

Opportunity Boundaries

The Politics of Fair Chances in Rich Democracies

Technological revolutions eliminate many jobs even as they create new ones, forcing families to find new pathways to opportunity. Theorists have argued that liberal democracies should offer these opportunities on equal terms, for both positive and normative reasons. But access to opportunity remains durably unequal in these countries. Why are opportunities so persistently unequal across social groups, despite the ever-higher stakes of securing them and the normative appeal of equal opportunity? This dissertation develops a comparative theory to answer this question and tests it on cases in which specific “opportunity boundaries” are challenged yet persist nonetheless in the United States, Germany, and Japan.

I argue that when middle-class families are uncertain about their future status, they mobilize to defend boundaries that allow them to hoard opportunities. Which groups of “marginal insiders” mobilize to defend an opportunity boundary depends on how institutions shape the alternative strategies they have to secure their status and the presence of representation gaps between this group and “marginal outsiders” whom reform would benefit. This theory explains the political resilience of specific types of opportunity boundaries within and across three democratic cases. I test the theory against attempted reforms to residential sorting across stratified schools in the U.S., early-age student sorting across diverging school tracks in Germany, and worker sorting across employment tracks in Japan. I find that in each case a group of insecure but well represented marginal insiders successfully defend specific boundaries against reform even as other boundaries are relaxed. In the wake of successful boundary defense, I observe that marginal outsiders then seek alternative political strategies to secure access to opportunity. Lacking efficacy in electoral politics, they form coalitions with producer groups to pursue gradual reform, which reinterpret the rules that define boundaries and develop policy alternatives that compensate for persistent boundaries with potential costs to the broader public.

This study offers new perspectives on the politics of distinct but functionally parallel policy areas that determine group-level access to opportunity in three diverse national cases. In contrast to conventional views that high-status elites preserve status quo policies that reproduce economic inequality, I show that lower-status families defend opportunity boundaries that reinforce unequal opportunity when they lack alternative strategies to secure their social status in times of economic uncertainty. To close, I argue that attempts to suppress this backlash by insulating opportunity reform from democratic pressure may have helped to foster explosive political resentments that pervade contemporary democracies, and suggest in turn that efforts to address boundary defenders’ anxieties with social policy may both better accord with the democratic side of the normative ideals that underpin liberal democracies and be more effective than technocratic alternatives in political practice to secure equal opportunity for outsiders.

Introduction. The Politics of Durable Inequalities

This chapter outlines the problematic that motivates the dissertation. Previous social science literature has documented durable inequalities across groups in liberal democracies. This phenomenon is understudied by political scientists, except in specific policy areas. Existing explanations for it focus on organizational norms or take institutions for granted. Explaining durable inequalities requires a political economy approach, which defines how actors strategically seek opportunities by contesting the institutions that distribute them across contexts.

Chapter 2. A Theory of Opportunity Boundaries

In this chapter, I develop a theory about “opportunity boundaries” which provides a political economy explanation for durable inequalities. Opportunity boundaries secure status for families that I call “marginal insiders” by allowing them to hoard opportunities. When they lack alternatives for status maintenance, marginal insiders engage in “boundary defense”. This limits the upward mobility of a group that I call “marginal outsiders”. In the wake of boundary defense, marginal outsiders seek opportunity in “boundary coalitions” with producer groups that pursue quieter and more gradual strategic alternatives to confrontational boundary reform.

Chapter 3. American Boundary Defense: Marginal Suburbanites Against Desegregation

This chapter tests the theory in the American case, in which marginal as opposed to secure suburban families attempt to defend residential sorting across school districts against a coalition of political elites and outsiders. I test this with a mixed-methods analysis of metropolitan-scale desegregation politics in the 1970s, using evidence from geo-located ANES surveys, congressional roll-call votes on desegregation bills, and archival evidence on the electoral motives that shaped the judicial politics of school desegregation from sources that include presidential archives on U.S. Supreme Court nominations in the period and court files from failed efforts to achieve metropolitan desegregation through litigation in Boston and Detroit.

Chapter 4. German Boundary Defense: Working-Class Natives Against School Reform

This chapter tests the theory in the German case, in which lower status and less academically educated German parents block attempts to reform a persistent system of early-age sorting across stratified school tracks. I test this with a mixed-methods analysis of a specific reform episode in the German city-state of Hamburg, in which a citizens’ movement successfully passed a referendum that blocked elite-led efforts to delay tracking two years and remove parents’ choice in order to equalize opportunities between native and immigrant children. I use evidence from precinct-level votes, city-district demographics, election studies that capture recalled referendum votes among parents, and archival observations from both media and partisan publications.

Chapter 5. Japanese Boundary Defense: Salarymen Against Labor Market Liberalization

This chapter tests the theory in the Japanese case, where the political dispute is over whether older labor market insiders can defend stratified employment tracks against reforms that would

benefit young workers and unmarried women. It uses a mixed-methods analysis of intra-partisan conflict over labor market policy in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), with evidence from panel surveys, newspaper polling and election results from intra-partisan LDP presidential elections, as well as qualitative observations of failed elite-led efforts to reform a dualized system of employment protection at both the turn of the millennium and in more recent years.

Chapter 6. Boundary Coalitions: Gradual Reform in the Wake of Boundary Defense

This chapter examines the strategies that marginal outsiders deploy after efforts to overcome opportunity boundaries have failed due to successful boundary defense in each of these national cases. I find that groups representing these outsiders are often observed forming coalitions of convenience with producer groups to pursue more gradual institutional reform, through strategies that contest prevailing interpretations of the sorting criteria that define boundaries or that layer new policies that offer compensatory opportunities without provoking marginal insiders. Accordingly, I find that opportunity boundaries' formal persistence due to successful boundary defense may mask changes over time in how they functionally distribute opportunities across groups. I develop this argument using a mixed-methods comparative-historical approach, based on evidence from long-term administrative data, archival research from each case, and a comprehensive review of the secondary literature.

Conclusion: Liberal Equality of Opportunity and Contemporary Political Dysfunction

I conclude the dissertation by examining the implications of opportunity boundaries for contemporary politics. To do so, I re-introduce the theory's four-class model of opportunity politics, with special focus on "secure insiders" who do not contest opportunity boundaries because they can use private alternatives to maintain their status and "burdened outsiders" who fail entirely to secure access to opportunities through politics. I argue that, when marginal outsiders form coalitions with powerful producer groups to secure access to opportunity, they may initiate reform trajectories that offer remedies for their exclusion, but that also generate spillover costs which foster broad political resentment. Likewise, I highlight that when outsiders and secure insiders with strong universalist values form mass electoral coalitions that defeat marginal insiders without addressing their underlying status anxieties with policy alternatives, they may foment longer-term resentments at great political cost. Finally, I suggest that since they do not themselves benefit from marginal outsiders' upward mobility, burdened outsiders can come to resent boundary coalitions that ignore their persistent exclusion from opportunity in favor of securing gains with diffuse costs within an enclosed set of marginal outsider and vested interest groups. Each of these resentments are ripe for activation by populist entrepreneurs on the supply side of politics. Their strategies cast interest groups, secure insiders, and marginal outsiders as members of a corrupt elite coalition. I argue that, as a result, the politics of boundary defense can help to explain contemporary reactionary populism in an era of rising social risks. This suggests that "equal opportunity" is a fraught normative ideal for liberal democratic market societies when unaccompanied by a complementary ideal of broad-based social solidarity.