

CONTENTION IN CONTEXT

*Political Opportunities and  
the Emergence of Protest*

Edited by Jeff Goodwin  
and James M. Jasper

---

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

©2012 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of Stanford University Press.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Contention in context : political opportunities and the emergence of protest / edited by Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8047-7611-0 (cloth : alk. paper)--ISBN 978-0-8047-7612-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Social movements. 2. Protest movements. 3. Political science. I. Goodwin, Jeff, editor of compilation. II. Jasper, James M., 1957- editor of compilation.

HM881.C655 Z011

322.4--dc23

2011026604

Typeset by Bruce Lundquist in 10/14 Minion

## 5 The Civil Rights Movement

*Charles Payne's I've Got the Light of Freedom*

FRANCESCA POLLETTA

IN THE FALL OF 1962, few would have predicted that Greenwood, Mississippi, was about to become a hotbed of civil rights insurgency. Located in the Mississippi delta, legendary for its intransigent racism, Greenwood was still dominated by a planter class determined to retain its grip on the black residents who made up two-thirds of the county's population and owned less than a tenth of its land. The notorious White Citizens' Council (WCC) had its national headquarters in Greenwood. Counting a membership of 80,000 within two years of its founding in 1954, the WCC relied on economic reprisals and physical intimidation to destroy state chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Outright murder was also part of the segregationist repertoire. In 1955 alone, seven black activists were killed.

When in the summer of 1962, an organizer from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began to have some success in persuading black residents to attempt to register to vote, county officials responded by cutting off the federal surplus commodities—meal, rice, flour, and sugar—on which 27,000 mostly black residents depended to survive the winter.

Cutting off the food supplies proved a tactical blunder, however. Through its central office in Atlanta and support chapters around the country, SNCC put out a nationwide call for food, clothing, and medical supplies. In distributing the donations, SNCC workers gave preference to residents who were suffering reprisals for attempting to register to vote. Voter registration efforts

rose dramatically. On February 25 and 26, 1963, 150 local black residents attempted to register, the largest group at one time in the Black Belt. White harassment kept apace, but now arrests and violence against civil rights workers only spurred more mobilization. Over one hundred residents protested the arrest of the original SNCC organizer, Sam Block. When another SNCC worker was shot, fifty more organizers descended on the county, along with national movement leaders and celebrities. Voter registration efforts continued, joined by marches—sometimes two a day—and rallies. Food and clothing distribution reached 1,349 people in the first three weeks of March. Greenwood put police officers on twelve-hour/seven-day-a-week shifts, brought in personnel from surrounding counties, and filled the city jail, but they were unable to stem the mass mobilization. They stopped using police dogs when SNCC provided the national media with photos of civil rights workers being attacked.

How to account for the Greenwood insurgency? It is tempting to view it as an extension of a movement that had begun elsewhere. In what Doug McAdam (1982) describes as a second phase of civil rights insurgency, formal political organizations such as SNCC eclipsed the local and often non-political organi-

zations (churches, black colleges, and NAACP chapters) from which the movement had sprung and were able to mobilize support from a national conscience constituency of Northern churches, white liberals, organized labor, and students. In *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, however, Charles Payne cautions against such an explanation. SNCC organizers would never have gained a foothold in Greenwood, indeed, would likely never have gone there in the first place, without the help and inspiration of an older group of local leaders who had come to prominence in the 1950s. Veteran Mississippi activists had developed support networks that extended through a variety of political organizations, reached outside the state, and pushed the limits of Southern white officials' tolerance for mobilization. Their "spadework" provided SNCC workers personnel, contacts, and tactical expertise. The 1963 Greenwood movement was not simply an extension of a national movement into previously impenetrable areas of the Deep South but rather was forged in the same period and context as the national movement. To understand Greenwood in 1963, we need to understand Greenwood in 1953.

Payne's study of the Greenwood movement follows in a line of community-

#### MAJOR EVENTS IN THE U.S. CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

- April 3, 1944: U.S. Supreme Court outlaws the white primary in *Smith v. Allwright*
- 1944: Activists begin to mobilize around Mississippi voter registration; registered black voters rise from 2,000 in 1940 to 25,000 in 1954
- 1947: Mississippi Progressive Voters' League (MPVL) is founded and claims a membership of 5,000
- 1951: Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) is founded; its mass meetings in the early 1950s are attended by over 10,000 people
- May 17, 1954: U.S. Supreme Court unanimously outlaws segregated education in *Brown v. Board of Education*, signaling the opening of political opportunities for black collective action
- 1954: NAACP activist Aaron Henry organizes four hundred residents to petition for school desegregation in Clarksdale, Mississippi; intimidation and threats cause almost every one of them to remove their names
- 1954: In response to the *Brown* decision, the White Citizens' Council is founded in Indianola, with membership swelling to 80,000 within two years; its tactics to demobilize black activists include economic reprisals and physical intimidation
- 1955–1958: NAACP loses 246 Southern branches and 48,000 members; the number of blacks on voter rolls plunges from 25,000 in 1954 to 8,000 in 1956

1955: Seven black activists are murdered, among them Belzoni NAACP founder Reverend George W. Lee (May 7), his death ruled a "highway accident"; one to two thousand mourners attend the funeral, amid shouts of "He was murdered"

1955: The Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* editorializes against the shooting of activist Gus Courts, and the Citizens' Council offers a \$250 reward for information leading to the arrest of his assailants; racial terrorism is seen for the first time as creating bad press

1955–1960: Black defiance is channeled into political concerns by such groups as the Regional Council of Negro Leadership and the Citizen's League, which bolster the beleaguered NAACP; Northern black allies such as Congressmen Charles Diggs and William Dawson, as well as businessmen and black media provide financial assistance and publicity

1962: Leflore county officials cut off federal surplus commodities to black residents after initial SNCC success in voter registration drives; SNCC puts out a national call for supplies and sends more organizers to Greenwood

February 25, 1963: 150 black Greenwood residents attempt to register to vote, the largest group at one time in the Deep South; the arrest of SNCC organizer Sam Block provokes marches, rallies, and stepped-up voter registration efforts

based studies of the civil rights movement that have explicitly challenged the "King-centric" view of earlier historical scholarship, and have implicitly corrected accounts that assume geographically undifferentiated national movements. Rather than concentrating on national leaders, federal agendas, and high-profile confrontations, with local leaders portrayed as King's lieutenants or followers, historians in the 1980s began to document local movements with distinctive origins, aims, and trajectories. "Blacks in these communities developed their own goals and strategies which bore little relation to national campaigns for civil rights legislation," historian Clayborne Carson wrote in a 1986 survey of the scholarship. "There is much to suggest that national civil rights organizations and their leaders played only minor roles in bringing about most local insurgencies" (1986, p. 24).

Since Carson's article, several scholars have tempered the sometimes overly localist perspective of the first generation of community studies, calling instead for analysis of the "complex ways in which local and national movements fed off one another" (Payne 1995, p. 415; see also Lawson 1991). But the latter perspective still poses interesting problems for the political-process model that dominates sociological accounts of the civil rights movement. If civil rights insurgency was indeed a movement of many movements, were the same national political opportunities responsible for them all? Do national political developments signal new opportunities in the same way to people in regions where the national government has long been seen as a distant actor with little impact? Should we look for additional layers of political opportunities: elite allies, political access, and declining repression at state and local, as well as national, levels?

*I've Got the Light of Freedom* helps to answer these questions. It gives a central causal role to expanding national political opportunities in accounting for the emergence of the Mississippi movement. But it reworks the political-opportunity thesis in at least three crucial ways: by challenging its distinction between elite allies (typically considered part of the political opportunity structure) and indigenous organizations (typically considered mobilizing structures); by viewing voter registration efforts as protest rather than as a precondition for it; and by suggesting that repression under certain circumstances facilitates rather than discourages protest. More broadly, Payne's account helps to expose questionable assumptions made by political-process analyses about what counts as movement "emergence" and whether we can conceptualize challengers as unitary actors. Instead, it supports the notion that Jasper details in the Introduction of movements and the groups that compose them as strategic players, who share

some goals and not others, who mobilize people on the basis of their emotional indignation as much as their perception of new opportunities for impact, who respond to the tactical blunders of their antagonists as well as to longer-term redistributions of political authority, and who engage and reengage in long-running games whose rules may change even though the stakes do not.

I should note from the outset that much of the argument I attribute to Payne is teased out from a narrative that is deliberately much stronger on historical detail than theoretical elaboration (I will argue later that, while largely effective, Payne's focus on individual experiences and relationships sometimes obscures his causal claims). Payne does not engage sociological theories of movement emergence directly. His purpose is not to account for the beginnings of the movement in Greenwood. Rather, he aims to document a community-organizing tradition that generated neither the media-worthy events nor the subsequent historical scholarship that its community-mobilizing counterpart generated, yet was responsible for opening up the most oppressive areas of the South and went on to influence the women's, anti-Vietnam War, and New Left movements. Still, Payne's close attention to the extralocal activist networks and local political shifts that preceded mass insurgency yields insights about the relations between national politics and local protest that should be instructive to students of this and other movements.

### Origins of the Movement

Before addressing Payne's account of civil rights insurgency, I will briefly summarize Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, where the key tenets of the political-process model were worked out. Challenging both collective behaviorist and resource mobilization accounts of movement emergence, McAdam emphasized political opportunities over system strain and emphasized indigenous resources over elite support (the latter, he pointed out, followed mobilization rather than preceded it). Key to the development of black insurgency were the political opportunities afforded by a newly vulnerable national political structure, the growth of indigenous institutions that provided insurgents necessary organizational resources and, mainly a result of the first two, Southern blacks' new sense of collective efficacy.

While the Compromise of 1877—and the alliance between Northern industrialists and Southern planters on which it was based—effectively organized blacks out of national politics, the erosion of that same alliance helped to bring

them back in. The decline of the cotton industry in the 1920s and 1930s ended Northern elites' receptiveness to Southern planters' interests. It also spurred a massive migration of Southern blacks to Southern cities and Northern states where they were able to exercise electoral clout. The importance of the black vote was evident in the presidential elections of 1944 and 1948. Both would have gone to the Republican challenger had blacks voted for him. The growth in the Southern black electorate after 1950 further contributed to the salience of the black vote, McAdam argues. At the same time, America's postwar struggle with the Soviet Union for the allegiance of third world nations made it sensitive to charges of racism within its borders. Together these trends resulted in a federal government newly amenable to black claims.

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision capped twenty years of Supreme Court decisions that were increasingly favorable to the interests of black Americans (only 43 percent of Supreme Court decisions handed down before 1931 favored black litigants while fully 91 percent between 1931 and 1955 did [p. 84]). Roosevelt's 1941 executive order establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission, a response to A. Philip Randolph's threatened March on Washington, broke with the former hands-off policy of the executive branch. It inaugurated a series of supportive executive actions that continued into the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, among them a Committee on Civil Rights in 1946, plans for desegregation of the armed services and a comprehensive civil rights package in 1948, pressure for the desegregation of public facilities in the District of Columbia and a Committee on Government Contract Compliance in 1951.

Concurrent with these national developments, the growth of key institutions within Southern black communities during the 1930–1954 period, namely black colleges, churches, and NAACP chapters, provided black activists the communication, organizational, and ideological resources necessary to mount a full-fledged assault on white supremacy. By 1955, black activists could exploit federal vulnerability, strong indigenous resources, and a newfound sense of collective efficacy on the part of black Southerners in order to launch the first wave of mass insurgency.

At first glance, Payne's description of Mississippi in 1955 seems dramatically at odds with this picture. While the 1954 *Brown* decision was initially met with what seemed grudging acceptance on the part of white officials, within weeks acceptance had ceded to a wave of repression. Clarksdale NAACP activist Aaron Henry organized four hundred residents to petition for school desegre-

gation but intimidation and threats caused almost every one of them to remove their names. Quasi-official state-funded White Citizens' Councils officially eschewed violence, preferring campaigns of economic intimidation and legal measures to disenfranchise blacks. In practice, these were often accompanied by physical threats and actual violence. The effect was chilling. Over 20,000 blacks had been on the Mississippi voting rolls in the early 1950s; the number dropped to 8,000 by 1956. Belzoni NAACP founder Reverend George Lee was murdered after a series of death threats; his death was ruled a highway accident (and the bullets in his jaw reported as dental fillings). Lee's NAACP colleague Gus Courts was shot six months later; surviving, he fled to Chicago for safety. T.R.M. Howard and Dr. C. C. Battle, two leaders of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, were also forced to leave the state. A. H. McCoy stayed but saw his home wracked by gunfire. With Courts and Lee, the three men had been named on a Klan death list. In Charleston, NAACP activist Robert Smith simply disappeared. Between 1955 and 1958, the NAACP lost 246 Southern branches and 48,000 members. In the second half of the decade, Payne concludes, there seemed to be far more defeats than victories (p. 55).

Yet, he goes on, the decimation of black leadership in 1955–56 “is misleading, obscuring the fact that the return on racist violence was actually diminishing” (p. 40), and political opportunities for activism were in fact opening up. This seems a curious conclusion, given that repression was mounting, electoral power was declining, and two indices of indigenous organizational strength in McAdam's scheme—the black Church and the NAACP—seemed respectively unwilling to get involved in political activism and about to go under altogether. But Payne argues that the wave of repression that followed the *Brown* decision concealed three longer-term changes. The stranglehold of violence had in fact been permanently broken. Mississippi activists had secured allies outside the state who supplied essential financial and political resources. And black residents were meeting white intimidation and violence with political action. These changes made possible the consolidation of a cadre of Mississippi black leaders and then a mass movement that depended on their tactical expertise, political resources, and personal contacts.

#### Relaxed White Repression

Figures on lynching do not convey its brutal and public character: the crowds, often alerted days before by ads placed in local newspapers, the victims' slow

torture and mutilation, their bodies dragged through the streets and burned, with murderers posing for photographs and taking body parts as souvenirs. But the graphic brutality was essential for communicating to black residents the costs of challenging a system dependent on black labor. Those lynched were often innocent of the crimes for which they were murdered (robbery, assault, rape of a white woman in one-sixth of all cases), but they were judged guilty by the white community—of becoming too prosperous, of encroaching on occupations considered white men's turf, of having mobilized fellow residents or workers against white brutalities.

Lynching's decline throughout the South—by 1935 the number had dropped from the hundred per year prior to the turn of the century to eighteen, and in the next twenty years, it would not rise above eight per year—reflected in part the federal government's new willingness to intervene in Southern racial practices, and behind that, Northern blacks' growing electoral clout. It also reflected the fact that racial terror was simply less necessary. In the 1920s and 1930s mechanized cotton production displaced thousands of workers at the same time as competition from synthetics and cheap foreign cotton devalued the cotton crop. With the Depression, the bottom fell out of the cotton market. The average price of cotton plunged from 35 cents per pound in 1919 to 9 cents per pound in 1931. By the 1960s, the great plantations would be using one-fifth of their former workforce. State officials who had passed laws to arrest Northern labor recruiters charged with luring away black cotton workers now worked on schemes to drive blacks from the state altogether.

So far, this argument recapitulates McAdam's. However, the decline of the cotton industry also undermined the hegemony of the planter class, Payne goes on, and the rise of a competing business class was another reason for lowered white repression, something McAdam does not discuss. Anti-lynching activist Jessie Daniel Ames wrote in 1939 that "we have managed to reduce lynchings . . . not because we've grown more law-abiding or respectable but because lynchings became such bad advertising. The South is going after big industry at the moment and a lawless, lynch-mob population isn't going to attract very much outside capital" (p. 21). The cost of bad publicity was increasingly entering into the calculus of overt racial oppression. Greenwood planters still managed to get their candidate into the mayor's office in 1957, but it was, says Payne, a last hurrah. "By the 1960s, then, there was no politically meaningful class of whites for whom suppression of Blacks was the kind of economic necessity it had been in years past. As terrible as it was for its vic-

tims, the level of violence is not what one would expect from people defending a vital class interest" (p. 203).

The new calculus was evident in white response to the 1955 Lee and Courts shootings. Nine years earlier, the national NAACP had organized a series of hearings in Jackson intended to establish Senator Theodore Bilbo's role in systematically disenfranchising black citizens. County registrar after county registrar testified openly about their efforts to keep Mississippi blacks off the voter rolls. Their candor, Payne observes, was "a gauge of how little some Mississippians of that period worried about the opinions of the world" (p. 25). By 1955, those opinions mattered. The Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* condemned Courts' shooting, and the Citizens' Council offered a \$250 reward for information leading to the arrest of his assailants (who, the sheriff seemed convinced, were light-skinned Negroes). Mississippi's governor warned of federal intervention: "If they can say that state law has broken down, there's no telling how much federal interference might be forced on us" (p. 39).

Federal involvement in the Southern way of life was becoming a real possibility, Payne shows, and its possibility—never certainty—tempered at least official segregationist response to black collective action. For example, when SNCC workers in 1961 mounted their first registration drive, in McComb, white response was initially disorganized and ineffective. This was a function, Payne surmises, of white officials' uncertainty about what role the federal government would play in prosecuting interference with voter registration workers. The Justice Department's policy in McComb, and throughout the South, was erratic. Suits were sometimes filed on behalf of beaten civil rights workers, but their complaints were just as likely to be ignored (and the information sometimes passed on to local law enforcement officials). Young civil rights workers experienced the Justice Department's callousness as a profound betrayal, and their radicalization dates from their earliest encounters with the federal government in Mississippi. But Payne points out that the uncertainty of federal action was enough to restrain racial terrorism: "from the viewpoint of local law-enforcement people, the mere possibility of federal intervention was probably enough to put some limits, however slight, on violence and blatant illegalities" (p. 124).

Those who formed Mississippi's black leadership cadre in the 1950s tended to be least vulnerable to white economic control. They were independent farmers, real estate owners, undertakers, dentists. But the relaxation of white terrorism enabled them to hold public gatherings and to begin to groom a new generation of young leaders.

### Co-optable Networks

When the federal government threatened to intervene in Mississippi's affairs, it did not act autonomously. Rather it responded to an increasingly well-organized group of activists and influential supporters. The Lee shooting reveals this shift. Payne writes:

Ten years earlier, a killing of this sort might have been put down as a "traffic fatality," and no word of it would have crossed the county line. By 1955, Delta Blacks were better organized, better connected to concerned audiences outside the state. Negroes trying to use the phones the evening of the killing were told by the operators that all long-distance lines were tied up, so drivers were sent to officials of the NAACP and the RCNL [Regional Council of Negro Leadership] across the state . . . [RCNL president] Dr. Howard called Congressman Diggs—who had headlined the RCNL rally a few weeks earlier—who called the White House. In Jackson, Medgar Evers, the newly hired state NAACP field secretary . . . immediately began gathering material for the national press (p. 39).

Mississippi's diminishing isolation from the rest of the country was a function not only of the federal government's greater scrutiny, but also of black activists' ability to draw on national sources of publicity, financial support, and organizational expertise.

Within the state, the NAACP was but one of several organizations supporting black leadership. The Mississippi Progressive Voters' League claimed a membership of five thousand by 1947 (Dittmer 1994, p. 25). The Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) was founded in 1951 in the all-black town of Mound Bayou. Led by the charismatic T.R.M. Howard, it held mass meetings that were attended by ten to twelve thousand people in the 1950s. While the NAACP was under attack, a Citizen's League was founded in Greenwood in 1957.

The agendas of these organizations centered on voting rights. Contrary to McAdam's argument that the movement before 1965 was united around a goal of desegregation (1982, p. 137), for postwar Mississippi black activists the goal was electoral power (see also Dittmer 1994; Bloom 1987). SNCC organizer Bob Moses recalls that NAACP activist Amzie Moore "wasn't distracted by school integration. He was for it but it didn't distract him from the centrality of the right to vote" (p. 106). From that vantage point, the important Supreme Court ruling—and one often overlooked, Payne observes—was the 1944 *Smith v. Allwright* decision outlawing the white primary. An estimated

two thousand blacks were registered in the state in 1940, twenty-five hundred in 1946, but five thousand in 1947, an increase of 100 percent. By 1954 there were twenty to twenty-five thousand registered black voters (p. 25). The importance of the vote was not lost on white Mississippians. While the White Citizens' Councils were formed in response to the *Brown* decision, they "quickly became involved in a broader defense of white racism" (p. 35), with white control of the vote its centerpiece. Councils successfully lobbied for a law requiring potential voters to be able to interpret any section of the state constitution to the satisfaction of the registrar (a practice widespread even before the law).

The legal and illegal strategies were successful in disenfranchising blacks, and the number of registered black voters in Mississippi plunged to 8,000 in 1956. The decline was a setback in a long and continuing battle, however. By 1959, voter registration was back up to 15,000. Recognizing the role of organizations other than the NAACP in black Mississippi communities in the 1950s thus foregrounds a voter registration thrust that extended back before the war. It also helps to explain how Mississippi activists were able to survive the 1955–56 wave of repression. With memberships in multiple organizations, they continued to operate under the rubrics of other organizations when the NAACP was attacked.

In addition, multiple ties allowed activists to maneuver around the NAACP, thus avoiding some of its more onerous mandates and organizational territoriality. Local NAACP heads were "restive under the tight reins of the NAACP's national office" (p. 32), Payne observes, and sometimes downright dismissive. Of Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, Amzie Moore said, "He'd fly down here and hold our conferences and hold our annual 'days' and raise our freedom money and be advised by different people outa the New York office. And that was it" (p. 33). Payne documents numerous instances in which local activists such as Moore defied national NAACP opposition to pursue broader agendas and to form coalitions with groups the national office perceived as competitors. For example, in 1962, Medgar Evers, Aaron Henry, and Amzie Moore brought SNCC activists into the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) coalition that would later coordinate the Mississippi Summer Project. It was a move that sat ill with national NAACP headquarters. "Had the veteran Mississippi activists, with their credibility and contacts, taken the stance toward the other groups that the national organization consistently took, the movement of the sixties would have had more difficulty establishing itself. Instead,



they chose to legitimate the outsiders" (p. 62). Overlapping memberships thus enabled activists to draw on the resources of the NAACP while maintaining the tactical flexibility and responsiveness to local conditions that strict adherence to national directives would have made impossible.

Another important feature of Mississippi activist networks in the 1950s was their inclusion of black elite allies. Political-process theories have analytically separated elite allies (considered part of the political opportunity structure) from facilitative organizations within the aggrieved group (considered indigenous mobilizing structures). But in this case the categories overlapped; elites were members rather than supporters of the aggrieved group. As Jasper points out in his Introduction, the concept of "elite" mistakenly assumes a unity of interest among all those in that category. In this case, influential black individuals and groups outside the state provided money, organizational expertise, and national publicity. NAACP and RCNL meetings in the early 1950s featured national speakers such as Congressmen Charles Diggs and William Dawson, and attorney Thurgood Marshall. Black magazines and newspapers like *Jet*, *Ebony*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* garnered Northern publicity and provided financial assistance, as did Northern black civic organizations, churches, and banks. When Amzie Moore faced bank foreclosure on his home as a result of his civil rights work, he survived on donations solicited by *Jet* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and on assistance from the black-owned Tri-State Bank in Memphis. With contributions from the NAACP and organized labor, Tri-State opened a loan fund for black activists, enabling them to withstand white economic reprisals. Reverend Aaron Johnson of Greenwood saw his congregation and salary slip away when he opened his church to SNCC activists in 1962. A \$1,300 gift and a weekly stipend from his church headquarters in Indianapolis enabled him to survive.

These outside groups and individuals also served as communicative resources, conveying to people in Mississippi the existence of new political opportunities and national support. For black Mississippians, the federal government had long been a distant and ineffectual actor. Most of the Supreme Court decisions and executive orders favorable to black claimants in the 1940s and 1950s had little chance of being enforced in Mississippi. FBI agents, even when they appeared at victims' behest, did little but take notes, and White Citizens' Councils were able to get black leaders audited by the IRS after 1955. The message was not obviously one of federal support for racial equality. Mississippi's long political isolation meant that a central challenge for activists was to convince

residents that political opportunities on the national scene had meaning for people in Mississippi. While Attorney General Herbert Brownell was unlikely to appear at a Mississippi mass meeting in the 1950s, Congressman Diggs did so, and was more likely to be trusted and believed when he described the federal government's new amenability to black claims. But the communicative role played by influential allies worked the other way, too. Black luminaries and organizations with national reach were able to stimulate the Northern attention that compelled the federal government to take a stand on abuses in Mississippi.

### Defiance

Payne identifies a third transformation under way in the 1950s that was responsible both for the emergence of a powerful black leadership and for their later organizing successes. Mississippi blacks were increasingly unwilling to back down from racist violence. Between one and two thousand mourners attended George Lee's funeral in 1955, and services were interrupted by shouts of "He was murdered!" (p. 38). Belzoni black residents went on to boycott white stores to protest the killing. Angry protesters gathered at the trial of Emmett Till's murderers a few months later, some of them carrying weapons. Amzie Moore dated the beginning of the modern movement in Mississippi to that time. And NAACP regional head Ruby Hurley linked the Till killing to an increase in regional NAACP membership. Black Mississippians had a long tradition of standing up to white oppression, Payne notes. What was different now was the scale of resistance, and its channeling into political forms: people joined the NAACP, boycotted white stores, and withdrew money from white banks.

Payne sees the change in consciousness as generational: "Black Mississippians coming to adulthood in the late 1940s had a stronger sense of entitlement" (p. 21). He cites Hortense Powdermaker's (1968) study of the Indianola black community in the early 1930s: blacks born in the early years of the century were less willing to accept the codes of ritual deference than their parents, and those who were well educated were even less so. One young man, typical of the better educated, "recognized his inability to vote as the crucial point. For him the vote has become the symbol of the kernel of the inter-racial situation. He maintains that . . . only a need for the votes of the Negroes will bring justice to them in work, in conditions of living, in the courts" (quoted in Payne, p. 23). Veterans and those who had traveled outside the state tended to be even more

militant, Payne argues. Most of the leaders who came to prominence in the 1950s were among the 83,000 black Mississippians who had served in the Second World War.

Payne attributes people's willingness to participate to their perception that collective action was eliciting a more restrained response, albeit one that was often still violent. He also notes numerous instances of NAACP membership rising or boycotts developing in response to the arrest, beating, or murder of those known to be involved in the movement, for example, in response to Lee and Courts' shootings, Sam Block's arrest, and Medgar Evers' murder. This suggests the operation of indignation and outrage more than a cool assessment of the prospects for participating unharmed. Although Payne does not broach this possibility, I wonder whether violence against people seen as putting their lives on the line for the community helped to create a powerful and mobilizing sense of collective identity, one that transcended divisions of class and status within black communities. These activists tended already to occupy an interstitial position in black communities. They were relatively well-off but not part of the status-conscious and sometimes accommodationist black elite, and thus were more able than others to mobilize people throughout the community. Violence against them may have crystallized a community stake in collective action (see also Wood 2003).

In the 1950s, then, a combination of relaxed white repression, new activist alliances and organizations, and a growing sense of entitlement set the stage for 1960s protest by generating a group of leaders and a citizenry increasingly open to their organizing efforts. How did these older leaders spur and shape the movement? By providing an agenda, contacts, an organizational framework, and financial support for young activists. Historical accounts of SNCC's move into voter registration in 1961 tend to attribute it to the persuasive powers of the Kennedy administration. But Payne makes clear the role that Mississippi activists, especially Armzie Moore, played in convincing SNCC workers to launch a voter registration campaign and, importantly, to do so in Mississippi's rural areas. These counties had been all but written off by the national organizations on account of their danger, but they also held the greatest potential for black electoral strength. Some of SNCC's best organizers in places such as McComb and Greenwood were young Mississippians who had been identified and politicized by older leaders such as Moore, Vernon Dahmer, and Clyde Kennard. In addition to providing financial support, places to stay, and tactical advice, older leaders opened doors that would have been otherwise closed to

outsiders. By the spring of 1963, Payne observes, "Black Greenwood . . . [had] become an organized town" (p. 132). This remarkable transformation was the result of the effective if unlikely cooperation of young SNCC shock troops with activists who had begun the movement more than a decade earlier.

Had they begun a *movement* more than a decade before? That is, can one characterize the actions of the NAACP, RCNL, and the Progressive Voters' League in the 1950s as insurgency, rather than as expanding the indigenous organizations that facilitated later insurgency? Certainly, Mississippi activism in the 1950s was elite, low profile, and small scale. But if we define a movement as sustained contention with authorities, and distinguish it from the growth of indigenous organizations on that basis, then what occurred in the 1950s was an early phase of the movement rather than solely a precursor to it. Would the national movement have come eventually to Greenwood without this prior history of activism? Payne does not answer this hypothetical question explicitly, but his account suggests that if national organizations had attempted to make inroads in the state without the aid of Mississippi movement veterans, they would likely have focused on segregation rather than voting rights, and have attempted high-profile and short-term demonstrations rather than building enduring political institutions. Given the clear costs of movement participation, it is unlikely, following Payne's argument, that such efforts would have succeeded.

#### Expanding Political Opportunities?

To what extent, then, were expanding political opportunities responsible for the Greenwood movement? Payne's account revises each of the four components of political opportunity identified by McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) and, in the process, illuminates dynamics insufficiently developed by political-process accounts.

#### *Increasing Popular Access to the Political System*

Payne follows McAdam (1982) as well as Piven and Cloward (1977) and Bloom (1987) in arguing that the federal government's increasing willingness to threaten—if not act on—intervention in the South was a function of Northern blacks' growing electoral clout. McAdam (1982, p. 157) argues additionally that a sharp increase in voter registration in the South between 1950 and 1965 further strengthened the power of the black vote. But in Mississippi, the precipitous drop in the number of blacks on the voter rolls in the mid-1950s would suggest that opportunities had contracted. Rather than a precondition

for black activism, Payne shows, voter registration was an important goal and accomplishment of Mississippi black activism, something that McAdam's account misses. The drop in the voter rolls during the wave of 1955–56 repression was thus a setback in an ongoing battle (registered black voters had increased steadily from 2,000 in 1940, to 5,000 in 1947, to 17,000 in 1952, and 20,000–25,000 in 1954 [p. 25]). The larger point is that in the repressive context of the South, voter registration—that is, an institutionalized form of political behavior—was activism.

#### *Unstable Elite Alignments or Elite Competition*

In emphasizing the importance of the Northern black vote in spurring new federal interest in the South, Payne supports McAdam's argument that national party competition created political opportunities. But he also suggests that competition within Mississippi communities between an increasingly obsolete planter class and an ascendant stratum of white businessmen opened up opportunities for black activists. Desirous of Northern investment and aware of the (literal) costs of continued racial terrorism, white industrialists styled themselves racial moderates. Publicly cautioning segregationist restraint, they were sometimes able to persuade law enforcement officials to investigate and try crimes against blacks. In other words, repressive social control was relaxed not only in response to fears of federal intervention but also in response to the efforts of a new class who saw its economic benefits. Bloom (1987) has shown that white moderates crumpled in the face of the wave of white repression that followed *Brown*, but the earlier thaw enabled black activists to forge the networks that could withstand the subsequent assault. The larger point is that elite competition may occur at state and local as well as national levels. Such competition may reflect larger-scale regional or national developments (in this case, the decline of the cotton industry was responsible both for new pressures on the national democratic party and the decline of the planter class in Mississippi communities), but it may also take distinctive forms and establish unique alliances and conflicts.

#### *Elite Allies Who Encourage or Facilitate Protest*

Influential black individuals and groups outside the state supplied essential support in the early years of the movement. With political, cultural, and economic capital, they provided the resources that enabled black Mississippi activists to survive the periods of harshest repression. Black elites' connections to national white elites and the federal government made them credible framers of national political opportunities. Furthermore, their capacity to bring news

of the South to the North helped to spur the Northern liberal indignation that compelled federal involvement, however erratic. These individuals and groups blur the distinction that political-process theory posits between elite allies (considered part of the political opportunity structure) and indigenous institutions and leaders (considered mobilizing structures), because they were both elite (politically and economically influential) and indigenous (solidary with Mississippi blacks) before the movement even began.

A tendency to conceive of elite allies and indigenous networks as mutually exclusive obscures important dynamics in the process by which an aggrieved population takes advantage of national political shifts. People whom writers have termed variously “mediators” (Mische 2008), “bridging leaders” (Robnett 1997), and “brokers” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) seem to play critical roles in mobilization. Mississippi's isolation from the centers of political power and currents of mainstream opinion meant that such interlocutors were essential both to the framing processes by which national-level opportunities were perceived as such by local insurgents and to the processes by which national attention was focused on Mississippi and with it, calls for federal intervention.

#### *Declining State Repression*

The economic and physical reprisals launched in the wake of the *Brown* decision virtually put the Greenwood NAACP chapter and others across the state out of business. However, repression had already declined before the *Brown* decision, and its character overall had changed. White violence was more surreptitious, more likely to be threatened than acted upon, and more likely to be publicly condemned and investigated by white officials. Payne attributes the change to several factors: white planters' lessening dependence on black labor; their own eclipse by businessmen and industrialists eager to recruit Northern investment and concerned about their racist image; and black residents' more systematic use of armed self-defense.

The thaw in repression enabled activists to organize publicly and thereby develop networks that would be crippled but not eliminated by the heightened repression following the *Brown* decision. Subsequent repression, particularly that directed against activists, seems to have actually galvanized action by unifying divided communities in outrage at violence directed against people who were seen as fighting for the community's interests. Charles Brockett has interestingly challenged the rational choice argument that official violence targeted to opposition leaders is most likely to discourage mass participation, since it will supposedly convey to nonelites the futility as well as danger of participation. Such an

explanation obscures the collective rationality and powerful emotions fostered by strong social ties, Brockett points out. “[A] violent attack by the state on a member of the group (such as a parent, a close friend, a village elder) could provoke anti-regime activity from other group members, not necessarily out of self-defense but out of outrage and a desire for revenge (as well as justice)” (1995, p. 124; see also Brockett 2005). In Mississippi communities, the violence may have helped to make activists symbols of the group, thereby unifying the group (see Wood 2003 for a similar dynamic). The timing and targeting of repression not only establish the costs of participation but generate collective sentiments of anger and indignation that are sometimes more powerful than those of fear. Increasing repression may actually spur activism if it follows a period of declining repression, during which insurgent organizations and networks are developed.

### Criticism

Payne’s account focuses on the Mississippi activists who anticipated, exceeded, and made far-reaching changes. His aim is to bring the movement down to the level of the maverick NAACP officials, activist families, and quiet organizers who were its real leaders. This makes for fascinating history and provides important correctives to sociological accounts of movement emergence. The risk of such an approach, however, is that illustrative episodes and compelling profiles substitute for fully fleshed out arguments. Indeed, causal mechanisms are sometimes only hinted at in the text, and some passages are inconsistent. For example, Payne argues that as a result of the wave of reprisals that followed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the NAACP lost 246 Southern branches and 48,000 members between 1955 and 1958 (p. 43). He also quotes without comment NAACP official Ruby Hurley’s report of an *increase* in NAACP memberships in 1955 (p. 41). The Greenwood NAACP chapter “couldn’t have been formed at a less auspicious time” in 1952, Payne contends, but that year, “by Mississippi standards was a relatively peaceful year in terms of race relations” (p. 138). The chapter “fell on hard times after the Till murder” in 1955, but “within two years” of its founding, “active membership had fallen off so much that the chapter became inactive” (p. 139), that is, in 1954.

Payne’s too-brief discussion of the relations between repression and insurgency is disappointing because the narrative hints at important insights on the topic. For example, his provocative and plausible argument that white violence in Greenwood declined because “the targets were increasingly prone to shoot

back” (p. 204) is undermined by his failure to explain that shift. “Mississippi has a long tradition of Blacks taking up arms to defend themselves or their communities,” he says. “What happened in the early sixties seems to be a good deal more systematic” (p. 205). How so? SNCC organizers, while benefiting from locals’ willingness to stand armed guard, were not actively organizing more systematic self-defense. How did black residents organize armed resistance? How does Payne’s argument here square with his earlier claim that the crucial change in Mississippi was the easing of white repression? Could organized armed resistance on the part of black Mississippians have worked earlier? Another interesting point: NAACP branches in the Southwest “generally seem to have weathered the [1955–56] repression better than branches in other ‘easier’ parts of the state” (p. 113). Why?

The competition between an ascendant business class and a declining planter class that Payne identifies merits further examination. Payne attributes the relaxation of repression in Mississippi in large part to the fact that it simply was not necessary. With the decline of cotton, plantations could make do with far fewer workers, and planters were being eclipsed in any case by a new class of industrialists who were eager for Northern investment. But the planter class fought hard for an archsegregationist mayor in 1957 and fought tooth and nail against desegregation in the wake of *Brown*—and encountered little resistance from white moderates. If white planters were battling to retain their hegemony on the terrain of racial policy, it is hard to imagine any reason to fight harder. Just as we have to ask when repression spurs rather than prevents mobilization on the part of an aggrieved population, we have to explain when the motivations for repression transcend narrowly economic interests.

Payne’s task in this book is doubly difficult: to explain dramatic change without giving short shrift to continuities in activist networks and oppositional traditions, and to highlight the contributions of individuals without ignoring the structural and organizational conditions that made individual agency newly effective. His solution is to privilege narrative over theory. That his causal arguments are sometimes unclear or truncated attests to the complexity of the story.

### Conclusion

Was the Greenwood movement the result of expanding political opportunities? Yes. Payne’s account, however, suggests several revisions to the political-opportunity thesis. First, shifts in national-level political structures and alliances

may not be perceived as affording obvious opportunities for people in regions that are politically isolated. More broadly, we need a better understanding of the processes by which national-level shifts “cue” local insurgency. The Greenwood case suggests that members of the aggrieved group who nevertheless enjoy national influence can play an important role in conveying political opportunities to local activists and drumming up support for them nationally. Recognizing these dynamics requires, however, that we abandon a narrow construction of elite allies that places them by definition outside the aggrieved group.

Second, the prospects for insurgency are affected by local political structures and elite alliances as well as national ones (Kriesi [2004] makes a similar point). Local structures may mediate national-level political shifts, they may be transformed by the same underlying economic or demographic processes, or they may counter shifts perceived at the national level. The Greenwood case shows that the relaxation of repression reflected not only whites’ fears of federal intervention, the latter a function of Northern black electoral clout, but also the efforts of a new class of racial moderates motivated by the possibility of Northern investment.

Third, key dynamics are obscured by viewing challengers in unitary terms, without internal divisions and as given rather than created through political processes. The Greenwood case shows the role played by influential black allies outside the state—people who were part of the challenging group by virtue of their ties of racial identification and yet had access to economic and political sources of power. It also suggests that a precondition for insurgency was bridging the class and especially status differences that characterized Mississippi black communities. Mississippi activists such as Aaron Henry, E. W. Steptoe, and Amzie Moore were uniquely qualified to do so by virtue of their interstitial social positions (attesting to the importance of dynamics of brokerage described by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Violence against activists may also have served to unify black communities. A monolithic understanding of the aggrieved group misses both these processes.

Now that sociologists of social movements have successfully put to rest views of insurgents as apolitical bearers of system strain or as entirely dependent on the munificence of elite allies, we should be able to develop more complex models of the relations between opportunities and insurgency. Key features of that model, Payne’s account suggests, should be more variegated notions of challengers, allies, and political structures.

## 6 The Women’s Movement

Anne Costain’s *Inviting Women’s Rebellion*

JOHN D. SKRENTNY

**I**F THERE IS A WORK that could be characterized as an archetype for the political-process approach to social movements, Anne Costain’s *Inviting Women’s Rebellion* is it. In her introduction, Costain describes her initial puzzlement over the women’s movement, and the epiphany she experienced when introduced to the political-process model. The mysterious political dynamics of the movement suddenly clicked into focus. In her study of the women’s movement, she tests and uses the theory with enthusiasm. The result is a brilliant book that is to the women’s movement what McAdam’s pioneering (1982) work is to the civil rights movement. Like McAdam, she uses the concept of political opportunity to analyze the emergence, impact, and decline of a social movement.

Her case, however, offers a sterner test for the approach and the very concept of political opportunity than did McAdam’s. In this essay, I describe Costain’s work and make two main points. First, the civil rights movement played an important but unrecognized role in creating political opportunities for women. Second, this book forces social movement theorists to question the very concepts of social movement, opportunity, and government action. The case of the women’s movement exposes problems and ambiguities in a theoretical model which assumes that social movements and the government are separate and discrete entities.

*Inviting Women’s Rebellion* covers the period from the 1950s through the 1980s to capture the emergence and impact of what Costain calls the “current