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Policy networks and social resistance to water privatization in Latin America

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Abstract

The paper looks at civil society campaigns against water privatisation in six Latin American countries, resulting in both success and failure. Our inquiry aims at contributing to the understanding of the determinants of social movement outcomes. We explain variations in outcome as a result of interrelations between: a) agency; b) mobilisation tactics; c) political opportunity structures; and, d) network composition (i.e. the composition of coalitions promoting the campaigns). Our findings indicate that the strengthening of coalitions is a significant determinant of successful outcome. The combined effect of network size and heterogeneity of the coalition contributes to the representativeness, cohesion and effectiveness of the campaigns.
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Keywords: Policy networks; social movements; social campaigns; mobilisation tactics; coalitions; water privatisation; political opportunity; Latin America.

1. Introduction

Diani (1992: 13) defines social movements as "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups, or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity". Giugni (1999: xiv–xv) argues that "the study of the consequences of social movements is one of the most neglected topics of the literature." More systematic studies are needed to shed light on the impact of social movements, as well as on the conditions and circumstances favouring certain consequences and the processes leading to such impact (Giugni, 1999: xv). The relational elements of social movements have been thoroughly investigated and theorised, for example by Diani and McAdam (2003). Diani (2002:173) lists a number of areas where network analysis has been fruitfully employed, which however do not include social movement outcome. Furthermore, Uba (2005: 383) notes that empirical results on movement outcomes "remain inconclusive and for the most part U.S.-focused".

This paper aims at contributing to the understanding of the determinants of the outcome of social movements. It does so by looking at a variety of civil society campaigns against water privatisation in six Latin American

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countries. Our inquiry focuses on the composition of coalitions as a determinant of social movement outcome. As factors of network composition, we analyse the number of actors and type of organizations involved in the campaign. To the best of our knowledge, this field has received little attention in the literature on social movement outcomes.

We use the mediation theory/interaction model (Uba, 2007) as an analytical framework to guide our empirical study of the determinants of policy networks and social movement outcome in a non-Western context. The campaigns observed have resulted in success (Bolivia, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay) and failure (Chile and Colombia). We explain variations in outcome as a result of interrelations between: a) actors' interests and agency (both within and outside the coalitions promoting the campaigns); b) resources deployed in the form of mobilisation tactics (e.g. campaigns' use of the local media, public participation mechanisms, legal action and alliances with political parties); c) the socio-economic and political context (e.g. political opportunity structures); and, d) network composition (i.e. the composition of coalitions promoting the campaigns) investigated throughout time and by means of horizontal, cross-country comparison. Lobina et al. (2010) provide further details of the theoretical and analytical framework, methodology and empirical evidence.

2. Theoretical and analytical framework

The stance of theoretical traditions on the emergence and impact of social movements can be explained in light of different views on the relative and interdependent role of agency and structure as determinants of social processes. Resource mobilisation theory (RMT) explains the emergence and impact of collective action in terms of the resources mobilised by social movements. Resources can be material, such as financial means, or intangible such as knowledge and power (Dominguez, 2007). Conversely, the Political Opportunity Structures (POS) tradition emphasises the role of stable and volatile dimensions of the political environment in discouraging or encouraging resort to collective action (Tarrow, 2004; Gamson and Meyer, 2008).

Amenta et al. (2005) posit that a favourable context to mobilisation necessarily requires the presence of a democratic regime and a programmatic party system, as opposed to a party system based on patronage. Such preconditions can be accompanied by the presence of a polity and bureaucrats open to challengers' demands. The absence of allies among politicians and bureaucrats could be compensated by more assertive mobilisation tactics or repertoire of collective action. However, Kolb (2007) points out that despite the established literature on POS, there is little theoretical clarity about what, when and why specific political opportunities matter in determining outcome.

Much literature debates whether RMT or POS offer more powerful explanatory tools of social movement formation and outcomes (Meyer, 2004). Interestingly, Meyer (2004) recognises social movements as coalitions in order to reconcile different visions of political opportunity. Also, Casey (2004) acknowledges the importance of networks and stresses the importance of membership. This suggests that adopting a networks approach to the investigation of social movements allows for reconciling and going beyond the apparent dichotomy between agency and structure. In fact, networks do not exist in a vacuum and both their origin and evolution are a result of the interdependence between agency and structure.

Diani (1997) uses a combination of network analysis and social capital analysis to study the influence and impact of social movements. This approach combines the analysis of internal social capital production, for example linkages between movement members, with a perspective of the movement's position in broader social networks. Diani (1997) argues that the influence of social movements is dependent on their structural position. This means that the influence and impact of social movements are defined by "the solidity of the linkages within the movement sector as well as—more crucially—of the bonds among movement actors, the social milieu in which they operate, and cultural and political elites … The broader the range of social capital ties emerging from a period of sustained mobilization, the greater the impact" (Diani, 1997: 129).

The policy networks tradition captures the interdependence between actors' interests, resources, and context (Klijn, 1997). A promising solution to adapt policy networks to the inquiry of social movements is offered by the mediation theory/interaction model, as illustrated by Uba (2007). Derived from representative democracy theory, the interaction model posits that the effectiveness of mobilisation strategies in achieving policy change depends on POS. More precisely, mobilisation strategies and tactics adopted by social movements would at the same time reflect and contribute to shaping the dynamic and systemic elements of POS. Dynamic factors include the relationships between social movements and political allies, opponents of their claims and the broader community, that is the presence or

absence of public support. Systemic factors are the institutional and cultural dimensions, either volatile or stable, including the relative openness of the policy making process, public opinion and the stance of the media. We draw on Tarrow (1994), Casey (2004), and Gamson and Meyer (2008) to differentiate between dynamic and stable factors of POS as the "systematic analysis of the political context that mediates structural conflicts" (Kriesi, 1995, 167).

3. Methodology

We comparatively look at social movements reacting to similar policies and pursuing similar outcomes in terms of policy change. These are, respectively, the rejection of proposals to introduce water privatization and the reversal of implemented water privatization schemes. The selected case studies were chosen as they illustrate prominent civil society campaigns in different Latin American countries and have no statistical representativeness. However, the comparative evaluation of campaigns resulting in policy change with campaigns failing to see their demands translated into policy allows us to put forward hypotheses on the determinants of movement outcome. The validity and generality of such hypotheses remain to be tested through empirical examination of a larger number of case studies.

In each of the six case studies, we map the events leading from the origin of the campaign to success or failure to achieve the intended outcome, and identify the determinants of policy makers' final decision in that respect. Empirical observation suggests that the successful campaigns are broadly characterized by three evolutionary phases: a) emergence; b) consolidation; and, c) maturity (Lobina et al., 2010).

In order to investigate the interrelationship between the evolution of the coalitions running the campaigns and the dynamics of the events external to the coalitions, we look at a number of factors throughout time. Annex I in Lobina et al. (2010) presents indicators on the network attributes of coalitions and resources mobilised, dynamic dimensions of POS, stable systemic dimensions of POS, and volatile systemic dimensions of POS. In particular, the network attributes of coalitions include the number of actors participating in the coalition and the number of types of organizations participating in the coalition. All else equal, variations in these indicators reflect variations in the representativeness of the coalition that is the ability to represent societal interests, and its cohesion. Resources mobilised by the campaigns are not assessed due to the difficulty of measuring intangible resources. We thus overlook process and consider instead the product of resource mobilisation, categorising the tactics and repertoire of collective action deployed.

All the above indicators are registered in two moments for each campaign, the passage from the emergence to the consolidation phase and from the consolidation to the maturity phase. This exercise applies to the four successful campaigns in: Salvador de Bahia, Brazil; Cochabamba, Bolivia; Huancayo, Peru; and Uruguay (national campaign). We thus compare across eight phases in total for the four case studies. This allows us to address the dynamic evolution of networks, in light of changes in the systemic dimensions underlying the campaign and of interaction with actors external to the campaign (Lobina et al., 2010).

4. Discussion of findings

4.1 Network Attributes of Coalitions and Resource Mobilisation

The successful campaigns observed managed to obtain the intended policy change as policy makers perceived the political cost of implementing the challenged policy. This applies to those campaigns that primarily resorted to more democratic and persuasive forms of collective action (Brazil, Peru and Uruguay) but also to Bolivia, where the campaign contained a disruptive element in the form of resistance to military repression. Conversely, the two unsuccessful campaigns (Chile and Colombia) failed to achieve the intended outcome as policy makers were insulated from the political costs of implementing the proposed water privatisation. These findings appear to lend support to the underpinnings of the mediation theory and interaction model.

The four cases of successful campaigns show that the network attributes of the coalitions had an important role in determining outcome. In seven out of the eight phases observed in the four successful campaigns, the strengthening of coalitions is associated with successful outcome – explained in terms of durability and direction of change (Giugni et al., 1999). In other words, the growth of coalitions in terms of number of actors and number of types of organisations participating in the campaign contributed to the representativeness and cohesion of the coalition,

sending a strong signal to decision makers on the potential political costs of implementing or retaining privatisation schemes. By contrast, failure to achieve policy change can be either explained by failure to extend the coalition beyond the instigator, as in the case of Colombia, or to extend the coalition to an extent capable of generating a potential political cost for decision makers, as in the case of Chile. Nonetheless, outcome should not be regarded as a mere function of numbers as power and other resources are unequally allocated among the actors participating in a campaign. A clear example in that sense is represented by the decisive role played by the Catholic Church since joining the campaign in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil.

Strengthened coalitions appear to support combinations of assertive persuasive and threatening tactics in different POS contexts. The effectiveness of the strategies adopted by successful campaigns in Brazil, Peru and Uruguay lies in the sophistication of persuasive tactics and the combination of non institutionalised and institutionalised means. Campaigns used more traditional, non institutionalised forms of mass mobilisation rallies, demonstrations and leafleting. In order to stop and reverse the policies challenged, they also resorted to forms of direct democracy such as referenda and municipal legislation adopted by popular initiative. Other institutionalised instruments used included legal action challenging the validity of constitutional amendments and governmental inaction. The observed level of institutional activity questions the thoroughness of mainstream definitions of social movements. These in fact fail to recognise the use of institutionalised means by social movements to further their objectives (McAdam, 1982: 20; Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008).

However, the case of Uruguay shows that the strength of coalitions and the assertiveness of tactics are not necessarily derived from continuous numerical increases in membership. Following a strategically crucial intermediate victory in the consolidation phase, the campaign opted for the so-called "forum shifting" (Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008: 87) by changing tactics. Reduced emphasis on mass mobilisation and consensus-seeking tactics was accompanied by greater use of more institutional channels including legal instruments. This reflected a change in objectives after the intermediate victory, which thus aimed at obtaining the implementation of the favourable results of a national referendum. Not only was the switch in tactics functional to adapting to changed strategic imperatives. It also allowed the coalition to compensate for a relative abatement in membership. Conversely, fragile and poorly cohesive coalitions appear to be associated with ineffectiveness of tactics and unsuccessful outcomes, as suggested by the Colombian and Chilean cases.

4.2 Dynamic and volatile systemic dimensions of POS

The role of political allies was an important factor contributing to success in three of the four successful campaigns. However, it proved to be controversial both in Uruguay and Colombia. In Uruguay, a key political ally (the opposition party Frente Amplio) ceased to support the campaign as it was elected into government. Similarly, in Colombia, the opposition candidate withdrew support after being elected as mayor and being faced with World Bank conditionality on the release of a loan. In addition, popular sentiment contrary to trade unions and public sector provision meant that the mayor's U-turn would not imply any political cost. This suggests that the stance of political allies towards social movements may vary as a result of changes in their role, notably in the passage from opposition to government. New roles might imply different priorities and lead to the realignment of political alliances.

The inconsistent pattern of association between the behaviour of political allies and outcome seems to confirm Amenta et al.'s (2005) prediction that political allies' support is not a necessary condition to success. We also observe an inconsistent pattern of association between the behaviour of opponents and movement outcome. While some campaigns, both successful and unsuccessful, encountered military and para-military repression, others only faced criticism in debates and the public sphere.

In eight out of the eight phases observed in the four successful campaigns, public support and favourable public opinion are associated with successful outcome. This lends support to the view that the influence of social movements is not only dependent on network structure, but also on "the bonds among movement actors, the social milieu in which they operate, and cultural and political elites" (Diani 1997:129). At the same time, the network attributes of strengthened coalitions appear to facilitate public support for and favourable public opinion to the campaign. Increasing numbers of actors and broader varieties of organisations participating in the campaign may in fact facilitate stronger bonds between social movements and the local community.

Conversely, social movements' inability to establish robust bonds with community and political and cultural elites might undermine success. Such inability resulted in the indifference of public opinion towards the campaign in Santiago, Chile, and in protracted public hostility towards key members of the campaign in Cartagena, Colombia. The above suggests that broader public support, public opinion and the stance of the media can be influenced by the campaign, especially as a result of communication of the campaign's motives. At the same time, public opinion and the media affect the campaign and frame ability for manoeuvre on the political and social arena.

4.3 Stable systemic dimensions of POS

There is an inconsistent pattern of association between the availability of opportunities for institutionalised, as well as public and deliberative participation in decision making, and outcome. In other words, none of the stable systemic dimensions of POS seem to have played a predominant role in determining movement outcome. This contrasts with the more consistent pattern of association between positive outcome and, respectively, the network attributes of coalitions, the assertiveness of the strategies adopted, and the dynamic and volatile systemic dimensions of POS.

Amenta et al. (2005) posit that a necessary precondition to the success of social movement is the presence of a democratic regime and a programmatic party system. This seems to be contradicted by the fact that none of the observed countries can be described as an established, Western-style democracy. The sovereignty of Latin American democracies is limited by the interference of international financial institutions and bilateral development agencies, notably through lending conditionality. However significant the degree of interference in the national and local political processes, this form of external influence could not prevent the success of campaigns in Bolivia, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay. Conversely, World Bank conditionality proved crucial in determining the negative outcome of the Cartagena campaign.

Furthermore, with the exception of Chile and Uruguay, all the case studies are set in countries that can be described as illiberal democracies in the periods observed (Smith and Ziegler, 2008: 51-52). In Bolivia, Brazil and Colombia, the political process is also characterised by patronage (Domingo, 2005; Lazar, 2004; Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Alston and Mueller, 2005; Haglund and Gomez, 2006). This contradicts Amenta et al.'s (2005) prediction that the presence of programmatic party systems is a precondition to the success of social movements. Success in a Latin American context can in fact be explained by campaigns bypassing the formal processes of representative democracy. Alternatively, campaigns might acquire such momentum that the political cost of ignoring them exceeds the political cost of abandoning established patronage practices.

The above points to the validity of Davis's (1999) critique of the Western bias affecting the political process model of the state. This suggests that the absence of Western-style sovereignty, democratic regimes and Habermas' public spheres might explain the observed prominence of the attributes of coalitions, and their ability to dynamically interact with the surrounding social and political environment, as a determinant of success. Otherwise put, in an environment where the institutional dimensions of POS are strongly unfavourable to the emergence and consolidation of social movements, movement outcome prominently depends on the network attributes of coalitions. These network attributes include the size of the network and the heterogeneity of the coalition, which affect the ability to mobilise resources and translate them into assertive mobilisation tactics.

5. Conclusions

We find that, in a non-Western context such as Latin America, the combined effect of variations in network attributes throughout the evolutionary phases of the campaign is a significant determinant of social movement outcome. Such network attributes include the size of the network constituted by the coalition and the diversity of its membership. In turn, these attributes affect the assertiveness of persuasive and threatening mobilisation tactics adopted thanks to the collective resources of the coalition. The role of network size and the heterogeneity of coalitions remain relatively unexplored in the literature on social movement outcomes. Our analysis points to the crucial importance of the representativeness and cohesion of coalitions in achieving policy change. In the mediation theory/interaction model these factors signal the potential political costs associated with the implementation of challenged policies.

The composition of coalitions is central to determining policy change, as is the coalition's ability to mobilise others (Meyer, 2004). More precisely, broader and stronger coalitions appear to be more closely connected to the local community. In turn, this acts as a catalyst for public support and favourable public opinion, which reinforce the coalition's prospects for success. We thus confirm the validity of Diani's (1997) findings on the interplay between coalitions, communities and cultural and political elites.

In addition, we identify variations in network size and heterogeneity of membership as variables shedding lights on the interactions between social movements and policy and decision makers, on one hand, and social movements and the local community, on the other. They are thus instrumental to the exploration of two central dimensions identified by the mediation theory/interaction model.

Nonetheless, further work is required as network attributes alone cannot determine policy change. Other fundamental factors include favourable public opinion and broader public support. Future inquiry should thus focus on the dynamic interrelation between coalitions, resources mobilised and political opportunities, and the respective causalities.

Beyond the polarization of the debate on the respective merits of RMT and POS, adopting a networks approach to the study of social movements offers the possibility to reconcile the apparent divergence between agency and structure and address their interdependence. In turn, this promises to allow for a more holistic and better understanding of the dynamics within and around social movements and the determinants of movement outcome.

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