

Rivalry and Reform

Presidents, Social Movements, and
the Transformation of American Politics

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments / vii

ONE / Presidents, Social Movements, and Contentious Change:
Some Theoretical Foundations / 1

TWO / The Crucible: Lincoln and the Abolitionist Movement / 41

THREE / The Wayward Path: Presidents and Civil Rights,
1901–1945 / 80

FOUR / “Joining the Revolution”: Lyndon Johnson
and the Civil Rights Movement / 135

FIVE / Protestant Rearguard: Presidents, Christian Conservatives,
and the Modern State / 183

SIX / Building a Movement Party: Ronald Reagan
and the New Christian Right / 225

SEVEN / Executive Power, Social Movements, and American
Democracy in a Polarized Age / 279

Notes 319

Index 369

Presidents, Social Movements, and Contentious Change: Some Theoretical Foundations

*Poem for a man
Who plays the checkered game
Of king jumps king
And jumps a President
That order 8802
For me and you*
—Langston Hughes

For many foot soldiers of the immigrant and gay rights movements, the energy and excitement with which they greeted the new presidency of Barack Obama gave way to exasperation when the administration clarified that immigration reform and marriage equality were secondary to economic recovery, health care policy, and international relations. It was a familiar barrier for US political insurgents; even friendly presidents regularly evade contentious social movement goals in favor of other agenda items. Unfriendly ones can inflict far greater damage. As several leaders of the immigrant and gay rights movements told us as we researched this book,¹ however, they remained undaunted and drew inspiration from the iconic efforts of an earlier civil rights organizer to enlist presidential support for his cause: A. Philip Randolph and the March on Washington movement.

As we will discuss in chapter 3, Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and head of the National Negro Congress, played a leading role for more than two decades in the struggle for the rights of African American workers. His enduring lesson to social activists was that even sympathetic presidents like Obama would be unlikely to join arms with them unless they could mobilize not only conventional political pressure,

but also grassroots support and direct action that would “force” the White House to advance fundamental reforms against the injustices they fought to remedy.

For months, the administration of Franklin Roosevelt gave vague assurances that it would do something about discrimination against African Americans in a defense industry that had mobilized with the approach of World War II. Weary of inaction, Randolph organized support throughout the country for a march of one-hundred thousand supporters on the nation’s capital. The most important objective of the “mobilization and coordination of their mass power,” Randolph’s call to arms proclaimed, was that it could “cause President Roosevelt to Issue an Executive Order Abolishing Discrimination in All Government Departments, Army, Navy, Air Corps, and National Defense Jobs.”² Roughly a quarter century earlier, Woodrow Wilson felt compelled to address similar pressure during World War I from Alice Paul and her “Silent Sentinels” of the woman’s suffrage movement, though he was deeply offended by their “unladylike” picketing of the White House.³ During another tumultuous world war, Roosevelt initially tried to resist Randolph’s demands. Yet when faced with a large demonstration that might prove embarrassing to the White House and risk violence in the capital, the president relented and issued Executive Order 8802, which forbade discrimination in defense industries or government. In pursuance of this action, Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee to enforce it.

Although the White House prohibition on discrimination in the “arsenal of democracy” never lived up to Randolph’s expectations, it marked a major step forward in the long struggle for African American rights and a significant development in the critical but fraught relationship between presidents and social movements. As we show in chapter 2, formative relationships involving America’s national leader and grassroots insurgents did not start with Franklin Roosevelt: Abraham Lincoln’s constructive and contentious alliance with abolitionists marks the crucible that foretold of such unlikely partnerships throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But never before had a mass demonstration focused so directly on the White House; never before had a social movement forced a president to executive action to serve its cause. As Langston Hughes exulted in a poem honoring Randolph on his seventieth birthday: “[He] plays the checkered game of king jump king. And jumps a President.”⁴

Furthermore, the March on Washington movement’s high-stakes checkers game with the White House revealed that the consolidation of the modern executive office during Roosevelt’s long tenure began, in effect, the process

of institutionalizing the relationship between movement activists and presidents. Roosevelt's advance of the rhetorical and administrative capacities of the presidency allowed his administration to circumvent the resistance of his party and Congress to civil rights reform and to respond directly to the amplified protest of African Americans. To be sure, the Roosevelt administration was a reluctant partner in the pursuit of racial progress; nevertheless, civil rights activists' demand for the attention and action of the White House anticipated the more fruitful relationship between Lyndon Johnson and the advocates of racial justice during the 1960s. More broadly, the tempestuous ties between the March on Washington movement and the White House, which continued up to the 1963 demonstration during the Kennedy administration, set the stage for a more ritualized connection between presidents and social movements that none could miss during the Obama presidency. Even as he responded to some of their demands, Roosevelt bristled at the pressure civil rights activists brought to bear on him. Obama also resented relentless pressure from immigration and LGBTQ activists; at the same time, he shared memories of Randolph's accomplishment in counseling movement leaders to force him to take action that served their causes.⁵

Presidents, Social Movements, and American Political Development

This book tells the story of how the collisions and uneasy alliances between presidents and social movements have been central to some of the most important developments in American politics and government. Few subjects are more captivating to American social scientists and historians (not to mention journalists, officials, activists and even casual observers) than major political change. This may seem ironic for a US polity whose design betrays a bias toward countervailing powers and structural veto points that have in the long run regularly frustrated significant political and policy innovation. Yet it is precisely the long odds against bold reform and durable shifts in the political order that make them so fascinating. And two actors loom larger than most in dramatic alterations of American political life over time: presidents and social movements. As Alexander Hamilton predicted, the presidency long has attracted ambitious leaders inclined to "undertake extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit," to shake up the political status quo so as to leave a distinctive mark. In turn, just as Frederick Douglass insisted that "power concedes nothing without a demand,"⁶ social movements are driven to upend the social, economic, and political orders in pursuit of attention and redress for their causes. Usually these disruptive

aspirations clash, setting presidents and social movements on a collision course. Even when their political agendas dovetail, these two actors compete to control the timing and conditions of political change. During rare historical moments, however, presidents and movements have forged uneasy partnerships that profoundly recast the ideals, institutions, and policies of American government.

Despite their historical importance, surprisingly little focused research has been done on the contentious and sometimes creative interactions between presidents and social movements. The shelves of popular and academic bookstores and the lists of online booksellers are packed with a seemingly endless supply of works on the lives and legacies of past presidents or on the nature and challenges of modern presidential leadership.⁷ An equally impressive mountain of books can be found on the struggles and triumphs of grassroots social movements in the United States over time, or on the meaning and importance of collective protest.⁸ Yet rarely do these two worlds of scholarship meet. In the discipline of political science, prevailing divisions of labor largely separate the study of the American presidency and protest movements. Sociology long has set the standard for sophisticated movement research, but typically pays little or no heed to the development of the presidency and other formal governing institutions. US historians used to devote enormous energy to chronicling presidents and conventional political history, yet in recent decades many have rejected the study of “powerful men” in favor of “a new emphasis on history from the bottom up, spotlighting the role of social movements in shaping the nation’s past.”⁹ These intellectual norms (both past and present) have obscured a pivotal and revealing relationship in American political development. The frequent conflicts and tense collaborations between presidential administrations and social movements capture major political change that is neither top down nor bottom up, but instead reflects a crucial interplay of the two.

Indeed, the epic clashes and contentious partnerships between insurgents and the White House represent some of the most dramatic conflicts in US history. American presidents are living symbols of the nation’s power and unity, and they loom as formidable defenders of the country’s economic, political, and social establishment. Little wonder that social movements fighting the status quo are regularly on a collision course with the White House. More than a few commanders in chief have had little tolerance for social movement disruptions. From Grover Cleveland sending federal troops to put down the Pullman strike in 1894¹⁰ to Richard Nixon launching an all-out (and unsuccessful) campaign to sabotage the sweeping October 15 moratorium against the Vietnam War in 1969,¹¹ most presidents

have tried to block people's voting with their feet to undermine social order or administration policies. In turn, insurgents usually have scorned presidents for failing to employ their enormous clout to address glaring social problems or for using their office to reinforce entrenched interests. To 1980s activists in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), for instance, Ronald Reagan was a "monster" who was "irrevocably opposed to anything having to do with homosexuality" and thus undertook "no work of any urgency" to prevent the deaths of "many millions of gay men."¹² More than two decades later, when Barack Obama came to New York for a fund-raising event in 2011, Occupy Wall Street protesters held signs that read, "Obama is a corporate puppet" and castigated him for "coming to town solely to raise money from the richest of the rich."¹³ The fact that Obama took pains weeks earlier to express support for the Occupy movement, telling activists that "we are on your side," failed to buffer him from charges of catering to the nation's wealthiest 1 percent.¹⁴ Presidents and insurgents are hardly a match made in heaven.

Yet for all of their differences, most presidents and social movements share something crucial: a gnawing desire to recreate the political order. We know this well about movements. As numerous scholars have noted, social movements at their core are sustained "collective challenges" by people or groups "engaged in a political or cultural conflict," who employ "repertoires of contention" (petition drives, strikes, sit-ins, marches, rallies, traffic blocking, pamphleteering, boycotts, etc.) in order to change "some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society."¹⁵ For their part, as Alexander Hamilton anticipated, presidents are not always as hidebound as most insurgents (and the rest of us) presume. "The presidency is a battering ram, and the presidents who have succeeded most magnificently are those who have been best situated to use it forthrightly as such," Stephen Skowronek famously observed. "[I]t has functioned best when it has been directed toward dislodging established elites, destroying the institutional arrangements that support them, and clearing the way for something entirely new."¹⁶ In truth, social movements and presidents are two of the most crucial catalysts for change—"battering rams"—in an American polity structured to make large-scale reform difficult. When these actors pursue rival agendas, their clashes can be explosive. But when movements and presidents are drawn to the same causes and reform aspirations, their uneasy collaboration can be one of the most important forces of transformation in American political life.

While the extensive respective literatures on the American presidency and social movements rarely intersect, the few salutary works that do address the

relationship between these two compelling political forces emphasize the inherent conflicts between a centralizing institution tasked with conserving the constitutional order, and grassroots associations dedicated to structural change.¹⁷ Yet there is a hint of caricature here, with presidents cast as regularly indifferent, resistant, or openly repressive toward insurgent causes, and social movements deemed too hamstrung by radical visions or noninstitutionalized tactics to engage effectively in the art of political compromise. Lost amid the narrative of inherent conflict are the key moments in American political development when presidents and social movements have worked together in advancing major legal, policy, and political innovation.

In the chapters that follow, we focus on the tense alignments and political reconstructions authored by Lincoln and the abolition movement, Lyndon Johnson and the civil rights movement, and Reagan and the Christian Right. Before examining these transformative collaborations, however, we aim to place them in a broader analytical context by exploring the nature of executive-movement interactions in United States over time. In particular, our goal in this introduction is to map out both *durable patterns* of interaction based on defining features of the presidency and social movements, and *historical dynamics* of the relationship as presidential and movement politics have developed longitudinally in the United States.

We begin by taking stock of the distinct presidential and movement world-views, resources, and strategies, as well as the natural conflicts and rivalries between these restless political actors. We also explore the uneasy yet essential bond that sometimes has joined presidents and social movements, considering key incentives and openings for collaboration. As a means of conceptualizing a broad variety of interactions between presidents and insurgents, we develop an analytical framework of executive responses to movements with varying political ideals, methods, resources, and goals. This discussion also will highlight the dynamism of presidential-movement interactions with an eye toward certain “long” social movements over multiple generations that move from the fringes to the center of American politics over time.¹⁸ We next move from this theoretical foundation to the historical development of presidential-movement relations. This discussion will take stock of traditional interactions during the nineteenth century, and then explore innovations in the presidency and social movements from the Progressive Era onward that reshaped relational dynamics. These innovations made modern presidents a more prominent and regular target of insurgents and, in turn, gave the White House fresh incentives to stay on top of potent social movements, to try to control them, and sometimes to partner with them. Along the way, the worlds

of these often distant actors increasingly overlapped as the size and scope of presidential power and particular movements grew.

Understanding the durable patterns and historical developments of presidential-movement interactions is a useful foundation for grasping the uneasy yet pivotal bonds that joined abolitionists to Lincoln's "new birth of freedom," the civil rights movement to Johnson's Great Society, and the Christian Right to the Reagan Revolution. These presidents and social movements coauthored not only profound political transformation, but also forged a volatile marriage of presidential and movement politics that has fueled unprecedented forms of political polarization and executive aggrandizement since the 1960s.

Defining Features of Presidential-Movement Politics

Before we delve into the long-term patterns of rivalry and collaboration between US presidents and social movements, let us begin by taking inventory of their respective orientations and ideals, as well as the reasons why each protagonist may be drawn to or repelled by the other. Bear in mind as we do so, that individual presidents and their administrations of course may vary dramatically and social movements even more so. Yet this starting point provides useful groundwork for understanding their core perspectives, their distinct sources of potential power, and the roots of their frequent conflicts and uneasy alliances.

US Social Movements: Core Perspectives and Power Resources

American social movements are quite diverse in terms of their ideologies, resources, tactics, and ultimate goals. Consider John Wilson's classic definition of social movements as "conscious, collective, organized attempts to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by noninstitutionalized means."¹⁹ Among the core qualities of movements that this definition captures, it crucially highlights how organized collective insurgency may champion *or resist* major social, economic, or political change. Two movements at the heart of this book—the civil rights movement and the Christian Right—advanced decidedly different conceptions of national identity, human freedom, and moral regeneration. Civil rights insurgents called for radical social change that demanded government action on behalf of racial justice, social welfare, and greater democratic inclusion. By contrast, Christian Right activists sought to guard the nation from countless

enemies—socialists, communists, homosexuals, feminists, secularists, pornographers, drug dealers, and other threats to “family values”—by mobilizing government on behalf of traditional family values at home and military strength abroad. Despite the ideological chasm between them, these two movements, like other progressive and conservative insurgencies, offered searing critiques of American society that energized supporters.

One of the most important potential resources of movements is the power to deploy ideas, even from the margins of the US mainstream, that resonate with key constituencies and inspire collective challenges to the political status quo. More than half a century ago, William Kornhauser noted that mass movements usually (but not always) “mobilize people who are alienated from the going system, who do not believe in the legitimacy of the established order, and who therefore are ready to engage in efforts to destroy it.”²⁰ As we shall see in chapter 2, this was certainly true of many abolitionists before and during the Civil War, inspired by militants like John Brown and William Lloyd Garrison who openly scorned the Constitution and placed antislavery aspirations before preservation of the Union. The power of penetrating reform ideas has fueled crusades and movements on both the American political left and right—from Martin Luther King’s dream of a “beloved community” to Jerry Falwell’s jeremiad to bring the country “back to basics, back to biblical morality, back to patriotism.”²¹

In their pursuit of progressive or conservative reform, most social movements try to shape national debate and opinion by dramatizing their collective claims through what Charles Tilly described as public representations of “worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.”²² This brings us to the diverse political resources, strategies, and tactics that movements employ to achieve their ends. Some scholars, like John Wilson above, suggest that disruptive outsider tactics—“noninstitutionalized means”—are crucial elemental features of social movements.²³ Yet others offer a more capacious view. Sidney Tarrow, for example, argued that not all movements are radical, reject mainstream or institutionalized forms of political contention, or favor wholesale social change. “Rather than seeing social movements as expressions of extremism, violence, and deprivation,” he notes, “they are better defined as collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.”²⁴ In short, whereas some social movement leaders and organizations champion disruptive protest and militancy, others favor relatively conventional political methods.

The “noninstitutional” methods employed by social movements reflect a range of disruptive resources and tactics designed to challenge or exert

pressure on government officials and powerful opponents. For the abolitionists discussed in chapter 2, these tactics included petitions, antislavery mailings and newspapers, speech tours, marches, an “underground railroad” to liberate slaves, and at its most militant, Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry to initiate an armed slave revolt in 1859. Chapters 3 and 4 capture a civil rights movement engaged in massive nonviolent confrontation through boycotts, sit-downs at segregated lunch counters, freedom rides, and mass marches. As we shall see in chapters 5 and 6, the Christian Right staged large public demonstrations such as rallies and marches, but generally steered clear of disruptive, unconventional tactics. This reminds us that a full inventory of movement tactics also includes conventional political resources and methods for pressing demands. Each of the movements examined at length in this book engaged in voter registration and mobilization, various forms of party building or influence, political advertising, litigation, and legislative lobbying, as well as nurturing alliances with public officials at the centers of power.

Movements on Presidential Power: Forces of Aversion and Attraction

To most social movements, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue serves as a potent symbol of the very political establishment that they seek to upend. Presidents routinely elicit hostility from movement leaders and activists who associate the Oval Office with three significant threats to their causes: fierce repression, untenable compromise, or official indifference. Let us consider each in turn.

One of the chief reasons that social movements scorn occupants of the Oval Office is because they loom as menacing ideological enemies who can and will repress movements they consider nettlesome. From the earliest days of the American republic, presidents have wielded executive power to crush insurgencies deemed as radical and threatening. George Washington personally led thirteen thousand troops to quash a whiskey rebellion of tax resisters in western Pennsylvania and Virginia, an insurgency led by war veterans who believed they were fighting for principles of the American Revolution, particularly the ideal of “no taxation without representation.”²⁵ More than a century later, the Palmer Raids during Woodrow Wilson’s administration targeted socialist labor leaders, anarchists, and other political radicals for mass arrests and deportations.²⁶ Presidents throughout the twentieth century unleashed J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI to surveil, infiltrate, and undermine civil rights organizations.²⁷ Executive repression can also take rhetorical forms. Not long into office, Donald Trump’s speeches took “aim

at Black Lives Matter” and his White House website “put Black Lives Matter on notice” by denouncing an “anti-police atmosphere” and adding that “our job is not to make life more comfortable for the rioter, the looter, or the violent disrupter.”²⁸ His administration also left little doubt that he endorsed backing up these words with strong-arm tactics, rolling back limits on the militarization of local police to give them access to armored vehicles, grenade launchers, high-caliber weapons, and other equipment to put down unrest.²⁹ Presidents have significant capacities at their disposal to openly or surreptitiously thwart movement causes and activities.

Even when presidents share key ideals and goals with social movements or are willing to grant them important concessions, many insurgents remain hostile to the White House. As radical activists, many simply cannot stomach finding common cause with an elected leader who sits atop what they perceive as a corrupt US political establishment. More fundamentally, however, occupants of the White House face political constraints that make them far more eager to maintain or expand mainstream support than their insurgent counterparts. Indeed, movement leaders and activists typically are repelled by what they see as untenable political compromises that presidents either demand or accept. As we shall see in chapter 4, courageous members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party saw only moral bankruptcy in Lyndon Johnson’s insistence that they accept a few token seats at the Democratic National Convention in the name of electoral expediency. Less than two decades later, as discussed in chapter 6, key Christian Right activists expressed outrage that the Reagan administration failed to expend political capital on cultural issues that they considered important but that lacked majority public support. Ultimately many insurgents distrust presidents due to their propensity to negotiate core principles and to serve as forces of political moderation.

A final major reason why movements often despise the White House is because it so often ignores their grievances and demands. “The whole world is watching!” chanted thousands of antiwar protesters as news cameras broadcast images of Chicago police beating them with nightsticks outside the Democratic National Convention in August 1968.³⁰ But what if no one *is* watching? For insurgents who yearn to draw attention to their ideas and reform goals, obscurity and neglect can be more lethal than direct repression. Even assaults on movements have the potential to mobilize old and new defenders and to expand their resources, as environmental and abortion rights groups discovered during the Reagan, Bush, and now Trump years.³¹ Yet for most movements the key question is not *how* presidents respond to their challenges, but *whether* they respond at all. Presidential

indifference is par for the course for the vast majority of insurgents. Most may simply lack the political traction to elicit a White House response. Generations of women suffragists, for instance, were largely ignored by the nation's top elected leader.³² Yet presidents also have strong incentives to divert attention away from reform causes that pose political dilemmas, seeking to reduce the salience of issues that present risks or vulnerabilities. Franklin Roosevelt candidly told the NAACP's Walter White in 1934 that he would not support federal legislation that imposed penalties on participants in lynch mobs because doing so would incur the wrath of southern Democratic senators and voters.³³

The significance of presidential indifference for movements underscores three dimensions of political power. Repression and compromise speak to the first "face" of power, associated with Robert Dahl's pluralist formulation, which roots power in the ability to prevail in political struggles over governing choices.³⁴ Official indifference reflects what Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz described as a second "restrictive face of power," in which influence is used to exclude certain issues and problems from the public agenda and to thereby limit the scope of decision-making.³⁵ It also finds expression in a third dimension of power characterized by John Gaventa as the capacity of victors in the first two dimensions to foster over time "an unconscious pattern of withdrawal" among those unable to control the agenda or win political contests.³⁶ Put another way, movements curse the White House not only for ignoring problems that energize them, but also for nurturing a sense of apathy or powerlessness among constituencies whom they hope to uplift.

Ironically, it is also precisely the role of American presidents as the polity's chief agenda setters that draws many movements inexorably toward them. As much as insurgents loathe being ignored by the White House, they also crave presidential attention when it shines a spotlight on the problems they seek to dramatize and helps win over new followers, patrons, and public backing. Sometimes movement leaders and followers, like many conservative evangelical Christians discussed in chapter 6, look to the White House mostly for genuine political recognition. Yet the rhetorical presidency, especially when deployed by gifted communicators and artful speechwriters, can elevate the most forceful ideas of movements and give them political legitimacy. Indeed, at their most stirring during critical moments, presidential words like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address have the potential to redefine the national identity and justify major political transformation.³⁷ Less majestically, executive power is magnetic to most insurgents not because they admire presidential leadership but because they hope to harness some of its energy to advance their political and policy aspirations. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass,

woman suffragist Alice Paul, labor firebrand John L. Lewis, and transcendent civil rights leader Martin Luther King sought to influence the White House not because they were enamored with particular occupants of the Oval Office but because they saw them as the most powerful actors in the American political system.³⁸ Or, to be more precise, their movements saw the presidency as possibly the most promising catalyst for nonincremental change within a governmental structure that regularly bedevils significant reform.

The American Presidency: Core Perspectives and Power Resources

Two competing views of the US presidency's relationship to stability and change in American politics capture key features of the orientation and power resources of the institution. First, studies old and new portray the presidency as a potent agent of change in a labyrinthine US political system that regularly frustrates innovation. "In presidential government, Americans have established one of the most powerful institutions in the free world," James MacGregor Burns noted in classic fashion. "They have fashioned, sometimes unwittingly, a weapon that has served them well in the long struggle for freedom and equality at home."³⁹ It is a refrain that we can trace back to Hamilton's famous depiction of executive power in the *Federalist Papers* as the critical source of energy in constitutional government, derived from the office's unitary character that bestowed many virtues on the presidency: "decision, activity, secrecy, and dispatch . . . vigor and expedition."⁴⁰ In contrast to James Madison, Hamilton believed that the constitutional blueprints permitted presidents to do much more than fend off foreign and domestic threats; it empowered them to serve as a force for advancing the country's economic, social, and political strength. In truth, the Framers were exceptionally vague about the nature and limits of executive power.⁴¹ As an influential Treasury secretary, Hamilton gave eloquent expression to the views of his longtime mentor, George Washington, that the ambiguities of Article II provided room for the country's first president to act forcefully without explicit legal authorization when needed.⁴² It is a model of executive power that has been fully institutionalized by the modern presidency. Yet Stephen Skowronek reminds us that older, recurrent patterns of presidential authority help make the American executive a "blunt disruptive force" whose "deep-seated impulse to reorder things routinely jolts order and routine elsewhere." Skowronek avoids the normative claims of a heroic presidency described by Burns and others; instead, he focuses on the presidency as an institution that "routinely disrupts established power arrangements and continually opens new avenues of political activity for others."⁴³

Rejecting conceptions of the presidency as an agent of reform, a second leading view of the office posits that it is naturally inclined to oppose insurgency and contentious change. Article II of the Constitution, for example, stipulates that one of the chief duties of the presidency is to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” The take care clause and other elemental features of the presidency reinforce an executive obligation to guard law and order and to promote consensus over conflict. According to scholars such as Russell Riley and Thomas Langston, executive caution and resistance on many of the controversial questions raised by movements reflect the presidency’s role as a “nation-maintaining institution” whose occupants “portray themselves . . . as the embodiment of the whole nation.”⁴⁴ From this perspective, social movements that seek to disrupt existing social, economic, or political arrangements clash with executive imperatives to secure “domestic tranquility” and national unity. Moreover, presidential responses to social movements are closely tied to their electoral implications; when a movement’s activists and supporters are not a crucial portion of a president’s real or potential voter base, then incentives to dismiss or repress these insurgents are strong. In his historical study of the presidency and race, Kenneth O’Reilly argues that the imperatives of elections and majoritarian politics in the United States made nearly all incumbents reactionary adversaries of civil rights reform. “At root, it is nothing more than a belief that presidential elections can be won only by following the doctrines of white over black,” he notes. “The pecking order has stayed that way through the death of slavery and Jim Crow, and notwithstanding Lincoln and Johnson, our presidents have in nearly every other case made it their job to keep that order.”⁴⁵ Elizabeth Sanders adds that the modern executive’s responsibilities for economic management, global diplomacy, and warfare has reinforced an “institutional logic” pushing the presidency “in a conservative direction” when responding to social movements.⁴⁶ Overall, whereas most insurgents have strong incentives to stir and exploit social disorder and government vulnerability, scholars like Riley conclude that the presidency “is fundamentally a change-resistant institution” predisposed to favor national calm, to meet national crises with a firm hand, and to suppress various forms of social agitation.⁴⁷

Presidents on Movement Power: Forces of Aversion and Attraction

Presidents have many reasons to maintain a strained, if not openly hostile, relationship toward insurgents. Indeed, the core qualities of social movements give most presidents and their advisers plenty to worry about. To

begin with, the issues that mobilize insurgents usually polarize society and have the potential to upend White House efforts to solidify or expand a president's electoral base. In the process, these insurgent efforts to command the political spotlight challenge the power of presidential spectacles and the clout of the "bully pulpit."⁴⁸ In their pursuit of *or opposition to* large-scale change, movements also pose potential hurdles for executive agenda setting, threatening to interrupt, if not ruin, the best-laid White House plans. Additionally, their "noninstitutional" methods take presidents out of their political comfort zone. As Bruce Miroff so aptly described a few decades ago, from "the standpoint of presidential politics, what is distinctive—and troublesome—about social movements is their preference for mass mobilization over elite negotiations, their propensity to confront issues directly rather than exerting pressure through Washington lobbying, and their desire for public attention and controversy rather than quiet coalition-building."⁴⁹ More fundamentally, movements collide with presidents most dramatically when their extra-institutional methods disturb the social, economic, and political order.

These defining features reinforce an earlier point: both presidents and social movements have the potential to be major vehicles of change in American politics, compelled to persistently challenge and remake the existing political order. Yet herein lurk several crucial challenges for the nation's chief executives. One of the most obvious is the fact that large-scale reforms pursued by social movements may conflict with or distract from those envisioned by the White House. Presidents generally want to control the national public agenda, and highly effective social movements can undermine that role. Equally telling, however, are the profound struggles that emerge even when a movement and an administration agree on the same broad objectives. As we have discussed, differences regularly emerge over the means of obtaining shared objectives, with presidential calls for moderation and patience routinely scorned by movement activists as compromising cherished ideals in the name of political expediency. At the heart of these conflicts are widely divergent conceptions of how far reform should reach. Even the most ambitious and successful reformers in the White House—including so-called presidential "greats"—were "conservative revolutionaries" who reconciled dramatic regime change with constitutional traditions and political realities.⁵⁰

Whereas even the most reform-minded presidents take pains to balance the demands of innovation and conservation, Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Carol McClurg Mueller remind us that often what the insurgent agenda

“entails is nothing less than the reformulation of public life, the educational sphere, the workplace, and the home—that is, a total transformation of society.”⁵¹ Accordingly, even those presidents who share the goals of a particular movement will be vilified by rank-and-file activists as too timid and uncommitted. For administration officials, these insurgents are at best politically naïve and at worst dangerously militant. In truth, presidents have strong incentives to pay little or no attention to most social movements with whom they share little ideological affinity and which typically command limited resources and influence. The political risks of engaging social movements is nearly always far greater than the potential rewards for presidents. Avoidance is a safe strategy in most cases. For movements, as we have discussed, the political calculations are usually quite different, as they look to the White House to draw attention to their issues and to spur government action. In this way, social movements usually need presidents more than presidents need movements.

Presidents are not, however, invulnerable to movement pressure. To be sure, they are the commanders in chief of a US military, national-security, and law-enforcement establishment that has demonstrated the capacity to crush domestic insurgencies since Washington melodramatically donned his Revolutionary uniform and led troops to put down the fledgling whiskey tax rebellion in western Pennsylvania. Movements ultimately may have more reason to fear presidents than vice versa. Still, insurgents are far from powerless. Consider Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush, two chief executives of rival parties with distinct political interests and contrasting goals in domestic and foreign policy. Despite their differences, both Carter and Bush won office with the help of white evangelical voters. Yet both also considered the strident Christian Right leaders and their cultural agenda on issues like abortion, homosexuality, and school prayer to be irritating. In the end, each chose to keep conservative evangelical activists mostly at arm’s length during their administrations. Leaders of the Christian Right responded by mobilizing legions of rank-and-file supporters in primary and general election campaigns, playing a pivotal role in rendering Carter and Bush one-term presidents.

The ability of some movements to exert electoral pressure is clearly only one source of insurgent power. Others have compelled reluctant, even opposing, presidents to respond to their demands by effectively deploying protest strategies that reach beyond conventional or institutionalized political methods. Alice Paul and other militant women suffragists initially elicited little more than disdain from Wilson for their “unladylike” tactics

when they picketed the White House during the First World War.⁵² Yet their challenge to wartime unity, and particularly their insistence that any nation that disenfranchised more than half of its adult population could not claim to be on a crusade to “make the world safe for democracy,” ignited violent reactions from onlookers and eventually arrests. Pressure on the White House mounted when the public learned that imprisoned suffragists were subjected to brutal treatment by their jailors amid courageous hunger strikes.⁵³ Power for Paul and other picketers derived from their ability to upset the status quo, draw attention to their cause, and agitate public opinion. During the New Deal era, Roosevelt faced a similar challenge from a burgeoning industrial labor movement. Roosevelt understood that the labor movement was a crucial element of his electoral and governing coalition, yet his own Labor secretary Frances Perkins noted that he failed to grasp that unions gave industrial workers “power and status to deal with their employers on equal terms.”⁵⁴ Labor leaders like John L. Lewis were well aware of Roosevelt’s efforts to distance himself from the political goals of the industrial workers movement, and they responded with increased militancy. Strikes, sit-downs, and other labor disputes more than doubled between 1932 and 1935, and were punctuated by bloody clashes between workers and company police. The Roosevelt administration, rattled by the labor agitation that raged across the country in the spring and summer of 1935, felt compelled to support the Wagner Act—hailed as labor’s “Magna Carta”—which gave industrial workers newly enforced rights to form unions and collectively bargain.⁵⁵

Finally, it was the enormously disruptive capacity and moral resonance of the civil rights movement’s mass nonviolent campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s that compelled Dwight Eisenhower to uphold the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision, even as he refused to express support for desegregation, and John Kennedy, who was determined to keep his distance from racial conflict, to advocate sweeping reform. The civil rights movement, especially, testified dramatically to the potential power of social movements to exert significant force that even recalcitrant presidents cannot disregard.

Durable Patterns of Rivalry and Collaboration

Based on the analysis so far, there is considerable reason for us to expect frequent acrimony and struggle between social movements and presidents. Elemental features of social movements—including their propensity to raise controversial issues, to compete with policy-makers in terms of agenda

setting and public spectacle, and to employ extra-institutional methods of mass mobilization and disruption that upset the status quo—seem to pre-ordain constant warfare with the White House. In turn, it also seems to matter little whether one is drawn more to transformational or reactionary conceptions of the presidency: both views place administrations on a collision course with insurgents. It is hardly surprising that models of the reactionary or moderating executive underscore constitutional, electoral, economic, and geopolitical incentives for presidents to derail formidable social movements. Even portraits of the presidency as a crucial source of reform in American politics emphasize rivalry between insurgents and the White House over the means and ends of large-scale change. Given these defining qualities of social movements and the American presidency, we should expect recurrent tensions and, at times, harsh struggles to characterize their relationship. Indeed, as noted above, profound conflict and pitched battles are dominant realities of presidential-movement interactions over the course of US history—and a key pattern we highlight in subsequent chapters.

But this is only part of the story. An adequate theoretical and historical treatment of the relationship between presidents and social movements should take stock of not only conflict but also collaboration between these actors. The respective literatures on executive power and insurgency rarely intersect, and as noted, scholars who have probed the subject have tended to emphasize the inherent divide between presidents and social activists. However, these agents of change in American political life have at times forged an uneasy alliance to champion major legal, policy, and political innovation. Some presidents have found themselves at the center of national crises where conserving the Constitution requires a redefinition of the social contract—disruptive constitutional politics that includes an uneasy partnership with movement leaders and activists. Social movements at times seek to secure the rights of the dispossessed and to advance moral causes not merely by opposing the existing order of things but through a principled commitment to reconstituting it with the help of powerful allies in government. Despite their elemental differences, under certain conditions presidents and social movements sometimes have needed each other to realize shared aspirations to transform the political order.

To better understand tense yet formative collaborations between movements and administrations, it is important to reiterate how diverse social movements can be in terms of their identities, resources, tactics, and ultimate goals. Not all movements are radical, reject mainstream or institutionalized

forms of political contention, or favor wholesale social change. Indeed, some of the most fervent internal struggles for movements have revolved around political resources, strategies, and tactics.

Interestingly, one also can discern important divisions in how social movement scholars explain how activists achieve “success.” For example, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward in their classic work on the subject contend that poor people’s movements are most successful when they pose major disruptive threats and that more conventional organizational efforts are doomed to fail.⁵⁶ By contrast, Ann-Marie Szymanski’s impressive study of temperance campaigns during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries finds that moderate mobilization strategies were far more successful than radical activism.⁵⁷ Still other scholars, such as Sidney Tarrow, stress the efficacy of movements that blend “institutional and noninstitutional politics.”⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Herbert Haines has analyzed the positive and negative effects of radical flanks on mainstream movement efforts.⁵⁹

This study generally reinforces the conclusions of scholars like Haines and Tarrow; in fact, we find that pinning down precisely the nature of movement “success” can be a chimera. Scholars like Piven and Cloward as well as Szymanski straightforwardly point to major constitutional, legal, and policy breakthroughs as the ultimate measures of success. Abolitionists succeeded when slavery was finally abolished; nativists carried the day when they secured Chinese exclusion and racist national-origins quotas; women suffragists won when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified; and civil rights reformers triumphed with the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. Yet for a surprising number of Christian Right activists in the early 1980s, success came with full-throated recognition by President Reagan for people who had considered themselves politically marginalized and isolated for generations.

In our view, one can gain stronger analytical purchase on varied presidential-insurgent interactions—including durable patterns of conflict and collaboration—by focusing on strategic and resource distinctions among movements. As we have seen, many definitions of social movements concentrate on their “noninstitutional” methods in which activists exert pressure on government officials or powerful opponents through disruptive, unconventional means, such as large public demonstrations, marches, street theater, vigils, boycotts, strikes, destruction of property, or planned violence. However, we also have argued that a more complete inventory of movement resources and tactics should include conventional political methods of pressing demands through voter mobilization, petitions, campaign finance, lobbying, political advertising, and litigation, as well as nurturing alliances

Table 1. Movement challenges and presidential responses: linking conventional and disruptive capacities

	<i>Significant tactical challenge to social, economic, or political order</i>	<i>Insignificant tactical challenge to social, economic, or political order</i>
Significant conventional political leverage	<p><i>Formative movements:</i> forceful presidential response (uneasy collaboration)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolitionist movement, 1860s • Woman’s suffrage movement, 1910s • Labor movement, 1930s • Civil rights movement, 1950s/1960s • LGBTQ rights, 1987– • Immigrant rights and Dreamers, 2006– 	<p><i>Institutionalized movements:</i> co-optative presidential response (recognition, access, and collaboration)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation movement, 1880s–1908 • Labor movement, 1917–28, 1941–80 • Environmental movement, late 1970s– • New Christian Right, 1980s– • Tea Party, 2009–
Insignificant conventional political leverage	<p><i>Militant movements:</i> forceful presidential response (surveillance and repression)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anarchists and Industrial Workers of the World, 1910s/1920s • Weather Underground, 1960s/1970s • Militia movement, 1990s • Earth Liberation Front, 1990s– • Animal Rights Militia, 2000s– 	<p><i>Marginal movements:</i> cursory presidential response (indifference or tepid reaction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utopian movement, 1840s • Anti-Imperial League, 1890s • Poor People’s Campaign, 1968 • 9/11 Truth movement, 2001– • Occupy movement, 2011–

with public officials at the centers of power. As table 1 illustrates, we can identify four kinds of movement challenges and presidential responses by concentrating on two dimensions. One dimension takes stock of the disruptive capacities of a movement and whether it poses a significant or insignificant tactical challenge to social, economic, or political order, based on its resources and methods. The second dimension centers on whether a movement exercises significant or insignificant conventional political leverage via electoral mobilization, lobbying access, litigation, or formal institutional allies. Mapping social movements along these dimensions illuminates four types of movement challenges and presidential responses: *marginal movements* that elicit executive indifference; *militant movements* that trigger executive

repression; *institutionalized movements* that facilitate official recognition, access, and incremental policy gains; and *formative movements* whose leverage and intractability evoke forceful presidential responses to their reform agenda.

It is crucial to underscore that movements are not necessarily locked in one category in terms of the political capacities and challenges they present to presidents and other public officials. When social movements are studied carefully *over time*, one can discern their potential to develop new resources and strategies, and for political barriers to their agendas to sink or rise in changing contexts. Put another way, broader temporal horizons reveal the possible dynamism of movements as they move from the margins of US political life to contention, and to later stages of decline, militancy, or institutionalization in the corridors of power. This is not to say that movements follow a preset cycle of stages the longer they endure. Rather, as we shall discuss later in this chapter, tracking movements over time captures their ability to assume new political incarnations, to adapt as the larger polity evolves, and to confront a shifting set of constraints and openings in pursuit of their goals. This underlying dynamism is particularly true of the long movements studied in this book. To gain a better understanding of the *marginal*, *militant*, *institutionalized*, and *formative* categories, however, let us freeze a variety of movements in time for a moment as a means of highlighting distinctive types of movement challenges and presidential responses.

At the Periphery: Marginal Movements and Presidential Avoidance

Public policy scholars for several generations have shown that only a small fraction of social problems find their way onto the national government agenda, and even fewer inspire tangible policy innovation.⁶⁰ The same can be said of social movements over the course of US history, of which most labored in relative political obscurity and left little or no mark on the policy-making process. The White House has usually been indifferent or lukewarm in its response to marginal movements that have little capacity or inclination to be disruptive or to flex conventional political muscle. If they even know a marginal movement exists, presidents have good reason to ignore it, and most do. Repression is unlikely but always an option if a marginal movement gets under a president's skin for some reason, as is sponsorship if an executive has reasons to support a cause and wants to nurture its growth. But most of these movements struggle to get even recognition from presidents and other officials, let alone strong media attention or public identification. Take the case of the Anti-Imperial League (AIL), a movement

that sought to mobilize peace activists and isolationists in response to the Spanish-American War in 1898. AIL activists organized public meetings and publicity campaigns demanding the withdrawal of US troops from the Philippines. In time, AIL leaders articulated broader constitutional, cultural, and economic objections to what they deemed imperialist American policies. Yet the AIL later failed in its campaign to block ratification of the Treaty of Paris in 1899, which granted US control of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam, and permitted a military occupation of Cuba. The AIL then concentrated its energies on defeating William McKinley in the 1900 presidential campaign, yet the Republican candidate never felt compelled to address AIL attacks. Tellingly, the candidate the AIL endorsed, Democratic challenger William Jennings Bryan, supported the Treaty of Paris, thus compromising his embrace of the party's anti-imperialist platform. Moreover, he kept his distance from the AIL on the campaign trail because he concluded that it would not attract voters and threatened to divide his party.⁶¹ Unable to mobilize mass support for its cause, the AIL and the anti-imperialist movement it spearheaded gradually faded after William McKinley's decisive reelection.

Sometimes presidents pay close attention to new insurgencies until they determine that activists lack political leverage. For example, the Johnson administration kept close tabs on the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and did not relax until it was clear that organizers were ill-equipped to marshal either significant conventional or extra-institutional pressures on the government. Initiated by Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the spring of 1968, the campaign was designed to force the White House and Congress to take more decisive action to alleviate poverty in America. To this end, the Poor People's Campaign organized three thousand indigent people to live in a shantytown on parkland next to the Lincoln Memorial. The Johnson administration readied for an attempt to take over the nation's capitol, but the disruptive threat never materialized. Just weeks before the campaign began, King was assassinated, which left leadership of the protest effort to less prominent SCLC figures. Days of torrential rains drenched the campsite, many of the fragile wooden shanties fell apart, trash piled up, violence broke out among activists, and most protesters went home early. Only weeks after its start, the Poor People's Campaign fell apart. The few protesters who remained at the campsite at the end of June were evicted or arrested, with little public scrutiny and no White House comment.⁶²

More recently, the Occupy movement helps capture some of the ebb and flow (or, to be precise, the flow and ebb) of presidential attention to an insurgent cause that enters the public arena with great fanfare but may have a

limited political impact. Drawing on the California student movement's slogan "Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing" and inspired by anti-austerity insurgency in Spain, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) began on September 17, 2011, as a protest against the enormous wealth and power of the nation's top 1 percent. For more than a month, protesters in this peaceful movement staged an iconic occupation of downtown New York's Zuccotti Park, two blocks from the Wall Street financial district. Their battle cry, "We are the 99%," resonated broadly as a critique of economic inequality and the concentrated power of the nation's privileged few. Occupy protests spread to more than six hundred communities in the United States and dozens of other countries in the weeks that followed. Soon after their first demonstration, President Obama sided with OWS in its challenge to corporate power and politics-as-usual. "I think it reflects the frustration that the American people feel," he told reporters,⁶³ while the White House issued statements that it was fighting to make sure that "the interests of 99% of Americans are well represented."⁶⁴

Less than a year later, however, the West Wing had distanced itself from the movement. In contrast to the Tea Party movement on the Right, Occupiers never articulated a unified set of political demands and never recruited or mobilized on behalf of candidates at election time. Whereas Tea Party activists filled seats at the Republican National Convention of 2012, heard Tea Party-elected politicians give speeches from the dais, and successfully pressed for Tea Party ideas to be included in the GOP platform, Occupy protesters demonstrated outside the Democratic convention hall and told reporters that they endorsed "Nobody 2012."⁶⁵ In truth, the Obama campaign wanted little to do with the movement after 2011 and the forcible closing of Occupy camps in cities across the country. Even though its focus on economic inequality and "the concentrated political power of the 1%" continues to reverberate in US political discourse, Occupiers struggled to translate "what was going on in the park and in the financial centers" into practical political leverage.⁶⁶ In its disavowal of traditional political methods—"we don't want to associate with politicians because that would just divide the people"⁶⁷—and the limits of its disruptive capacities, the Occupy insurgency became a movement that the White House could ignore or repress. In the end, it did both. Administration officials said little or nothing about the Occupy movement one year after it emerged, but federal documents show that the Federal Bureau of Intelligence and the Department of Homeland Security counterterrorism agents carefully monitored and investigated camps and protests.⁶⁸

Collision Course: The White House, Militant Movements, and Social Order

Presidents typically pay very close attention to social movements with the motivation and capacity to significantly disrupt US social, economic, and political order. When these same movements espouse unpopular political beliefs and show little interest in (if not contempt for) conventional political processes, they become prime targets for repression by presidents and other government officials. Indeed, militant social movements are the most likely forms of insurgency to evoke strong crackdowns from the White House to guard domestic tranquility. President James Buchanan is deservedly considered one of the nation's worst presidents for his anemic response to the Southern secession crisis in 1860, but his administration tried to forcefully end the violent brand of abolitionism advanced by John Brown's League of Gileadites during the 1850s by posting substantial rewards and mobilizing federal troops to subdue Brown well before his fateful raid at Harpers Ferry.⁶⁹ Nonviolent insurgencies employing unconventional and disruptive tactics also can fall in this category of militant movements that draw the ire of US commanders in chief. At its peak of protest activism and occupation of sites in communities across the country in late 2011, one could argue that the Occupy movement was more of a militant than marginal movement for executive officials, thereby eliciting coordinated surveillance, removal, and arrests. Yet protest groups engaged in illicit or violent activism—such as the destructive tactics of the Environmental and Animal Liberation Fronts or violent antiglobalization protests—clearly draw the most forceful reactions from government officials determined to maintain law and order.⁷⁰ It is important to recognize, however, that official views of militancy and presidential perceptions of domestic threat are deeply influenced by historical context. Three insurgent challenges generations apart—Coxey's Army and striking railroad workers in 1894, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) of the 1910s, and the militia movement of the 1990s—capture this pattern well.

During an 1894 depression that left one in five Americans out of work (and one-third of all manufacturing workers off the job), second-time Democratic president Grover Cleveland had little patience for any significant insurgency inspired by the economic unrest. Ohioan Jacob Coxey rallied unemployed workers across the country to march on Washington, DC, to demand that the federal government create public works jobs and to offer other forms of relief. After several thousand jobless men forming "Coxey's Army" encamped at a farm site near the nation's capitol in April 1894, Cleveland refused a request by movement leaders to meet with him. On orders from

the White House, fifteen hundred soldiers and policemen greeted members of Coxey's Army when they assembled to hear a speech by Coxey on the steps of the Capitol. Before they could speak, Coxey and movement leaders were arrested for trespassing on the grass while soldiers dispersed the assembled crowd.⁷¹ "We choose this place of assemblage because it is the property of the people," Coxey protested.⁷² The *Topeka Advocate* was more outraged: "These men have as much right to go to Washington and demand justice at the hands of Congress as bankers, railroad magnates, and corporation lawyers have to go and lobby for measures by which to plunder the public."⁷³ Another "army" of five hundred Coxeyites took control of a Pacific Northwest Railway train that they hoped would take them to Washington, DC, to air their demands. Thanks to popular support along the way, they were able to fight off federal marshals until finally stopped by federal troops in Montana.⁷⁴

A few months later, several thousand workers of the Pullman Company walked off their jobs in a small company town outside of Chicago when their wages were cut for a fifth time, without reductions in fees the company charged them for rent, utilities, and other expenses. In sympathy, more than 150,000 railroad workers in twenty-seven states joined a strike designed to stop the movement of any train that carried a Pullman car. The president's response was swift: over the objections of Illinois governor John Altgeld (a fellow Democrat), Cleveland sent federal troops to break the strike, stop interference with railroad lines, and remove obstruction to the US mails.⁷⁵ "If it takes the entire army and navy to deliver a postcard to Chicago, that card will be delivered," Cleveland bellowed. Well after the Pullman crisis was over, Cleveland explained that he had no choice but to respond forcefully to what had become "a tremendous disturbance, paralyzing the most important business interests, obstructing the functions of the Government, and disturbing social peace and order."⁷⁶

National security jitters informed a similar crackdown on political radicalism and labor agitation during World War I. Despite his Progressive credentials and alliances with mainstream unions, Woodrow Wilson favored harsh treatment of the IWW, commonly known as the Wobblies, which was founded in 1905 to organize unskilled, factory, and migrant workers largely ignored by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and craft unions. Its leadership included anarchists, socialists, and communists who embraced radical visions of class struggle and revolution. Many of its campaigns, like the "free speech fights" in Spokane (1909–10), were models of nonviolent resistance.⁷⁷ Yet the provocative rhetoric and labor unrest associated with the

IWW was viewed as unacceptably dangerous by employers and government officials. After the outbreak of World War I, the IWW threatened strikes in industries like copper mining and logging. In response, vigilantes in western states targeted members of the IWW for punishment. In Arizona, roughly one thousand copper miners who belonged to the IWW were placed in cattle cars and left in the desert without food or water; in Montana, IWW organizer Frank Little was lynched by a mob.⁷⁸ Wilson denounced anti-IWW lawlessness by vigilantes, but he also authorized US Department of Justice agents to raid IWW offices nationwide, searching for treasonous material. The raids were followed by mass arrests charging all movement leaders and many rank-and-file members with various crimes. Deportations and imprisonment soon followed for these IWW activists. While lauding “patriots” in the labor movement like AFL president Samuel Gompers, who adhered to a voluntary no-strike agreement during the war, the Wilson administration was adamant that “we must oppose at home the organized and individual efforts of those dangerous elements who hide disloyalty.”⁷⁹

The citizen militia movement of the 1990s illustrates similar dynamics. Movement activists subscribed to right-wing conspiracy theories that portrayed the federal government as tyrannical and warned of an impending takeover of the country by the United Nations. Organized in rural areas across thirty-four states, citizen militias focused their energies on paramilitary training in preparation for an eventual federal or international assault on their freedoms.⁸⁰ Their activities and radical beliefs did not escape notice of the Clinton administration. Going off-script in an address to Democratic supporters in Washington, DC, President Bill Clinton expressed open disgust with militia movement activists: “People who say, ‘I love my country but I hate my government.’ These people—who do they think they are, saying that their government has stamped out human freedom?”⁸¹ In April 1995, the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City resulted in 168 deaths at the hands of two domestic terrorists with ties to the militia movement. Under direction from the White House, the response at all levels of government was swift. Militia groups and their members became the target of intense government surveillance, infiltration, and arrests.⁸²

From a broad historical perspective, therefore, it is clear that both radical left-wing and right-wing movements can inspire strong government crackdowns when perceived as threatening social, economic, or political well-being. Movement militancy often catches presidential attention, but significant disruptions without conventional political engagement almost always yield confrontation and repression.

*In the Mainstream: Institutionalized Movements
and Presidential Co-optation*

Another opening for presidential-movement alignment presents itself when activists identify with an administration or its party and demonstrate political muscle in elections, litigation, or legislative wrangling. Social movement organizations that demonstrate significant conventional political leverage but pose little challenge to domestic tranquility usually have notable strategic advantages not shared by their marginal and militant counterparts.⁸³ These institutionalized movements may enjoy political recognition, access to the centers of power, and a secure role in regular policy-making. At the same time, institutionalized movements typically lack either the capacity or the will to employ disruptive tactics that significantly threaten social, economic, or political order; radical strategies of confrontation and disruption may also lie outside their ideological or practical conceptions of how best to advance their cause. In contrast to those lacking conventional political clout, mainstream social movement organizations may win incremental policy gains, but they are unlikely to shatter the status quo in favor of sweeping reforms. The relatively harmonious and often collaborative relations that developed between the White House and the conservation and labor movements during specific periods of US history are instructive.

During the late 1880s, decades before he became president, Theodore Roosevelt helped found an organization that would prove influential in advancing a new conservation movement: the Boone and Crockett Club. Although it may seem ironic to contemporary environmentalists, Roosevelt and his cofounders were avid big-game hunters who worried that unrestrained mining, timber cutting, and hunting in the Gilded Age threatened the survival of animal species and natural resources. The Boone and Crockett Club worked particularly hard in the 1890s to safeguard Yellowstone National Park, which was not protected from commercial interests under federal law. Troubled that railroad and mining companies were exploiting Yellowstone to a point that threatened its long-term well-being, Roosevelt and other Boone and Crockett members launched speaking tours, wrote prominent editorials, and lobbied in Washington to save Yellowstone. Their efforts paid off in 1894, when President Grover Cleveland signed legislation that imposed special protections against commercial exploitation for Yellowstone National Park.⁸⁴

Once he ascended to the White House, Theodore Roosevelt's relationship with conservation movement activists became more contentious. Roosevelt and his administration's Bureau of Forestry chief, Gifford Pinchot, pursued

a notion of conservation that called for scientific management of natural resources such as timber and the construction of dams and irrigation to expand national farmland. Conservationists like the Sierra Club's John Muir vehemently disagreed with the Roosevelt administration's "wise-use" timber policies, advocating instead that the nation's forests be kept completely off limits to commercial interests. Nevertheless, leaders in the conservation movement, including Muir, remained friends and allies of the president, and pursued collaborative, "insider" strategies to advance their goals.⁸⁵ The influential Muir, for instance, persuaded Roosevelt during a well-publicized camping trip to significantly expand Yosemite National Park.⁸⁶ Yet the nation's twenty-sixth president needed little convincing to advance the conservationist cause on his own terms. "It is . . . vandalism wantonly to destroy or to permit the destruction of what is beautiful in nature, whether it be a cliff, a forest, or a species of mammal or bird," Roosevelt noted. "Here in the United States we turn our rivers and streams into sewers and dumping-grounds, we pollute the air, we destroy the forests, and exterminate fishes, birds and mammals. . . . But at last it looks as if our people are awakening."⁸⁷ Although conservation activists were uncomfortable with the Roosevelt administration's timber and reclamation policies, they praised White House leadership in establishing 4 national game preserves, 5 national parks, 51 federal bird preserves, 150 national forests, and the US Forest Service. Roosevelt is credited with protecting wildlife and forests on roughly 230 million acres of public land.⁸⁸ Although Roosevelt co-opted the conservation movement in significant fashion, conservationists could point to significant policy gains during his tenure.

The bureaucratization of much of the American labor movement during World War II offers another important example of executive-movement collaboration, albeit one that was far less fruitful for labor organizers than it had proven for conservationists during the Progressive Era. In 1940, labor leaders of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) elected to discard earlier radical tactics in favor of a more pragmatic role in Washington and a firmer alliance with Democratic leaders. CIO "labor statesmen" like Sidney Hillman forged close ties with the Roosevelt White House, and oversaw the creation of the CIO's political action committee, which cemented ties between organized labor and the Democratic Party.⁸⁹ After Pearl Harbor, war imperatives called for extraordinary industrial production and coordination. Labor leaders such as Philip Murray, the new CIO president, and Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers proposed "industrial councils" that would facilitate efficient wartime production while giving organized labor real influence—along with business and government—in supervising

industries and the work force. The Roosevelt administration eschewed such ideas. In the end, the AFL, the CIO, and various unions agreed to a “no-strike pledge” during the war and grew dependent on the war agencies to exercise their power over industrial workers benevolently. “Instead of an active participant in the councils of industry,” historian Alan Brinkley notes, “the labor movement has become, in effect, a ward of the state.”⁹⁰ Co-optation was the price of labor’s programmatic partnership, as union radicalism and independence gave way to a more moderate, bureaucratic style of labor organization that lasted until the weakening of the New Deal political order in 1980.⁹¹

Not all presidential collaborations with institutionalized movements fit this pattern described by Brinkley. As the ties between Theodore Roosevelt and the conservationist leaders reveal, the relationship between mainstream movements and the White House does not necessarily stymie meaningful political and policy shifts. Indeed, as we will see in chapters 5 and 6, collaboration between presidents and more conservative movements focused on institutional (rather than “noninstitutional”) forms of political participation can produce major political change. Until Reagan’s ascendance to the White House, this collaboration was limited due to tepid presidential support. The alliance between the Reagan White House and the “new” Christian Right that had emerged by the late 1970s spurred a profound transformation of American political life over the next three decades. At the same time, Christian conservatives’ frustration with the Reagan administration reveals how the absence of significant disruptive capacities (or little will to challenge the existing order) can significantly limit the bargaining power of institutionalized movements with the president and other officials.

Leverage for Change: Formative Movements and the White House

As we have noted thus far, politically active social movements can fall on a spectrum that ranges from mainstream efforts to influence government decision-makers through conventional tactics, such as lobbying or getting out the vote, to militants determined to upend the dominant social, economic, and political order. The relationships between the White House and purely militant movements are routinely grim. Yet more diversified movements featuring both radical and conventional political organizations and tactics, which we call formative movements, generally elicit strong reactions from presidents who cannot ignore their formidable pressure campaigns in the way they dismiss marginal movements. Some presidents may be inclined to use various tactics to repress these confrontational movements,

but these insurgent challenges typically have considerably more clout than strictly militant movements in terms of political allies, media attention, and public opinion. In fact, as social movement scholars like Aldon Morris and Harold Haines observe, these diversified movements can benefit enormously from positive radical-flank effects that strengthen the leverage of more mainstream leaders in their negotiations with the White House and other government actors.⁹² “The bargaining position of moderates is strengthened by the presence of more radical groups,” Haines writes. “This happens in either (or both) of two ways. The radicals can provide a militant foil against which moderate strategies and demands are refined and normalized—in other words treated as ‘reasonable.’ Or, the radicals can create crises that are resolved to the moderate’s advantage.”⁹³ The relationship between presidents and formative movements can be quite strained, if not volatile, but it also can produce dramatic political change.

Consider the examples of the abolitionist, woman’s suffrage, and industrial workers movements of the 1860s, 1910s, and 1930s, respectively. As we discuss in chapter 2, while Garrisonian abolitionists agitated outside the traditional institutional arenas of American politics during the Civil War, other abolitionists, thanks to successful electoral and partisan efforts, advanced their cause through an “insider” strategy of increased clout in the nation’s capital and especially within the halls of Congress. The repertoire of the woman’s suffrage movement in the 1910s contrasted the antagonistic protests of Alice Paul and her radicalized National Woman’s Party, on the one side, and the conciliatory lobbying of Carrie Chapman Catt and her more moderate National American Woman’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA), on the other.⁹⁴ During the 1930s, the CIO recognized the value that rising militancy among rank-and-file industrial workers might offer the US labor movement, pressing their causes in dramatic showdowns such as the 1936–37 takeover of General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan, by autoworkers loyal to the CIO.⁹⁵ At the same time, the AFL and CIO were effective players in Washington negotiations, congressional lobbying and electoral and partisan politics. Paradoxically, the insurgent goals of these movements were well served by internal leadership rivalries that produced moderate and militant wings. Whereas militancy alone may routinely produce a repressive response from state actors, it has potential to give social movements mercurial political leverage by equipping them with different repertoires of collective action and organization to which governing elites—often presidents—usually must respond.

To be sure, determined and reactionary administrations can always choose to resist and even suppress these movement pressures. However,

in contrast to crackdowns on purely militant movements, political risks abound for presidents when they wage war on formative movements equipped with varied weapons and backed by broader constituencies. For their part, movements have proved most viable in their pursuit of contentious change when they have combined conventional political leverage with credible disruptive threats to orderly politics. Initially, for instance, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt were decidedly reluctant to serve as an agent of sweeping reform for African American freedom and labor rights, respectively. Yet in both of these cases, insurgents recast executive calculations and aspirations about how to restore order on new terms. As we shall see, the creative tensions and political consequences of collaboration between a formative movement and a president have never been greater than those generated from the strained partnership of Lyndon Johnson and the civil rights movement.

The Historic Dynamism of Long Movements and Presidential Responses

As we discussed in our introduction of this typology of marginal, militant, institutionalized, and formative movements, it would be a mistake to assume that movements are locked into one category of political capacities and challenges, or that they always elicit the same presidential responses. When we study social movements over time, the potential for them to shift across categories emerges, as does a changing set of political opportunities and constraints.⁹⁶ This dynamism is particularly evident when a spotlight is trained on long movements in American political development. For generations antislavery agitators were deemed to be fringe radicals whose egalitarian ideas were rejected by most Americans; they either languished at the margins of national politics or fled violent reaction from mobs or officials who denounced their militancy. During the 1850s, however, they made inroads in party building and at the ballot box, they won new allies among elected politicians, and their speeches and newspapers gained larger and more approving audiences. "There is one thing stronger than all the armies of the world," Victor Hugo observed in *Histoire d'un Crime* in 1852, "and that is an idea whose time has come."⁹⁷ Over decades of struggle, abolitionists moved from the periphery to center stage in American politics. This reminds us that a protest movement like Occupy Wall Street that appears to be marginal at a particular moment may prove to be far more influential and to find a second life at another. Occupiers injected forceful critiques of economic inequality into national (and global) political discourse, and their ideas arguably energized Democratic progressives who turned the populist

campaign of Bernie Sanders into a surprising electoral juggernaut.⁹⁸ The efficacy and success of protest movements can be more fluid than many observers appreciate.

The other long movements studied in this book also capture the variegated resources, strategies, and presidential responses that we can associate with a single social movement when we track it over time. During the early twentieth century, for example, African American leadership and organization assumed mainstream, radical, and marginal forms. Booker T. Washington, popular director of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, was an influential proponent of economic nationalism and architect of the Atlanta Compromise, which called for blacks to “dignify and glorify common labor” rather than agitate for social equality.⁹⁹ By contrast, W. E. B. Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter, and other African American civil rights activists established the Niagara Movement in 1906, which denounced Washington’s Atlanta Compromise in favor of unflinching attacks on racism and discrimination. “Two classes of Negroes are standing at the parting of the ways,” movement leaders declared. “The one counsels patient submission to our present humiliations and degradations. . . . The other class believes that it should not submit to being humiliated, degraded, and remanded to an inferior place.”¹⁰⁰ Embracing the traditions of militant abolitionism, the Niagara Movement scheduled its second conference on the hundredth anniversary of John Brown’s birth at the site of his Harpers Ferry raid.¹⁰¹ On the political fringes, Marcus Garvey created the United Negro Improvement Association in 1914 to spearhead an African American exodus from the United States to ancestral lands.¹⁰²

As chapter 3 details, the civil rights movement deployed both conventional tactics and direct action in pushing Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt, all of whom sought to avoid taking action against Jim Crow laws, to use the new rhetorical and administrative powers that accrued to the “modern” executive office to endorse, albeit modestly, racial reform. This pull between civil rights activists and modern presidents during the first four decades of the twentieth century marked an important step in the development of the long civil rights movement; it helped set the stage for the critical developments in the 1950s and 1960s, which saw organizations dedicated to fighting against white supremacy evolve into a potent formative movement wielding significant conventional and disruptive political clout. Yet the movement assumed new forms in the years following the monumental Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, decisively breaking with the Johnson administration and moving toward marginality with the Poor People’s Campaign and toward militancy with the black

power movement. Before long, civil rights activists also shifted resources from gaining the right to vote to winning elective offices up and down the ballot. The founding of the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971 and the development of Washington-based advocacy groups during the ensuing decade signaled a fresh emphasis on institutionalized politics, as many civil rights leaders sought to translate hard-won recognition and rights into representation in state structures and conventional political benefits for African Americans.

The political development of the new Christian Right reveals its own variety of capacities, tactics, and presidential responses over time. During the 1970s, conservative Christian activists occasionally flirted with militant resistance but mostly pursued conventional political mobilization. The considerable mainstream political influence exerted by the new Christian Right in the Reagan years won them historic White House recognition and access, in exchange for significant presidential co-optation. In the years that followed, however, conservative evangelical insurgents grew less satisfied with symbolic forms of recognition, absent more substantive political and policy commitments. They eagerly supported the outsider campaign of televangelist Pat Robertson and later turned on Reagan's successor by backing the primary challenge of conservative iconoclast Patrick Buchanan. Moreover, conservative Christian activists, most notably Randall Terry's Operation Rescue, embraced aggressive noninstitutional means to prevent abortions.¹⁰³ Most important, rather than finding itself permanently captured and co-opted, the new Christian Right became more adept at playing the insider game, altering its strategies to demand a heavy political price for its formidable support. By the time the first President Bush was succeeded by his son, this conservative movement exercised remarkable influence in every branch and at every level of American government.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, the study of movements and their interactions with presidents over the *longue durée* reveals a rich variety of tactics, resources, and presidential responses. The dynamism of movement forms and White House responses comes into even sharper relief when we take stock of how presidential-movement relations expanded as executive power and key movements grew in size and strength. This is the subject of our next section.

The Development of Presidential-Movement Relations

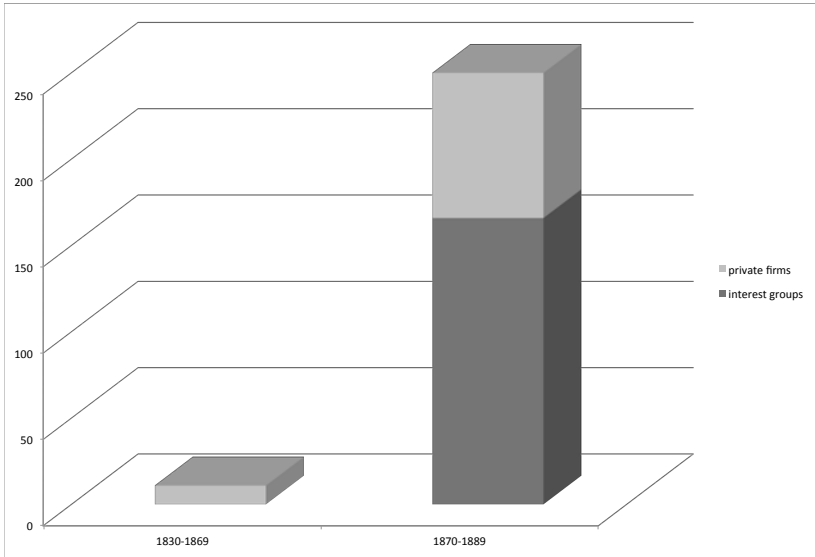
In this chapter, we have explored crucial defining features of both the US presidency and social movements that underscore why frequent conflict

and rivalry between these political actors are the norm. To help conceptualize a broad variety of interactions between presidents and insurgents, we also have considered an analytical framework that highlights distinctive executive responses to marginal, militant, formative, and institutionalized movements. In this vein, we have found that as much as executive indifference and repression are predictable reactions to many insurgency campaigns, an essential bond has sometimes joined presidents to formative or institutionalized movements in pursuit of transforming American politics and governance. Equally important, the relationship between presidents and social movements has been anything but static over time. As will become abundantly clear in the chapters to follow, the parallel development of the American presidency and social movements over the course of US history has influenced the dynamics of conflict and collaboration in presidential-movement relations that we have examined in this chapter. To borrow Skowronek's apt theoretical framing of institutional politics in American political development, *recurrent patterns* of presidential-movement interactions have been layered atop *emergent* ones.¹⁰⁵ Before the twentieth century, numerous US social movements experienced political success or failure with little or no presidential involvement (either positive or negative). Reform-minded activists and groups often concentrated their resources and energies on political parties, state governments, or Congress. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Leagues of the Gilded Age spearheaded a formative movement that won sweeping and draconian policy changes at the state and national levels through a combination of demonstrations, strikes, targeted violence, party building, voter mobilization, and legislative lobbying. Tellingly, presidents were largely peripheral to this successful populist campaign to exclude Chinese newcomers, or simply followed the prevailing Sinophobic political tides.¹⁰⁶ When the White House did respond vigorously to movements during the nineteenth century, it was usually to put down disruptive insurgencies and to restore order in a manner similar to Grover Cleveland's use of federal troops to end the Pullman strike.

The most important and revolutionary exception to these undeclared nineteenth-century rules for presidential-movement engagement is the focus of chapter 2: the stormy collaboration of Lincoln and the antislavery movement. Lincoln and the antislavery movement could not have formed an alliance in the service of transformative change if it were not for a major wartime crisis that empowered insurgents and gave the presidency extraordinary prerogative power. Yet these conditions that shaped the opportunity structure of the Civil War, although necessary, were not sufficient for an effective executive-activist nexus. Such an uneasy yet productive partnership also required a powerful social movement that could both mobilize grassroots

activists capable of considerable societal disruption and movement pragmatists who could exploit these pressures to lobby effectively for enduring reform. This was the case with the abolitionists during the Civil War. To be sure, their divergent mixture of conventional and militant political activism was bound to yield a tense relationship with the executive office. Nevertheless, Lincoln and the abolitionists ultimately shared a commitment to condemn slavery to extinction. Moreover, the relationship between Lincoln and the antislavery movement was mediated, and to a point rendered less contentious, by an intensely mobilized and highly decentralized party and a strong Congress. These forces enabled Lincoln and the abolitionists to form an uneasy alliance that forged a strong Republican coalition and brought dramatic constitutional reform—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Even at this monumental juncture, however, the limits of the Lincoln and abolitionist partnership were evident. Public administration was too decentralized to adequately enforce these reforms; the powerful, decentralized “state of courts and parties” of this era made impractical the expansion of national administration that might ensure the enforcement of the rights embodied by these landmark amendments.¹⁰⁷ Once Reconstruction collapsed, the decentralized party state would severely constrain presidential authority for decades to come. Not surprisingly, few late-nineteenth-century movements looked to the White House to advance their cause. Indeed, the populist movement that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, suffering a combination of indifference and repression from the executive mansion, proposed a constitutional amendment that would limit the president and vice president to one term.¹⁰⁸

Yet despite the failure of Reconstruction—indeed, partly as a consequence of the collapse of national reform—many Progressive Era reformers thought it was necessary to revisit the lessons of the Civil War. Like many reformers, Theodore Roosevelt, the leading political figure of his age, greatly admired Lincoln, who in seeking to purge slavery from the American Constitution, modified the meaning of national community in the United States, investing it with a sense of purpose, even religiosity, which signaled a change in the relationship between the individual and the government. By bestowing national prominence on Progressive objectives, Roosevelt’s presidency ushered in a new form of leadership—one that transformed the chief executive into the “steward of the people,” tasked with giving expression and effect to the nation’s aspirations for economic and social improvement. Roosevelt’s path-breaking presidential tenure and his visionary 1912 Progressive Party campaign suggested to these reformers that the president, not Congress or political parties, was the principal instrument of popular rule.



1. Organized interests testifying before Congress, 1830–89. (Data compiled from Congressional Information Service, *US Congressional Committee Hearings Index* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985).

The late nineteenth century also saw an unprecedented number of organized interests—including many reform movements—descend upon Washington to pursue their political and policy goals (see figure 1).¹⁰⁹

With the advent of the modern executive, leaders of social movement organizations were more likely to view occupants of the Oval Office as critical political agents capable of either advancing or derailing nonincremental change. As noted briefly above, Alice Paul of the woman’s suffrage movement captured this new preoccupation well when she and her supporters made newly elected Woodrow Wilson the focus of regular protest activities throughout his administration. These efforts began with controversial protest marches coordinated with his inauguration and reached a crescendo with high-profile pickets at the White House by Paul and her “Silent Sentinels” during World War I. Paul explained that these efforts reflected a new conviction that winning the services of the energetic presidency established by Theodore Roosevelt was essential. “We knew that [presidential support], and perhaps it alone, would ensure our success,” she noted. “It means to us only one thing—victory.”¹¹⁰ While pursuing every structural opportunity afforded them by federalism, judicial activism, and legislative entrepreneurship, social movements increasingly focused their political energies on the

White House. In the wake of the Great Depression and World War II, crises that consolidated executive obligations to manage the economy and to exercise leadership on a world stage, the modern presidency was invested with powers and public expectations that made it a critical agent of social and economic reform. Once the White House became the center of growing government commitments, social movements increasingly saw their political fortunes as contingent upon executive power and support.

Nevertheless, chapters 3 and 4 underscore that until the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, the idea that the executive office might act as a spearhead for social justice—a rallying point for democratic reform movements—was more aspiration than reality. As noted, the nation received glimpses of the transformational possibilities of presidential-movement collaborations during the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt. But they also demonstrated the deep conflicts of interest and ideology that inherently divided presidents and movements. Only with Johnson was the full panoply of modern presidential powers—political, administrative, and rhetorical—deployed on behalf of insurgent interests and demands. Johnson claimed broad authority to transform domestic policy on his own terms at a time when Congress and parties were subordinate to a “modern” presidency at high tide and a national administration unprecedentedly expansive. This also was a period when the civil rights movement’s ability to blend and balance disruptive collective action and conventional political pressure was at its zenith. Consequently, Johnson and the civil rights movement formed a more direct, combustible, and transformative relationship than was true of previous collaborations between presidents and social movements. The result was a historic body of civil rights reforms, enormous political fallout for Johnson, and the transformation of national party politics.

As we discuss in chapters 5 and 6, Reagan and the new Christian Right offer a markedly different perspective on the relationship between presidents and social movements. Like the formative relationship between Johnson and the civil rights movement, the constructive partnership that Reagan formed with Christian Right leaders built on previous relations between the White House and social activists. As we discuss in chapter 5, however, the long Christian Right movement did not parallel the development of civil rights activism. For years after the Scopes trial and the repeal of Prohibition, many evangelical Protestants largely retreated from the political sphere into a separate subculture of churches and sectarian educational and social institutions.¹¹¹ Still, although most fundamentalists and many other evangelicals played a marginal role in the political realm and other aspects of the dominant culture from the late 1920s to the 1970s, an important segment

of the religious Right stayed engaged. Christian libertarians like Billy Sunday, James Fifield, Jr., Howard Kershner, and Norman Vincent Peale coupled with the high-profile evangelism of Billy Graham, who established close relationships with Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, helped pave the way for the new Christian Right, discussed in Chapter 6, which became a strong presence on the US political scene in the 1970s and formed an important institutional partnership with Ronald Reagan.

The evolution of the relationship between the modern presidency and the Christian Right allows us to examine how the executive-insurgency alliance plays out as part of a national conservative offensive. Reagan, like Johnson, commanded a strong and active presidency that reshaped national law and policy commitments, but he sought to deploy modern executive power to achieve conservative objectives. Some of these purposes, most notably the pursuit of a more aggressive anticommunist agenda and the protection of "family values," required the expansion rather than the rolling back of the national government's responsibilities. Indeed, Reagan contributed significantly to the development of an executive-centered, nationalized party system that abetted rather than impeded centralized administration. Religious conservatives embraced Reagan's foreign and social policies; however, the new Christian Right's formidable capacities to press its cause through conventional political means stood in sharp contrast to its very modest deployment of disruptive tactics. In this regard, the Christian Right became quite skilled at institutionalized forms of politics yet never mounted the kind of fundamental, insurgent challenges to social and political order marshaled by abolitionists and civil rights activists. Still, with their impressive march through American political institutions, the Christian Right contributed vitally to the emergence of a conservative Republican Party, and the advancement of Reagan's core economic and foreign policy initiatives. At the end of the day, the new Christian Right's relationship with the White House cannot be simply characterized as "institutional." Indeed, their relationship with Reagan was forged on the anvil of a centralized, polarized, and programmatic party system that defied national consensus and enduring reform; instead, it appeared to instigate a rancorous contest between conservatives and liberals for control of national administration power. The Reagan–new Christian Right alliance, therefore, bespoke important developments that significantly changed not just presidential-activist relations but also the nature of American politics.

Running through each of these chapters is a common dynamic that shows how presidents and social movements can form an alliance in the pursuit of fundamental change in an American polity that often frustrates

nonincremental reform ambitions. But as the collaboration between the White House and the religious Right illustrates, this enduring pattern has been profoundly affected by developments that have over time made association between executive power and social activists more commonplace. These developments of the 1980s, however, were connected in important ways to the rage of the 1960s. Because the social movements of the 1960s grew out of an unprecedented clash between America's oppositional culture and the modern executive establishment, which presumed to embody its aspirations, Johnson became the focus of the activists' sense of national betrayal.¹¹² Yet civil rights organizations and the other movements these associations helped inspire—feminists, environmentalists, consumer advocates, and LGBTQ rights activists—believed they had no recourse but to forge ties with the modern executive. The new public interest movements of the 1970s, Jeffrey Berry has observed, followed from their leaders' desire "to transcend 'movement politics' with organizations that could survive beyond periods of intense emotion."¹¹³ They championed statutes and court rulings that would make administrative agencies more responsive to social causes than they had been in the past. But participation in administrative politics has come at a cost: since the 1960s, advocacy organizations formed to participate in the details of administration have taken an increasingly prominent part in advancing social causes, a strategy that may deprive activists of a vital connection with grassroots politics.¹¹⁴

During the past three decades, both conservative and liberal activists have taken steps to respond to this criticism. Recognizing that their alliance with Ronald Reagan had left them too far removed from their rank-and-file supporters, conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christian leaders at the end of the 1980s refocused their organizing talents on forming a strong grassroots political movement. During the presidency of George W. Bush, saved from alcoholism by a born-again experience, the president's top political strategist, Karl Rove, who had a long-standing close relationship with conservative evangelical leaders, firmly established the Christian Right grassroots network as a central part of a national Republican "machine" that successfully mobilized support for the 2004 election.¹¹⁵ In contrast to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Christian Right thus set about from the start to build and remake *the party* with which they were most closely aligned.

As we will see in chapter 7, this emphasis on party building would be adopted by progressive candidates and activists intent on imbuing the Democrats with more moral fervor. Improving on the innovative techniques that the Bush-Cheney campaign developed in 2004, Barack Obama built an information-age grassroots organization that sought to transform his

presidential candidacy into a movement. Significantly, Obama's campaign organization was kept intact after the 2008 election and ensconced in the Democratic National Committee, where the president and key White House advisers, such as David Plouffe, envisaged Organizing for America (OFA) as the grassroots arm of the party. Although OFA, facing an uphill battle amid the controversy aroused by the president's health care bill and the stubborn persistence of the Great Recession, could not fend off a Republican landslide in the 2010 congressional elections, it played a key part in mobilizing support for the administration's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and Obama's 2012 reelection campaign.¹¹⁶ After the 2012 election, it was rechristened Organizing for Action and spun off as a 501(c)(4) social welfare group explicitly committed to forming alliances with social movement organizations that supported the president's signature policy, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act; immigration reform; climate-change legislation; the advance of LGBTQ rights; and reform of the criminal justice system.¹¹⁷

Just as the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and the civil rights movement gave impetus to a new progressive politics during the 1960s, so the Obama White House and OFA forged an uneasy but effective alliance with the immigration rights and LGBTQ movements in the hope of consolidating the insurgent partisanship born of the Great Society. Obama's efforts to extend and elaborate the progressive tradition in the wake of Reagan insurgency, now newly invigorated by the Tea Party, fueled a polarized debate over national health care reform, undocumented immigrants, and same-sex marriage, suggesting how the polarized politics spawned by the Johnson and Reagan years had become a ritual observance of American politics. That the intensification of the battle between progressives and conservatives centered on a program that both camps called Obamacare makes clear just how executive-centered the partisan conflict has become. Yet no sooner had Obama entered the White House than his effort to establish himself as the leader of a new progressive movement was challenged by fervent activists, whose resistance to White House co-optation revealed that the inherent tension between executive politics and social activism endures. Indeed, the personal nature of presidential partisanship helps explain why the attacks from the left were hardly less condemning than those from the right. Obama's dogged leadership in the fight over national health reform failed to win a single Republican vote in Congress; at the same time, the compromises he was willing to accept—especially his willingness to jettison the most ambitious feature of his plan, the "Public Option"—incited many leaders of progressive social movement organizations to dismiss him as a trimmer.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, then, a new politics emerged that combines executive prerogative, party politics, and social movement activism. Our account of Obama's relationship to the immigration rights and LGBTQ communities in the final chapter of the book reveals that social movement organizations can be demanding partners—their objectives can force presidents to pursue potentially destabilizing positions and policies. At the same time, this is a risk that ambitious modern executives are ultimately willing to assume, not only for activists' support in elections and policy fights, but also to establish an enduring legacy. Animated by moral imperatives and large ambitions no less than partisan strategy, the tense partnership between presidents and social movements can result in stunning policy change, but such collaboration can also be a divisive force that sharpens political conflict and rattles national resolve.

Indeed, as we will discuss in the final pages of this book, the 2016 election, pitting the iconoclastic mogul, Republican Donald Trump, against the first woman nominated by a major party for the presidency, Democrat Hillary Clinton, appeared to bring this new form of partisanship to a troubling climax. The first year of the Trump presidency confirmed that American politics now centered on fierce battles between liberalism and conservatism—competitors in a partisan politics that has been remade by the ritual, but still unsettling, clashes and alliances between the White House and social activists.