Grassroots Social Action

Lessons in People Power Movements

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and economic improvements in Birmingham that benefited the whole society. Reflecting on the protest movement, Robert Corley writes, "Both blacks and whites could claim some measure of victory. The blacks had won pledges of desegregation . . . and the white leaders won what they had really been seeking all along—racial harmony" (Corley 1982, 190). However, the impact of the Birmingham movement did not end there. Because of the movement, President John F. Kennedy realized the urgency of resolving racial problems in the country (Dallek 2003, 36–40). About a month after the protests in Birmingham, Kennedy proposed a civil rights bill that would safeguard every citizen's right to vote and ensure equal employment opportunities and eliminate discrimination in places of public accommodation (Dallek 2003, 36–40). The Civil Rights Act was passed the following year and stands as a testament that the protestors of Birmingham returned good to their society for the evil they had received.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

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A Comparative Analysis of Grassroots Studies in Politics

Charles V. Willie, David A. Willard, and Steven P. Ridini

The uniqueness of the United States as a reality and as an ideal lies in its ability to redress social injustice, misfortune, and the misrepresentation of the principles upon which it was founded. Embedded in the trust we, as citizens, bestow upon our governing documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—is the belief that harm experienced by any of our citizens, upon identification and amplification, will be corrected for the common good. Indeed, we, the authors of this book, venture to say that there is an implicit understanding on behalf of the citizenry of the United States that a just and properly functioning society has an obligation to change or stabilize social customs so that they promote the general welfare within our society.

Because of our distinct American history of protest and change, social scientists have devoted considerable effort to examining social movements that have pushed us closer to our democratic ideals. According to Rhoda Blumberg, "Social movement theory . . . attempt[s] to explain individual cases—such as civil rights, the women's movement, [gay rights, and environmental justice]—in terms of general principles" (Blumberg 1991, 191). Sociologists describe social movements or collective behavior for the common good as activity in which large numbers of participants attempt to modify existing norms and institutions that "reconstitute a ruptured social structure" (Blumberg 1991, 191; Morris 1984, 275). In a more colloquial vein, grassroots movements grow out of need. While the beginning of social movements appear to be spontaneous, their momentum tends to be a function of many unfortunate

happenings in the past that were not appropriately solved. Common to all social movements is that each tries to formulate ideologies, attract members, develop strategies and tactics, gain support of the uncommitted public, and counter the forces of opposition.

The four case studies reviewed in Part III of this book concern

- the interstate Freedom Rides in the Southern region of the United States in 1961
- the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and its encounter with the National Democratic Convention in 1964
- the land-use dispute in Warren County, North Carolina, regarding a toxic-waste dumping ground and environmental justice in 1982
- the civil rights protest movement in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963

We classify these as political case studies because each case is concerned with laws, regulations, public policies, and practices that promote the general welfare and establish justice in ways that are fair to all people. The issues analyzed have to do with civil decision making at the local, state, and national levels. The cases also indicate that the interests of individuals and the community must be fulfilled simultaneously in effective grassroots social action. This analysis focuses on several overlapping ideas that bind these case studies together: the use of multiple methods to achieve social objectives, the benefit of vertical and horizontal linkages, the development of subdominant groups into a critical mass, heterogeneous versus homogeneous populations, the benefit of negotiated settlements, and diversity as a contribution to solving social problems, especially local actions that influence national affairs, and vice versa.

Democracy, Grassroots Action, and the Importance of Vertical Linkages

In her well-written and documented study on the civil rights movement, Blumberg succinctly summarizes and encapsulates the continued struggle for equality waged by black Americans during the civil rights period of the 1950s and 1960s.

> Black Americans have had to wage a continuing struggle for political, economic, and social rights in the United States—a battle not yet fully won. Periodically, they have managed to propel the issue of their civil rights from the periphery to the center of American political life. The decades of the 1950s and 1960s were that kind of time, when nonviolent forms of black protest arose with compelling force. Active refusal to accept enforced segregation and subordination was coupled with equal determination to avoid utilizing physical retaliation no matter how much protestors were abused, insulted, or harmed. Nonviolence was linked with direct, sometimes provocative action such as sit-ins, pray-ins, and wade-ins, as well as marches, boycotts, freedom rides, and rallies. The central tactic of the modern civil rights movement was also a principle intended to transform . . . separate racial groups into [what Martin Luther King Jr. described as] a "beloved community." (Blumberg 1991, 1)

In studies regarding this period, social scientists like Blumberg (1991), Aldon Morris (1984), and Taylor Branch (1988) have correctly identified the foundation upon which these protests were built. The movements challenged official segregation and were designed to ensure equal access to basic American rights, such as education, voting, fair access to public facilities, and equal protection of the laws. Thus, this movement was firmly rooted in the Jeffersonian notion of American democracy and, as stated above, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of a beloved community.

In reviewing these case studies, one should remember (as mentioned earlier) that the United States has identified itself as a constitutional democracy. This is an important contextual feature and differs from other countries' identification as procedural democracies. The majority in a constitutional democracy does not always win if the victory results in activities and consequences contrary to the common definition of a well-ordered society as defined by the constitution that has been adopted (Rawls 2002).

Regulations of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the federal government, as well as the "equal protection of the laws" clause in the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, mandate fair access to facilities that serve the public. There was not equal access for all interstate travelers to cafes and waiting rooms in bus stations in Southern states of the United States in the 1960s. Neither were lunch counters or other customer services in stores equally available to people of color in white-owned businesses. The Freedom Rides and the sit-ins at lunch counters were radical ways of protesting inequities experienced by racial and ethnic minority groups. The young people who demanded equal access to public spaces and places brought to the attention of the nation that some white people in charge of local community facilities and services rejected or ignored rights and privileges guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution. People who engaged in such actions in Northern and Southern regions were out of synch with the constitutional requirements of this nation.

The young activists who challenged these unconstitutional customs used multiple methods to achieve their goals. That the simultaneous use of different kinds of methods is beneficial has been supported by historical evidence. People involved in the Montgomery freedom movement for equitable seating on common carriers boycotted the bus company at the local level and, simultaneously, filed a court case at the federal level against segregated bus-seating practices.

Immediately after the Civil War, when Southern states were under federal military control or the authority of federal agencies such as the Freedmen's Bureau, racial integration was promoted. But when the former Confederates returned to power after the end of the Civil War and again had dominion over the Southern states, W. E. B. DuBois reported that Reconstruction diminished, and "the public schools, which had attained a degree of efficiency never before reached in the South, were greatly curtailed" (DuBois 1935, 644).

Findings mentioned above indicate that local politics may be beneficial for dominant people of power. Late speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and former Cambridge, Massachusetts, resident Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill asserted that political power ultimately is local. This assertion may be classified as the perspective of a dominant person of power and does not seem to be true for subdominant people of power.

DuBois discovered that the local scene was less hospitable to black subdominant people of power in the Southern region of this nation following the emancipation of slaves and that this condition continued unabated for one hundred years until the advent of the civil rights movement (DuBois 1935 [1969], 644). While veto actions may interfere with business-as-usual local practices, true justice and a normalization of behavior for all may require federal legislation, federal court decrees, or other forms of federal intervention as seen in the Montgomery and Birmingham freedom movements and in the other case studies of politics and government analyzed in this book.

This is why subdominant people need to establish vertical contacts with individuals, groups, organizations, and agencies that transcend local power and authority. For example, in the Warren County demonstration against the plan to use available space in minority communities for dumping toxic waste, help was received from a national religious organization that sponsored regionwide studies and gathered scientific data to demonstrate the presence of a pattern of establishing toxic-waste sites near communities of minority people. Officers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, also helped the local people in Warren County by advising them on how to effectively engage in civil disobedience and use direct social action. While participants in the Birmingham freedom movement turned to the federal government and invoked the assistance of the U.S. president to free Dr. King from solitary confinement in the Birmingham jail, they also successfully used local civil disobedience and direct social action. The MFDP had to travel far from home to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where the National Democratic Party was having a meeting, to get their local complaints against discrimination in the selection of delegates turned into a national-agenda item.

All of this activity reinforces the notion that vertical linkages with people, organizations, and resources beyond the local scene are necessary and essential to achieving the goals of subdominant people of power who inhabit a common locality. The analysis above also reveals that not all political action is local, especially for subdominant people of power. In all four of the political cases, both distant and local help was needed.

The Theory of Critical Mass and the Necessity of Heterogeneous Populations

The previous discussion concerning locality and the importance of vertical links in grassroots movements leads quite naturally to our next issue of importance. Charles Willie emphasizes that time, place, and a critical mass of subdominant people of power are necessary and essential for effective grassroots social action. "Critical mass has to do with the size of a population necessary to have a noticeable impact on a social system" (Willie 1994, 75). With reference to the three cases of direct social action pertaining to government, Willie explains that before the civil rights era, black Americans were, as a group, ill equipped to launch and execute a successful protest movement against the social injustice they had endured.

> The undifferentiated, relatively large minority of blacks during the age of slavery was unable to mount and sustain a revolution for reform. But the relatively large minority that was differentiated into middle-class and other socio-economic levels during the era of MLK Jr. was able to mobilize and act effectively. When MLK Jr. began his work in the South, one-fifth of the population in that region was black, and at least one out of every three southern blacks was above the poverty line. This proportion that was beyond the clutches of daily worry about personal [and] physical survival apparently was sufficiently large to spark and sustain a revolutionary movement for reform. This demographic fact is the reason the civil rights movement started in the South when it did. (Willie 1994, 84–85)

The passage above emphasizes not only the numbers needed in a subdominant population to enact change but that a subdominant group will be ill

prepared to mount such a charge until it has moved from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous population.

It is ironic to note that the exact forms of discrimination foisted upon blacks by whites—community isolation, segregation, and degrading conditions—all worked to the advantage of the disadvantaged in their quest for equality. Conditions in the South during the early twentieth century helped produce the large minority needed to propel a cause (Anderson 1988, 202), while segregation meant that blacks, as a group, had to do for themselves what whites would not. This produced a professional class of businessman, merchants, lawyers, medical doctors, Ph.D. recipients, teachers, and clergy, which moved a heretofore poverty-stricken and uneducated population following slavery to the levels of the middle class and beyond. In addition, class became intermingled, allowing for the newly successful and heterogeneous population to care for the destitute and redeem the fallen. The cases in Part III of this book show these assertions to be true. In Birmingham, blacks comprised one-third of the populous, while in Mississippi, "[African Americans] constituted over forty percent of the population" (Blumberg 1991, 94). Sarah Mittlefehldt points out that Warren County was 66 percent African American. These facts seem to support the hypothesis that a critical mass and heterogeneous socio-economic population enhance effective grassroots social action.

The Importance of Horizontal Linkages

We have already stressed the importance of vertical linkages in grassroots social action. However, horizontal linkages are equally important among subdominant people of power for implementing a successful social movement. In her analysis of Warren County, North Carolina, author Mittlefehldt emphasizes that "Ken Ferruccio and the Concerned Citizens realized they needed a more effective strategy for fighting the proposed landfill. But, they lacked experience and the technical expertise of civil rights action. . . . Therefore, Ferruccio and the Concerned Citizens decided to actively recruit leadership from the black community, people who had connections with experienced civil rights activists" (Mittlefehldt 2003, 7). She goes on to state that it was this recognition of "the necessity of synthesis between two previously disparate subdominant paradigms, namely, the environmental movement, with its concern for the health of the environment, and the civil rights movement, with its concern for equality and social justice" that led to success in Warren County (Mittlefehldt 2003, 3). We assert that the synthesis of these two issues (environmental justice and civil rights) was in and of itself a necessary and important horizontal linkage that resulted in two separate, but similar,

groups joining together to form a multicultural critical mass with increased power because of their numbers, diverse expertise, and resources. This enabled them "to exercise their collective 'veto power'" (Mittlefehldt 2003, 8).

In the case involving Birmingham, Alabama, author Sara Lam explains how coalitions between like-minded organizations such as Fred Shuttlesworth's Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Western Christian Leadership Conference, the Virginia Christian Leadership Conference, and other affiliated organizations launched a successful nonviolent protest movement in a city that Dr. King had referred to as the most segregated in America and where seventeen unsolved bombings of African Americans had occurred between 1957 and 1964 (Blumberg 1991; Branch 1988). Lam's analysis also attests to the benefits to be derived from a heterogeneous subdominant population in a protest movement and to the fluidity of dominance and subdominance as categories. She writes, "As black people, the leaders of the movement were subdominant in relation to the white people of Birmingham, but they possessed a range of resources that placed them in positions of dominance within the protest movement. . . . As dominant people of power [within the movement] black leaders had the resources necessary to organize the subdominant people of power" (Lam 2003, 6–7).

The Freedom Rides of 1961 marked an escalation in the resistance to segregation and discrimination by a multicultural group of young people involved in the civil rights movement. The success of the rides was a high point in the movement and "drew the involvement of every major civil rights organization. . . . Skills, funds, man[power], and womanpower were derived from varied sources. The creative . . . cooperation of the organizations made all of this possible" (Blumberg 1991, 87). The Freedom Rides demonstrated unequivocally the power of horizontal linkages and what can be achieved when individuals and groups who possess vision and a variety of skills marshal together for a common cause.

The fourth of our cases, the MFDP, is a textbook example of horizontal coalition building and its necessity in grassroots social action. Jeffrey Garrett in his analysis demonstrates how the governing body in this case, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), was revamped by the leaders from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the NAACP "into an organization incorporating all national, state, and local protest groups operating in the state [of Mississippi]" (John Dittmer, quoted in Garrett 2004, 12). Garrett goes further in explaining that COFO not only interwove organizations together for

a common purpose but also provided all local black Mississippians with the opportunity to assume ownership of the central issue of their time in their home locale. "COFO provided a homegrown organization that Mississippi blacks could turn to as their own civil rights creation" (Garrett 2004, 12). Thus, horizontal organization among a heterogeneous populous creates "buy-in" and legitimation from those whom grassroots initiatives are intended to benefit.

Negotiation

The case of the MFDP presents readers with lessons to learn and emulate for further grassroots action, lessons for success and failure. Of the four cases presented in Part III of this book, only the MFDP may be perceived as a failure. The goal of the party was "to unseat the segregated delegation [from Mississippi] to the National Democratic Convention." That mission, however, was not accomplished. If the MFDP had won, it would have been a complete defeat for the all-white Democratic delegation from Mississippi. As mentioned in chapter 2 of this book, it is difficult to reconcile opposing *positions* for integration and against segregation. However, according to Roger Fisher and William Ury, one has a better chance of reconciling common *interests*, such as those pertaining to justice and other similar concerns. To paraphrase John Rawls, within a large society people must learn to achieve consensus (Rawls 2002). Also, as stated earlier, fulfilling the requirements of justice enhances both dominant and subdominant people of power because justice is fair to everyone.

Although the MFDP brought to the attention of the National Democratic Party the inappropriateness of a political party with such a name seating a delegation from one of its member states that was deliberately segregated, Garrett calls the effort of the MFDP a failure because its single goal was to unseat the white segregated delegation to the national convention with delegates chosen by this new party. And this did not happen.

Because the resolution of the situation was limited to either losing or winning, the only way the alternative black-controlled political party could win was to defeat the traditional white-controlled political party that had sent only white delegates to the National Democratic Convention over the years. To summarize, there was no room for a negotiated solution that could be interpreted as a win-win outcome for both parties to the dispute. This reflects the fact that the MFDP entered into the National Democratic Convention without a negotiation strategy. When the Credentials Committee of the national party agreed to welcome the people of the MFDP as "honored guests" of the convention and to give special status as "delegates-at-large" to two of its leadership members, the MFDP rejected the proposal as a form of "tokenism." But it did not have a counterproposal to offer. We believe that learning how to negotiate should be an important part of grassroots planning, as seen in the case of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in which protesters appointed a negotiating committee and a strategy committee to take care of such business (King 1958, 225).

Despite the group's failure to achieve its singular goal, during that particular period, the activity of the MFDP helped put voting rights on the national agenda. In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which was applicable to specific political divisions in some states but to the whole state of Mississippi (Larson and McDonald 1980, 44–62).

In a similar vein, the case of Warren County may also be seen as a partial failure. The initial goal of the Warren County Citizens Concerned about PCBs (Concerned Citizens) was simply to derail the construction of a new landfill in Warren County, North Carolina (Mittlefehldt 2003, 3). However, the Concerned Citizens, after a three-year legal battle with the Environmental Protection Agency and the state of North Carolina, were unsuccessful in that effort. It was not until the Concerned Citizens joined forces with experienced civil rights activists and broadened their singular focus on the removal of one landfill in Warren County to "a desire to bring national attention to the disproportionate pattern of siting toxic-waste landfills in low-income and minority communities throughout the country" (Mittlefehldt 2003, 4) that ultimate victory for Warren County, the state of North Carolina, and the nation was achieved. This speaks to the value to be derived from diversified and multicultural movements and reinforces the fact that grassroots initiatives are "long-haul" struggles that may take years to resolve. The report of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice (UCCCRJ), citing a pattern of toxic-waste dumping throughout the United States in low-income and minority communities, was issued in 1982, approximately five years following the initial protest initiated by the Concerned Citizens. The Environmental Justice Executive Order was signed into law in 1994, a full twelve years after the initial study conducted by the UCCCRJ.

The Value of Diversity

Our findings also suggest that diversity is of value in grassroots social action. These case studies reveal that an inclusive community has a better chance of solving social problems than a homogenous one. The initiation of the Freedom Rides was a project of CORE. Founded in April 1942, the organization was multiracial from its inception. The first group of thirteen freedom riders boarded buses in Washington, D.C., and traveled through Virginia and

North Carolina without any difficulty but encountered terrifying violence in Alabama and at other stops. Of the thirteen people on this first Freedom Ride, seven were black, and six were white. Undoubtedly, the extreme violence perpetuated against this multiracial band of young students and activists garnered national attention and sympathy on the part of citizens who witnessed unbridled racism and hatred against any and all—black and white, young and old, Northern and Southern, Christian and Jew, male and female—who were willing to uphold justice and fairness as a condition for living in this country (Branch 1988; Blumberg 1991; Lewis and D'Orso 1998). There was racial diversity to be found during the Freedom Rides, and there was age diversity among the participants in the Birmingham demonstrations; children as well as adults marched in the demonstration and were subjected to violence by the use of high-powered fire hoses, beatings, and attacks by police dogs. This tactic was perceived as extremely controversial by those within and outside the civil rights movement but was ultimately prescient in garnering worldwide support for the cause.

As evidenced, there was inclusion and cooperation among different kinds of civil rights groups. The NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund made available money from its bail account for the three hundred CORE freedom riders imprisoned in Mississippi and "appealed the convictions of the Mississippi courts all the way up to the Supreme Court" (Blumberg 1991, 87), ultimately achieving success in 1965. In addition to the diversity that constituted COFO, the MFDP also received substantial support from the United Auto Workers and Americans for Democratic Action. Also, the initial white protestors in Warren County, North Carolina, reached out and obtained valued assistance from people of color.

As discussed above, the grassroots movement in Warren County, North Carolina, against the dumping of toxic waste on land near residential communities was first led by white people who advocated not-in-my-backyard tactics but did not complain about attempts to dump the toxic material elsewhere. However, the demonstrations did not gain sufficient traction to become a movement until the movement linked up with a nearby black community that had more experience in grassroots social action. Mittlefehldt points out that by joining different racial groups together, the movement eventually "involved a diverse cross section of the local community" (Mittlefehldt 2003, 11).

Local Actions and National Implications

Finally, Nelson Polsby theorizes that "national and international events of all kinds have their repercussions in [local] community life" (Polsby 1963, 133).

However, as evidenced by the cases in this section of the book on politics, we assert that the reverse may also be true. Local actions may have national consequences. Each of these initiatives started in very specific locales within the United States to address regional problems, and the resolution of each case had national implications.

Approximately one month following the protests in Birmingham, President John F. Kennedy proposed comprehensive civil rights legislation. In 1964, one year after Birmingham and President Kennedy's assassination, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed guaranteeing equal employment opportunities to all citizens and eliminating discrimination in places of public accommodation (Lam 2003, 10). The Freedom Rides of 1961 helped to bring about strenuous reinforcement of integration in interstate travel as decreed by the Supreme Court in the 1960 case of *Boynton v. Virginia*. As stated previously, the MFDP did not achieve its initial goal, but the bold actions of those who participated led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The most current of the cases dealing with the issue of politics is arguably our most profound because it addresses the most pressing problem of our time: environmental justice and the protection of our natural resources. Mittlefehldt states that Warren County is "frequently cited as the birthplace of the environmental-justice movement" (Mittlefehldt 2003, 1) and that this investigation of toxic-waste landfills led to the signing and passage in 1994 of the Environmental Justice Executive Order. In summary, not all grassroots action will have national consequences such as the cases cited, but we hope our readers understand that subdominant people of power can alter their times and the course of history.

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PART IV

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS