# Political Women

## The Women's movement, political institutions, the battle for women's suffrage and the ERA

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Routledge Research in Gender and History

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# Political Women

Under what conditions are political elites responsive to social movements, and when do social movements gain access to political elites? This book explores this question with regard to the women's movement in the U.S., asking under what conditions are Congress and the presidency responsive to the women's movement, and when will the women's movement gain access to Congress and the presidency?

The book systematically compares the relations between political leaders and each of the three waves of the women's movement – 1848–1889, 1890–1928, and 1960–1985, in light of the political dynamics that each wave faced. The author utilizes perspectives and methods from the fields of Political Science, Sociology, and History to illustrate the ways in which changing political dynamics impacted the battle for both women's suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment. The book clearly demonstrates the importance of a dynamic institutional analysis of social movement–political elite relations. The author argues that without such an analysis we cannot fully understand the conditions under which legislation of interest to movements will be lobbied for by presidents, introduced into Congress, granted hearings, receive favorable reports, and be reported to the floors of the House and Senate.

A significant addition to the study of women's history and American Studies, *Political Women* illustrates the important roles that political leaders played in the battle for women's suffrage and the ERA and demonstrates the political savvy among women suffrage activists who recognized the institutional barriers present in the U.S. political system and fought to overcome them.

**Alana S. Jeydel** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Oregon State University. She has published research on the impact of women in the U.S. Congress in *Political Research Quarterly* and her work on the women's movement in the United States has appeared in *Congress and the Presidency* and *White House Studies*. She is currently co-authoring a book, *Participation and Protest: Women and Politics from a Global Perspective* with Dr. Sarah Henderson.

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# Abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| AERA | American Equal Rights Association |
| AFL-CIO | American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations |
| AWSA | American Woman Suffrage Association |
| CEO | chief executive officer |
| CPOS | closed political opportunity structure |
| CU | Congressional Union |
| EEOC | Equal Employment Opportunity Commission |
| EO | Executive Order |
| ERA | Equal Rights Amendment |
| GFWC | General Federation of Women's Clubs |
| NAWSA | National American Woman Suffrage Association |
| NOW | National Organization for Women |
| NWP | National Woman's Party |
| NWSA | National Woman Suffrage Association |
| OPOS | open political opportunity structure |
| POS | political opportunity structure |
| RM | resource mobilization |
| SMO | social movement organization |
| STMA | Sheppard–Towner Maternity Act |
| UAW | United Auto Workers |
| WCTU | Women's Christian Temperance Union |
| WEAL | Women's Equity Action League |

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# 1 Introduction

Under what conditions are political elites responsive to social movements, and when do social movements gain access to political elites? Political scientist Michael Lipsky once asked: 'Under what conditions will relatively powerless groups receive official recognition and responsiveness? . . . Formulation of such questions directs attention to *describing contexts and political constellations* in which the American political system is more or less open and responsive' (emphasis added).[1] Almost thirty-five years later this question has not been adequately answered. This research explores the ebb and flow of political elite responsiveness (to social movements) and social movement access (to political elites) through a comparative longitudinal analysis of the three waves of the women's movement: 1848–89, 1890–1928 and 1960–85. It focuses on the political opportunity structure as a major determinant of the degree of responsiveness and access, and as a key determinant of relations between social movements and political elites. The political opportunity structure is a term used to describe the political climate and institutional arrangements of a political system. It is composed of the level of electoral stability, level of unity among elites, mass opinion and powers granted to party leaders.[2] How these indicators are measured is discussed in Chapter 3. Political elites are those individuals who are either elected or appointed members of the institutional political system at the national, state and local level, and who also have the ability to exercise power in the political system.[3] This includes, but is not limited to, elected representatives, heads of state and bureaucratic leaders. More will be said on political elites in Chapter 3.

This volume enters into two debates in the literature, one concerning access and responsiveness, the other concerning the nature of relations between social movements and political elites.

On one side of the debate regarding responsiveness and access is the work of political process/political opportunity theorists, like Costain, Jenkins, McAdam, Piven and Cloward, and Tarrow (among others). They argue that the state of the political opportunity structure accounts for, in large part, the degree of both social movement access to political elites and political elites' responsiveness to social movements.[4] On the other side of the debate are resource mobilization theorists, like Freeman, McCarthy and Zald, and Jenkins and Perrow, who argue that the level of available resources in society, along with the presence or absence of

movement entrepreneurs and external allies (leaders of interest groups, labour unions, etc.), accounts for, in large part, the degree of access and responsiveness.[5]

This study addresses this debate by showing that both theories are useful when combined, but incomplete when taken alone. The assumption in resource mobilization theory that external allies are necessary in gaining access to political elites is helpful in explaining how social movements gain access. Where resource mobilization theorists are lacking is in their analysis of when allies will emerge among the political elite. This is where political process/political opportunity theory enters. Political elites will be more responsive to social movements when the political opportunity structure is open(ing).

This research also identifies and specifies aspects of the political opportunity structure that condition social movement access to, response from and interaction with political elites. The literature is replete with discussions of the political opportunity structure,[6] and among scholars studying it there exists a general acceptance and understanding of the variables that define it.[7] There is no satisfactory operationalization of these variables, however, and without this it is impossible for scholars to test the validity of the concept of a political opportunity structure. The research informing this study seeks to overcome this problem.

This research also attempts to reconcile the debate concerning the nature of relations between social movements and political elites. On one side lie political opportunity theorists, like Costain, McAdam, and Piven and Cloward, who argue that relations with political elites are detrimental to social movements, as political elites attempt to push social movements in more politically orthodox directions, thereby diffusing their potential for more radical, far-reaching change.[8] On the other side are resource mobilization theorists who view political elites as not only helpful to movements but as active proponents of their causes. In the middle lie other political opportunity theorists, like Tarrow, who neither discourage nor embrace relations with elites, but simply argue that they are inevitable. This research untangles these differences by showing that the political opportunity structure is a key determinant of the relations between social movements and political elites.[9]

To examine these theories, this study analyses three different phases of the women's movement: 1848–89, 1890–1928 and 1960–85. The year 1848 marks the dawn of the women's movement (and this wave) because the first woman's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848; 1889 is considered the end of this wave because it marks the end of the separation of the two leading suffrage organizations, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). The second wave begins in 1890 because that was the year the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was formed, born of the merger between NWSA and AWSA. The birth of NAWSA marks the beginning of a unified woman suffrage movement.

The end of the second wave is signified by 1928. At that date, the women's movement was no longer able to speak with a unified voice, because it was made up of too many diverse groups that could no longer concur on a common purpose

or goal in the post-suffrage era. It is also the year that the Sheppard–Towner Maternity Act (STMA) lapsed. Under the STMA, money was to be given to the states to promote welfare and hygiene during maternity and infancy. The lapse of this act marks the end of a period of government attention to women's issues (suffrage, maternity, child welfare).

John F. Kennedy was elected President in 1960 and, in 1961, created the President's Commission on the Status of Women. This commission was designed to show that the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was unnecessary, but its ultimate result was to help spawn the women's movement. The President's Commission brought women together to discuss their problems, created the notion that government would be responsive, spurred the creation of mini-commissions in the states, and planted the seeds for a mass-based movement. In 1982, the ERA failed to get the necessary three-quarters of the states to ratify it. Over the next few years there were a few failed attempts to get the ERA through Congress again. The movement began focusing its energies elsewhere, and the movement quietened down. Consequently, 1985 is used as the last year of the wave. There was still activity on the part of women, but the movement had no rallying cry to motivate the troops.

While other work has examined a single or multiple phases of the women's movement, there has been no systematic comparison of the relations between political elites and each of the three waves, in light of the political opportunity structure each one faced. The fruits of such analysis may then be applied to the study of other social movements.

## Overarching questions

I expect that openings in the political opportunity structure permit movements to increase their impact and influence upon political elites and to achieve desired policy outcomes. Openings in the political opportunity structure occur when there is a combination of the following conditions: divisions among political elites, unstable political alignments, mass opinion favourable towards the social movement issue, and rules governing Congress that do not grant party leaders the power to assign members and chairs to committees, refer legislation, etc. (specific combinations discussed in Chapter 3). Openings in the political opportunity structure shift the balance of power among political elites, thereby disrupting the status quo. Political elites will be left scrambling to claim (or reclaim) their position in the political system. For instance, Costain argues that during an unstable political alignment 'politicians and political parties are actively involved in seeking out bases of political support. A group of newly organized people will be viewed as potential supporters by political entrepreneurs.'[10] Thus, during an unstable political alignment the women's movement had more leverage with political elites because 'as has been argued in relation to blacks, neither party could afford to forfeit competition for women's votes . . . '[11] Or, for example, one could argue that woman suffrage became more attainable after the General Federation of Women's Clubs, which boasted over 100,000 members, endorsed suffrage – politicians

seeking re-election (or election) recognized the potential of this voting bloc of women. Such a period of transition will offer social movements greater leverage with political elites.

Furthermore, I expect that during an open political opportunity structure (OPOS), there will exist multiple access points to political elites, thus offering a social movement more venues upon which to present and pursue their claims. As Costain notes, 'the structure of political opportunity for a women's movement had expanded rapidly in the early 1960s . . . Changing circumstances emanated from the president, Congress, executive agencies, and competing elites within the government and parties.'[12]

I also expect that social movements will experience little to no access to or response from political elites during a closed political opportunity structure (CPOS). A closed political opportunity structure will exist when few to none of the conditions that define an open political opportunity structure exist – i.e., no divisions exist among elites, there are either stable political alignments, or unstable ones where the political parties are not in need of the social movement's constituency,[13] mass opinion is not favourably disposed towards the movement's goal(s), and party leaders in Congress have the power to assign members and chairs to committees, refer legislation, etc. A closed political opportunity structure will mean that a social movement's resources (votes, constituents, cause, etc.) are of no use to political elites. Thus, social movements will have little access to or responsiveness from political elites. As McAdam notes regarding the lack of black electoral influence, despite their numerical strength, from 1876–1930 'the geographic alignment of political loyalties, coupled with disenfranchisement, destroyed whatever chance blacks might have had of mobilizing any semblance of national electoral leverage'.[14]

Furthermore, I expect that social movements will risk co-optation by political elites when they enter into relations with them during a closed political opportunity structure. If a closed political opportunity structure exists, social movements may be forced to rely on political elites in hopes that they will champion the social movement's cause. This alliance, however, may be made on terms that are less than favourable for the social movement's goals. Political elites may have leverage in such a situation, and thus be in a position to dictate the terms of the alliance. During an open political opportunity structure, however, such co-optation by political elites is not inevitable as social movements have resources (and thus leverage) that political elites need at such times.

Finally, I also expect that there are different types of response from members of Congress and the President. There may be concrete responses – responses that specifically address the goals of a social movement (such as enactment into law of a bill). These responses are most likely during an open political opportunity structure, for the reasons discussed above. There may also be mixed responses – responses that address social movement concerns, but do not result in a concrete response (such as legislation or an executive order that creates an agency the purpose of which is beneficial to the social movement, but not its ultimate goal). Such responses are most likely to occur while a political opportunity structure is in

the process of opening or closing. During such periods the social movement has some leverage, but its resources are of only limited use to political elites. Finally, there may be co-optive responses – responses that try to assuage the social movement (e.g. verbal support, introduction of a bill that has a slim chance of passage). Such responses allow the member of Congress and/or the President to look good in the eyes of the social movement (and the public), and arguably may quell the social movement – it feels its concerns are being addressed and thus does not need to work so hard. Such responses are more likely during a closed political opportunity structure.

## Key research questions

Extant research on the political opportunity structure and social movements prompts the following questions. How do divisions within elites affect their relations with social movements? How does elite divisiveness affect social movement access to political elites and their responsiveness to social movements? Tarrow argues that social movements will tend to be more successful (gain more access) where party unity is weak.[15] For example, after the 1910 revolt the low levels of party unity in the House of Representatives arguably helped the suffrage movement influence parties and attain its goal.[16] This research examines the effect of party unity on access and response through an analysis of party unity in Congress from 1869–89, 1890–1928 and 1960–85, in conjunction with the actual access and response the women's movement received from Congress.

What is the effect of electoral instability on the relations between social movements and political elites? Costain, McAdam, Perrow and Jenkins, and Tarrow, argue that unstable political alignments (electoral instability) force political elites to find new constituents.[17] As Costain notes regarding the women's movement of the 1960s, 'the power of a mobilizing women's movement became greater relative to government because many alignments within the party system dissolved . . . The Democrats and Republicans were looking for organized blocs of voters to help build a new majority governing coalition.'[18] This research examines the effect of electoral stability on the relations between social movements and political elites through an analysis of the electoral conditions during each wave, in conjunction with the movement's access to and response from Congress and the Presidents.

Finally, how do the rules that govern Congress affect a social movement's ability to gain access to Congress or the types of responses it might receive from it? I expect that when rules grant party leadership considerable power (ability to assign members to committees, ability to assign chairs of committees, ability to assign a bill to a specific committee, ability to decide whether a bill receives a hearing, etc.) then social movements may have a more difficult time gaining access to and see very little response from Congress.

In sum, I expect that social movements will gain little access to or response from Congress or Presidents, during a closed political opportunity structure. And, I expect that social movements will gain access to and response from Congress and

Presidents during an open political opportunity structure. Finally, I expect that movements risk co-optation during a closed political opportunity structure, and have a better chance of remaining autonomous during an open political opportunity structure.

## Notes

1. Michael Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally and Company, 1970), p. 13.
2. See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
3. This study focuses on political elites at the national level. Power in the political system will be defined as control over resources that may be used solely by elected and appointed members of government institutions. Such resources include, but are not limited to, the ability to vote yay or nay on any given piece of legislation, the ability to determine the composition of a committee in the legislature, the ability to determine the chairs of said committees, the ability to grant a hearing to groups lobbying the legislature and the ability to veto a piece of legislation.
4. Anne Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); J. Craig Jenkins, *The Politics of Insurgency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930–1970* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements* (New York: Vintage Books); Tarrow, *Power in Movement.*
5. Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1975); J. Craig Jenkins and Charles Perrow, 'Insurgency of the Powerless: Farm Workers Movements (1946–1972)', *American Sociological Review* 42 (1977), pp. 249–67; John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, 'Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: a Partial Theory', in *Social Movements in an Organizational Society*, Mayer Zald and John D. McCarthy (eds) (New Brunswick and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987), pp. 14–42.
6. See Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion*; Peter K. Eisenger, 'The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities', *American Political Science Review* 67 (1973), pp. 11–28; Jenkins and Perrow, 'Insurgency'; Herbert P. Kitschelt, 'Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies', *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (1986), pp. 57, 85; McAdam, *Political Process*; Tarrow, *Power in Movement.*
7. These include the level of electoral instability, level of unity among elites and the institutional arrangements of the state. But see the discussion in Chapter 2 of political process/opportunity theorists.
8. Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion*; McAdam, *Political Process*; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements.*
9. Tarrow, *Power in Movement.*
10. Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion*, p. 24.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 40.
13. For instance, during the Reconstruction era the Republican Party attempted to expand its constituency but it was interested only in extending the vote to blacks (and not to women), arguably because it hoped that blacks, if enfranchised by the Republican Party, would repay them with votes, whereas it may have felt that women, if enfranchised, would vote the way their husbands did. Furthermore, the Republican Party may have realized that it could get only one group enfranchised at a time and that to add women to the mix was to risk getting nothing at all.

14. McAdam, *Political Process*, p. 70.
15. Tarrow, *Power in Movement.*
16. David Morgan, *Suffragists and Democrats* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1972).
17. Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion*; McAdam, *Political Process*; Jenkins and Perrow, 'Insurgency'; Tarrow, *Power in Movement.*
18. Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion*, p. 136.

# 2 Theoretical context

A number of current theories attempt to explain the relations between social movements and political elites, including when social movements gain access to political elites and when political elites will be responsive to social movements. Most prominent among these are resource mobilization and political process theory/political opportunity theory. While exploring the literature concerning social movement–political elite relations we must also examine the process by which movements come into existence, maintain themselves and disperse. This will aid in understanding the questions regarding social movement–political elite relations. The three schools of thought that deal with questions of emergence, maintenance and dispersion are the classical, resource mobilization and political process/political opportunity schools.

## The classical model

The classical model emerged after the Second World War. This model is a psychological based model of discontent. It encompasses a number of different variations including mass society (Kornhauser), collective behaviour (Smelser; Turner and Killian), rising expectations (Davies) and relative deprivation (Gurr).[1] Though differences exist among these they all share a few common assumptions. All believe that a social movement is the result of some structural strain in society that leads to a disrupted psychological state in individuals and ultimately the creation of a social movement. Structural strain can be the result of such social changes as industrialization, rapid urbanization, economic depressions/recessions and war. Structural strain fosters feelings of tension and alienation from society. Members of society attempt to ameliorate these psychological tensions by coming together and forming a social movement. As Kornhauser argues, 'social atomization engenders strong feelings of alienation and anxiety, and therefore the disposition to engage in extreme behavior to escape from these tensions'.[2] Smelser echoes this sentiment, arguing, 'some form of strain must be present if an episode of collective behavior is to occur. The more severe the strain, moreover, the more likely is such an episode to appear.'[3] Social movement formation is seen to be the result of a need to relieve psychological tensions rather than the desire to achieve a political goal. As McAdam comments, 'the motivation for movement