the Civil Rights Movement, feminist movements, LGBTQ+ rights, and climate activism, we will explore the factors that contribute to the success or failure of social movements in shaping public policy. By considering these elements, this research will shed light on the mechanisms through which social movements drive social, political, and legislative change, contributing to a broader understanding of their impact on contemporary governance.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between social movements and policy change has been extensively studied through several theoretical lenses. These theories help us understand how movements operate, how they gain traction, and how they can influence policy outcomes. In this section, we discuss four key theories that provide important insights into the dynamics between activism and legislative change: Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), Political Process Theory (PPT), Framing Theory, and New Social Movement Theory (NSMT). Each of these theoretical frameworks offers unique perspectives on the mechanisms through which social movements impact the policy process.

1. Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT)

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), developed by McCarthy and Zald in the 1970s, focuses on the role of resources in the success of social movements. According to RMT, social movements are more likely to succeed when they are able to effectively mobilize resources such as money, labor, knowledge, and access to political elites (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This theory asserts that the success or failure of movements is closely tied to the availability and strategic use of these resources. A key assumption of RMT is that social movements are rational actors that behave strategically in pursuit of their goals. They must not only gain the support of the public but also ensure that they have the organizational structure to manage resources and mobilize participants. In this sense, RMT emphasizes the importance of organizational capacity, including leadership, institutional support, and the ability to create alliances with other groups (McAdam, 1982).

The theory also highlights the role of external resources, such as donations, volunteers, and support from sympathetic political elites, as critical to the success of a movement. This perspective contrasts with earlier views that portrayed social movements as purely spontaneous or driven by unorganized popular passions. Instead, RMT suggests that a movement's ability to convert resources into influence is central to its impact on public policy. While RMT has been influential, it has also faced criticism for its focus on organizational structure and resources at the expense of understanding the broader cultural and political contexts in which movements operate. Critics argue that the theory overlooks the ways in which social movements create meaning and transform the public discourse (Polletta, 2002). Nonetheless, RMT remains valuable in highlighting the critical role that resources play in facilitating political engagement and advocacy.

2. Political Process Theory (PPT)

Political Process Theory, developed by Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam, argues that social movements succeed or fail based on the political context in which they operate (Tilly, 1978). PPT emphasizes the importance of political opportunities, elite alignment, and the ability of movements to exploit changes in the political landscape. Unlike RMT, which focuses on resources, PPT highlights the role of external political conditions, such as the openness of political institutions, elite opposition, and shifts in public opinion. One of the central tenets of PPT is the idea of political opportunities—periods when the political system is more susceptible to change. These opportunities can arise from various factors, including shifts in government leadership, economic crises, or social movements that challenge the status quo. Movements are more likely to succeed when they capitalize on these moments of political openness.

For example, movements are often more successful when a political regime faces internal instability, or when the government is experiencing a crisis and may be more receptive to reforms (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). PPT also underscores the role of political elites in shaping the success of movements. Social movements are often in direct competition with other interest groups, and their ability to form alliances with sympathetic elites or parties can significantly enhance their influence on policy. However, movements that encounter elite resistance or are ignored by key political actors are less likely to achieve their objectives. While PPT provides important insights into the political context of movements, it has been critiqued for focusing primarily on the external environment and for overlooking the internal dynamics of movements, such as how they organize and mobilize supporters. Nonetheless, it is invaluable for understanding how movements interact with the larger political system and how political opportunities shape their strategies and outcomes.

3. Framing Theory

Framing Theory, primarily developed by Erving Goffman (1974) and later expanded by Snow and Benford (1988), focuses on the role of interpretation and discourse in the success of social movements. According to framing theory, social movements frame their issues in specific ways to resonate with potential supporters, influencing how the public and policymakers perceive the movement's goals and demands. Framing refers to the process by which movements construct meanings around particular issues and present them in ways that are likely to mobilize action. Snow and Benford (1988) identified three key types of framing: diagnostic framing (identifying the problem), prognostic framing (proposing a solution), and motivational framing (motivating people to take action). Effective framing can help a movement define its cause in ways that appeal to mainstream values, gain the support of influential actors, and resonate with the broader public. Framing also involves the ability to reframe existing discourses to challenge dominant ideologies or portray an issue in a new light. For example, the Civil Rights Movement reframed the issue of racial inequality by focusing on human rights and moral justice, thereby making it more difficult for policymakers to ignore the movement's demands. Similarly, the LGBTQ+ rights movement has framed issues of discrimination as matters of equality, justice, and human dignity, which has helped shift public opinion and influence legal reforms.

However, framing theory has faced some criticisms, particularly for its focus on the subjective construction of issues while underemphasizing the material and structural conditions that may limit a movement's ability to shape discourse. Critics argue that framing may be insufficient on its own to achieve significant policy change without the support of broader political and economic structures (Benford & Snow, 2000). Nonetheless, framing remains crucial for understanding how social movements craft messages that resonate with audiences and gain traction.

4. New Social Movement Theory (NSMT)

New Social Movement Theory (NSMT) emerged in the 1980s as a response to traditional social movement theories that primarily focused on economic issues and class struggle. NSMT shifts the focus to cultural, identity-based movements that address issues related to social values, individual rights, and environmental sustainability. Scholars like Alain Touraine (1981) and Jurgen Habermas (1987) argued that these movements are shaped by changes in post-industrial society, where traditional class-based struggles have given way to struggles over identity, culture, and lifestyle. NSMT suggests that the rise of new social movements is a response to the changing nature of power in modern societies, where individuals and groups seek recognition and self-expression rather than solely economic or material benefits. These movements often challenge hegemonic social norms, such as those related to gender, sexuality, race, and the environment. For example, feminist movements, environmental activists, and LGBTQ+ rights groups are all examples of movements that engage with cultural and symbolic issues in addition to advocating for policy reform. One key aspect of NSMT is the emphasis on collective identity.

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Movements based on shared identity whether national, ethnic, or social are seen as powerful because they provide a sense of solidarity and belonging. This identity fosters a collective consciousness that motivates action and enables movements to gain social and political influence. NSMT also stresses the importance of networked organizational structures, as these movements often do not have centralized leadership and instead rely on decentralized, grassroots networks. While NSMT provides valuable insights into the nature of post-industrial social movements, it has been criticized for idealizing the role of culture and identity in shaping political action, sometimes neglecting the structural constraints and material interests that still influence many movements. Additionally, NSMT has been seen as overly focused on specific movements in Western contexts, which may not be universally applicable. The theoretical frameworks of Resource Mobilization Theory, Political Process Theory, Framing Theory, and New Social Movement Theory provide complementary insights into the ways in which social movements influence policy change. These theories emphasize the importance of resources, political opportunities, framing, and identity in shaping the success of movements. By considering these perspectives, scholars and activists can gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that drive social change and the factors that contribute to the achievement of legislative reform. Each theory, with its strengths and limitations, offers valuable tools for analyzing the complex relationship between activism and policy, and together they provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how movements can reshape public policy.

Policy Change Mechanisms

Social movements play an essential role in driving policy change by influencing public opinion, shifting political discourse, and applying pressure on policymakers. The process through which social movements achieve policy reform is complex, involving multiple mechanisms that interact with the political system. These mechanisms often reflect the movement's strategic efforts to align its goals with the political, social, and economic context in which it operates. Understanding the policy change mechanisms utilized by social movements requires an exploration of the different avenues through which activism impacts legislation. This includes media mobilization, coalition building, public opinion shaping, legal challenges, lobbying, and electoral influence. Together, these strategies demonstrate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of social movement engagement with policymaking processes.

1. Media Mobilization and Public Discourse

One of the primary mechanisms through which social movements influence policy change is through media mobilization. Social movements strategically use the media to frame their issues, raise awareness, and garner public support. The media serves as a key channel for amplifying the demands of movements and putting pressure on policymakers. This can include traditional media outlets such as television, radio, and print, as well as digital platforms like social media and blogs. The power of media in shaping public discourse and policy agendas is significant. Movements often employ framing techniques to present their issues in a manner that resonates with the general public. For example, the Civil Rights Movement used powerful visual imagery, including television broadcasts of violent confrontations, to evoke emotional responses and gain widespread support for legal reforms (Gitlin, 2003). The media's role in constructing narratives around issues of social justice, inequality, and human rights can make it difficult for policymakers to ignore the movement's demands. In the digital age, social media has become an increasingly important tool for activism. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow movements to bypass traditional media channels and engage directly with a global audience. Social movements like the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo have used social media to mobilize protests, spread their messages, and put pressure on policymakers in real-time (Tufekci, 2017). The viral nature of social media campaigns enables rapid mobilization, making it an indispensable tool for modern activism.

2. Coalition Building and Alliances

Coalition building is another crucial mechanism that social movements employ to amplify their influence and push for policy change. By forming alliances with other movements, interest groups, advocacy organizations, and sympathetic political actors, social movements can increase their organizational capacity, extend their reach, and create a unified front to challenge the status quo. Coalitions enhance the strategic leverage of social movements by pooling resources, sharing information, and broadening the base of support. They can increase the legitimacy of a movement by connecting it with other causes and groups that align with similar values or objectives. The effectiveness of coalitions is often dependent on the ability of different groups to overcome differences in ideology, priorities, and tactics. For instance, the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s worked alongside labor movements, civil rights organizations, and LGBTQ+ groups to advocate for broader social and legal reforms

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(Mansbridge, 1998). Such alliances can create a more powerful political force capable of influencing the policymaking process. Coalitions can influence political decisions by exerting pressure on policymakers through collective action, mass protests, lobbying, and public demonstrations. They often act as intermediaries, mobilizing constituents, organizing demonstrations, and facilitating direct engagement with policymakers. When a coalition is large and diverse enough, it can create a compelling case for policymakers to support changes that benefit a broad constituency.

3. Public Opinion Shaping

Social movements also influence policy change by shaping public opinion and altering societal norms. Public opinion plays a significant role in the policymaking process, as elected officials are responsive to the views and preferences of their constituents. As social movements work to raise awareness and shift public sentiment, they create a political environment where policymakers are incentivized to respond to these shifts. The relationship between public opinion and policy is evident in many social movements that have contributed to changing societal attitudes and fostering legislative change. For example, the legalization of same-sex marriage in many countries was facilitated in part by a significant shift in public opinion on LGBTQ+ rights. Movements such as the fight for marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws used media campaigns, advocacy, and grassroots mobilization to change the cultural and political discourse around LGBTQ+ issues (Cohen & Arieli, 2020). As public support for these issues grew, lawmakers faced increasing pressure to align their policies with changing societal norms. Through direct action, protests, and advocacy campaigns, social movements can influence public perception and encourage the electorate to push for policy change. For instance, environmental movements have successfully raised public awareness about climate change and environmental degradation, leading to greater demand for climate action from political leaders. As public concerns grow, political leaders may feel the need to enact policies that reflect the electorate's priorities, leading to tangible legislative change.

4. Legal Challenges and Litigation

Legal challenges and litigation are another mechanism through which social movements can influence policy change. Social movements often use the courts to challenge existing laws, demand enforcement of existing protections, or create new legal precedents that influence public policy. By pursuing legal avenues, movements can have a direct impact on the interpretation and application of laws that affect marginalized groups. Litigation has played a pivotal role in advancing civil rights, gender equality, and environmental justice. In the U.S., landmark court cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Roe v. Wade* (1973) were critical to shaping public policy on racial segregation and reproductive rights, respectively. The legal system can act as a powerful tool for social movements, particularly when political institutions are resistant to reform. In many cases, the judicial branch provides an alternative path for social movements to achieve their goals when legislative or executive actions are stalled. Successful legal challenges can set important precedents that influence future policy decisions. The litigation strategy not only seeks legal victories but can also shift public awareness and set the stage for broader legislative reforms. For example, the series of legal victories achieved by the LGBTQ+ rights movement has significantly influenced public opinion and provided a foundation for subsequent policy changes in favor of marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws.

5. Lobbying and Direct Engagement with Policymakers

Lobbying and direct engagement with policymakers represent another important mechanism through which social movements influence policy change. Movements that have established political capital and organizational resources often engage in lobbying to directly influence legislation. Lobbying efforts can involve meeting with lawmakers, presenting research, drafting policy proposals, and mobilizing supporters to contact elected officials. Effective lobbying requires movement leaders to understand the political landscape, build relationships with key policymakers, and align the movement's goals with the interests of political elites or parties in power. Social movements often work with political allies to advance their legislative agendas and negotiate with government officials to draft laws that align with the movement's goals. Lobbying can also involve grassroots mobilization efforts, where large numbers of supporters engage with elected officials and press for specific policy changes. In some cases, social movements employ "insider" tactics, working closely with lawmakers, while others rely on "outsider" tactics, such as protests or public demonstrations, to pressure legislators into action. The combination of both strategies can often be a powerful tool for achieving legislative change, as seen in movements like the environmental and gun control movements, which use a combination of lobbying, public demonstrations, and media advocacy to advance their agendas.

6. Electoral Influence and Political Realignment

Finally, social movements can influence policy change by mobilizing voters and affecting electoral outcomes. Through voter education, mobilization campaigns, and political endorsements, social movements can shift the political landscape by electing representatives who are sympathetic to their causes. This is particularly important in democratic systems, where elections determine the composition of legislative bodies and the implementation of policy agendas. Movements can encourage voter turnout and campaign for candidates who support their policy objectives, such as candidates advocating for climate change action, criminal justice reform, or universal healthcare. Electoral influence is especially crucial when movements can align themselves with emerging political coalitions or parties, thereby ensuring that their demands are represented in government.

The Black Lives Matter movement has played an influential role in shaping discussions around police reform and racial justice by mobilizing voters, endorsing political candidates, and pushing for policy changes through electoral politics (Oliver & Ha, 2018). Similarly, the environmental movement has pushed for greater representation in the political arena through advocacy for candidates who prioritize climate action. Social movements employ a variety of mechanisms to influence policy change, ranging from media mobilization and coalition building to legal challenges, lobbying, and electoral engagement. The success of these mechanisms depends on the political environment, the movement's organizational capacity, and its ability to build alliances with key actors and institutions. In today's interconnected world, social movements are increasingly able to leverage digital platforms and networks to amplify their messages, create awareness, and shape public opinion. While the path to policy change is often slow and complex, these mechanisms represent the essential strategies that movements use to exert pressure on political systems and achieve transformative legal reforms.

Case Studies of Social Movements and Policy Change

Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

The American Civil Rights Movement is one of the most iconic examples of how social movements can achieve significant policy changes. The movement's efforts led to landmark legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Key to the movement's success was its ability to gain widespread media attention, mobilize grassroots support, and apply sustained political pressure on elected officials. The role of leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., the involvement of organizations like the NAACP, and the strategic use of nonviolent protests helped catalyze public support for racial equality and contributed to legal reforms.

Feminist Movement (1960s-Present)

The feminist movement, particularly the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, succeeded in pushing forward legislative reforms related to gender equality, such as Title IX (prohibiting sex discrimination in education) and the Equal Pay Act. By challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for women's rights in areas like workplace equality, reproductive rights, and sexual autonomy, the movement has had a profound impact on public policies across the world. The feminist movement's ability to frame gender inequality as both a moral and legal issue helped it gain traction in both public discourse and legislative processes.

LGBTQ+ Rights Movement (1980s-Present)

The LGBTQ+ rights movement has achieved significant milestones in recent decades, including marriage equality, anti-discrimination laws, and broader social acceptance. The movement's success in influencing policy, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States, is a testament to the strategic framing of issues related to equality and human rights. The coalition-building strategies used by LGBTQ+ advocacy groups, including alliances with mainstream political organizations, have allowed the movement to navigate political opportunities and achieve legal victories.

Climate Change Movement (2000s-Present)

The global climate change movement has gained substantial momentum in recent years, advocating for policies to mitigate the impacts of climate change, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and transition to renewable energy. Major international agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement reflect the success of global activism in influencing national policies. Movements such as Fridays for Future, led by young activists like Greta Thunberg, have contributed to the political pressure that has led to a growing recognition of climate change as an urgent issue. However, challenges remain in translating activism into concrete legislative changes due to political and economic factors.

Factors Influencing the Success of Social Movements in Achieving Policy Change

1. **Media and Public Opinion:** Media plays a critical role in amplifying the messages of social movements and influencing public opinion. Movements that can gain media attention and frame their issues effectively are more likely to create the public pressure needed for policy changes.
2. **Political Environment:** The political context in which movements operate can either facilitate or hinder policy change. A government open to reform or a shift in political power can create favorable conditions for activism to translate into legislative change.
3. **Leadership and Organizational Structure:** Movements with strong leadership and effective organizational structures are often more successful in achieving policy change. Charismatic leaders can attract attention and rally support, while well-organized movements can effectively lobby and advocate for policy reforms.
4. **Institutional Engagement:** Movements that engage with formal political institutions such as by providing expert testimony, participating in legislative hearings, or collaborating with sympathetic politicians are more likely to succeed in influencing legislation.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricate relationship between social movements and policy change, highlighting the various mechanisms through which activism can influence legislation. Social movements are crucial drivers of social and political transformation, using strategies such as media mobilization, coalition building, public opinion shaping, legal challenges, lobbying, and electoral influence to pressure policymakers and effect change. By framing issues, organizing protests, leveraging resources, and aligning with political allies, social movements can push their agendas into the legislative agenda, often leading to significant reforms. While the path to policy change is complex and fraught with challenges, these movements play an essential role in shaping public discourse, influencing policy decisions, and promoting justice and equality. The interplay between activism and legislation is dynamic and multifaceted, with each movement finding its own blend of strategies that respond to both the political context and the movement's specific goals. Ultimately, the success of social movements in achieving policy change underscores the power of collective action in reshaping societal norms and pushing for legislative reforms that reflect evolving public needs and values. Through sustained efforts and strategic engagement, social movements continue to be a powerful force in advancing policy changes that promote social justice and equity.

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