

# Contentious Policy Making: A Framework

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# Power in Numbers

Contentious policy making requires **costly contribution** from a lot of individuals. Examples:

- 1 boycotting goods
- 2 attending protests
- 3 sit-ins
- 4 distributing pamphlets, sometimes illegally
- 5 writing graffiti on walls, sometimes illegally
- 6 armed resistance
- 7 suicide missions

**Routine channels** of policy making are often **less costly**: voting, signing petitions, attending a town hall meeting.

Routine versus contentious is not binary. Rather, there is a spectrum from fully routine to fully contentious.

# Participation Decisions

**Lost Cause Principle:** People do not contribute to a cause that they believe is sure to fail.

$$p \times B(e) - C(e).$$

- $0 \leq p \leq 1$  is the probability of success.  $e \geq 0$  is a contribution level.
- $B > 0$  is the value that an individual receives from contributing at a level  $e > 0$  to the cause..
- $C(e) > 0$  is the costs of exerting effort  $e > 0$ .

Reference: Shadmehr 2014; Morris and Shadmehr 2020.

# Lost Cause Principle

Expressive motives are not enough for sustained actions in support of lost causes.

**American Revolution:** Loyalist Nicholas Cresswell of VA, after the battle of Trenton: The minds of the people are much altered. A few days ago they had given up the cause for lost. Their late successes have turned the scale and now they are all liberty mad again (Rhodehamel 2001, 264).

Washington to the Congress: The honor of making a brave defense does not seem to be a sufficient stimulus, when the success is very doubtful and the falling into the Enemy's hands probable (Middlekauff 2005, 342).

- McAdam (1982), Civil Rights Movement: “cognitive liberation”
- Petersen (2001), Eastern Europe under Nazi and Communist rule
- Wood (2003), El Salvador: “pleasure in agency”
- Pearlman (2018), Syria: “joy of agency”

# Lost Cause Principle

Even God has had a difficult time convincing people to contribute when  $p$  is small.

**Torah:** Israel's refusal to fight with Amorites for land (Deut 1:26-33).

It is because the Lord hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt to hand us over to Amorites to destroy us.... The people are stronger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified up to heaven!

**Quran:** Has to promise heavenly support to raise  $p$ : 3,000 warrior angels, 5,000 warrior angels, etc. (3: 121-7).

# Lost Cause Principle

**More grievances do not translate into action**, e.g., more inequality does not mean more protest, because people may anticipate more resistance.

# Participation Decisions

## Free-Riding Principle:

- Does my contribution increase the chances of success? That is, does  $p$  depend on  $e$ ? Because, typically, an individual's contribution is very small relative to the total contribution:

$p(\text{total effort} + e)$  is almost the same as  $p(\text{total effort})$ .

## Free Riding: Non-excludable Benefits

If I favor a goal (extension of suffrage) and it is achieved by others' efforts, I'll enjoy the results without paying the costs:

- My payoff if I contribute:  $p_1 \times G - C$ , where  $G$  is the payoff from success that all will enjoy.
- My payoff if I don't contribute:  $p_2 \times G$ , where we recognize that  $p_1$  is almost the same as  $p_2$  (as we discussed in the last slide).

Then, I will not contribute. Instead, I free ride on other people's contributions and efforts that brings about that goal (e.g., suffrage for me, or the results of that suffrage for me).

E.g., during the revolutionary war throughout the 1780s, states regularly under-provide public goods much to the dismay of the Congress.

**There must be some SELECTIVE benefits, material or psychological, for me to participate in a movement whose fruits are non-excludable.**

## Free Riding: Selective Benefits

- My payoff if I contribute:  $p_1 \times (G + B) - C$ , where  $G$  is the payoff from success that all will enjoy, and  $B$  is selective benefits that only contributors enjoy.
- My payoff if I don't contribute:  $p_2 \times G$ , where we recognize that  $p_1$  is almost the same as  $p_2$  (as we discussed before).

Then, I will contribute when  $p_1 \times (G + B) - C > p_2 \times G$ , that is,  $p \times B - C > 0$ , where we recall that, more or less,  $p = p_1 = p_2$ . *B is the (excludable) selective benefit of contribution to a cause.*

Examples of selective incentives:

- **Material:** money, land, looting, favorable contracts, government offices.
- **Psychological:** being part of the making of history, serving justice, revenge, God's pleasure, afterlife prizes, feelings of honor, patriotism, implementing an ideology, defending liberty.

# Free Riding: Selective Benefits

Just because some policy change benefits a lot of people, it does not mean that it will be implemented. Without sufficient **selective benefits**, Free-riding can reduce the chances of change.

Reference: Dziuda et al. 2020

# Psychological Selective Benefits

- Framing: tapping into the existing culture:
  - You're a good Christian, this is a Christian thing to do (e.g., abolitionists). You're a good Marxist, this is what Marxism prescribes (e.g., lots of guerrilla fighters).
  - They insulted your honor (e.g., American Revolution, or some of the Southern yeomanry in the Civil War).
  - They have a plan to take away your basic liberties, do you want to be slaves? (American Revolution)
  - This is what someone that you admire would have done, e.g., Christ's sacrifice, Hossein's martyrdom in Shia, your fathers' courage.
  - Re-interpreting the culture, e.g., Islam was all about justice, and so is this movement.
- creating a culture: Early Islam and Christianity (often involves intangible afterlife promises), Woman Suffrage Movement. **Create value, and then use it.** Even here, cultural elements are essential: Mohammad borrowed credibility by repeatedly referring to Judaism and Christianity (to fend off "these are just old myths").

# Psychological Selective Benefits

**A key element of culture is religion. Don't ignore it. In the case of Islam, consistency of reforms with some version of the Sharia Law is essential.**

## Extra: Non-selective Psychological Benefits

- Even though you can make very little difference ( $p_2 - p_1 \approx 0$ ), all the world and the posterity will benefit,  $B \approx \infty$ .

Abraham Keteltas's 1777 sermon, "God Pleads His Cause" (Sandoz 1998, 579-605): America will be a glorious land of freedom, knowledge, and religion, an asylum for distressed, oppressed, and persecuted virtue. Let this exhilarating thought, fire your souls, and give new ardor and encouragement to your hopes—**you contend not only for your own happiness, for your dear relations; for the happiness of the present inhabitants of America; but you contend for the happiness of millions yet unborn.** Exert therefore, your utmost efforts, strain every nerve, do all you can to promote this cause.

Reference: Shadmehr 2019.

# Creating an Incentive Scheme

## Non-egalitarian Selective Benefit:

If all who contribute anything are equally patriotic, then all will contribute minimally: Because  $C(\text{large effort}) > C(\text{small effort})$ , if  $B(\text{large effort}) \approx B(\text{small effort})$ , then all do small effort. **Higher effort must yield higher selective benefit.**

E.g. from early Islam: Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) and receive no hurt, and those who strive and fight in the cause of Allah with their goods and their persons. Allah hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight with their goods and persons than to those who sit (at home). Unto all (in Faith) Hath Allah promised good: But those who strive and fight Hath He distinguished above those who sit (at home) by a special reward. (Quran 4:95)

Reference: Morris and Shadmehr 2020.

**God learns mechanism design:** The difference between the coarse reward-punishment scheme in Torah and fine-tuned scheme in Quran.

# Chances of Success

What goes into  $p$ ?

- 1 How much others will contribute? After all, my contribution is small.
- 2 Allies and coalitions: Large Players
- 3 Bystanders
- 4 Division among the status quo proponents
- 5 Goal, Compromise, Coalition

# Chances of Success I: Coordination

- What goes into  $p$ ? (1) How much others will contribute? After all, my contribution is small.

Suppose there are  $N$  potential contributors, and let  $A$  be the total contribution, so that  $A = e_1 + e_2 + \dots + e_N$ . Consider the decision of individual  $i$  who must decide how much effort/contribution  $e_i$  to put in.

$$\max_{e_i \geq 0} p(A) B(e_i) - C(e_i).$$

Higher  $A$  implies higher  $p(A)$ , which, in turn, makes contribution more attractive to individual  $i$ :

**Individuals' strategic interactions is a coordination problem.**

# Chances of Success I: Coordination

The more you contribute, the more I want to contribute. Implications:

- If I convince people that they are not alone in this, they do more.
- **Common knowledge** is of essence:

**I want it + you want it << I want it + you want it + we both know this.**



**Public information (i.e., the media) play a disproportionate role.**

**pamphlets, newspapers, radio, TV, taverns ⇒ common knowledge**

**Organization facilitate common knowledge.** 10 small organizations, each with a limited reach, trying to organize protest independently  
VERSUS one organization with a far wider reach. It is more than the credibility of “the right strategy,” it is about common knowledge.

Reference: Shadmehr and Bueno de Mesquita 2020 (same mechanisms, different context)

## Chances of Success II: Alliance

What goes into  $p$ ? (2) Is there alliances and coalitions with other powerful groups? Let  $E$  be the contribution of an allied group, e.g., WCTU for Woman's Suffrage Movement in America.

$$p(e_1 + e_2 + \dots + e_N + E) > p(e_1 + e_2 + \dots + e_N).$$

BUT

$$p(e_1 + e_2 + \dots + e_N) \approx p(e_2 + \dots + e_N).$$

Alliances feed back into the coordination cycles: If individual  $i$  believes that a coalition is made, and the new ally will contribute  $E \gg 0$ , then s/he realized that  $p$  is larger, and that others, too, realize that  $p$  is larger.

- But coalitions, sometimes, mean significant compromises (e.g., the Populist Party and the Democratic Party), causing a split in the original group (fusionists vs. mid-roaders in the Populist Party). (Does our simple  $pB - C$  formulation accommodate these issues? More later)

## Chances of Success III-IV: Bystanders & Divisions

- “Bystanders” (e.g., many Northern whites in the Civil Rights Movement) can make small contributions, e.g., vote one way or another:  $p$  increases.
- Divisions among the status quo supporters reduce their ability to counter:  $p$  increases.
  - Rivalry between establishment parties in democracies: competitive election between Democrats and Republicans.
  - Factions in the ruling parties dictatorships: hard-liners and soft-liners in Latin American military regimes.
  - Allies in the ruling group: Constantine’s conversion, or (somewhat similarly) Carter’s presidency and the Iranian Revolution.

Any kind of weakening the repressive apparatus of the state: e.g., WWI and the Tzarist Russia, periods of reform (Gorbachev) (de Tocqueville’s observation)

# Chances of Success V: Goal, Compromise, Coalition

The farther the goal is from the status quo, the less chance of compromise with the status quo supporters.

A **tradeoff** can arise in every movement:

- the further the goal from ideal, the less people are willing to contribute:  $B$  is smaller.
- the closer the goal to the status quo, the easier for the status quo supporters to compromise:  $p$  is larger. **But beware of splits in the existing coalition.**

The same issue arises when making coalitions. Finding the right balance is of essence.

- Examples: voting rights versus redistribution demands (civil rights movement), voting rights in local or school board elections versus legislature or gubernatorial elections (woman's suffrage movement), not taxing a few items vs. no right to tax (American Revolution).

# Optimal Tactic Design

We talked about  $p$  and  $B$ . What about  $e$ ? What does tactic correspond to in our  $p \times B(e) - C(e)$ ? Different tactics correspond to different contribution levels  $e$ .

**Extensive v. Intensive Margins:** A lot of contribution from few v. a little contribution from many

- Paul: how much contribution to join the movement? Requiring observance of the Jewish Law excludes most Gentiles. Islam: how far can you deviate from common practices?

**Generalization:** Trying to design many different contribution levels or only a few:

- Join our guerrillas in the mountains, or do nothing.
- wear a wristband of particular color, contribute a little money, participate in a demonstration, leave your door open to let protesters hide inside, write graffiti on walls, strike, sin in, assassinations, armed resistance, suicide bombing, etc.

# Optimal Tactic Design

Suppose there are two levels of contribution: Low  $\ll$  High. Some of those who do Low, would like to do more, but not as much as High. Some of those who do High would like to do less, but not as little as Low.

Suppose we create a third tactic corresponding to a Medium level of contribution: Low  $<$  Medium  $<$  High. Tradeoff:

- 1 Encourages some who would have otherwise contributed Low to switch to Medium.
- 2 But it also discourages some who would have otherwise contributed High to switch to Medium.

When repression/cost accelerates with higher contribution ( $C(e)$  is convex), more levels tend to be better. When decelerates ( $C(e)$  is concave), less levels tend to be better.

Reference: Morris and Shadmher 2018.

# Indiscriminate Repression

When the costs of contribution are similar for all levels of contribution (e.g., indiscriminate repression, either with us or against us), demand highest contribution possible.

- Conversely, calling all opponents deplorable, or all supporters of anti-immigration Nazis pushes people in the opposite direction.
  - Sometimes, this is to signal resolve and convictions to elicit more support from radical supporters. But it's a double-edged sword: may gain a little more support from radical supporters, but lose a lot of moderates.

## Extra: Tactics: Violence

Violence may signal (1) resolve, (2) lack of organization (riot), or (3) character of supporters, depending on the context.

- 1 IRA (Ireland), Taliban (Afghanistan), Hamas (Palestine), FLN (Algeria), Iranian Mojahedin, Iranian Fadaiyan (Marxist), Shining Path (Peru), etc.
  - Also, one goal could be to make the country ungovernable, thereby reducing the support of the current regime.
- 2 Most riots
- 3 White supremacists in the South during the Civil Rights Movement: no respect for law and order, no empathy. Boston Massacre in the American Revolution (perceived by many colonists that way).

## Extra: Tactics: Violence

A consequence is that the government (good or bad) will take a more aggressive stand toward the movement:

past violence makes it more difficult to credibly organize peaceful protest (“how can we trust the same won’t happen again?” or “how do we know that the militant wing is not among the protesters?”).

Perhaps that’s part of the strategy of using violence: forcing the government to respond with violence partly indiscriminately, thereby antagonizing the moderate opposition. E.g., Lincoln Park 1968 around DNC, the Middle East conflict.

# Information

- 1 About logistics of activities (e.g., protest time and location)
- 2 About the likelihood of success (related to 1).
- 3 About the status quo and the alternative (e.g., British plan to subdue America versus a harmonious republic, Stanton's Solitude of Self, Christianity and salvation)

## Key Persuasion Element

- **Conflict of interest:** “radicals” will have a hard time to persuade because they have more incentives to manipulate.
- Reputation
- Culture: e.g., difficult to convince a Marxist based on the Scripture.

Reference: Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2011, 2019.

# Information

Bystanders are often uncertain about the nature of the activists' demands and the intentions of the state that represses them.

- legitimate coercion

There is an information war between the opposition and the state:

- Opposition: we seek changes that benefits the public.
- State: we use coercion to protect the public against the opposition and their harmful demands.

E.g., ISIS and Assad, Taliban and the U.S. + Afghan government, the Shah and Khomeini, parts of the U.S. government and parts of the civil rights movement (e.g., FBI and Black Panthers), Woman's voting rights and parts of the government, the theocratic establishment and Christians, etc.

Reference: Shadmehr and Boleslavsky 2019; Shadmehr et al. 2020; Wasow 2020.

# Leadership

- 1 Inspiration:** assign value to different levels of contribution
  - lead by example: signal value of the enterprise (reputation is essential)
  - re-framing the problem, re-interpretation of cultural or ideological elements
- 2 Direction:** communicating the goals
  - tradeoff I (supporters): extensive versus intensive margins of support.
    - Disproportionate influence of extremists b/c they are most eager to contribute.
  - tradeoff II (opponents): more valuable goal vs. more achievable.
    - goals too close to the status quo (1) garner little supporters, rendering them less achievable, (2) may signal co-optation, and (3) opens room for new leadership, fractionalization, and in-fighting.
  - coordination: common knowledge versus scattered focus.
- 3 Coalition:** which group and in exchange for what.
- 4 Tactics:** discussed before + timing: act now or wait for an opportunity

# Direction & Communication: Trust & Col

- 1 Conflict of Interest:** not like us: co-opted, ideologically too radical, doesn't bear the costs, reaps more benefits: empathy, step-by-step trust building
- 2 Competence**

Often there is a tradeoff between (1) and (2). More educated, well-off leaders may be more skillful and have a layer of protection from repression.

# Coalition at Home: Preventing Fractionalization

- 1 **Early Christianity:** Council of Jerusalem to discuss whether Gentiles must obey the Jewish Law to be good “Christians”, i.e., contribution levels.
- 2 **Early Islam:** Quran 49:9-12.
- 3 **American Revolution:** delaying independence until all states are ready.
- 4 **Suffrage Movement:** split over the 15th Amendment.
- 5 **MLK:** convincing others for the moratorium in protest around the presidential election of 1964.
- 6 **Iranian Revolution:** Khomeini avoids criticizing Shariati.

# The Forgotten Ethics of Leadership: Preparing for Success

- American Revolution: lots of preparation
- French, Russian, and Iranian Revolution: very little preparation: it was sudden and unexpected
  - state had to be re-structured with new personnel, and new loyalties
  - Server foreign and domestic threat + uncertain loyalties

In American, late 1790s: Alien and Sedition Acts and the “revolution of 1800”. But uncertainties and dangers were far less that, say, in post-revolution Iran in 1979-1982.

**Prepare! If You Ask People to Follow You, It Is Your Responsibility to Know Where They'll End Up. Beware of Unintended Consequences of Radical Change.**

**Sometimes, “Taking Steps Is Easy, Standing Still Is Hard.”**

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