Abstract

We examine the conditions leading social movement organizations to adopt consensus in their internal decision making. To do so, we look at organizations of the Swiss global justice movement, which puts the search for consensus at center stage. Our findings show that the ways in which social movement organizations take decisions and their vision of democracy more generally are not simply a matter of free choice by their leaders and members, but depend on certain organizational characteristics. The most important one is a small organizational size, which is a crucial condition for the adoption of consensus in internal decision making. This condition combines with another one pertaining to the cultural tradition of contention represented by the social movement family to explain consensus. In addition, our findings show that small, transnational organizations following inclusive participatory practices are also more likely to adopt consensus when they make decisions.

Reference


DOI: 10.1111/spsr.12016
Paths towards Consensus: Explaining Decision Making within the Swiss Global Justice Movement

MARCO GIUGNI AND ALESSANDRO NAI
University of Geneva

Abstract: We examine the conditions leading social movement organizations to adopt consensus in their internal decision making. To do so, we look at organizations of the Swiss global justice movement, which puts the search for consensus at center stage. Our findings show that the ways in which social movement organizations take decisions and their vision of democracy more generally are not simply a matter of free choice by their leaders and members, but depend on certain organizational characteristics. The most important one is a small organizational size, which is a crucial condition for the adoption of consensus in internal decision making. This condition combines with another one pertaining to the cultural tradition of contention represented by the social movement family to explain consensus. In addition, our findings show that small, transnational organizations following inclusive participatory practices are also more likely to adopt consensus when they make decisions.

KEYWORDS: Social movements, Deliberation, Decision-making

Introduction

The so-called global justice movement (e.g. della Porta 2007) challenges the traditional views of representative democracy by emphasizing participation and deliberation as fundamental principles of collective decision making. For participants in this movement, the criticism against globalization “from above” and against neoliberalism is paralleled by a skeptical view of representative forms of democracy implying a redrawing of the boundaries of politics in favor of participatory and deliberative democracy (della Porta et al. 2006). The degree to which deliberation is seen within the movement as a core value to be pursued, however, varies from one movement organization to another. This is not least due to the fact that the movement is particularly heterogeneous, formed by a variety of organizations ranging from traditional environmental groups to organizations more typically addressing global justice issues, trade unions, loosely structured anti-imperialist groups, and still many others.

This paper examines the conditions leading organizations active in the Swiss global justice movement to adopt a democratic model in internal decision making that emphasizes
the search for consensus rather than the majority rule. Consensus is addressed by a growing literature on deliberative democracy in non-institutional settings (Cohen 1989; Dryzek 2000; Mansbridge 1996; Offe 1997; Young, 2003) and is at the heart of what has been called in recent research the deliberative-participative model of democracy (della Porta 2009). We focus on five conditions of deliberation: the degree of formalization of organizations, their size, their territorial scope, the movement family to which they belong, and the degree of participative inclusion of their members. The first three aspects characterize the internal structuring of the organizations, the fourth refers to the cultural tradition of contention of which they are part, and the last one captures the participatory side of the deliberative-participative model of democracy. To be sure, these conditions do not exhaust the potential factors leading social movement organizations to search for consensus in their decision-making practices. For example, the presence of a strong leadership committed to consensus or previous experiences by movement activists with deliberative practices are likely to play a role as well. However, they are arguably five important aspects relating to the organizations and their context which can potentially influence the movements' internal dynamics, including their democratic practices (della Porta 2009; Kriesi 1996; Polletta 2002). Furthermore, our study is not oriented towards model specification and variance explanation, but rather aims to ascertain the impact of a restricted number of conditions and how they combine to lead to the outcome.

The impact of these conditions on the adoption of a decision-making model that stresses the importance of consensus will be inquired by means of an original dataset which includes a sample of organizations active in the global justice movement in Switzerland. These data include standardized information on the decision-making rules of these organizations, as well as information on potential explanatory variables. Since we are working with a limited number of cases, we use Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which is a particularly appropriate method for the study of small samples (Ragin 1987, 2008; Rihoux and Ragin 2009). However, the choice of our approach is also dictated by theoretical reasons, for we also aim to identify the combination of factors leading a social movement organization to adopt a given democratic model in internal decision making. With its emphasis on multiple conjunctural causation, a set-theoretic method such as QCA is well equipped to analyze the joint effect of the conditions favoring deliberation.

Democracy in social movements

Perhaps the most basic and well-known distinction one can find in the literature concerning democratic models is that between representative and participative democracy (Pateman 1970). While in the former a small group of people takes collective decisions on behalf of a larger constituency that delegates power to elites, the latter provides for the direct involvement of the constituency in decision making. Simply put, representative democracy is based on delegation of power, whereas in participative democracy the end-users of the public good intervene directly in the decisional process, without the transmission belt represented by a smaller group of elites.²

Representation vs. participation, however, is only one aspect of a more general typology of democratic models. Participative democracy is often associated with deliberative democracy, which stresses the quality of communication in addition to the need for broader par-

² Direct democracy, which is particularly developed in Switzerland, can be seen as the translation at the institutional level of the principles of participative democracy.
participation. In the social movement literature, deliberation has only recently begun to be discussed, perhaps spurred by the rise of the global justice movement, which emphasizes precisely those characteristics that have put participation and deliberation on center stage. This trend can be seen both internally, in discussions about organizational structures and practices (e.g. Polletta 2002), and externally, in experiments of citizens’ involvement in decision-making processes (e.g. Fung and Wright 2001). This is not the place to discuss in detail a concept that has caught much attention from political theorists (see Dryzek 2000, Elster 1998, Fishkin and Lasslet 2003 for reviews) and was brought to the fore in social theory by the seminal work of Habermas (1984, 1987, 1996), but we need at least to sketch an operational definition allowing us to study the relationship between deliberation and the movement’s organizational features.

Deliberative democracy can be defined through the following characteristics (della Porta 2005a: 74): preference transformation, orientation towards the public good, rational argument, consensus, equality, inclusiveness, and transparency. Thus, “we have deliberative democracy when, under conditions of equality, inclusiveness, and transparency, a communicative process based on reasons (the strength of the argument) transforms individual preferences into consensual decision-making oriented towards the public good” (della Porta 2005a: 74–75). According to this definition, the search for consensus is the main feature of deliberation, as it represents the desired effect, while the other characteristics can be seen as either conditions or means to reach consensus. To be sure, not everybody today considers consensus as the main feature of deliberation and not even a required one for that matter (see Bächtiger et al. 2010 and Mansbridge et al. 2010 for discussions). The important point for our present purpose, however, is that, regardless of whether we believe that consensus is a central feature of deliberation or deliberative democracy or that it should not be considered as such, it is a core value of the global justice movement and the organizations that are part of it. More generally, for social movement organizations the choice between making decisions based on consensus rather than following the majority rule is a crucial one.

Conditions for consensus within social movement organizations: some hypotheses

The internal structuring of the organizations has been studied thoroughly by social movement scholars, in particular by resource mobilization theory (see Edwards and McCarthy 2004 for a review). This theory has long stressed the importance of the amount of resources and degree of organization for the movements’ emergence and mobilization (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Kriesi (1996) suggests that four aspects must be considered in the analysis of organizations’ development: organizational growth and decline, internal structuring, external structuring, as well as goal orientations and action repertoires. Here we focus on one of these aspects, namely the internal structuring of the organizations. Specifically, we look at the impact of the degree of formalization of the organizations, their size, and their territorial scope on the adoption of a model of democracy based on consensus.

We hypothesize, firstly, that poorly formalized organizations tend to have structures based on consensus more frequently than more formalized ones, both for practical reasons and for reasons relating to organizational culture (see Clemens and Minkoff 2004 for a review of work on the role of organizations in social movement research). Formally structured organizations tend to delegate the most important decisions to a small group of leaders, thus preferring representation to the participation of all members. In addition,
majority decision making better reflects the routines of a professional board and of formal organizations more generally (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Majority decision making, for example, produce faster and clear-cut decisions.

Secondly, we expect smaller organizations to be more favorable than larger ones to consensus. Organizational size has long been considered by sociologists and political scientists as an important aspect to be addressed, including with regard to its impact on democratic practices. The smaller the number who have to agree, the easier it is to get agreement. For example, larger political parties have more complex decision-making structures and tend to be less participatory than smaller ones (Tan 1988). A similar reasoning may be applied to the global justice movement. For example, Saunders (2009) found that large organizations tend to be more oligarchic than smaller ones, although the correlation between organizational size and oligarchy is far from being perfect. Here we follow a similar line of reasoning applied to the adoption of a decision-making model by the organizations. Thus, we hypothesize that consensus is more easily reached in smaller groups, where membership is limited and face-to-face encounters are more likely, whereas larger groups face practical obstacles to implementing this democratic model.

Thirdly, although a clear-cut hypothesis is more difficult to advance with regard to this aspect, we suggest that organizations that have a domestic territorial scope are more likely to adopt consensual internal practices, as compared to organizations whose scope stretches beyond the national boundaries. A growing literature has stressed both the democratic gains and losses implied by the rise of the so-called “global governance,” including its impact on democratic practices (see Scholte 2002 for a discussion). Without engaging in this discussion, which is beyond the scope of this paper, we may expect more complex, transnational organizations require higher efficiency in decision-making routines which is provided by delegation and majority rule, while domestic organizations can afford to be more open to participation and deliberation. Furthermore, to the extent that they are embedded in a multilevel game, transnational organizations face a number of practical obstacles to consensus and participation in decision making which domestic organizations can avoid. For example, participatory democracy is easier within organizations based on face-to-face interactions among people who know each other (Rosenthal and Schwartz 1989). Transnational organizations certainly do not meet these requirements. Similarly, reaching consensus within larger organizations with scattered constituencies is arguably more difficult than within smaller organizations.

In addition to these three aspects relating to internal structuring, fourthly, regarding the movement family to which the organizations belong, we expect organizations that reflect the cultural cleavage embodied by the new social movements to be more inclined to adopt a decision-making model that stresses consensus. The new social movements have specific structural and cultural roots, distinguishing them from other types of movements (Kriesi 1989; Kriesi et al. 1995; see Buechler 1995, Pichardo 1997 for reviews). Most importantly for our purpose, they have been promoting participatory and open processes in collective decision making (Polletta 2002). Therefore, organizations in this movement family should be particularly inclined to embrace a consensual democratic model. A similar argument applies to the global justice movement, which can be considered as a new social movement insofar as their social bases and thematic priorities largely overlap (della Porta 2005b).

Finally, we include in our analysis the presence of participative practices as a further condition for consensus. Arguments for individual agency stress both the decision to pay high to increase inclusive participatory practices and to adopt consensus. In addition, consensus and participation are often considered by movement leaders as two requirements of deliberative-
participative democracy. We therefore expect organizations that follow a participatory approach to decision making to be more likely to follow a consensual decision making model.

In sum, we expect consensus in internal decision making to be adopted by informal, small organizations that have a domestic scope, belong to the new social movement family, and follow participatory internal practices. Our analysis aims to assess the role of these conditions of deliberation and their combination. In other words, we look at the configurations of conditions that can lead social movement organizations to adopt a democratic model based on consensus. This calls for a methodological approach going beyond a linear and additive logic in order to follow a set-theoretic logic allowing us to identify different combinations of factors as well as different causal paths. QCA is a particularly appropriate method to study such a multiple conjunctural causation (Ragin 1987, 2008; Rihoux and Ragin 2009).

Data and methods

We confront our hypotheses concerning the impact of conditions for deliberation with original data retrieved in a EU-funded research project on democracy in social movements. The data were collected by means of a structured questionnaire submitted to a sample of organizations active in the Swiss global justice movement. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or by phone, in French or German, with key informants speaking on behalf of the organizations. 

The initial sample of organizations was generated with two main goals in mind: to include the most relevant organizations in terms of their visibility in the public domain (following a reputational approach) and to insure variation in terms of their thematic focus, characteristics, and geographical scope. Although we initially selected 36 organizations, we have information on the democratic model of only 31. We conduct our analysis only on 14 of the organizations due to missing data on some of the variables of interest. This, however, should not affect our analyses in a significant way. First of all, our initial sample cannot be considered as statistically representative of social movement organizations in Switzerland, but provides variation among organizations active in the Swiss global justice movement. Furthermore, the missing cases are randomly distributed among the main variables. We can therefore assume that eliminating the missing cases does not affect the overall importance of certain types of organizations.

The causal conditions have been operationalized as follows. We measure the degree of formalization by means of two separate indicators: the presence of a written constitution and of a membership card. Organizations that have one or both of them are considered as being more formalized than those who do not. Organizational size is operationalized through a variable measuring the number of people participating in the assembly (or open meeting). The original variable distinguishes between assemblies (or open meetings) having less than 31 participants, between 31 and 100, and more than 100 participants. Given these cutoff points in the original variable, we used the smallest category, less than 31 participants, for our definition of a small assembly. Territorial scope was operationalized through a question asking for the highest territorial level of the campaigns in which the organizations have participated. We distinguish between the domestic (local or national) and the international level. Finally, belonging to a given movement family was operationalized

---

3 The interviews were conducted between February and June 2006.
4 Missing information on this variable was replaced through a variable asking if the organization had some form of collaboration with international institutions (if yes, we consider the international level as the highest one).
through a variable that classifies the organizations based on various sources (online and offline documents as well as the structured questionnaire). This variable distinguishes between six main branches: old Left; new Left, anarchism, autonomy; new social movements; solidarity, peace, human rights; new global; and other issues). We merged the third, fourth, and fifth category (new social movements; solidarity peace, and human rights; and new global), which we consider as belonging to the new social movement family.5 Finally, participatory practices are measured through the degree of delegation of power. Organizations following participatory practices make decisions based on a low degree of delegation of power. Table 1 shows the initial truth table with the 14 organizations included in the analysis.

Given the binary form taken by our logical conditions, we use traditional crisp-set QCA.6 This method is particularly adequate to deal with small to medium-sized samples like the one we are studying here. In addition, it stresses the impact of combinations of variables (conjunctural causation) and allows for different configurations of variables to produce the same outcome (multiple causation). This method, however, also has a number of weaknesses. In particular, while it is particularly adapted for small to medium-sized samples, it has problems in dealing with larger datasets. A large number of cases increase the frequency of contradictions (i.e. identical configurations leading to different outcomes). Since the resolution of contradictions is a crucial and potentially problematic task in QCA, a large N increases the chances that no relevant solution is reached (Hicks 1994). Likewise, too many causal conditions exponentially increase the number of (potential) combinations of factors, again leading to a higher probability that that no solution is found (Scharpf 1997). We do not face this problem here as our analyses provide clear-cut results and are not affected by contradictions.

The presence of “empty” combinations of causal conditions (i.e. causal paths that lack empirical cases) is an important concern in set-theoretic analysis, especially when it is built on small to medium-sized datasets. Real-world phenomena often have limited diversity, and situations in which all possible combinations of conditions are matched with empirical observations seldom exist (Rihoux and Ragin 2004). In our case, there are empirical data for only 15 logical combinations of conditions. With five conditions, this yields 18 remainders (2^5 minus 14 non-empty combinations). In order to avoid the two extreme solutions to cope with limited diversity, i.e. simply either to exclude all remainders from the minimization process or to include them all, we adopt here an alternative strategy: counterfactual analysis (Ragin and Sonnett 2005). Such strategy evaluates each remainder in terms of its plausibility for producing the outcome, through an answer to the following question: “If this combination of causal conditions were empirically represented, could we justifiably expect it to result in a positive outcome?” (Veugelers and Magnan 2005). If the answer to this question is “yes” the remainder is included as a potential simplifying assumption.

To achieve a satisfactory counterfactual analysis, the researcher needs clear theoretical expectations about the importance of conditions for the presence of the outcome. In our

---

5 Following previous work (e.g. Kriesi et al. 1995), we think that solidarity, peace, and human rights organizations belong to the new social movements, although they might have certain peculiar features such as for example religious roots, the involvement in project developments, and a strong international orientation. To be sure, anarchist and autonomous groups could also be qualified as belonging to the new social movements; however, in our final sample of 14 groups no such association exists.

6 Size is an exception in this regard as it is not a binary variable in the beginning. In our view, however, the creation of a binary indicator starting from the original variable still make sense as the original information was retrieved through a question using a categorical variable.
Table 1: Initial truth table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization name</th>
<th>Short name</th>
<th>Logical conditions</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attac Switzerland</td>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe-Third World Center</td>
<td>ETW</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group for a Switzerland without an Army</td>
<td>GSA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Courrier</td>
<td>CRR</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Communistes</td>
<td>COM</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Magasins du Monde</td>
<td>MDM</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement for the Socialism</td>
<td>MFS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Service Union</td>
<td>PSU</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Réalise Association</td>
<td>REA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarité sans frontières</td>
<td>SSF</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarités</td>
<td>SOL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity with Chiapas</td>
<td>SWC</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Greens</td>
<td>GRE</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unia</td>
<td>UNI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note* For each logical condition and the outcome, the value 1 indicates the presence of the condition or outcome, the value 0 its absence.
case, our hypotheses are quite straightforward: the presence of each of the six conditions should lead the movement’s organizations to adopt consensus and participation in their internal decision making. Thus, we treat logical cases in which one or more causal conditions are true as “don’t care” combinations and we include them in the minimization procedure. Following standard practice, we provide measures of consistency and coverage of the causal paths (see Ragin 2006). We use the level of coverage to set a threshold for the interpretation of our findings.

Findings

We present the findings in the form of an equation for both the presence of the outcome (presence of consensus) and its absence (absence of consensus). The latter is performed in order to provide a contrario confirmation of the relevance of the findings concerning the presence of consensus. Given that QCA models do not assume causal symmetry (which would mean that, if the presence of a variable explains an outcome, then its absence should explain the absence of the outcome), it is necessary to also explain the absence of the outcome. If we find a symmetric set of causal conditions, this provides an indirect confirmation of their theoretical relevance.

Table 2 shows the results for the presence of consensus in the organizations’ internal decision making. The QCA algorithm yields four causal paths made of different combinations of conditions. However, only the first two paths have a sufficiently high coverage score and are therefore empirically relevant as they cover a substantial share of the cases (the level of coverage equals .67 for both paths). In contrast, the last two paths should not be overestimated, even if their consistency is sufficiently high. Yet a high consistency score does not guarantee that a meaningful set-theoretic connection exists. For example, an outcome present in only 70% of 20 instances is more reliable than an outcome present in 100% of only two instances. Keeping these qualifications in mind, the results for this outcome largely support our hypotheses. According to the first path (SMALL * NSM), consensus is adopted when organizations belong to the new social movement family and have a small size. This is consistent with our hypotheses as we expected organizations belonging to the new social movements to be more inclined to promote open ways to take

7 The analyses were performed with Tosmana (Tool for Small-N Analysis), a free software created by Lasse Cronqvist (http://www.tosmana.net). They are done on 14 cases for both the presence and absence of consensus. The results are presented following a modified style of notation. In QCA notation, upper case usually indicates the presence of a condition, while lower case indicates its absence. Here we use upper case for conditions that meet our hypotheses and lower case for conditions that go counter them. Thus, “MEMBERSHIP” indicates an organization with formalized status for members through a membership card and “membership” an organization without a membership card; “SMALL” indicates a small organization and “small” a large one; “DOMESTIC” indicates an organization whose campaigns are prevalently domestic (local and/or national) and “domestic” one that has at least some campaign activity on the international level; “NSM” indicates an organization belonging to the new social movement family and “nsm” one that belong to another movement family; “PARTICIPATION” indicates an organization that follows a participative decision-making model and “participation” one that does not. The logical operator “and” (*) means that two or more conditions need to be present jointly for the outcome to occur (conjunctural causation). The logical operator “or” (+) means that there is more than one path leading to the outcome (multiple causation).

8 Setting a specific threshold is of course a largely subjective exercise. Here we consider a coverage threshold of .20. This means that the path should be built on at least 20% of the cases yielding the outcome in order to be considered as relevant. Such a threshold is useful to evaluate the empirical relevance of the results. It should be noted that more conservative thresholds yield easier results, but face the risk of omitting theoretically relevant causal paths.
collective decisions and therefore to favor consensus in internal decision making. Furthermore, when considering the internal characteristics of the organizations, we expected consensual procedures to be privileged by smaller organizations.

The second empirically relevant path (PARTICIPATION * SMALL * domestic) shows once again that small organizations are more likely to adopt a consensual approach when taking decisions. This causal path presents furthermore a conjunctural effect with two further conditions: a participative model of decision making and an international (i.e. non-domestic) territorial scope. The first condition confirms that participation clearly favors consensus, as expected. However, this result suggests at the same time that participation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to explain the presence of a consensual decision-making model. The second condition goes against our expectations (but we were aware of the more difficult prediction concerning this aspect). We expected consensual practices to be enhanced especially in organizations with a domestic scope as they can afford to be more open to deliberation insofar as they have a more limited reach, while we associated majority decision making to organizations with a broader scope. Our findings do not support this expectation; organizations that are international in scope are more likely to seek consensual decisions.

The most important finding concerning the explanation of consensus is that, in our sample, small organizations clearly lead to its presence. The two empirically relevant causal paths are both made of a conjunction of small size and some other condition. Being small therefore is a necessary condition for organizations to implement a consensual model in internal decision making.

We also note that the logical condition pertaining to the level of formalization of the organizations (i.e. having a membership card) seems quite irrelevant to explain the presence of consensus. We observe a causal path including the presence of a membership card, combined with the presence of participation and a non-domestic scope (“PARTICIPATION * MEMBERSHIP * domestic”), but this path has quite a weak empirical relevance (the level of coverage is significantly lower than the .20 threshold).

Table 3 shows the results for the absence of consensus in the organizations’ internal decision making. The QCA algorithm yields five causal paths, four of which are empirically relevant (their level of coverage is above the threshold of .20). The first causal path (small * NSM) shows that consensual decision-making does not occur when the organization is large and when it belongs to the new social movement family. The first condition is
in line with our previous findings as a small size has been shown to be a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for the presence of consensual decisions. The second condition is however somehow counterintuitive. Our previous findings showed that organizations adopt consensus when they belong to the new social movement family. We expected organizations belonging to this movement family to be more inclined to promote open ways to take collective decisions and therefore to favor consensus in internal decision making, which was verified for small organizations ($\text{CONSENSUS} = \text{SMALL} \ast \text{NSM}$).

The results in table 3 show that belonging to the new social movement family leads to a lack of consensus when the organizations are large ($\text{consensus} = \text{small} \ast \text{NSM}$). In other words, for new social movement organizations, what really matters is their size: smaller new social movement organizations follow consensual decision making, whereas large organizations don’t.

The third causal path explaining the absence of consensus ($\text{participation} \ast \text{SMALL} \ast \text{nsm}$) shows a different situation. When they do not belong to the new social movement family and do not promote inclusive participation, in our sample even small organizations do not follow consensual decision making. In other words, size matters more than the movement family for explaining the presence or absence of consensus, but this does not apply to organizations that do not have participatory practices.

The second and fourth causal paths for the absence of consensus (respectively, $\text{nsm} \ast \text{DOMESTIC}$ and $\text{small} \ast \text{DOMESTIC}$) are consistent with the findings concerning the presence of consensus. These paths show that consensus does not occur when organizations have a domestic scope and are either big or not part of the new social movement family.

To summarize, we found fairly consistent findings on both the presence and the absence of consensus. In particular, we found, firstly, that consensus requires smaller organizations. The presence of this logical condition in all empirically relevant causal paths means that to be small is a necessary condition for those organizations to adopting a consensual model of decision making. We also found that large organizations are not inclined to make decisions based on consensus, which provides a contrario confirmation of our findings, except when they belong to the new social movement family and do not follow inclusive participatory practices.
Secondly, we observed an important effect of the movement family on the presence of consensus. Specifically, our findings show that organizations reflecting the cultural tradition of contention represented by the new social movements are more inclined to adopt a decision-making model that puts consensus at center stage. This result, however, should be somewhat nuanced by the fact that belonging to the new social movement family also explains the absence of consensus, but only for large organizations (which confirms once again the importance of the organizational size for explaining the presence or absence of consensus).

We also have an unexpected finding. The analysis does not support our expectation that organizations with a domestic scope would be more inclined to adopt a deliberative-participative democratic model. Quite on the contrary, in our sample, organizations having an international territorial scope are more likely to take decisions based on consensus, whereas organizations with a domestic scope are consensual in their internal decision making.

Concerning the degree of formalization of organizations, we have no evidence of an impact on either the presence or the absence of consensus. To be sure, the indicator we used to grasp this aspect (the presence of a membership card) appears to be a condition for both outcomes, jointly with other factors. However, the paths including this condition are not empirically relevant enough according to our criteria.

Finally, we found that participatory practices lead to the adoption of consensual decision making (and the lack of participation to its absence). However, this condition is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain the outcome.

Conclusion

We examined the conditions leading social movement organizations to adopt consensus in their internal decision making. This is a main component of the so-called deliberative-participative model of democracy, which puts the search for consensus at center stage and is a core value of the global justice movement. To explain the adherence by the organizations of the Swiss global justice movement to consensual decision-making we looked at a number of conditions pertaining to the internal structuring of the organizations (their degree of formalization though the presence of a membership card, their size, and their territorial scope), the tradition of contention of which they are part (the movement family to which they belong), and the presence of inclusive participatory practices.

Our findings show that the ways in which with social movement organizations make decisions and their vision of democracy more generally are not simply a matter of free choice by their leaders and members, but depend on certain organizational characteristics. One aspect seems to play a particularly important role in this regard: our analysis suggests that a small organizational size is a necessary condition for consensus to be adopted. In line with what came out of a comparative analysis of the determinants of decision making of the global justice movement in different countries (Giugni and Nai 2009), this is clearly the most important factor in this regard. It is a necessary condition for the presence of consensus (although not a sufficient one) and a crucial condition for its absence. This finding echoes classical and more recent works in political science looking at the relation between size and the functioning of democracy. For example, Dahl and (Tufte) (1973) as well as Ott (2000) have shown how consensus is more easily reached within small communities. Closer to our subject matter, Mansbridge’s (1980) sophisticated discussion of deliberation and democracy suggests the importance of group size for reaching consensus.
In addition, our findings show that belonging to the cultural tradition of contention represented by the social movement family also plays a role, in particular by favoring consensual practices within the organizations. Thus, when it comes to stress consensus in decision making, a major condition is that the organizations rest on a cultural cleavage which has been variously characterized as being post-materialist (Inglehart 1977), post-industrial (Touraine 1984), or left-libertarian (Kitschelt 1994), and was said to have brought to the fore the new social movements (Melucci 1996) as well as the new politics more generally (Eder 1993). Yet this result should be considered in the light of the fact that, for large organizations, belonging to the new social movement family also explains the absence of consensus.

Beyond the impact of the single factors, the QCA allowed us to stress the multiple conjunctural causation involved in the explanation. On one hand, all the causal paths are made of more than one condition, which means that different explanatory factors combine to account for the adoption of consensus in internal decision making. No single factor can lead social movement organizations to take decisions based on consensus. On the other hand, each analysis yields more than one causal path, although with different degrees of empirical relevance, suggesting that there is more than one way through which organizations try to implement consensus in internal decision making. This holds especially for the dimension relating to the absence of consensus, for which we found four empirically relevant causal paths. From a broader perspective, our findings show that choices concerning the internal functioning of social movement organizations are not free of constraints, but depend in important ways on certain structural characteristics of the organizations, in particular its size. Such choices, furthermore, also depend from the cultural heritage of the organizations, in particular by the movement family to which they belong. In other words, there are both structural and cultural conditions forming the path towards consensus. Here we explored the nexus between some of them and the adoption of consensus in internal decision-making, but other conditions are likely to play a role as well. Our aim was not to be exhaustive about such conditions, but rather to focus on some aspects which we expected to play a crucial role. The lesson to be drawn from our analysis for movement activists is that, if they intend to push towards a more consensual decision-making process, they need to consider these organizational features in order to avoid facing an insurmountable challenge.

References


---

*Marco Giugni* is a Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations and Director of the Institute of Social and Political Research (resop) at the University of Geneva. His research interests include social movements and collective action, immigration and ethnic relations, unemployment and social exclusion. *Address of correspondence*: Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva, Boulevard du Pont-d’Arve 40, CH-1211 Genève 4, Switzerland. Phone: +41 (0)22 379 99 14; Email: marco.giugni@unige.ch.

*Alessandro Nai* is currently lecturer at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the University of Geneva. His current research is on political behaviour, opinion formation, and the effects of political campaigning in referenda.