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A Story-Centered Approach to the Newspaper Coverage of High-Profile SMOs

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3 A STORY-CENTERED APPROACH
5 TO THE NEWSPAPER COVERAGE
7 OF HIGH-PROFILE SMOS
9

11 Edwin Amenta, Beth Gharrity Gardner, Amber
13 Celina Tierney, Anaïd Yerena and Thomas
15 Alan Elliott

17
19 **ABSTRACT**

21 Purpose – *To theorize and research the conditions under which a high-*
23 *profile social movement organization (SMO) receives newspaper cover-*
25 *age advantageous to it.*

27 Design/methodology approach – *To explain coverage quality, including*
29 *“standing” – being quoted – and “demands” – prescribing lines of action –*
31 *we advance a story-centered perspective. This combines ideas about the*
33 *type of article in which SMOs are embedded and political mediation*
35 *ideas. We model the joint influence of article type, political contexts and*
“assertive” SMO action on coverage. We analyze the Townsend Plan’s
coverage across five major national newspapers, focusing on front-page
coverage from 1934 through 1952, using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative
analyses (fsQCA).

35 _____
37 **Media, Movements, and Political Change**

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1 Findings – *We find that only about a third of the Townsend Plan’s*
 3 *front-page coverage was initiated by its activity and very little of it was*
 5 *disruptive. The fsQCA results provide support for our arguments on*
 7 *coverage quality. Disruptive, non-institutional action had no specific*
 9 *influence on standing, but its absence was a necessary condition for the*
 11 *SMO expressing a demand; by contrast, assertive action in combination*
 13 *with movement-initiated coverage or a favorable political context*
 15 *prompted the publication of articles with both standing and demands.*

9 Research limitations/implications – *The results suggest greater attention*
 11 *to wide array of SMO coverage and to the interaction between article type,*
 13 *SMO action, and political context in explaining the quality of coverage.*
 15 *However, the results are likely to apply best to high-profile SMOs.*

17 Originality/value – *The paper provides a new theory of the quality of*
 19 *newspaper coverage and finds support for it with fsQCA modeling on*
 21 *newly collected data.*

23 **Keywords:** Newspaper coverage; story-centered model; consequences
 25 of social movements; disruptive action; assertive action; standing;
 27 demands

21 Scholarship shows that the relationship between movements and media is
 23 conflicted. Gaining media coverage for social movement organizations
 25 (SMOs) indicates their legitimacy as spokespersons (Berry, 1999; Gamson,
 27 1975), increases their support (Costain & Majstorovic, 1994; Vliegenthart,
 29 Oegema, & Klandermans, 2005), and may be necessary to achieve political
 31 gains (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans, 2004; Lipsky, 1968). But the
 33 coverage of movements’ disruptive action, on which most research is based,
 35 is likely to be unfavorable and distorting of messages (Gitlin, 1980; Smith,
 37 McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001). In this paper, we seek to reconcile
 39 these findings. We go beyond disruption to identify different ways in which
 SMOs are covered in newspapers – including stories not initiated by the
 SMO as well as other contentious action taken by SMOs. More important,
 we present a story-centered model to explain the quality of coverage.

Our explanation of the quality of coverage combines insights from
 theories of media coverage and social movement consequences. Our story-
 centered argument holds that the quality of coverage of SMOs depends on
 the type of article in which they are embedded, and incorporates political
 mediation ideas about the consequences of challengers (see Amenta, Caren,
 Chiarello, & Su, 2010). We argue that specific combinations or interactions

1 of coverage situations, political contexts, and collective action will produce
different coverage results for SMOs. In addressing collective action, we
3 argue that “assertive” action, a subset of institutional activity that includes
contentious meetings, electioneering, litigation, and legislative activity, when
5 covered and in combination with specific media and political contexts will
be covered in ways that aid in the transmission of the messages. By contrast,
7 we argue the coverage of disruptive action will not. We examine the
quality of coverage through “standing,” or quotations, SMOs gain in
9 coverage, and SMO demands, or “prescriptions,” that appear in coverage.
We argue that gaining demands in coverage is more valuable than gaining
11 standing for SMOs, and gaining both demands and standing to be more
valuable still.

13 Empirically, we analyze the newspaper coverage of the Townsend Plan
(Amenta, 2006) over two decades and across five newspapers – the *New*
15 *York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and
Wall Street Journal. After identifying the population of coverage,
17 approximately 3,335 articles mentioning the SMO from 1934 to 1952, we
randomly sampled half of its front-page coverage to analyze content for
19 standing and demands. The Townsend Plan figures significantly in
approximately three-fourths of the sampled 207 front-page items in which
21 it is mentioned, although only about a third of significant Townsend Plan
front-page coverage was initiated by its activity. Moreover, less than half of
23 the coverage mainly involved collective action. The significant front-page
coverage of the Townsend Plan included both a demand and standing – the
25 highest quality of coverage we examine – about 43% of the time.

Finally, we analyze a detailed sample of 132 front-page articles in which
27 the Townsend Plan figures significantly to address the conditions under
which standing and demands are likely to appear in high-profile coverage
29 through fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analyses (fsQCA). These are
designed to appraise arguments, such as the story-centered model, that
31 encompass combinational and multiple causes (Ragin, 2008). These analyses
indicate that various combinations of political contexts, coverage contexts,
33 and SMO action produced different qualities of coverage. Notably, front-
page coverage initiated by movement activity, mainly involving any
35 movement collective action, or appearing in the context of the investigation
of the SMO produced standing. By contrast, assertive action in combination
37 with either having a bill on the political agenda or movement-initiated
coverage produced articles including both demands and standing. These
39 findings support our story-centered model and our adaptations of political
mediation arguments.

A STORY-CENTERED APPROACH TO THE QUALITY OF SMO COVERAGE

The newspaper coverage of an SMO is an important cultural consequence that may also lead to organizational growth and political influence (Berry, 1999; Gamson, 1975; Vliegenthart et al., 2005), and scholars have addressed how specific SMOs or types of movement action and newspapers' operating procedures or ideological biases may influence SMO coverage (Gans, 1979; Oliver & Maney, 2000; Rohlinger, 2007; Ryan, 1991; Schudson, 2001; Smith et al., 2001; Sobieraj, 2010). However, this literature has given little thought to the influence on the quality of coverage of different *combinations* of types of stories, political contexts, and forms of SMO action. Also, the literature has been limited empirically, focusing on protest and disruptive action (see reviews in Andrews & Caren, 2010; Earl, Martin, McCarthy, & Soule, 2004) and finding that articles initiated by protest rarely provide favorable coverage (Smith et al., 2001), but rarely addressing the fact that SMOs are routinely covered for reasons other than protest (Corbett, 1998).

We confront these gaps by building on previous research addressing interactions between movements, media, and politics (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Oliver & Maney, 2000; Rohlinger, 2007). Specifically, we theorize about which combinations of article type, SMO activity, and political contexts influence the quality of coverage for SMOs. We address first the different sorts of stories SMOs may be embedded in, focusing on whether articles are initiated by SMOs or by institutional actors. We address next the activity covered, including both disruptive protest activity and assertive political action (Amenta, 2006), which we expect will be connected to higher quality coverage for SMOs. Third, we address the political contexts in which coverage takes place. Our hypotheses are about combinations of article type, movement action, and political context. This theoretical approach is similar to that of political mediation models of movement outcomes, which focus simultaneously on movement action and political contexts (Amenta, 2006; Amenta, Caren, & Olasky, 2005). Before presenting hypotheses, we briefly discuss the quality of coverage.

Demand-Side Analysis

In examining the quality of coverage (see also Rohlinger, 2007), we specify, employ, and combine two longstanding concepts in the literature. First, we examine whether the news coverage confers "standing" on an SMO, by

1 providing opportunities for SMOs to speak, by being quoted or paraphrased
2 in an article (Ferree et al., 2002; Gamson, 2004). Standing provides the SMO
3 with voice and often signals the SMO's legitimacy as a representative or
4 spokesperson for a particular group or issue. Second, we examine whether
5 an SMO's "demand" is presented in articles. By a demand, we mean what
6 Tilly (1999) calls a "claim" or what framing analysts call a "prescription"
7 (Snow & Benford, 1988). We consider the printing of demands as being
8 more important than gaining standing for SMOs. Often SMO spokes-
9 persons are quoted in ways that do not transmit substantive messages, such
10 as when commenting on wayward protest events or the finances of or
11 personnel issues in their organization, or other tangential matters (Sobieraj,
12 2010). By contrast, getting across a demand is central to contests over
13 meaning, may gain support for the SMO and its cause (Koopmans, 2004;
14 Lipsky, 1968) and conveys the SMO's interpretation of a policy issue (Ferree
15 et al., 2002; Rohlinger, 2007).

16 An article that includes both the demands of the SMO and standing for its
17 spokesperson constitutes what we are calling "substantive" coverage for an
18 SMO. Substantive coverage differs from other ways of conceptualizing
19 coverage. An SMO can gain demands and standing in coverage without it
20 providing a non-individualistic or "thematic" discussion of issues (Iyengar,
21 1991) or without the article adopting its preferred diagnostic framing or **AU :2**
22 other favored terms (Ferree et al., 2002; Snow & Benford, 1988). Demands
23 and standing could also appear in slanted articles, in which a journalist sides
24 against an SMO or its claims (Rohlinger, 2007; Smith et al., 2001), and in
25 coverage in which the media inaccurately describes movement processes
26 (Gitlin, 1980). All the same, given the difficulties SMOs have in transmitting
27 messages through news media, gaining standing and demands is important,
28 and demands and standing are easily identifiable, highly reliable, and can be
29 applied to any SMO.

31

The Basics of a Story-Centered Approach

33

34 To understand how SMOs are covered, we employ a story-centered
35 approach that starts with newspaper contexts, as SMOs are typically
36 embedded in specific types of stories, or articles. Newspapers make
37 decisions, often quite standardized, about what is news and how to cover
38 that news, especially political news (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1979;
39 Tuchman, 1978). As journalism textbooks indicate (e.g., Mencher, 2008),
editors and reporters see "news" as being based on qualities including

1 timeliness, the impact of the events, the prominence of the people involved
 3 in them, and the proximity to readers, with local news angles considered
 5 important in national stories. News includes events that are unusual in some
 7 ways, or highly conflictual. Reporters and editors focus on events with
 9 currency, which means many people taking sudden interest in them. These
 11 qualities are similar to those identified in Harcup and O'Neill's (2001)
 13 update of Galtung and Ruge's (1965) classic study of "news values."

15 Politics receives the highest profile in coverage because political deci-
 17 sions have high impact and involve prominent people, who are elected and
 19 conduct governmental activity openly, and to whom reporters have great
 21 access. Media and movement scholars alike (Bennett, 1995; Fishman, 1980; **AU 3**
 23 Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gans, 1979; Oliver & Maney, 2000; Sobieraj,
 25 2010; Tuchman, 1978) see routine newsgathering as primarily revolving
 27 around institutionalized political activity and official state actors. News
 29 "beats" are organized such that most coverage of politics is initiated by those
 31 elected to or seeking the highest offices, and those appointed to positions of
 33 administrative authority. Some issues receive recurrent attention and run on
 35 standardized schedules: which new laws are going to be proposed or enacted;
 which decisions will be made by courts; who will be elected or nominated to
 key offices. Often political stories involve conflict and disputes, such as those
 between political parties, the president and Congress, parties in Congress,
 and factions on the Supreme Court. These stories are expected to include the
 views of the main opposing sides, as journalists see them, somewhat evenly
 balanced, providing "fair" coverage in that sense of the term (Gans, 1979;
 Hallin, 1984). The quality of coverage of SMOs depends greatly on how they
 and their actions intersect with the coverage of politics.

27 In what follows, we develop expectations for combinations of newspaper
 29 contexts, SMO action, and political contexts on the quality of coverage
 31 SMOs receive. Our arguments are meant to apply mainly to SMOs that are
 33 already fairly well mobilized and have gained some media attention. They
 35 are not expected to apply well to brand-new SMOs or those not seeking
 media attention and thus may diverge from arguments that seek to
 distinguish which SMOs in an industry are likeliest to gain coverage
 (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Ferree et al., 2002; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

Who or What Initiates Coverage?

37 We argue that the quality of coverage of SMOs depends in part on the type
 39 of story or article in which they find themselves. A key distinction concerns
 who or what initiates the coverage: its "occasion" or "news peg." Articles
 are motivated by specific actions typically signaled in the first paragraph

1 (or “lede”) of the story. Given that institutional political actors initiate most
2 political coverage, SMOs may need novelty or disruption to gain media
3 attention (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Rohlinger, 2002; Tuchman, 1978).
4 Although research has shown that protest coverage focuses more on the
5 event than the demands being made by SMOs and larger issues being raised
6 by them, SMOs may drive coverage in nonprotest ways, which in turn can
7 produce more substantive discussions. In addition, political coverage
8 initiated by state actors can, under circumstances discussed below, provide
9 a valuable forum for SMOs to transmit demands and other messages.

11 *The Coverage of Disruptive Action and Assertive Action*

12 Movement actors engage in contentious action, and a standard route to
13 coverage for SMOs is through *disruptive collective action*, which is newsworthy
14 to the extent it is large, novel, conflictual, or violent and which has received the
15 bulk of scholarly attention (Earl et al., 2004). Disruptive collective action
16 comprises “protest” activities (Lipsky, 1968), such as marches, rallies,
17 demonstrations, civil disobedience, and actions involving collective violence,
18 such as riots, though not peaceful strikes or boycotts, which employ
19 “constraints” and are thus more valuable resources than protest (Lipsky,
20 1968). Although coverage of such disruptive or non-institutional action is
21 typically SMO initiated, the type of news article they find themselves embedded
22 in results in poor quality coverage. Coverage gained through disruptive
23 processes is likely to distort the message of SMOs and movements, as the media
24 focus on the disruption and novel or violent details surrounding the event; often,
25 minor counter-demonstrations will get disproportionate attention as well
26 (Gitlin, 1980; Smith et al., 2001; Sobieraj, 2010). SMO actors frequently will be
27 asked to comment in such articles, but, given the type of story SMOs are
28 embedded in, these articles are not expected to transmit the demands of SMOs
29 or more detailed preferred frames.

30 We argue that more substantive coverage for SMOs will occur when they are
31 covered by way of *assertive collective action* (Amenta, 2006, pp. 26–27), which is
32 deemed the most influential in politics for SMOs according to political
33 mediation models (Amenta et al., 2005). Assertive action is typically
34 institutional, but not “assimilative” (Kitschelt, 1986), in that it seeks to wrest
35 away prerogatives typically held by institutional political actors. Assertive
36 collective action includes the introduction and the fight for passage of
37 movement-sponsored legislation and initiatives, electioneering activity, such
38 as running candidates for office and seeking to defeat enemies and support
39 friends in elections, mass political meetings that challenge the main parties’
nominating conventions, and litigation that challenges laws. Working through

1 institutionalized channels for political change, assertive collective action
2 challenges the power and prerogatives of institutional actors. Although
3 assertive collective action is typically institutional, most SMO institutional
4 collective action is not assertive. For instance, letter writing, petitioning,
5 information distribution, press conferences, or lobbying are not considered
6 assertive action, as they do not typically challenge the prerogatives of
7 institutional actors and seek mainly to persuade or provide information. When
8 covered, assertive action is more likely to receive substantive coverage because
9 news media are highly interested in legislation, elections, and court actions,
10 which draw the attention of reporters on politics beats.

11 Most SMO-initiated articles concerning assertive action feature an SMO
12 dominating standard political coverage, such as of policy making or elections.
13 SMOs can influence policy-related coverage by proposing legislation and gaining
14 sponsorship for legislation by institutional actors, by direct democratic devices
15 overriding the prerogatives of state legislators, or by litigation. It is difficult to
16 avoid discussing an SMO's demands when the article is about newsworthy
17 legislation or litigation initiated by an SMO. SMOs can also influence political
18 coverage through electoral activity by running their own candidates for election,
19 through endorsement policies, or by holding third-party or third-party-like
20 conventions. Election coverage is somewhat less likely than policy-related
21 coverage to provide substantive discussions because it often focuses on horse
22 races among candidates, their personalities, or minor events, such as gaffes or
23 performances in debates, that presumably influence the races' outcomes (Dalton,
24 Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998). However, an SMO driving election coverage is
25 unusual, and thus an SMO's take on an issue is more likely to be addressed. We
26 thus argue that such coverage, involving *both assertive action and a story that is*
27 *SMO-initiated*, is likely to produce higher quality coverage for SMOs, including
28 both standing and demands. By contrast, we expect standing to be gained in
29 articles that focus on *any contentious collective action*.

31 *Political Contextual Influences on SMO Coverage: Policy Debates and* 32 *Investigations*

33 In political mediation arguments, political contexts mediate the influence of
34 challengers' collective action on political outcomes (see Amenta et al., 2010),
35 and we argue similarly that political contexts will mediate challengers'
36 collective action on the quality of SMO media coverage. One important
37 aspect of the political context concerns whether policy proposals are on the
38 political agenda; challengers' actions are more likely to be influential once
39 their issue is up for political consideration (Amenta, 2006; Kingdon, 1984);
similarly, research has shown that protest concerning issues that are already

1 on the media's issue-agenda are more likely to be covered than other
2 protests (McCarthy, McPhail, Smith, & Crisbock, 1998; Oliver & Maney,
3 2000; Smith et al., 2001). Here, we argue that favorable policy contexts are
4 more likely to produce SMO coverage with demands for action when
5 combined with coverage of assertive action from SMOs. As we argue above,
6 SMOs are most likely to be covered in the context of political news driven by
7 state actors, and although they are typically sideshows in this coverage,
8 SMOs can still gain substantive attention, especially when they engage in
9 action during these policy battles. In such situations, SMOs will be likely to
10 be asked to react to proposals influencing constituents they are seen as at
11 least partially representing, as with the African American civil rights SMOs
12 and bids to upgrade or retrench the Civil Rights Act, or the environmental
13 movement with the EPA and legislation regulating the climate.

14 The political mediation model also holds that some contexts are so
15 unfavorable that they deflect almost all movement bids for influence
16 (Amenta, 2006). A political context that we argue works similarly for media
17 is when SMOs are under official or state-authorized *investigation*, such as
18 unions in the labor movement, among Communist SMOs, or SMOs with
19 leaders on trial. We argue that when SMOs appear in stories in this context,
20 movement officials will likely gain standing, as they will be asked to explain
21 themselves or testify. These contexts will minimize their prospects of
22 transmitting demands and more elaborated frames and lead to articles that
23 tend to discredit the SMO by focusing on its internal problems or the real or
24 alleged crimes or misbehaviors of its leaders. Although about SMOs, these
25 stories are not typically initiated by them and place SMOs on the defensive.
26 Stories about rackets in unions or high-salaried officials in SMOs or
27 congressional investigations or criminal trials of key figures will tend to avoid
28 the claims of the SMO and provide unfavorable coverage in other ways. Such
29 contexts are likely to produce articles concentrating on scandal or the
30 sensational story (Benson & Saguy, 2005; Molotch & Lester, 1975), which
31 may explain why this type of story is not much examined by movement
32 scholars (cf. Gitlin, 1980). Stories written in such contexts are likely to elicit a
33 quote from an SMO spokesperson, but usually of a defensive nature and not
34 likely to express a demand by the SMO.

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37

A Summary of Expectations

39 We argue that there are several one-factor routes to gain standing, whereas
40 gaining demands and both standing and demands will involve combinations

1 of story type, action and political contexts. Specifically, we expect articles
 3 that are movement-initiated, or focused on any SMO collective action, or in
 an investigation context will lead to standing. However, we expect that both
 5 disruptive action and an investigation will inhibit the publication of
 demands. We expect demands to be promoted by combinations of any two
 7 of the following: assertive action, a favorable newspaper, or political
 context. The latter two include a movement-initiated article or the SMO
 9 having its issue under political consideration. For gaining both standing and
 demands in an article, we expect that assertive action is necessary in
 combination with a favorable contextual condition, either newspaper or
 11 political. Our arguments best apply to SMOs, like the Townsend Plan, that
 are relatively well mobilized and recognized as important players on their
 13 issue by the news media. We turn to a discussion of that SMO.

15

17 **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TOWNSEND PLAN** 19 **AND OLD-AGE MOBILIZATION**

19 The Townsend Plan was founded in January 1934 by Dr. Francis E.
 21 Townsend, a laid-off, 66-year-old Long Beach medical assistant, and Robert
 Earl Clements, a 39-year-old real estate broker (see Amenta, 2006, for
 23 further details). The purpose of the organization was to promote the
 enactment of the pension/recovery program Townsend had outlined in
 25 letters to the editor of the *Long Beach Press Telegram* in September 1933.
 The program, also known as the Townsend Plan, called for \$200 monthly
 27 pensions to all non-employed citizens over 60 years, excluding criminals,
 and was designed to end the Depression through the spending of these
 29 pensions, as well as to end poverty in old age. Clements ran the
 organization, and Townsend was its symbol and spokesman, something
 31 like Colonel Sanders for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

The Townsend Plan passed through some readily identifiable stages. In
 33 1934, it spent most of its time organizing in the West, especially in
 California, and became a recognized force in old-age politics, as the bill
 35 behind the Social Security Act was being devised by the Franklin Roosevelt
 administration that fall and was considered by Congress in January 1935.
 37 The Townsend Plan sought, with much publicity but no success, to replace
 the Social Security bill with legislation based on its more generous pensions.
 39 Signed in August 1935, the Social Security Act included a federal old-age
 annuity program with a payroll tax legislated to pay benefits out in 1942 and

1 a federal power-sharing program called Old Age Assistance to help the
elderly immediately.

3 The Townsend Plan seized national attention in fall 1935. First, it staged a
convention in Chicago designed to show its potential as a political force akin
5 to a national party. The conventions became an annual event. Then, in a
December off-year election for a Michigan congressional seat, its endorsed
7 candidate, Verner W. Main, won. This action, combined with accelerated
organizing efforts, a campaign to induce members of Congress to pledge to
9 vote for a Townsend bill, and the attendant national publicity, spread the
Townsend Plan across the country. In early 1936, a Townsend club, the
11 main local organizational form, was being created every two hours, resulting
in about 8,000 clubs and two million members.

13 In March 1936, however, the Townsend Plan's progress reversed.
Congress engaged in a bipartisan investigation of the Townsend Plan, and
15 Townsend forced out Clements and took charge of the organization. The
investigation and the fallout over the split led to disorganization with many
17 clubs and members breaking away. The organization also spent part of the
summer of 1937 in turmoil, with another major internal shake-up that year
19 keeping the organization in the news and causing the cancelation of its
convention.

21 By 1938, the organizational upheavals had ended, and the Townsend Plan
began to rebuild itself and sought systematically to influence the congress-
23 sional elections. In a national swing to the Republicans, the Townsend Plan
endorsed many successful, mainly Republican candidates. That campaign
25 also featured eight state-level initiatives for generous old-age pensions, with
a California organization known as Ham and Eggs winning national
27 attention demanding \$30 every Thursday for aged Californians. In 1939, old
age returned to the national agenda. As in 1935, an old-age bill supported by
29 the Roosevelt administration was debated alongside a Townsend Plan
alternative. This time, however, a Townsend Plan bill was allowed to gain a
31 recorded vote in the House. This move was orchestrated by Democrats to
demonstrate the insincerity of Republican support for the Townsend Plan,
33 which won 100 votes. Afterward, amendments to the Social Security Act
passed, augmenting both the old-age insurance and Old-Age Assistance
35 programs, with pundits crediting the Townsend Plan as being influential.
The Townsend Plan reached a secondary peak in its membership and the
37 zenith of its political power in the wake of this legislative drive.

The Townsend Plan backed many Democrats during the 1940 elections,
39 Roosevelt campaigned to upgrade old-age programs, and Congress was
proposing national and universal old-age pensions of \$30 per person, when

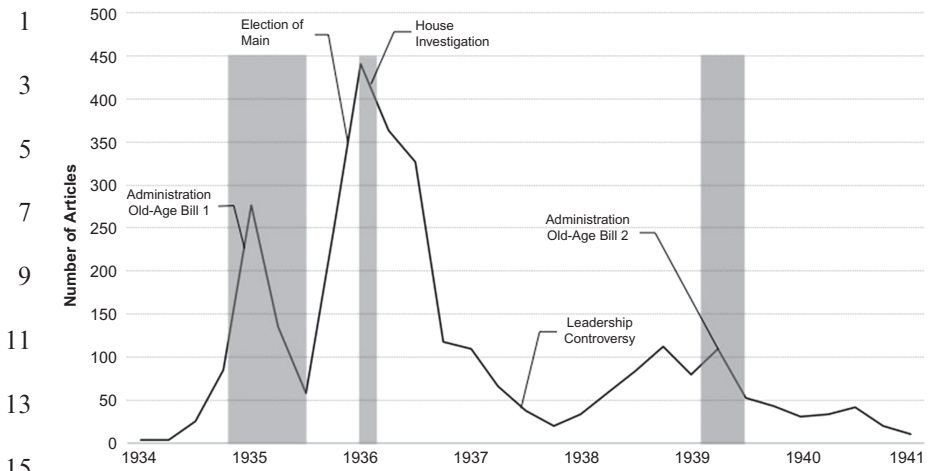


Fig. 1. Townsend Plan Coverage in Five Newspapers, by Quarters and Key Events, 1934-1941.

Pearl Harbor was bombed. By 1942, old age was off the national agenda. The Townsend Plan pivoted to demanding changes in state old-age laws, placing pension propositions on the ballots of a few western states in 1943 for \$60 per month pensions. After the war, however, the Townsend Plan was no longer a major player in old-age debates, though it carried on in some form until 1980.

Though only one SMO, the Townsend Plan is well suited to address our arguments. It engaged in a lot of assertive activity, including writing legislation, electioneering, and holding conventions rivaling those of the major parties, as well as at least some disruptive action. The Townsend Plan also contended in a variety of political and coverage contexts. These contexts include two periods when administration-sponsored old-age bills appeared before Congress and in a period when it was expected to answer for itself, during its investigation by Congress. (These are shown in Fig. 1 that also tracks the SMO's newspaper coverage.) The Townsend Plan also appeared in a wide variety of stories, including both those that its action initiated and those that it did not. The Townsend Plan was the coverage leader of the old-age pension movement during its main period of contention and was focused on legislation. Such organizations in turn account for a large share of newspaper coverage in the social movement sector, which is highly concentrated among the most-covered SMOs in each industry (Amenta, Caren, & Stobaugh, 2011).

1 DATA, METHODS, MEASURES, AND ANALYSES

3 Our data come from the population of newspaper articles mentioning the
4 Townsend Plan in five national newspapers: the *New York Times*,
5 *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street*
6 *Journal*, from 1934 through 1952. Searches through ProQuest Historical
7 Newspapers indicate that the Townsend Plan received a total of 3,335 article
8 mentions. Initially, we present and analyze the big picture of coverage. We
9 address how much the Townsend Plan was covered over time, in
10 comparison with the coverage of other SMOs in the old-age industry and
11 of all SMOs in the movement sector (see Amenta et al., 2011). Then we
12 ascertain how well overall coverage compares with front-page coverage. To
13 anticipate, the Townsend Plan dominated the coverage of the old-age
14 pension movement in this period, and its front-page coverage closely
15 tracked its overall coverage.

16 Finally, we analyze the front-page coverage of the Townsend Plan to
17 appraise our arguments regarding the quality of SMO coverage. Though the
18 same ProQuest searches, we located all front-page articles in which the
19 Townsend Plan was mentioned and randomly sampled half of this coverage,
20 producing 207 articles. Of those 207, we analyzed those that were not news
21 digest items, at least significantly about the Townsend Plan, and at least 400
22 words in length (for a similar approach, see Ferree et al., 2002). Our
23 analyses concentrate on the remaining 132 articles. Our coding addressed
24 the newspaper context of coverage, notably its “occasion,” indicating under
25 whose impetus the story was written. We also code whether collective
26 action, and if so which sort, dominated the coverage. We isolate non-
27 institutional “disruptive” action, which centers on protest activities, and
28 “assertive” collective action, which centers on legislative activity, litigation,
29 contentious meetings such as alternative political conventions, and
30 electioneering.¹ We also coded the proportion of text devoted to the SMO,
31 the length of the article, and its date of publication. Finally, we addressed
32 the quality of coverage. We code for whether Townsend Plan received
33 standing, an SMO or spokesperson being given the opportunity to speak
34 in the article, and coverage in which the SMO made a demand or had
35 one ascribed by the journalist. The first four authors coded the
36 sampled articles. Then, one-eighth of the articles were coded again to
37 ascertain inter-coder reliability. The results of this inter-coder reliability
38 check produced Krippendorff’s (1980) alphas greater than .80 for each
39 measure and above .85 for most of them, with values above .80 being
40 considered acceptable.

1 We analyzed these data using fsQCA (Ragin, 2000, 2008), employing the
 2 STATA 11.2 fuzzy command (Longest & Vaisey, 2008). These methods are
 3 appropriate in that we posit multiple causal paths to the outcomes, or
 4 equifinality (George & Bennett, 2005); also, some of our hypothesized causal
 5 paths have multiple components. Our main measures are categorical, which
 6 minimizes the calibration required for fsQCA (Ragin, 2008). In these
 7 analyses, to produce the truth table rows that were reduced to provide a
 8 solution, we set the significance level at .05, as the fuzzy command makes it
 9 possible to employ significance testing for each row of the truth table.

10 We employ three outcome measures. The first is standing (S), which
 11 addresses whether an SMO spokesperson had the opportunity to speak in
 12 the article. The second is demand (D), whether the article included a
 13 demand made by or attributed to the SMO. Third, we addressed articles that
 14 included standing and demands (S*D), the most valuable of these results.
 15 Our causal measures included the occasion of the coverage, the SMO action,
 16 and political contexts in which the articles were printed. Our first measure
 17 indicates whether the article was *movement-initiated* (M). The next three
 18 measures include whether SMO collective action dominated the article. The
 19 first scores one for an article that is mainly about any form of *collective*
 20 *action* (C), a second measure for articles dominated by *disruptive collective*
 21 *action* (R), and a third for articles dominated by *assertive collective action*
 22 (A). The next measures include key political contexts faced by the Townsend
 23 Plan, using the date of the article to ascertain whether it was published
 24 during these contexts. The first scores one for when an *old-age security bill*
 25 was before Congress (O): from December 24, 1934 through June 1935 when
 26 the Social Security Act was proposed, debated, and passed by Congress, and
 27 from February 1939 through July 1939, when the amendments to the Social
 28 Security Act were entertained. A second period (I) includes when the
 29 Townsend Plan was under *investigation* by Congress (March 24, 1936
 30 through May 1936).

31 We have different expectations for each of the three outcomes. The
 32 greatest difference is between standing and demands. For standing, we
 33 expect three simple recipes to produce coverage—if the article is movement-
 34 initiated, dominated by any sort of movement collective action, or occurs
 35 during the period of investigation. These expectations read: $S = M + C + I$.
 36 In fsQCA terminology the presence of a causal condition is indicated by the
 37 upper case and its absence by the lower case; a plus sign (+) indicates
 38 the operator “or” or set union and the asterisk (*) indicates the operator
 39 “and” or set intersection. For demands we also have three recipes:
 $D = M * A + A * O + M * O$. We expect that assertive action in combination

1 with either a movement-initiated article or a political context involving
 2 legislation will lead to demands appearing in the article. In addition we
 3 expect that a movement-initiated story during a context when legislation
 4 is up for political discussion will produce a demand in coverage.
 5 We also expect that disruptive action will need to be absent for a demand
 6 to be present. This changes the expectations as follows: $D = r^*(M^*A +$
 7 $A^*O + M^*O)$. We expect that standing and demands will be produced in
 8 routes similar to those for demands, though in this instance we expect
 9 assertive action to be necessary: $D^*S = r^*A^*(M + O)$. Because disruptive
 10 action and assertive action are coded as mutually exclusive, this reduces to
 11 $D^*S = A^*(M + O)$.

13
 14 **AGGREGATE PATTERNS OF COVERAGE AND**
 15 **FRONT-PAGE COVERAGE**

17 Our first results address the big picture of the coverage of the Townsend
 18 Plan. As Table 1 shows, the Townsend Plan gained the bulk of the coverage
 19 of the old-age pension movement during its main period of contention. It
 20 received slightly more than half of all coverage received by old-age SMOs in
 21 the five papers from 1934 through 1952 (see Table 1). This is an impressive
 22 performance, because we also included the most prominent state-level
 23 SMOs, such as California’s “Ham and Eggs” and Ohio’s Bigelow Pension
 24 Plan organization, and the Fraternal Order of Eagles, which focused on the
 25 old-age pension issue starting in the late 1920s. The coverage of the
 26 Townsend Plan outdistanced the coverage of other old-age SMOs as well as
 27

29 **Table 1.** Townsend Plan Coverage Across Five Newspapers, in
 Comparison to Old Age Coverage and SMO Coverage, 1934–1952.

News Paper	Townsend Plan (Percentage)	Old Age Coverage		SMO Sector Coverage	
		Total	% TP	Total	% TP
35 <i>Los Angeles Times</i>	1,433 (43.0)	3,293	43.5	78,401	1.83
36 <i>New York Times</i>	730 (21.9)	1,140	64.0	113,832	.64
37 <i>Washington Post</i>	611 (18.3)	886	69.0	61,617	.99
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	463 (13.9)	1,188	39.0	88,913	.52
39 <i>Wall Street Journal</i>	98 (2.9)	127	77.2	17,930	.55
Total	3,335	6,634	50.3	360,693	.92

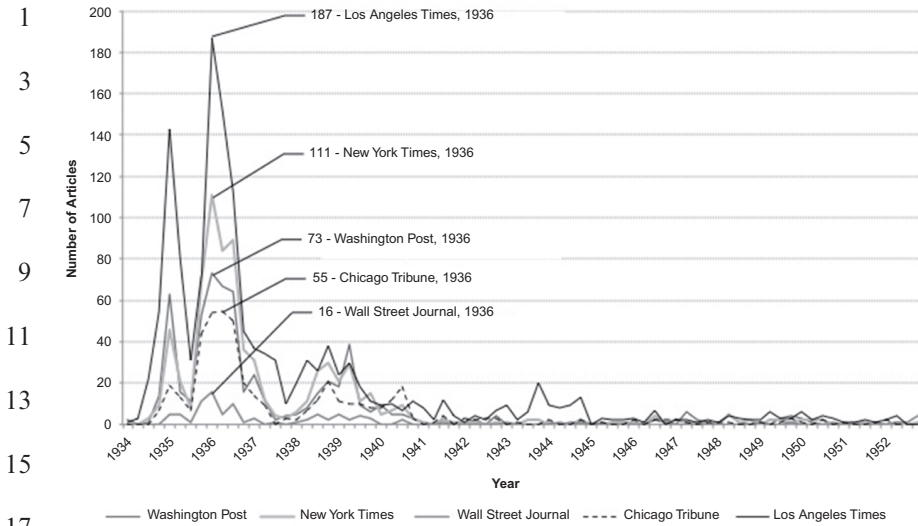


Fig. 2. The Coverage of the Townsend Plan Across Five Newspapers, 1934–1952.

the Eagles in every paper. The Townsend Plan received the greatest attention from the *Los Angeles Times*, which accounts for 43% of Townsend Plan coverage across the papers, but which, however, gave the Townsend Plan less than half of its old-age SMO coverage; the Los Angeles area was the birthplace of many state-level old-age SMOs, including Ham and Eggs. When examined against the coverage of the entire social movement sector, the coverage of the Townsend Plan is ordered similarly to that of raw coverage, with the *Los Angeles Times* providing the greatest attention.

However, the historical trajectories of coverage among the newspapers are quite similar (see Fig. 2). In each newspaper, the Townsend Plan received some coverage in 1934, increased its coverage in 1935, and peaked in coverage in 1936. For each paper the coverage plummeted in 1937 and recovered in the last years of the decade, but never again reaching previous heights. In each instance the coverage dropped precipitously in the 1940s, once the war began. The correlations of yearly coverage figures among the newspapers for the 19-year period range from .94 to .99. In quarterly coverage from 1934 through 1941, the period in which the Townsend Plan received almost all of its newspaper attention, the correlations range from .81 to .96. The evidence also indicates that the coded front-page coverage of the Townsend Plan mimics its overall coverage over time. When combined

1 across newspapers, coded front-page coverage correlates .98 with overall
2 coverage. On quarterly data from 1934 through 1941, coded front-page
3 coverage correlates .95 with overall coverage.

4 In turning to front-page coverage, we find first that the vast bulk of
5 mentions of the Townsend Plan addressed it in a significant way. By
6 significant, we mean approximately 10% of the article had to be about the
7 SMO or if the article granted the SMO standing or published a demand. Of
8 the 197 coded front-page articles that were not news-digest items, 145, or
9 about 73%, devoted “significantly” or greater attention to the SMO. Also,
10 the vast majority of the 145 articles were news reports (95%). Of these 145
11 articles, 132 were of more than 400 words. Our detailed analyses are based
12 on these 132 lengthy, “significant” front-page articles.

13 Examining these 132 articles, we can answer two key questions: Who or
14 what initiated the front-page coverage of the Townsend Plan? How
15 frequently did collective action dominate the coverage, regardless of who
16 initiated it? Of the 132 articles, 54% (or 71 articles) were initiated by *state*
17 activity, with SMO-initiated coverage second at 41% (54 articles), despite the
18 scholarly concern regarding protest. Despite our wide conceptualization of it,
19 less than half – 42% (56) –of these articles were mainly about contentious
20 action involving the Townsend Plan. Moreover, of the articles that were
21 mainly about contentious action, only eight were coded as “disruptive,”
22 whereas slightly more than half (29) were about assertive action. Of the 132
23 front-page articles, the Townsend Plan gained standing in 68% of them. It
24 was somewhat less common for the Townsend Plan to secure a demand in
25 these front-page articles, as this happened about 62% of the time. Gaining
26 both a demand and standing happened only about 43% of the time. It seems
27 likely that front-page coverage includes more standing and demands for
28 SMOs than would lower-profile and less extensive coverage.

31 fsQCA RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

33 Next, we appraise our expectations on the quality of coverage, based on
34 interactions between the type of article, the collective actions in those
35 articles, and the context in which the articles were published, using fsQCA,
36 which we discuss briefly. In set logic terms, “consistency” means the degree
37 to which cases with a given combination of causal conditions constitute a
38 subset of the cases with the outcome. For instance, attempting a suicide with
39 a gun produces a suicide, or is consistent with the outcome suicide, at a rate
of about 88% (see Amenta, Stobaugh, Caren, & Olasky, 2009). “Coverage”

1 **Table 2.** Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analyses of Standing,
 2 Demand, and Standing and Demand with Selected Causal Measures.

Outcome	True Combinations (Unique Coverage)	Reduced Solution	Solution Coverage	Solution Consistency
7 Standing (S)	M (.078) C (.089) I (.156)	M + C + I	.867	.940
9 Demand (D)	MAri (.171) mriO (.207) MarIo (.073)	<i>r*(M*A*i + m*O + M*a*I)</i>	.451	.841
11 Standing and 13 demand (S*D)	MArIo (.228) mAriO (.105) MarIo (.088)	<i>r*(M*A*i*o + m*A*O + M*a*I)</i>	.421	.828

15 *Note:* S = standing, D = demand, C = collective action, M = movement initiated, A = assertive
 16 collective action, R = disruptive action, I = Townsend Plan under investigation, O = old-age
 17 security legislation before Congress. Solutions in **bold** support our expectations. Solutions in
 18 *italics* partly support our expectations.

19
 20 indicates the degree of overlap between the cases with the causal
 21 combination and the cases with the outcome, showing how much of the
 22 outcome is explained or accounted for by the combination or group of
 23 combinations. For instance, gun suicides comprise or cover about half of
 24 U.S. suicides; the other half is accomplished by other means.

25 In our preliminary analyses of standing, we included only three measures:
 26 whether the article was movement initiated (M), mainly about any sort of
 27 collective action (C), and during the investigation of the Townsend Plan (I).
 28 That is because we expect that any article with any one of these
 29 characteristics will likely also include standing. The results confirm our
 30 expectations (see Table 2). There are three paths or recipes leading to
 31 standing, with one involving the presence of movement-initiated activity,
 32 another involving the presence of collective action, and the third the
 33 presence of the investigation. The result is as follows: $S = M + C + I$.
 34 Together the solutions “cover” about 87% of the cases and are about 94%
 35 “consistent” with the outcome. The collective action solution uniquely
 36 covers about 42% of the cases at a 93% rate of consistency.

37 Next, we turn to demands. As noted above, our expectations here involve
 38 both multiple causation (more than one recipe) and conjunctural causation
 39 (more than one causal factor in each recipe). For demands, there were three
 solutions: $M^*A^*r^*i$, $m^*r^*i^*O$, and $M^*a^*r^*I^*o$. In each of the solutions the

1 absence of disruptive action is a necessary condition. Because the
 investigation and old-age periods did not overlap, the result reduces to the
 3 following: $D = r^*(M^*A^*i + m^*O + M^*a^*I)$. Focusing on the positive or
 “present” conditions, we see three solutions: $D = M^*A + O + M^*I$. The first
 5 recipe (M^*A) involves assertive action dominating articles that are initiated
 by the action of the SMO; this combination uniquely covers 17% of the cases.
 7 The second recipe (O) involves a bill being before Congress and covers
 another 21% of the cases. Finally, a combination involving movement-
 9 initiated coverage during the inquiry (M^*I) uniquely covers seven percent of
 the cases. Together the solution covers 45% of the cases, with a consistency
 11 level of .84. These results mainly support our expectations. Notably, the
 combination of a movement-initiated article and assertive action leads to
 13 demands. A combination including a bill before Congress also leads to
 demands, though the coverage is neither dominated by assertive action, nor
 15 movement-initiated. Finally, there is a movement-initiated combination that
 we did not expect to lead to demands, though this covers the lowest
 17 percentage of cases. In sum, one of the three expected solutions appears, part
 of a second expected solution also appears, whereas a third solution is
 19 unexpected, and the third expected solution does not appear.

The results for articles that include both standing and demands are
 21 somewhat more supportive of our hypotheses and perhaps also more telling,
 as fewer articles produced both standing and demands. The solution was
 23 similar to that for demands, covering 42% of the cases at a .83 level of
 consistency. As with demands alone, the absence of disruptive action was a
 25 necessary condition. However, in this instance the result reduces to $S^*D =$
 $r^*(M^*A^*o^*i + m^*A^*O + M^*a^*I)$ or, with the positive factors alone,
 27 $S^*D = M^*A + A^*O + M^*I$. The M^*A combination covers 23% of the cases,
 and M^*I combination covers 11% of the cases, similar to the result for
 29 demands alone. For both standing and demands, however, the third solution
 includes both assertive action and an old-age bill before Congress (A^*O),
 31 which is anticipated by our arguments. This last solution covers nine percent
 of the cases. These results confirm our claims, in that assertive action coverage
 33 is a necessary condition in two combinations, which also include either
 newspaper or political contexts. These results, as with those for demands
 35 alone, suggest that coverage during an investigation can be substantive, if,
 however, it is movement-initiated. Two of the three expected recipes appeared
 37 in the solution, along with a combination that was unexpected by us.

We ran a few checks on the robustness of the results. We added a
 39 measure of *editorial slants* (E) of newspapers (Kahn & Kenney, 2002;
 Molotch & Lester, 1975). This measure was based on the coding of half of

1 the coverage of all editorial content in the five papers and scoring one for
 2 any editorial article that reflected favorably on the SMO or its demands,
 3 minus one for unfavorable evaluations of either, and zero for neither.
 4 However, this measure did not vary greatly, as all of the newspapers'
 5 editorial coverage was unfavorably disposed toward the Townsend Plan,
 6 and it is possible, for that reason, that the measure did not improve any of
 7 the solutions for the main outcome measures.² We also examined the *length*
 8 of articles (L), a calibrated fuzzy-set measure for each article with fewer than
 9 10 paragraphs scores zero, and each article with 26 or greater paragraphs
 10 scores one. This measure does not improve the results, perhaps because of
 11 the 400-word cutoff, though a 280-word cutoff produces similar results.
 12 Separate analyses of the *Los Angeles Times* and of the rest of the newspapers
 13 as a group produced similar results. Separate analyses of just news reports
 14 produced similar results. The four combinations that did not appear in the
 15 data for demands (and standing and demands) were not expected to produce
 16 the outcome. The timing of the publication of an article in a string of articles
 17 did not influence the coverage of demands.

18 All in all, the fsQCA results provide considerable support for the com-
 19 binational expectations of the story-centered perspective and the revised
 20 political mediation arguments. The movement-initiated and assertive action
 21 combination helps greatly to explain high-quality coverage, as represented
 22 by demands and standing and demands together. Similarly, influential in
 23 producing such favorable coverage is the combination in which assertive
 24 action takes place when the issue is on the political agenda. This provides
 25 support for political mediation arguments, which expect combinations of
 26 assertive action and favorable political contexts to produce results for
 27 SMOs. Finally, however, there is a pathway that works through what we
 28 hypothesized to be a negative political context for SMO demands: being
 29 under investigation. Typically, stories during the investigation period are
 30 state initiated. However, when the story is movement-initiated during such
 31 unfavorable periods, it leads to substantive coverage. Given that our
 32 solutions for the demand outcomes cover only 42– 45% of them, there are
 33 other, probably more complicated, paths to these outcomes.

35

CONCLUSION

37

38 Some of the descriptive analyses of our new data on the newspaper coverage
 39 of the Townsend Plan are telling. The Townsend Plan dominated among
 national SMOs in the old-age movement during its period of contention,

1 and its coverage trajectories across five papers over 19 years were quite
similar. In addition, its front-page coverage tracks closely its overall
3 coverage, providing confidence in the representativeness of analyses of
front-page coverage, and more than two-thirds of the coded front-page
5 coverage of the Townsend Plan was significantly about it, suggesting that
raw counts of coverage are likely addressing empirically meaningful
7 phenomena. However, the Townsend Plan was covered on the front page
mainly through events that it did not initiate. Newspaper analyses strictly of
9 collective action may be missing quite a bit of the coverage of SMOs and the
discursive struggles in which they are engaged.

11 The fsQCA of front-page coverage provide support for our story-centered
theoretical arguments explaining the quality of coverage, as defined through
13 standing and demands. Standing gives the SMO voice and signals its
legitimacy, and demands convey the SMO's interpretation of a policy issue
15 and are key in contests over meaning. We found that coverage of collective
action of any sort was closely associated with standing, as was the period
17 when the Townsend Plan was under official scrutiny. However, not all
collective action and behavior is equal in producing demands. Coverage
19 about assertive collective action was a key part of a recipe producing
demands in coverage, whereas the absence of disruptive action was a
21 necessary condition for demands to appear, supporting research that such
action does not promote coverage favoring movements (Smith et al., 2001).
23 In addition, achieving the highest quality coverage analyzed substantive
coverage, which included both demands and standing, involved combina-
25 tions of condition; two of these combinations included assertive action
paired with a favorable political or newspaper context. This suggests that
27 the coverage of action in specific contexts will lead to favorable coverage. As
assertive action is also associated with political influence for SMOs (Amenta
29 et al., 2010), that influence may work in part through newspaper coverage.

There are several limitations to this study. It does not (and cannot)
31 address why this coverage was received in the first place. All of our claims
and findings are about coverage once it appears. Thus, the results do not
33 provide guidance to news-conscious SMOs as to whether they should engage
in certain kinds of action; we do not know the rate at which different types
35 of actions are covered. Also, we focus only on the highest profile coverage,
and longer stories, in which movement standing and demands are more
37 likely to appear. Moreover, we address only whether standing or demands
appear, not the degree to which they appear. In addition, we do not address
39 the "slants" of the articles. Other limitations have to do with the case. The
Townsend Plan was the most high-profile SMO in its movement industry

1 during most of the time of its contention and thus was on the radar of the
 3 news media. Because protest and other non-institutional actions were low
 5 priorities for the Townsend Plan, it was covered less frequently through
 7 disruptive action than a typical SMO. The Townsend Plan has much in
 9 common with SMOs that led the coverage of their SMO industry but rarely
 11 engaged in disruptive activity – such as the Anti-Saloon League, American
 13 Legion, NAACP, National Organization for Women, Sierra Club, Human
 15 Rights Campaign, and ACLU. In addition, the Townsend Plan was active
 17 mainly under the administrations of President Roosevelt, who was favorable
 19 to old-age policy, though not the Townsend Plan.

21 Despite these limitations, our story-centered arguments should help to set
 23 future research agendas of the coverage of SMOs. The quality of coverage of
 25 SMOs is related closely to the type of article in which it is embedded.
 27 Moreover, the quality of coverage is a result of combinations of article
 29 types, SMO action, and the wider political circumstances in which SMOs
 31 contend. Scholars addressing the quality of SMO coverage should pay
 33 attention to both the nature of the article and the interactions between
 35 article type, collective action, and political context.

NOTES

1. We coded for 19 different categories of action; *disruptive actions are in italics*,
 25 and **assertive actions are in bold** (with the number of events, if any, in parentheses):
 27 *rally/demonstration (3)*, *march, vigil, dramaturgical demonstration, collective violence,*
 29 *civil disobedience (5)*; strike, boycott, picket, petitioning/letter-writing (3), informa-
 31 tion distribution (1), press conference (4), lobbying; **convention/contentious meeting**
 33 **(21)**, **electioneering (13)**, **testimony before Congress (5)**, **lawsuit; legislative action**
 35 **(4)**; **initiative/referendum**.

2. These results are not shown, but are available upon request, as are those noted
 31 below.

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