

# Politics, Government and Social Movements



**Take a social movement of your choice and explain its origins, activities, successes and failures, and present status using social movement theory.**

*This question is based on the case study approach and is good training for budding social scientists as it allows you to explore their benefits and limitations. This kind of question also gives you more of a free hand to design your own question within certain bounds.*

**Clearly the first task is to select a social movement.** You will need to ensure that your chosen movement fits the definition offered in the chapter, namely, 'collective attempts to further a common interest or secure a common goal through action outside the sphere of established institutions' (pp. 1010-11). It is possible to pick, say, surrealism or communitarianism, which are best characterized as cultural and political trends respectively, rather than social movements. A safe bet is to use a movement discussed in the chapter: labour movements, environmental movements, gay and lesbian rights movements, women's movements, student movements or black civil rights movements.

**Having chosen a social movement,** you will need to be able to trace its history and development. For this part of the answer it is worthwhile remembering that the book as a whole can be mined for insights. For example, should you choose environmentalism, then Chapter 5 contains a lot of relevant material that you can use. Similarly, Chapter 14 on gender and sexuality will prove useful for women's movements and gay and lesbian movements. Chapter 15 on 'race' and ethnicity covers the black civil rights movement. Returning to the question, what you will be looking to provide is essentially a movement 'life history' documenting its origins in a particular social and political context (why then?), its repertoire of activities (what do activists actually do to press their case for change?), its successes and failures (what did it achieve?) and its current status (what happened to it?). There is a clear danger here. You may focus too much on description and not enough on analysis and explanation. What the question demands is that you explain all of the aspects listed above using theory.



One important point to note now: you are not being asked to choose one theoretical position to the exclusion of the others. The social movements field has its own 'toolkit of concepts and theories and it is legitimate for you to draw on insights from across the different theories provided they help you to explain the movement's development. For example, social unrest theory and collective behaviour might be more helpful in explaining a movement's origins, focusing as they do on the social and political conditions for protest (pp. 1011-12). Smelser's structural functionalist theory performs a similar job, though this is more detailed, allowing you to base an answer on his six 'value-added elements' (pp. 1013-5). Resource mobilization theory (RMT) may enable you to explain how the movement achieved its main successes by mobilizing resources which gave it a competitive advantage. You will need to consider what New Social Movement theory (NSM) brings to the discussion, should you choose one of the more recent social movements which are collectively described in this way (pp. 1016-21).



What the question is looking for is a balanced essay which takes a particular social movement, demonstrates a good level of knowledge of this movement and explains its main features and activities with relevant theory. The difficult part is achieving that careful balance between description and explanation.