UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 15

Social Movements, Protest and Revolution

Why people act together, and when it works

Oxter Press · Teaching slides · Version 1.0, October 2026

OPENING PUZZLE

Anger without protest

The grievance

Many people are angry about a policy.

The puzzle

Few take to the streets.

Ask: why is widespread grievance not enough?

OLSON · THE COLLECTIVE-ACTION PROBLEM

> *“Rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests.”*

Olson (1965), p. 2, unless the group is small or there is coercion or another special device

Ostrom (1990): communities can solve the problem with rules they make.

Two more explanations

Preference falsification

People conceal views when expression is costly (Kuran, 1991).

Thresholds

People join once enough others do (Granovetter, 1978).

Small shifts can produce sudden cascades.

WHAT MOVEMENTS NEED

Resources and opportunities

Resources

Money, skills, organisations (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

Infrastructure

Churches supplied leaders and networks (Morris, 1984).

Opportunity

Openings and a changing sense of the possible (McAdam, 1982).

FRAMING AND IDENTITY

Making a grievance political

Diagnostic

What is wrong, and who is to blame?

Prognostic

What should be done?

Motivational

Why act now?

Benford and Snow (2000); collective identity sustains commitment (Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

Disruption, structure and networks

Disruption

Poor people’s movements gain most by disrupting (Piven and Cloward, 1977).

Structurelessness

Informal elites form without formal rules (Freeman, 1972).

Networks

Fast to scale, fragile to sustain (Tufekci, 2017).

CIVIL RESISTANCE

Does nonviolence work?

The finding

Major nonviolent campaigns, 1900–2006, succeeded roughly twice as often as violent ones.

The mechanism

Broader participation and defections from regime supporters.

Chenoweth and Stephan (2011).

REPRESSION

Does it suppress or provoke?

Consistent

Governments reliably respond to challenges with repression.

Variable

Its effects on dissent differ widely (Davenport, 2007).

Ask: what did repression do in your timeline?

> *“Rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures.”*

Skocpol (1979), p. 4

State crisis plus revolts from below; Tilly’s revolutionary situation is multiple sovereignty.

WHAT COUNTS AS SUCCESS?

Two dimensions of outcome

Acceptance

The challenger is recognised as a legitimate representative.

New advantages

The constituency gains concrete benefits.

Gamson (1975): a movement can win one without the other.

SEMINAR TASK · 25 MINUTES

Why does grievance not become protest?

1. Group A argues the free-rider explanation.
2. Group B argues preference falsification.
3. Group C argues thresholds.

THIS WEEK'S ESSAY

Is nonviolence more effective than violence?

Plan

Chenoweth and Stephan's data and mechanism.

Test

Selection, definitions and counter-cases.

Judge

A strategic advantage, under which conditions?

1,500 words maximum · Student Pack: essay questions