

**The Moments Before and After Disaster: An Analysis of the Grievances, Status
Preservation, and Symbolic Politics that Unlocked the 'Gridlock'**

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THE MOMENTS BEFORE AND AFTER DISASTER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE GRIEVANCES, STATUS PRESERVATION, AND SYMBOLIC POLITICS THAT UNLOCKED THE 'GRIDLOCK'

The election of Donald Trump was simultaneously an end and a beginning. In many ways, Trump was the culmination: an embodiment of the values that far-right movements promote. Yet, Trump's presidency has also proven to simply be the start of a trend in which radical ideas become mainstream (Kleinfeld 2021). In looking at the Republican candidates for the 2022 midterm elections, Trump's influence on candidate radicalization is evident. At every level—from senate contests to county auditor races—there are election deniers, blatantly racist and sexist candidates, and candidates who are willing to sacrifice democracy to maintain their power (see, for example, the official websites of Blake Masters, Doug Mastriano, and Marjorie Taylor Greene).

Operation Gridlock, a far-right movement in opposition to Governor Whitmer (D-MI) and her COVID-19 lockdown policy, provides an ideal case study for understanding radical movements through a modified analytical framework. Far-right movements are actively shaping the political agenda in significant ways, but traditional social movement theories fail to accurately explain their emergence. Thus, Kincaid's (2017) analysis, "Theorizing the Radical Right: Direction for Social Movements Research on the Right-Wing Social Movements," demonstrates the necessity of understanding grievances, status preservation, and symbolic politics as fundamental causes of right-wing movements like Operation Gridlock. To demonstrate this contention, I will first contextualize the meaningful differences between right-wing and traditional social movements and outline the deficiencies of traditional theory. Then, to show the applicability of Kincaid's arguments, I will present an analysis of the emergence, success, and legacy of Operation Gridlock using Kincaid's framework of grievances, status

preservation, and symbolic politics. Finally, I will delve into the relevance of Kincaid's framework by revealing the influence of right-wing movements on political ideation.

DEFINING FEATURES OF RIGHT-WING MOVEMENTS

Right-wing movements differ from traditional social movements in several ways. Most distinctly, right-wing movements consist of comparatively advantaged individuals. While traditional social movements seek to disrupt the status quo by correcting an injustice, right-wing movements focus primarily on "preserving, restoring, and expanding the rights and privileges of its members and constituents" (McVeigh 2009, as cited in Kincaid 2017:2). The individuals typically already possess material resources and face minimal, if any, economic oppression. Consequently, right-wing constituents possess more autonomy than traditional constituents and are not driven to mobilize by universally-accepted injustices. Furthermore, right-wing movements are populated by constituents who "enjoy... access to the normal channels of political power" (Kincaid 2017:2).

Considering this access, the question of why these groups mobilize is complicated. Dignam and Rohlinger (2019) offer an initial explanation, arguing that male activists engrain their white male identities as "more than personal" and believe that identifying collectively with similar men "can affect political change" beyond electoral politics (demonstrated in Figure 1). Through these differences, two predominant categories of right-wing movements are established: free market economics and race-oriented movements (Blee and Creasap 2010, as cited in Kincaid 2017:2). As shown, right-wing movements are defined by their privileged constituents, access to material and political resources, and focus on maintaining the status quo in relation to gender, race, and economic status.



Figure 1. Young White Male Protestors Stand on the Steps of the Michigan Capital with Assault Weapons and Protest Signs

(Buncombe, Andrew. 2020. "Operation Gridlock: Thousands of Conservatives Block Michigan Streets in Protest Over Stay at Home Order." *The Independent*. Retrieved Nov. 10, 2022 [<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/operation-gridlock-michigan-protest-stay-at-home-order-coronavirus-governor-whitmer-a9467546.html>])

INSUFFICIENCIES OF TRADITIONAL THEORIES

Having established the distinguishing elements of far-right movements, Kincaid's next key argument reveals why traditional social movement theory does not apply to far-right movements. In McCarthy and Zald's Resource Mobilization Theory and McAdam's Political Opportunity Model, grievances are treated as being unwavering; meaning, if the presence of a grievance is unquestionable, social movements are spurred by "whether or not particular movements are well positioned to act effectively on the existing grievances" (McVeigh 1999, as cited in Kincaid 2017:3). However, right-wing movements nearly always have the capacity to act if a grievance were to arise, so the presence or absence of a grievance becomes an important consideration.

The Inadequacies of Resource Mobilization

Resource Mobilization Theory is insufficient to explain right-wing movements because it assumes that "[t]hose who control the largest share of discretionary resources in any society

are also those least likely to feel discontentment concerning their own personal circumstances" (Mccarthy and Zald 1977:1226). Yet, if it were accurate that only individuals who lack resources mobilize to ease their discontentment, then far-right movements would not exist. The existence of right-wing movements indicates that resource allocation does not reliably predict contentment or desire to mobilize. Instead, there must be factors beyond access to resources that determines whether and when a movement emerges.

The Inadequacies of Political Opportunity

Similarly, the Political Opportunity Model analyzes social movements based on the hypothesis that movements originate through collective action because other formal methods of political change are unavailable. McAdam (1982) defines social movements as "rational attempts" by groups that do not possess access to normal channels to "mobilize political leverage...through noninstitutionalized means" (37). Given the scope of McAdam's definition, right-wing movements would not fit within this traditional understanding. For one, right-wing movements engage in actions that would be see as "irrational" by McAdam's definition. Additionally, their goal is generally to prevent or reverse political change rather than employing political leverage to respond to an injustice. Finally, right-wing movements often have access to institutional means and already have the capacity and political opportunity to exist within political structures. Rather than being sparked by a newfound belief that change is possible, as McAdam's theory of cognitive liberation suggests, far-right movements recognize their potential and simply decide when to deploy their resources (52). Overall, the theories of Resource Mobilization and Political Opportunity prove inadequate to analyze far-right movements because

they present inaccurate parameters for who mobilizes and why and when it occurs; after all, it is not solely those who are experiencing an injustice who mobilize.

NEW MOVEMENTS REQUIRE NEW THEORIES

The inadequacies of traditional theory framework in analyzing emerging right-wing movements leads Kincaid's framework to be crucial for a proper analysis. To defend the efficacy of the framework, I will demonstrate how Kincaid's arguments apply to Operation Gridlock. Starting broadly, the main advancement from traditional theory is that although resources and political opportunities are part of the equation, "the timing of the emergence of right-wing movements should be less dependent on both" (McVeigh 2009, as cited in Kincaid:3).

When it comes to Operation Gridlock, nearly all the participants were white, and the majority were men under forty. Young white men are not an oppressed group, yet they were motivated to mobilize. In the end, thousands of protesters descended on Michigan's state Capitol building—brandishing assault rifles and ignoring masking and social distancing—to wield signs and shout messages denouncing Governor Whitmer's handling of the pandemic (Smith 2020). The protest and message reverberated nationally, and COVID-19 response subsequently became a political issue. Using Kincaid's framework, there are three primary causes of this seemingly unexpected far-right movement: increase in grievances, desire to preserve status, and presence of political influence.

Grievances and Policy as Mobilizing Factors

The first element of Operation Gridlock's mobilization is the perception of injustice and an increase in grievances. The primary grievance in this case was freedom, as is clear by observing the protest signs (seen in Figure 2). Protesters argued that the lockdown impeded on autonomy and exemplified government overreach. While this would likely not be a significant

enough grievance to incite most groups to mobilize, it was enough for the group of predominantly young white men who rarely face any restrictions. Simply, any deviation away from the status quo for privileged groups results in a perceived loss of power and a desire to immediately return to a place of privilege. It is also evident that Operation Gridlock fits within the free economic markets category of far-right movements. Many Republicans demanded that economic prosperity be prioritized over health, and the protest reflected the desire to return to work and life despite the abundant health risks.

In addition to grievances, McVeigh (2009) contends that policy changes can be another “potential motivating force” (as cited in Kincaid:3). The expansive argument presented by Operation Gridlock was that the government was using unconstitutional methods to invoke mask mandates and stay-at-home orders. Whether or not the worry was genuine, protesters expressed concerns that COVID-19 policy was the start of repeated encroachment on personal liberties and fundamental rights. Thus, the decision to mobilize was a direct result of increased grievances and policy concerns.



Figure 2. A Protester Displays a Sign Reading “FREEDOM IS OUR RIGHT”

(Beggin, Riley. 2020. “Operation Gridlock’ Protest of Gov. Whitmer Stay-at-Home Order Jams Lansing.” Bridge Michigan. Retrieved Nov. 9, 2022 [<https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/operation-gridlock-protest-gov-whitmer-stay-home-order-jams-lansing>])

The Emphasis on Status Preservation

In addition to the role of grievances, another fundamental mobilizing element is the preservation of status. By focusing on status as a factor in insurgency, there is the “possibility of political action centered [on] issues of honor, prestige, and values” (Kincaid 2017:4). Before COVID-19, young white men enjoyed the greatest amount of privilege. While still privileged during the pandemic, stay-at-home orders made the privilege less pronounced since lockdown orders applied to everyone equally. Used to the benefits that being white and male afforded them before the pandemic, their “honor” and “prestige” was compromised when they no longer were able to work in the same capacity or operate in society with their aura of superiority.

In fact, the desire to defend the status quo and preserve power may cause movements to engage in “emotionally charged campaigns” that solely seek to enact revenge on the people whose “power can serve to explain their dispossession” (Bell 2008, as cited in Kincaid 2017:4). Meaning, far-right movements are able to exist in a space where their mobilization is primarily an emotional reaction to loss of status rather than a planned, intentional opposition to injustice.

Intersecting Frameworks: Symbolic Politics and Material Resources

Finally, symbolic politics and material resources replace the idea of access to political opportunities being the primary goal. This argument is rooted in the idea that political action can affect the distribution of symbolic characteristics the same way it can shape the distribution of material resources. Based on the political action employed, a group can “reshape the distribution of prestige or social status...relative to other groups in society” (Kincaid 2017:4). The balance between material and symbolic resources is specific to far-right movements; for traditional movements, the principal goal is simply to access the political structures that can ultimately provide increased material resources.

For Operation Gridlock, the protest intended to influence both material resources and symbolic politics. There was a desire to return to free economic markets that inherently benefitted the protesters more than others, and there was a goal to reinstate the normal structures of society that emphasized their status. Kincaid highlights that right-wing movements try to “incorporate aspects of both symbolic politics and status-based concerns over lifestyle, values, and prestige while simultaneously blending these issues with concerns over the control of material resources,” which is only possible for movements that already possess the resources capable for rapid mobilization (5). For example, an analysis of cellphone data shows that the protesters likely had the resources to travel from all parts of Michigan to participate in Operation Gridlock (shown in Figure 3). As indicated, the resources that far-right movements possess mean that the inciting factors of emergence are not resources or political opportunities but rather grievances, policy changes, status preservation, and a combination of economic and symbolic interests.

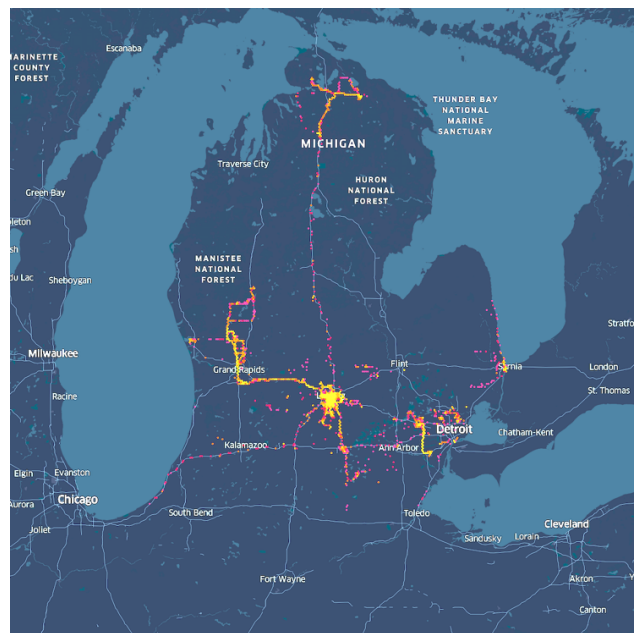


Figure 3. Cellphone Data Displays the Locations Protesters Traveled to after Operation Gridlock Concluded in Lansing

(DeVito, Lee. 2020. “Cellphone Data Shows Protesters Dispersed across Michigan, Raising Concerns of Spreading Coronavirus.” Detroit Metro Times. Retrieved Nov. 11, 2022 [<https://www.metrotimes.com/news/cellphone-data-shows-operation-gridlock-protesters-dispersed-across-michigan-raising-concerns-of-spreading-coronavirus-24468965>])

THE SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICS

Much like Trump's presidency, Operation Gridlock exists both within the context of a broader political trend and the start of a new trend. That existence is becoming increasingly common for far-right movements. Instead of curating new ideology for each social or political encounter, master frames—shaped by political parties—“constrain the orientations...of social entities and...[are]...an all-inclusive framework” that extends beyond isolated beliefs (Van Hauwaert 2021:90). For example, the Republican Party emphasizes ambiguous ideas of freedom, personal liberties, and checks on government. Party-sponsored framework makes it easier for far-right movements to immediately form opinions about political issues (seen in Figure 4). The master frame likely led to Michigan Republicans rapidly concluding that lockdown orders were condemnable because they threatened the values laid out by the Republican Party.

However, the relationship is reciprocal as well. As Van Hauwaert argues, “Far Right Parties aim to translate popular preferences into policy” (86). In response, political parties and candidates must listen to the demands of constituents. Consequently, political parties and institutions are “interpenetrated by social movements” and must base decisions on voter preferences (Kincaid 2017:7). Following Operation Gridlock, there were additional anti-lockdown protests that spread across the United States and gave rise to a narrative that Democrats were overstating the danger of COVID-19 for political gain. This Republican reaction influenced the way that Trump and Republican governors approached their responses to COVID-19 and shifted the types of candidates receiving endorsements ahead of primary elections.

Kincaid summarizes this trend of radicalization acceptance by articulating that modern movements often grow out of “relative obscurity” and morph into “positions of power and influence, setting the agenda and the tone of party policy” (7). Retrospectively, the same can be

said about Trump's election in 2016: "Collective identities can become politicized and move proponents from the armchair to the streets" (Digham 2019:593). In many ways, all it takes to influence the direction of the Republican Party is a properly timed movement.



Figure 4. Protesters Hold Political Signs Alluding to MAGA, Trump, and Republican Ideology

Kowalsky, Jeff. 2020. "Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer Says Protest Against Stay-at-Home Order Was a 'Political Rally.'" *Newsweek*. Retrieved Nov. 6, 2022 [<https://www.newsweek.com/michigan-governor-hits-back-protest-stay-home-order-1498228>]

Power has always rested in the hands of the privileged. Yet, the motivation to translate power into mobilization has not always been present. Kincaid argues that instead of understanding emergence as being predicated on access to resources and cognitive liberation, far-right movements stem from increased grievances, policy and status threats, and decreased material and symbolic resources. The origination, influence, and aftermath of Operation Gridlock demonstrate the necessity of applying Kincaid's analytical framework to far-right movements, as the existence of the movement cannot be adequately explained with traditional social movement theory. Through Kincaid's lens, we capture the differences between traditional and right-wing movements, the primary elements of far-right movement insurgency, and the symbiotic relationship between movements and political parties.

The election of Trump in 2016 was a direct result of increased mobilization from far-right groups. In accelerating fashion, Trump's presidency has in turn led to even more mobilization. The direction of the Republican Party—thus, the country—is determined by seemingly isolated movements like Operation Gridlock that spiral into broad political trends. To stop the right's agenda to reverse the political and social change that they find threatening to their power, we must first understand the causes and explanations of their movements' mobilization.

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