Tom Kirk   March 13th, 2025

Can We Systematically Uncover Activists' Recipes?

Tom Kirk sets out his plans for systematic comparative research on the recipes of tactics that activists use to create change across different contexts and overviews an innovative methodology that may help uncover them.

How can groups of dedicated activists influence those in positions of power to bring about changes previously thought to be difficult or impossible given the status quo?

This question is increasingly important as support for democracy and trust in formal political processes is falling in many countries. Furthermore, the mass protest movements of the 2010s were somewhat stymied by Covid, giving their opponents the chance to reorganise themselves and push back. Regardless, citizens everywhere continue to engage in intentional efforts to influence complex socio-political systems, with a view to widening civic space and securing tangible behavioural, policy or legislative changes.

Many of these episodes have led to gripping personal stories, insightful case studies and edited collections. Yet, there have been few systematic analyses to reveal in a more rigorous way what works where to create change. Specifically, little is known about the 'recipes' of public and private influencing tactics, ways of organising, modes of collaborating with external actors and responses to opportunities and unexpected events that activists consistently use across a range of influencing efforts. This stands in contrast to the vast literature on social and civil resistance movements, from writers such as Charles Tilly, Zeynep Tufekci and Erica Chenoweth.

What don't we know?

To be clear, I am suggesting that there is a lack of robust evidence for the subset of influencing episodes that involve dedicated groups of activists. In particular, those that set out with clear influencing goals or asks, even if they then modify them as influencing episodes unfold. Here, I'm

thinking of groups and organizations that work to change the way a neglected issue is seen or the way a policy is implemented. This type of everyday influencing that does not garner as much attention as noisier social movements. But it is at the root of what some academics call substantive democracy.

This worries me for several reasons: closest to home, alongside Duncan, I teach an LSE MA module on Advocacy, Campaigning and Grassroots Activism. For their coursework, students use the module's theories and analysis and planning tools to design what we term 'plausible influencing strategies'. We define these as consisting of 'a series of linked tactics' and point them towards the plethora of case studies, frameworks and toolkits that suggest when to use what approach to stand a better chance of success.

We find this literature very good at illustrating the variety of public tactics (e.g. use of traditional/online media, forums, messengers, stunts, contentious actions) and private tactics (e.g. use of lobbying, research, personal connections, consultations) that activists can use. It also documents the broader framings of different approaches (e.g. less/more confrontational, cultural, social and moral norms), ways of organising (e.g. consensus or top-down, strategic or reactive), and modes of collaboration with external actors (e.g. more or less visible, technical, funding-based) that have been used in successful cases. And the best of it incorporates insights from systems thinking and complexity science to show how successful influencing rarely unfolds in linear fashion and why the agency of activists isn't always central to change.

When we mark our students' proposals, we seek to ensure that their choice of tactics logically builds upon or flows from their analyses of the problems they are trying to address and contexts that produce them. This is all good and well. But can we not do better?

Horses for Courses

Imagine we were able to cross-check students' choice of tactics against rigorous research on successful recipes from different types of context, from stable multi-party democracies to developmental, authoritarian and fragile states. And if we could also choose those that consistently lead to particular types of win, from normative to legislative changes. Think about how activists and the organizations that support them could use such research to boost their chances of impact! Without it, the risk remains that theory, practical guidance and the spending of resources is based on a few well-known case studies and untested assumptions.

Last year, Duncan used a blog to sense-check whether such research is even possible or already exists. The feedback suggested that the case study data is out there but that it needs systematic analysis, which would be a huge undertaking. Others also pointed us towards recent efforts to do this at varying scales among I/NGOs keen to conduct meta-reviews into their advocacy and support to activists. It turned out we even knew some of the people behind them.

Let's Get Fuzzy

Many of these efforts deployed a methodology known as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) or, increasingly, its 'fuzzy-set' cousin fsQCA. In brief, fsQCA is ideal for investigating phenomena for which researchers have a large number of cases, but not enough to apply traditional statistical methods such as regressions. Through 'calibration', it allows for rich qualitative case study data to be turned into quantitative measures and cut-off points. These can be used to score how strongly a hypothesised tactic (e.g. insider lobbying) or contextual condition (e.g. transparent elections) is present in an influencing episode. After scoring multiple tactics, across multiple episodes, researchers can harness set theory and Boolean algebra to identify the range of recipes that lead to influencing outcomes, and for the most consistently successful to be discerned (the tastiest, perhaps).
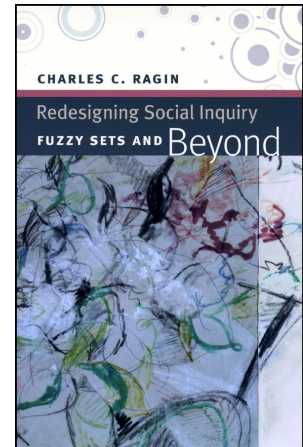
I've since learnt that fsQCA has seen use in organizational studies, business, education, data and political science. More recently, it has been used to examine influencing episodes as diverse as workers' rights in South Korea and activism against water polluting mining projects. Yet, to date, studies have mostly been confined to work supported by single organisations or focussed on particular issues. Nonetheless, alongside the aforementioned INGO meta-reviews, they have led to compelling insights into what works where, and to recommendations that have challenged received wisdom on how outsiders can support activists and the role of confrontational or supportive approaches.

Over the coming months, I want to build on these efforts to use fsQCA. My first task is to work out exactly which subset of intentional influencing episodes to focus on, so as to give myself healthy limits (given recent events, I am inclined towards those that have occurred in backsliding democracies). Then I will turn to collecting a trove of case studies and the calibration of tactics and contextual conditions with which to analyze them; a process which I'm thinking about crowd-sourcing online.

I aim to document as much of this as possible on this blog, with a view to benefitting from the advice of interested readers. I'm open to ideas, critiques and collaborations. So, please get in touch and/or stay tuned to see how it goes.

Photo by Daniel & Hannah Snipes

About the author

Tom Kirk

Researcher and consultant based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Interests include the provision of security and justice in conflict affected regions, protection, social accountability, civil society, activism, governance and public authority. Also a Research Associate with the Department of Communication & Media Studies, University of Johannesburg.

Posted In: Research

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE