

Introduction

On May 25, 2020, a black man named George Floyd was arrested outside a store in Minneapolis, where he had been suspected of trying to pass counterfeit money.¹ First seen on a cellphone video with his hands manacled, Floyd was recorded on the ground next to a police cruiser, with a policeman's knee pressed against his neck. When he complained that he could not breathe, the policeman, Derek Chauvin, told him to stop shouting, while three other police officers stood by and watched. Floyd died shortly after, and Chauvin was charged with third-degree murder by the Minneapolis District Attorney.²

As is now well known, building on outrage at other recent killings of black people, Floyd's murder led to a massive protest movement.³ This was the largest wave of protest in the country's history, according to scholars interviewed by *The New York Times*. "I've never seen self-reports of protest participation that high for a specific issue over such a short period," said Neal Caren, editor of the prestigious academic journal, *Mobilization*.⁴ The protest movement was black, white, small town, and big city, and rapidly spread across the country. It was "a demographic mix that is far more varied than anything we have seen in recent years," wrote Doug McAdam soon after. Indeed, writes McAdam, the mix is "far more diverse than anything we saw during the heyday of the mass Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s."⁵

Anger at the killing was amplified by the frustration that had bubbled up at the racial bigotry of President Donald Trump, beginning with his campaign claim that Mexico is "sending us rapists." Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown of schools and businesses left thousands of young people suddenly and unexpectedly thrown into a state of precarity and hardship (Chen 2020:25). But probably the most fundamental source of the mass agitation was the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

That movement had begun in July 2013, when George Zimmerman, who had killed a black teenager, Trayvon Martin, under cover of Florida's "Stand Your

¹ www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726.

² www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/us/derek-chauvin-criminal-complaint.html.

³ Well worth reading is Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui and Jugal K. Patel "Black Lives Matter May be the Largest Movement in US History," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020. www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html

⁴ Compare this to the women's march following the inauguration of Donald Trump, when between three and five million people turned out. Erica Chenoweth and Jeffrey Pressman, "This is What We Learned by Counting the Women's Marches," *The Monkey Cage*, February 7, 2017. www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/.

⁵ Doug McAdam, "We've Never Seen Protests Like These Before," *Jacobin*, June 20, 2020. www.jacobinmag.com/2020/06/george-floyd-protests-black-lives-matter-riots-demonstrations.

Ground” law, was acquitted.⁶ It became a national movement after the police killings of two other black men: Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City, both in 2014. From that point on, BLM became synonymous with black and minority rights. Although it was viewed initially with suspicion by many Whites, by June 2020 the movement had gained majority support from all major ethnic groups – including more than 60 percent of Whites.⁷ As in past cycles of contention, it also had a lateral influence on other movements: on the young people’s climate change movement that had exploded in the previous year;⁸ on healthcare workers who added support for racial justice to their protests against the mismanagement of the pandemic;⁹ and in more than eighty cities and counties that declared racism a “public health crisis.¹⁰ It looks,” remarked McAdam to the *Times*, that “We appear to be experiencing a social change tipping point – that is as rare in society as it is potentially consequential.”¹¹

Like the black urban movements of the 1960s, rage over Floyd’s killing helped to trigger a movement/countermovement dynamic. White militants under a variety of labels organized wherever there were strong and visible BLM protests. They were soon supported by federal forces under Attorney General Bill Barr. In Portland, Oregon, in response to attacks on federal property, federal paramilitary forces were photographed bundling protesters into unmarked vans.¹² In Washington, DC, Trump’s use of a church as a backdrop for a photo-op led to the brutalization of peaceful demonstrators by paramilitary police outside the White House.

The use of armed federal forces to repress peaceful protesters in her city did not sit well with Muriel Bowser, mayor of the District of Columbia. In a direct challenge to the president, she condemned the uninvited presence of federal forces on the streets of her city and renamed Lafayette Square “Black Lives Matter Plaza.”¹³ Not to be outdone, when a group of BLM activists decided to paint the words “Black Lives Matter” in front of Trump Tower in New York

⁶ www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/07/13/george-zimmerman-found-not-guilty/2514163/.

⁷ www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/us/george-floyd-white-protesters.html.

⁸ www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/03/young-climate-activists-rallies-us-elections-coronavirus?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

⁹ www.statnews.com/2020/06/16/doctors-protesting-racial-injustice/.

¹⁰ www.vice.com/en_us/article/wxq4v5/more-than-80-cities-and-counties-have-now-declared-racism-a-public-health-crisis.

¹¹ Quoted in note no. 10.

¹² www.npr.org/2020/07/17/892277592/federal-officers-use-unmarked-vehicles-to-grab-protesters-in-portland.

¹³ <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/washington-emblazons-defiant-black-lives-matter-sign-near-white-house>.

City, Mayor Bill de Blasio joined them, adopting the language of patriotism to applaud the protesters. “When we say ‘Black Lives Matter,’” he pronounced, “there is no more American statement, there is no more patriotic statement because there is no America without Black America.”¹⁴

The impact of the protest wave was soon reflected in both political parties. Like Richard Nixon in 1968, Trump saw in the protests an opportunity to give a “law-and-order” framing to his lagging re-election campaign.¹⁵ Trump and Barr accused Black Lives Matter of wanting to “tear down the system,” trying to stoke fear among white voters by trying to redefine the movement as a radical leftist mob looking to sabotage the white, suburban lifestyle.¹⁶

There were also effects on the usually slow-to-change Democratic Party, where progressive black activists began to challenge aging members of the Congressional Black Caucus.¹⁷ At its August 2020 national convention, the party focused heavily on racial justice.¹⁸ Its ability to bring out the black and youth vote – in contrast to the unfortunate Hillary Clinton campaign four years earlier – helped Joe Biden and his mixed-race running mate, Kamala Harris, win the November election.

From protest to counterprotest to electoral politics, the sequence of events from George Floyd’s murder in the spring of 2020 to Biden’s victory in the fall constituted a critical juncture that turned American politics 180 degrees from its crisis under Donald Trump to its resilience six months later (Lieberman et al. 2021). Trump’s refusal to accept the outcome of the election and his incitement of the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, only heightened the tension in American society, especially when it turned out that much of the former president’s base appeared to believe his misrepresentation of what appeared to be a clean and well-organized election. As late as April 2021, a majority of Republican voters continued to believe that the election had been stolen, a claim that was echoed by a number of high-ranking Republican members of Congress.¹⁹ The Trump movement was the tail leading the Republican dog.

¹⁴ www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/508-20/transcript-mayor-de-blasio-helps-paint-new-black-lives-matter-mural-outside-trump-tower.

¹⁵ www.cnn.com/2020/07/25/politics/trump-campaign-protest-federal-intervention/index.html.

¹⁶ www.politico.com/news/2020/08/10/elections-republicans-black-lives-matterbacklash-389906.

¹⁷ Aaron Ross Coleman, “Cori Bush’s Victory Signals the Return of the Protester-Politician,” *Vox*, August 8, 2020.

¹⁸ <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/511932-black-lives-matter-movement-to-play-elevated-role-at-convention>. Compare the lineup at the party’s 2016 convention when the mothers of black men killed by the police were the main reflection of its concern with racial injustice: www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-democrats-black-lives-matter-20160727-snap-story.html.

¹⁹ “Over Half of Republicans Believe Election Was Stolen from Trump: Poll,” MSNBC, April 6, 2021. www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/watch/over-half-of-republicans-believe-election-was-stolen-from-trump-poll-109731909987.

1 What Was Happening Here?

This was not the first time in American history that a movement/party linkage helped to transform American politics. From the Abolitionist/Republican linkage that supported the civil war and produced the Reconstruction Amendments, to the transformation of the agrarian movement into the Populist Party in the 1890s, to the impact of organized labor and civil rights on the Democrats in the 1930s and 1960s, to the infusion of the Christian Right into the Republican Party in the 1970s and 1980s, social movements have frequently been key “anchors” in the transformation of the party system (Schlozman 2015; Tarrow 2021). Often, they pushed parties and presidents to make profound changes in American institutions (Milkis and Tichenor 2019); sometimes, they brought about major changes in the political economy (Schickler 2016); more rarely, they were the pivots between democratization and de-democratization.

The events from the spring of 2020 through the presidential election in November of that year led supporters of American democracy to heave a sigh of relief (Mettler and Lieberman 2020). They also drew the attention of political scientists and sociologists. But while students of social movements focused on the phenomenology, the origins, and the discourse of the protesters (Chen 2020; McAdam 2020), political scientists were more interested in the response of the voters and in the effects of the protest wave on the coming election. With the exception of figures such as Caren and McAdam, they cordially ignored each others’ contributions.

In this section, I will examine the reasons for this strangely bifurcated reaction in two fields that share theoretical and empirical interests in contentious politics. Then, in Section 2, I will highlight three recent efforts to “fuse” research on movements, parties, and elections. In Section 3, I will identify the mechanisms that bring movement and party perspectives together during critical junctures. In Sections 4 and 5, I will briefly illustrate two short-term mechanisms and two intermediate ones, drawing on a number of historical cases of movement/party interaction. The Element will conclude with some reflections on a fifth potential mechanism: the long-term impact of party/movement relations on American democracy. This will take us back to the travails of American democracy under the Trump administration and to the events of 2020.

Movement and Party Scholarship: A Curious Lacuna

Both social movement research and studies of political parties and elections are well-developed traditions in the United States. But until quite recently, and

unlike the situation in Europe (Kriesi et al. 2020) or Latin America (Donoso and von Bülow 2017), disciplinary and methodological barriers hampered a synthesis between the two fields. While the study of parties has been seen as the proper province of political scientists, research on movements has largely been left to sociologists (Gamson 1990; Goldstone 2003; McAdam and Tarrow 2010). As Jack Goldstone observed in the introduction to his edited book, *States, Parties and Social Movements*:

There has been a persistent tendency to see this interaction [between movements and the state] as distinct from normal institutionalized politics occurring through voting, lobbying, political parties, legislatures, courts, and elected leaders. (2003:1)

More recently, coming from the European tradition, Donatella della Porta and her collaborators complained that

research on parties moved away from concerns with the relations between parties and society . . . and social movement studies mainly framed them as a social phenomenon whose political aspects had to be located outside of the political institutions. (della Porta et al. 2017:3).

Although “the party in the electorate” was one of the three main legs of American party scholarship in the past (Key 1955), in recent decades the field has moved away from Key’s focus on links between parties and society and toward the actions of elites and interest groups. This was in part the result of the influence of the methodological and theoretical individualism that became fashionable between the 1960s and the 1990s (Downs 1957; Aldrich 1995). That ontological shift moved the focus from parties as organizations (for example, see Mayhew 1986) to parties as majority-seeking office holders. John Aldrich, who best exemplified the approach, argued that parties are the solution to individual legislators’ problems as they face election campaigns and attempt to build their careers. Responding to the near-hegemony of the Downs–Aldrich approach, in the 1990s a group of political scientists working mainly out of UCLA reimported groups into the study of parties, but as internal components of parties as “long coalitions.”

With their habitual practice of slicing the study of politics into neat and manageable sectors, both groups of scholars elided the role of movements in their studies of elections and party systems.²⁰ For example, when Doug McAdam and I searched the index of the *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (Boix 2009), we found subject headings for elections and electoral

²⁰ The UCLA group attached “activists” to the “policy-seekers” who were the main actors in their intraparty model, but these were never connected to social movements.

systems – but none for social movements (McAdam and Tarrow 2010). Social movements were “the phantom at the opera” of public politics (Tarrow 1990).

Conversely, the 1960s wave of contention and the “new social movements” that followed led many social movement scholars to conclude that parties are cranky conservative institutions (Touraine 1971; Melucci 1980; Offe 1985) that needed to be examined separately from movements. The index to the first edition of *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Snow et al. 2004), arguably the definitive American sourcebook on the subject, included exactly two page listings for the term “elections.”²¹ As Daniel Gillion writes, “Historians and sociologists have explored protest and social movements, but they have largely focused on movements’ origins or what sustains them; they rarely draw political connections to electoral outcomes, leaving this terrain for political scientists” (2020:9–10).

To some extent, this gap was a natural outcome of diverging methodological practices. After the appearance of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), electoral studies were reshaped around survey methodology, which only taps into movements through the reports of surveyed individuals. More recently, a few scholars endeavored to use survey methods to study both protesting and voting behavior (Aytaç and Stokes 2019; Klandermans 2018), and a small but significant literature has adapted survey technology to the study of protesters in the act of protesting (for representative examples, see Fisher 2018 and 2000).

During the 1970s, Charles Tilly (1983) and John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1977) began to study both protest events and social movement organizations (SMOs) with different empirical methods. While voter surveys focus on individual decision-making, protest event analysts such as Tilly collected systematic data on collective actions (Hutter 2014; Bremer et al. 2020b) and students of movement organizations such as McCarthy and Zald studied the mobilizing structures that enable such actions (Minkoff 1995; Zald and McCarthy 1987). These different methodological vectors made it difficult for students of movements and students of elections to build a unified field that brought together parties, movements, and institutions.

But in part because of the fractured state of American politics today, this separation between party and movement research is no longer tenable. These advances can partly be explained by the advent of “movement-parties.” This concept first grew popular among political scientists in Europe, as the work of Herbert Kitschelt (2006) and Donatella della Porta and her collaborators (2017) attest. But it was familiar to scholars of Latin America after the rise of the

²¹ The second edition of the *Blackwell Companion* (Snow et al. 2018) is far more ecumenical in this respect than the first, a volume that was more “social movement-centered.”

Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil, and of a group of Indigenous-based parties in the Andes in the 1990s. Seeing something resembling movements within parties brought American scholars into dialogue with these comparative scholars. Starting at the turn of the new century, this led to a growing attempt to fuse the two fields into a broader field of contentious politics (Aminzade et al. 2001; McAdam et al. 2001; Goldstone et al. 2003).

2 Moves Toward Fusion

It was only in the new century that the idea of movements within parties began to influence the work of scholars of American politics, such as Daniel Gillion (2020), Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos (2014), Daniel Schlozman (2015), and Sidney Milkis and Daniel Tichenor (2019). The first moves toward fusion between movement studies and party scholarship came from movement scholars, the second from scholars of political parties, and the third from students of American political development.

Coming from Social Movements

Early pathbreakers in the social movement field were McAdam, Frances Fox Piven, and Richard Cloward. McAdam's history of the civil rights movement was impregnated with evidence of that movement's relations to the party system (1999b), while Piven and Cloward moved from an emphasis on the weight of public policy on the poor (1972) to analyzing the costs and benefits of political involvement on social movements (1977). Then McAdam – writing with Kloos – linked parties to movements in the post-1960s decades in their book *Deeply Divided* (2014). Unlike political scientists who saw polarization as a largely horizontal property, McAdam and Kloos gave polarization both a social and a political meaning, as movement activists filtered into the two major parties, assisted by such innovations as the direct primary, which had come out of the turbulence of the early 1970s.

In the 1990s, other movement scholars – such as Edwin Amenta and his collaborators – developed the concept of “political mediation,” which signified the intervening institutional agents that either make it possible for movements to influence policy or stand in their way (Amenta et al. 2005; Amenta 2006). Amenta was persuaded that American parties were traditionally shy about intervening in policy because of their patronage orientation. But starting with the New Deal, the growing links between the labor movement and the Democrats and the diffusion of movements like the Townsend clubs produced a convergence between movements and institutional actors. “The Townsend

Plan,” writes Amenta, “had its greatest influence when it was able to match its action appropriately to the political situation at hand” (2006:11).

Around the turn of the century, movement scholars began to examine the policy outcomes of movement activity, leading to a vast literature, best summarized in the work of Marco Giugni and his collaborators (Giugni and Yamasaki 2009; Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly 1999a and b). But measuring the outcomes of movements in terms of policy outcomes narrows the range of their possible consequences for politics (Giugni 2008:7). While Amenta’s “political mediation” model focused on the regime in power and the domestic bureaucracy as “mediating” actors (Giugni 2008:8), we need to know more about the intervening role of movements and parties as interlocutors in the struggle to achieve collective goods.²²

For example, the simplest factor that influences when parties will serve as brokers between movements and policy outputs is the strength of the party system. Strong parties have the capacity to ignore or select among movement claims, while weak parties are more likely to embrace them or risk standing aside while movements influence decision-makers. When party systems are weakened, as the American one was in the 1850s, or when they remain fully committed to an alignment structure that has become less relevant, as happened in Europe and Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s (della Porta et al. 2017; Anria 2019), political space is opened for social movements. Such interactions make clear why it is fruitful to engage the literatures on political parties and on social movements with each other.

A step toward connecting movements to the party system came in the 1960s and 1970s with the concept of “political opportunity structure” (Eisinger 1973). In the 1980s, Herbert Kitschelt used the concept as a framework for studying different forms of social movement interaction with politics (1986). Because of the greater frequency of party system change in European and Latin American history, scholars on those continents enjoyed a richer tradition of linking movements to parties and to the broader political system than Americans.

In the 1990s, Hanspeter Kriesi (1995) and Kriesi and his collaborators (1995) nested their studies of protest events within four different systems of political cleavages. In Germany, Felix Kolb studied the European antinuclear movements and the American civil rights movement in a political opportunity

²² Amenta gestures toward the role of the Democratic party in the New Deal when he points out that “US programs benefiting the aged may have come as a result of the Depression or the rise to power of the Democratic Party rather than the Townsend Plan” (2005:30), but it is not clear from his account whether it was party leaders, bureaucrats, or the regime as a whole that explained the outcomes he studied.

framework (2007). Also in Germany, Dieter Rucht built a massive protest event dataset that has been the source of rich studies of movement politics ever since (Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992). More recently, both Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani founded what by now is an “Italian school” of social movement studies (2006). At the European University Institute, Kriesi and his collaborators have taken protest event analysis to a new level of methodological sophistication (Bremer et al. 2020a; Kriesi et al. 2019; 2020).

These shifts in scholarly attention had a rich counterpart in Latin America. In Brazil, Margaret Keck (1992) and Wendy Hunter (2011) studied the transformation of a workers’ movement into the PT. In Central America, Paul Almeida (2008; 2010) showed how guerrilla movements emerged in the context of weak party systems. In Bolivia, Santiago Anria (2019) showed how – even after it became a fully developed party – the MAS retained many of the features of a movement. In Chile, Sofia Donoso and Marisa von Bülow and their collaborators made the relations between movements, parties, and the state central to their examination of that country’s contentious politics (2017). In Latin America in general, Kenneth Roberts showed how economic liberalization provided a political opportunity for movements in countries in which the party system had been severely weakened (2015).

This work in Europe and Latin America showed that through the links between movements and parties, social change is transformed into political dynamics. Indeed, as Steffen Blings shows in his research on the German and Swedish Greens, “the saturated party systems in Europe empower social movement organizations vis-à-vis the parties they spawned, *allowing movements to hold parties programmatically to account*” (Blings 2020:220, italics added). More recently, the study of populism has questioned the traditional division of parties into left and right and shown how new alignments have left the mainstream parties ill-equipped to deal with them (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

Coming from Political Parties

Parties are one of the most well-studied actors in political systems, ranging from the institutional studies of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, to more informal studies such as those of Key (1955 and 1984). Since parties are multifaceted and exist in virtually all political systems, much of the research in this field has been descriptive and typological – that is, until rational choice theory offered a way of narrowing the focus from party organizations and from “the party in the electorate” to elected elites. Following the lead of economist Anthony Downs (1957) and centering on the irreducible minimum of

what parties do – namely, try to get elected – scholars such as John Aldrich posited that parties can be defined as office-seeking assemblages (1995).

David Truman, who had launched the pluralist tradition in the 1950s, observed that interest groups were leery of becoming too closely associated with a particular party (1951). Unlike the pluralists, the UCLA scholars put groups of “policy-demanders” at the center of party coalitions (Bawn et al., 2012; also see Cohen 2008). As two close observers of the UCLA school summarize:

In making nominations, the groups that constitute parties define basic party positions, decide how much risk to take in pursuit of those positions, and choose which candidate to put forward under the party banner. Where Downs and Aldrich give primacy to office holders, the [UCLA-based] theory of parties sees successful politicians primarily as reliable agents of the groups that constitute the party” (McCarty and Schickler 2018:176–177).

For the UCLA scholars, parties were essentially “long coalitions” of groups who compose and compromise their differences through “invisible primaries” in order to win elections.²³

The UCLA model was built on the centrality of internal policy-demanding groups and the negotiation of their demands into a party program. What it largely neglected was the role of ideology in shaping the configuration of groups in the corona of a party, regarding a party as the negotiated agreement between different groups of policy-demanders. Their approach also elided the role of parties as intermediaries between social movements and the state (McCarty and Schickler 2018).

The UCLA group’s contribution to the theory of parties has been substantial. Yet although it is a deeper and more variegated model than the one that preceded it, it remained an *intra*-party model that made little of parties’ relations to institutions, to the voters, and to social movements. As McCarty and Schickler put it, for the UCLA group, “Rather than being a separate, intermediary institution, the party is the sum of the bargains made by the groups that compose it” (2018:184). The model gestures toward “activists” (Bawn et al., 2012:575), but it is hard to see where social movements fit, because movements’ claims frequently encompass broad ideological systems, loyalty to followers, and a dislike for transactional politics. It would take more deliberately comparative/historical approaches to tease out the various relations between parties and movements.

²³ To the categories of “policy seekers,” Hans Noel added ideologies (2012, 2014), and Rachel Blum added “insurgent factions” (2020: ch. 1), by which she means something like internal movements.