Where There’s a Will, There Will Be a Living Wage (Or Will There?):
Applications of Social Movement Theory to the Living Wage Movement’s Decline

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The living wage movement, an ideological product of the global justice movement grounded in the belief that no full-time worker should live in poverty, experienced tremendous growth in the late 1990s and 2000s. The movement’s success can largely be attributed to its form; local coalitions of religious organizations, labor unions, and social justice organizations connected by loose ties utilized a varied tactical repertoire and capitalized on the success of other coalitions. The coalitions’ variety of resources and organizations allowed them to expand their scopes to address economic justice and workers’ rights on a broader scale. Before the Great Recession, scholars anticipated a rise in movement activity, one even predicting that the movement may “be in a position to influence government and corporate policy enough to halt or reverse the trends of stagnating wages, rising inequality, and increasing numbers of poor working families” (Brooks 2007). However, the Great Recession brought with it a drastic decline in public support for government intervention in economic matters and a complete cessation of legislative progress, defying scholars’ expectations, social movement theory, and historical precedent. Partisanship, stratification beliefs, decreased expectations for a governmental pursuit of macroeconomic change, the growth of a strong, right-wing countermovement, and racial, sexual, and able resentment cultivated a constituency increasingly opposed to welfare programs and governmental intervention in the economy. Through aggregate-policy-attitude formation, as described by Macro Polity Theory, this shift in public opinion resulted in increasingly neoliberal policies, which served primarily to hinder union and NGO activity, thereby breaking up the progressive coalitions integral to living wage movement success.

While movement activity peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s, the historical legacy of the living wage movement began with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA), which established the first federal minimum wage. While the bill was not
comprehensive, as it did not cover all workers or adjust for inflation, it established a symbolic victory by framing economic protections for workers as a moral issue, and establishing that government was responsible for providing those protections. Steady movement activity persisted and achieved limited success, for instance, in lobbying the government to increase the federal minimum wage after World War II. However, in the early 1990s, the dangerously inadequate $4.25 minimum wage could no longer be overlooked (Luce 2002a).

While the lack of economic protections for workers was a pervasive issue, the first community to organize and achieve legal success was in Baltimore in the early 1990s. In 1993, local religious community service organizations in Baltimore noticed that it was increasingly the case that those seeking aid at homeless shelters and food banks were employed full-time. Religious organizations realized that with economic growth came polarization of wealth and declining wages. While unemployment rates dropped, working poverty was on the rise. This recognition allowed them to form a movement framed as a moral, not just economic, crusade, that challenged the dominant ideology, which holds that the poor are shiftless and undeserving of aid. Rather, the movement emerged based on the belief that those working full-time, especially for the government in some capacity, should not live in poverty or be reliant on welfare (Brooks 2007). Demanding a living wage as a social justice measure and framing the issue as “working poverty” rather than general socioeconomic inequality provided the movement with more widespread support, as it allowed those unfamiliar with economic policy or disinterested in politics to support the movement on moral grounds. Therefore, while the first Baltimore ordinance only directly affected the wages of construction workers and service contractors, about 1,500 workers, it served primarily as a symbolic victory for its moral cause. In addition, media attention focused on the movement served as a vehicle for public education around issues of
socioeconomic inequality and low wages, publicizing the cause and serving as leverage for movements in other cities (Nissen 2000).

While the success of the Baltimore movement served as publicity and political leverage for spinoff movements, its provision of the local coalition model for organizing was its primary contribution to other movements’ success. In Baltimore, religious organizations, chiefly the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), partnered with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) to create a grassroots organization and lobby local government. The initial coalition instigated the emergence of new actors, including various unions, the New Party, and, most notably, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), an NGO that became a key player in living wage movements across America (Nissen 2000). The local coalition model gave spinoff movements access to multiple points of entry in the political opportunity structure, as the diversity of organizations involved in the coalitions provided the coalition with a broad range of resources that allowed them to develop a varied tactical repertoire, including door-to-door canvassing, public hearings, rallies, direct action, and lobbying, among others (Brooks 2007). Additionally, the variety of organizations involved in the coalitions enabled them to encompass broader goals that surpassed their concrete, legal aims. Living wage coalitions began to address other issues that serve low-wage workers’ interests, such as health insurance, immigrants’ right, the expansion of state earned income tax credits, the monitoring of living age ordinances, and increases in state minimum wages. While this rapid and broad expansion of goals risked spreading the movement too thin, so to speak, it was primarily an indication of the movement’s success and ideological relevancy in the early 2000s.
Consequently, the broader, long-term goal of the living wage movement became building progressive coalitions capable of creating public debate about economic justice. While most regions still have no established living wage ordinance and the majority of living wage ordinances that are in practice do not establish a wage sufficient to establish self-sufficiency, in light of the movement’s broader social goals, the success of the living wage movement cannot be measured solely by the number of ordinances passed or the dollar amount established by law. As Professor of Labor Studies Bruce Nissen states, “how well do living wage campaigns provide opportunities for organized labor to participate in social movements for economic justice that develop enduring ties with progressive forces in communities? If they build enduring coalitions for unions with natural community allies interested in social and economic justice, they have long term potential that can never be measured by a simple calculation of wage increases immediately won” (Nissen 2000). The coalition model became a tenet of the living wage movement and a source of outstanding optimism, one scholar predicting that the coalitions “will join together to create a national economic justice movement capable of influencing federal policy” (Brooks 2007).

Baltimore’s successful ordinance and coalition model served as political leverage for other local movements, and incited a drastic burst in movement activity in the 1990s and early 2000s. Within two years of the 1994 ordinance, over fifteen movements were underway, and by 2006, over 200 local movements had contributed to the passage of more than 140 living wage ordinances in cities across America (Brooks 2007). Spinoff movements utilized Baltimore’s local coalition structure, and even today, “virtually all living wage campaigns grow out of existing organizations.” Coalitions of organized labor institutions, religious bodies and social justice organizations, and community organizing groups provided a mass base for mobilization,
contacts, and financial resources that provided tactical flexibility, allowing movements to thrive, despite political opportunity structures that varied by region. In some areas, coalitions were formalized by the creation of social movement organizations, which increased professionalism and financial and strategic efficiency (Nissen 2000).

While the coalition model proved universally successful, varied regional economies and political opportunity structures resulted in a heterogeneous array of living wage ordinances. While most political environments in the 1990s were moderately receptive to living wage campaigns, the race and gender politics and balance of political parties in each area affected the relative openness of each system. Most ordinances proposed a wage above the minimum wage, yet below the calculated wage necessary for self-sufficiency. Approximately 2/3 of the ordinances adjusted for inflation, and some included health benefits or stipends (Nissen 2000). The most common type of ordinance covered workers whose wages were subsidized by local government. Typically, this applied to firms that held service contracts with the local government, leased land from the government, operated on government land, or received government subsidies (Brooks 2007). Although the specificities of each ordinance varied, the symbolic victory established by each served to champion the progressive economic agenda promoted by the coalitions collectively.

Thus, while scholars have questioned whether the living wage movement can be considered a movement at all, given its limited and concrete legal goals, its focus on creating coalitions that encompass broader socioeconomic goals earns it a seat at the proverbial table of social movements. Additionally, the living wage movement belongs ideologically to the global justice movement and backlash against the costs of global capitalism and neoliberal economic policy (Brooks 2007). The push for a living wage diverges from other global justice movements
in that it is primarily composed of local coalitions with the goal of passing citywide and regional ordinances, as opposed to anti-sweatshop and fair trade movements, which mainly focus on international gains. However, its ideological connection to the global justice movement places it in a larger social context, endowing the movement with greater social significance and establishing it as a social movement in its own right.

Figure 1. Aggregate Opinion Trends – Specific Government Responsibility Items and Scale
Note: Charts’ y-axes defined by ±1 sd (higher scores indicate greater preference for government responsibility).

Figure 1. Aggregate Opinion Trends- Specific Government Responsibility Items and Scale; Source: *Gallup Poll 2011* (Brooks and Manza 2013)
The rapid proliferation of the living wage movement, based on the coalition model, seemed to portend enduring success; however, the Great Recession saw the creation of a citizenry opposed to government intervention in the economy and welfare policy. From 2008 to 2010, an expanding contingent of the general public believed that it was not the government’s responsibility to raise the standard of living of the poor, raise the standard of living of black people, reduce income differences, pay for doctors and hospital care, solve the country’s problems, or create socioeconomic change in general (Figure 1). Consequently, the push for progressive economic policy stalled; no living wage ordinances were passed in 2008 and 2009, while only one was passed in 2010, as opposed to 12 in 2005, 9 in 2006, and 5 in 2007 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Living Wage Ordinances Passed Per Year, 1992-2015; Source: National Employment Law Project (NELP 2010, 2015)
2). The decline in public and governmental support for the living wage movement defied scholars’ expectations, prevailing social movement theory, and historical precedent in its creation of a right-wing countermovement strong enough to pose a serious threat to the living wage movement’s existence and legacy.

Several social movement theories would anticipate a converse effect on movement activity and public support for the movement during the recession. For instance, grievance theory claims that grievances provoke movement activity (Staggenborg 2011). Thus, one would expect the widening socioeconomic gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” rising unemployment, and home foreclosures to increase grievances, and consequently, result in increased protests and demands. Additionally, collective behavior theory asserts that protest activity is out of the ordinary and provoked by grievances against the status quo. Therefore, one would expect the recession, a monumental economic event, to incite anomic social responses. One version of collective behavior theory, mass society theory, argues that collective behavior is an extreme response to social unrest and feelings of alienation and anxiety. In The Politics of Mass Society, William Kornhauser argues that economic depressions dismantle normal social networks and associations, particularly in cases of mass unemployment and immigration to cities. Uprooting large groups of people alienates them from social and political institutions, thereby creating feelings of “social atomization” and alienation that makes them more susceptible to recruitment by social movements, particularly the ideologically extreme (Staggenborg 2011). Therefore, one would expect the unemployed and alienated to jump on the living wage bandwagon. Further, contentious politics theory stresses that “episodes of contentious claims-making” depend on an active, government-based counter-movement to create contention (Edwards 2011). An increasingly polarized Congress and active business lobby,
spearheaded by Newt Gingrich and the Employment Policies Institute, that advocated normative economic theory, provided the political resistance necessary to incite movement activity (Luce 2002a).

In addition to dominant social movement theory, historical precedent contradicts the decline in living wage movement activity and public support. In the case of the Great Depression, public support for government intervention and welfare programs laid the foundations for the New Deal. The worldwide economic crisis instigated the creation of powerful grassroots social movements and state building initiatives that collaborated “to make liberalism the dominant public philosophy for the next generation (Brooks and Manza 2013). Historically, economic crises provoke challenges to normative economic theory (Brooks 2007). Rising unemployment and stock market crashes should challenge the idea that “wages cannot challenge market logic” and boost public support for governmental economic intervention. However, the Great Recession had a converse effect, reinforcing normative economic theory and the “market is g-d” mentality (Brooks and Manza 2013).

Scholars, perhaps influenced by social movement theory and historical precedent, anticipated movement growth in light of the recession. For instance, Fred Brooks predicted, “The living wage movement is the beginning of a movement for economic democracy in the USA. If the movement continues to grow over the next 10-20 years, it might be in a position to influence government and corporate policy enough to halt or reverse the trends of stagnating wages, rising inequality, and increasing numbers of poor working families" (Brooks 2007). Likewise, in the wake of the early 2000s recession, Professor of Labor Studies Stephanie Luce acknowledged, "although the recession will likely have some impact on the living wage movement, some of the
gains cannot be taken away—specifically, the new relationships built through the campaigns... it's definitely a lasting alliance" (Luce 2002a). While the coalitions did, in fact, remain intact throughout the early 2000s recession and experienced increased public support for movement activity, the same did not prove true for the Great Recession. Indeed, changes in public opinion prompted the government to pass legislation that limited union and NGO activity, thereby dismantling local living wage coalitions and ensuring the decline of the living wage movement.

The “heuristics and biases” tradition in cognitive and social psychology suggests that noneconomic and non-rational influences, such as stratification beliefs, partisanship, and symbolic racism, sexism, and ableism, can account for public opinion’s counterintuitive reaction to the recession. Stratification beliefs, such as the American ideal of individualism and capitalism, are often reinforced in the face of disconfirming evidence. Public opinion often reacts in perverse ways to historical change and environmental conditions; this proves especially true in relation to gun control, the Iraq War, and counterterrorism, among other issues. When viewed on a larger, macroeconomic scale, the economic downturn can signal failings of the capitalist system, but on an individual level, economic hardship often serves to strengthen prior held beliefs about personal responsibility and the “bootstraps” ideal. Partisanship and institutional political polarization bolster this process of “motivated reasoning and influence voter-level reasoning about economic issues. When asked whether welfare programs and other governmental intervention symbolize a governmental overreach, Democratic opinion remained relatively steady throughout the recession, whereas Republicans increasingly answered that these programs represent an excess of governmental regulation, widening the opinion gap drastically (Figure 4). Stratification beliefs and political polarization reinforce prior beliefs and foster beliefs at both ends of the political spectrum, discouraging moderates and other constituents
susceptible to influence from the economic crisis from endorsing progressive economic policy that they had not supported previously.

Figure 3. Party Polarization and Partisan Difference in Congress; Source: Gallup Poll 2011 (Brooks and Manza 2013)
Additionally, prejudiced beliefs about minority groups contributed to the lack of support for welfare policies. As minimum wage laws have historically been used to price racial minorities, women, and other “undesirables” out of the job market, the living wage movement failed to adequately represent those groups and their specific interests and needs, particularly those of racial minorities, in the movement’s early stages. However, social justice issues were and are increasingly framed in intersectional terms, highlighting the disproportional effect injustice has on underserved and underprivileged groups, primarily people of color, women, and the disabled, among others. Thus, as the movement began to incorporate intersectional rhetoric and shed light on the particular issues facing minority groups, prejudices based on racism, sexism, and ableism perpetuated common misconceptions about how deserving these various groups are of the economic relief. In other words, “racialized distinctions and stereotypes preconsciously affect public opinion of welfare policy” (Brooks and Manza 2013).
Macro Polity Theory offers an explanation as to how this shift in public opinion translates into progress, or lack thereof, in economic legislation. MPT relies on the assumption that the public responds rapidly to macroeconomic and policy change. However, these trends only emerge when the measure of public opinion is based on aggregate opinion, which excludes uncaring and uninformed constituents. One can therefore assume that the contingent of informed voters can rationally infer the potential economic outcomes of proposed economic policies. “Aggregate-policy-attitude-formation is a rational, forward-looking process,” and its most direct implications are election outcomes. This systems-level interaction between aggregate opinion trends and public policy is a two-way process; political candidates fear voter sanctions and react to aggregate opinion and pass economic legislation. In response, public opinion anticipates the economic implications of that legislation and often creates a backlash to those policies (Brooks and Manza 2013).

Aggregate opinion support for government intervention in socioeconomic matters fell steadily between 2008 and 2010, following a steady rise in support that lasted from the mid 1990s until the recession (Figure 4). Macro Polity Theory suggests that a series of economic policies passed between October of 2008 and March of 2010, including the 2008 Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, a $700 billion bailout of the financial sector, the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, a $787 billion stimulus package, and the 2010 Affordable Care Act, instigated a backlash against state intervention in economic matters. The increase in federal spending and expansion of governmental responsibility resulted in decreased expectations for macroeconomic change resulted in an ideological backlash exemplified by the 2010 midterm elections, which marked a triumph of neoliberal economic policy, as the Republican Party gained 63 seats in the House of Representatives and took control of 26 legislatures. Essentially,
aggregate opinion ideologically overcorrected, expecting extensive macroeconomic change that never came. Unable to anticipate the need for further economic protections, aggregate opinion reverted to greater support for neoliberal policies, affecting election outcomes and consequent legislative decision-making.

The decline in public and governmental support for progressive economic policy contributed to antagonism towards labor unions and legislation that hindered their organization. An integral part of the progressive coalitions fighting for living wage ordinances, unions faced a drastic decline in public support during the Great Recession. Indeed, support for unions fell below 50% for the first time ever in a 2009 Gallup poll, and as union power decreased, a 2010 Pew poll reported that over 60% of those interviewed believed unions had too much power. Statistician Nate Silver identified a historical correlation between the unemployment rate and public support for unions. Likewise, David Midland and Karla Walter at the Center for American Progress identified a proportional drop in approval ratings of government, business, and labor in times of economic hardship. In addition, unions became a scapegoat of local government, blamed by governors and mayors for budget shortfalls. Thus, several states passed laws during the 2010 midterm elections that placed limits on union organizing. The public image of unions deteriorated, altering the voting patterns of workers, which instigated a self-perpetuating cycle of increasing unpopularity and weakening of power (Surowiecki 2011).

Public opinion also turned against NGOs instrumental to the success of the living wage movement. The case of Association of Community Organizers for Reform Now (ACORN) exemplifies this shift in public, governmental, and financial support. From 1970 until 2010, ACORN was the nation’s largest community organizer for low-income families, representing over 175,000 member families through over 850 chapters in 75 cities. ACORN expanded to
focus not only on living wage ordinances, but workers’ rights and economic justice in a larger context. Indeed, “ACORN's accomplishments included successful campaigns for better housing, schools, neighborhood safety, health care, job conditions, and more. ACORN members would participate in local meetings and actively work on campaigns, elect leadership from the neighborhood level up, and pay the organization's core expenses through membership dues and grassroots fundraisers.” However, in 2009 and 2010, Congress added language to consequential spending bills that prohibited federal funds from being distributed to ACORN. The 2010 law states, "None of the funds made available under this or any other Act, or any prior Appropriations Act, may be provided to the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), or any of its affiliates, subsidiaries, allied organizations, or successors."

Tax officials tasked with monitoring nonprofits, secretly in collaboration with Iowa Representative Steve King, a perpetrator of multiple bills aimed at defunding ACORN and disempowering the labor movement, asked the IRS and FBI to conduct "an all-out, full court press federal investigation" of ACORN’s successors. While the congressional investigation of the IRS’ 2013 “targeting scandal” confirmed that both of these actions “may violate federal law,” the neoliberal countermovement prevailed, and ACORN has remained defunded and defunct since 2010.

Neoliberal economic policies that hindered union and NGO activity dismantled local coalitions, rendering the living wage movement incapable of promoting further progressive economic legislation. As the predicted economic consequences of the 2008 and 2009 financial sector bailouts never came to fruition, public opinion may have reverted to support progressive economic measures to some degree. However, a resurgence of public support and movement activity would likely have been futile, as the primary effect of social movement activity is in
agenda-setting; institutional protest can increase the hearings on a given issue, but it doesn’t necessarily make proposed bills more likely to pass. A substantial part of this agenda-setting is achieved through heightened media attention and other outlets aimed at raising awareness (Olzak & Soule 2010). The economic effects of the recession and low-wage workers’ grievances were widely publicized, even from 2008 to 2010, in the absence of major movement activity. Therefore, if public opinion and movement activity rebounded, it was likely for naught, capable only of providing media attention that already existed and initiating hearings that would fall on neoliberal, deaf ears.

The development of a citizenry increasingly opposed to progressive economic policy and governmental intervention in the economy, which took place primarily during the Great Recession of 2008-2010, defied social movement theory, historical precedent, and scholars’ expectations. Social and cognitive psychology offers insight into the role political polarization, stratification beliefs, and racial, sexual, and able resentment played in shifting public opinion. Furthermore, Macro Polity Theory depicts the process by which these trends in aggregate opinion influence policy-making, and vice versa. In the case of the Great Recession, aggregate opinion anticipated that financial bailouts would result in macroeconomic improvements, the majority of which never came to fruition. Aggregate opinion ideologically overcorrected, electing economically liberal politicians in the midterm elections of 2010. Consequently, the government enacted neoliberal economic policies, which served primarily to hinder union and NGO activity, thereby breaking up the progressive coalitions integral to living wage movement success. Thus, living wage movements were deprived of their resources and organizational structure, rendering them incapable of pursuing movement goals. Additionally, since the neoliberals remained in political power, movement activity could no longer affect the passage of
bills, as protest serves primarily to raise issues, rather than increase the likelihood that a bill will pass.

The case study of the Great Recession presents a conflicted indication as to the future of the movement. While movement activity has steadily increased since 2011, reaching almost peak 1990s levels of legislative success (Figure 2), ordinances are now being repealed and blocked at a similarly astounding rate. Bernie Sanders supporters call for an economic revolution as Trump blames immigrants and lazy people for economic hardship before a cheering crowd. Media coverage reinforces global justice cultural framing as local coalitions remain defunct. While the nearly obsolete coalition model is certainly incapable of creating a national progressive coalition capable of singlehandedly turning the tides of federal economic policy, it remains to be seen if and how the living wage movement will adjust to the new political opportunity structure. Will political polarization instigate a decline in public support for the movement, as it did during the Great Recession? Will the rising popularity of Bernie Sanders and progressive economic policy create a living wage movement reliant on individual politicians and directed lobbying rather than local grassroots efforts? Only time will tell.
Bibliography


