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# Alliances and Perception Profiles in the Iranian Reform Movement, 1997 to 2005

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## Abstract

What accounts for the formation and disintegration of social movement alliances? The dominant approach in social movement studies stresses the role of political opportunities and threats in facilitating or undermining alliances between oppositional groups. This article argues, by contrast, that the convergence and divergence of contenders' perceptions mediate between political opportunities and shifting alliances. Whereas previous studies conceptualize perceptions as global assessments of actors' environments, I disaggregate three dimensions of the concept: optimism about state elites, optimism about state institutions, and optimism about contentious collective action. The Iranian Reform Movement of 1997 to 2005 offers a nearly ideal case for the study of perceptions and alliances, because it encompasses a variety of opposition groups whose alliances formed and disintegrated over the course of the movement's rise and decline. This article examines shifting perceptions of opportunity among these groups and documents how these perceptions affected alliances, independent of state repression and groups' ultimate goals.

## Keywords

contentious politics, social movements, alliances, political opportunities, threats, repression, perceptions

The formation and disintegration of coalitions is an important area of study in several fields of social science, including organizational studies, electoral politics, revolutions, ethnic conflict, nationalism, and international politics. Alliances also draw significant scholarly attention in the field of social movement studies. To date, much of this literature follows the political process model, the dominant approach in social movement studies, emphasizing the state's role in facilitating or undermining alliances among protestors. This article argues that the state's impact is mediated by perceptions of various opposition groups: where perceptions of opportunity align, alliances are more likely to form, even when

actors have divergent interests or goals. Where perceptions of opportunity differ, alliances crumble, even when actors share the same interests or goals. This approach, building on recent work on perceptions in social movement studies, suggests that the study of activist alliances has something to offer the study of alliances in other contexts as well.

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The Iranian Reform Movement of 1997 to 2005 offers a nearly ideal case for the study of this phenomenon, because it encompasses a variety of opposition groups whose alliances formed and disintegrated over the course of the movement's rise and decline. This article examines shifting perceptions of opportunity among these groups and documents how these perceptions affected alliances, independent of state repression and groups' ultimate goals.

Studies of alliances have recognized the importance of perceptions of opportunity and threat in the emergence of collective action. However, previous studies tend to treat these perceptions as global assessments that are consistent across different dimensions of an actor's environment. By contrast, I propose that perceptions of opportunity and threat may be inconsistent across different dimensions of the political context; it is thus worthwhile to disaggregate these dimensions for the study of alliances in contentious politics and other political and organizational fields.

I distinguish three dimensions of political opportunity: optimism about state elites, optimism about state institutions, and optimism about contentious collective action. Opposition groups may share any or all of these dimensions. When perception profiles match, groups are more likely to share a strategic vision and work together. When perceptions differ, even groups with similar goals and backgrounds may have difficulty cooperating with one another.

## **POLITICAL PROCESS AND MOVEMENT ALLIANCES**

Coalitions are central to the understanding of numerous fields, both in the maintenance of social order and challenges to order (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Accordingly, sociologists have examined alliances to explain such varied outcomes as the trajectory of economic reform in China (Keister 2001), the rise of financial capitalism in Florence (Padgett and McLean 2006), the outbreak of civil war in England (Hillmann 2008), and gendered state

outcomes after democratic transitions (Viterna and Fallon 2008).

Similarly, the field of social movement studies has long understood the importance of alliances in understanding political protest. In the study of the U.S. civil rights movement, for example, scholars note the tensions between Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and more radical organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (McAdam 1999; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). In a foundational work of social movement studies, Tilly (1978:126) wrote that "shifting alliances" were among the "central issues" of the French Revolution, and coalitions may "take on special importance" in determining the fate of protest movements. Coalition formation is a "key process" in social movement campaigns, according to a recent review of the field (Tarrow 2011:191). Coalitions are also an important concept in recent scholarship on transnational activism, which focuses on alliances among organizations (Smith 2008) and among decentralized direct action networks (Bennett 2005).

In keeping with the existing social movement literature, I define alliances as "means-oriented" cooperation (Tarrow 2005:163) between actors who coordinate action and share some resources on a common project (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). By this definition, unanimity about long-term goals is not a necessary component of coalitions. Groups often forge coalitions despite ideological discrepancies. The importance of coalitions is widely acknowledged, but analysis of the phenomenon has "received relatively little empirical attention from social scientists," according to a recent volume on the subject (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010:xii). That volume identifies three primary factors favoring social movement alliances: preexisting social ties, shared ideology, and political context. According to this review, the presence of individuals with ties across organizations facilitates coalition building. Sharing the same goals and identities also plays an

important role in alliance formation. Finally, the structure of political opportunities creates incentives for cooperation among social movement organizations.

Here, I focus on political opportunity and threat in fostering or breaking apart oppositional coalitions.<sup>1</sup> This approach is rooted in the broader “political process” approach (McAdam 1999), which emphasizes the role of political context in shaping all aspects of social movements, including their emergence, form, and outcomes (Meyer 2004). Scholars using this approach, however, disagree about the direction of this effect. Some argue that repression facilitates alliance formation (Chang 2008), whereas others believe repression makes coalition formation unlikely (Brockett 2005). Some studies conclude that emergence of political opportunities is conducive to alliance formation (Diani 1990; Hathaway and Meyer 1997; Staggenborg 1986), whereas others suggest that threat is an important potential cause of social-movement coalition formation (McCammon and Campbell 2002; Meyer and Corrigan-Brown 2005; Van Dyke 2003). A number of studies focus on specific combinations of opportunity and threat. One such approach emphasizes selective repression, which is said to break apart alliances (Koopmans 1993). Another approach attributes the emergence of alliances to the combination of democratization, which offers new political opportunities, and neoliberal economic policies, which threaten popular interests (Almeida 2010). These hypotheses parallel the broader literature on repression and mobilization, which is also deeply divided (Davenport 2005).

Social movement activists debate these issues in much the same terms as scholars do (Maddison and Scalmer 2006; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Owens 2009). Activists use theories of opportunity and threat to understand and influence their environment, based on their personal experiences and commitments, their understanding of history, and—sometimes—their reading of the scholarly literature. In the Brazilian youth movement, for example, leading activists were familiar with theorists such as Dewey, Gramsci, Habermas, and Machiavelli (Mische 2008).

Activists may disagree about how to define what is happening in their political environment (Benford 1993), whether institutional or extrainstitutional venues offer the greatest chance of success (Gamson and Meyer 1996), or the degree of threat they feel (Jasper 2006). These disputes are not just theoretical—as this article will show, they may be associated with the development and decline of social movement alliances.

## PERCEPTION PROFILES

Political process theory emphasizes political institutions in shaping alliances; an alternative approach emphasizes subjectivity as a mediating factor. Not all oppositional actors perceive and respond in the same way to shifts in the political context. To borrow from Latour, actors are not just intermediaries who transmit inputs automatically into outputs, but rather mediators who “transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.” With mediators, input “is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time” (Latour 2005:39). Applying this distinction to perceptions of the political context, one could argue that contextual factors such as opportunity or threat cannot predict alliance formation or disintegration.

I propose to address the subjective aspect of political opportunity and threat through the concept of “perception profiles,” building on related concepts from the field of social movement studies. McAdam (1999) made “cognitive liberation” a key concept in his political process model and argued that insurgency does not occur unless contenders define the situation as unjust and subject to change. Other scholars have utilized the concept of cultural frames (Benford and Snow 2000) to examine how social movements define and present their understanding of political opportunities (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Kowalchuk 2005; Suh 2001). Finally, other researchers use perceptions, attributions, and interpretation to address how contenders make sense of their political environment (Kurzban 1996, 2004; McAdam et al. 2001).

The concepts of cognitive liberation, framing, and other perceptions generally assess the presence or absence of opportunities in the political context as a whole. However, when contenders recognize an opportunity for change, or when they frame mobilization in terms of opportunities, these assessments may not be consistent across all dimensions of the political landscape. It may matter how actors identify opportunities and threats. I propose the concept of “perception profiles” to engage the multi-dimensionality of perceptions and disaggregate them into significant constituent elements (Skrentny 2006). This approach to perception profiles mirrors the multi-dimensional approach to objective political opportunity and threat that is now standard in the study of collective action (Brockett 2005; Goldstone and Tilly 2001; Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam 1996).

I identify three dimensions of the political context that are frequently the source of disagreement among social movement activists: optimism about state elites, optimism about state institutions, and optimism about contentious mobilization. If we treat these dimensions as binaries—of course, they may also be treated as continuous spectrums—we have eight possible profiles (see Table 1). Only four of these eight profiles existed in the Iranian Reform Movement, but I will briefly discuss all of them, because these profiles could be used to study other oppositional groups beyond this case study. Future research may wish to incorporate four or more dimensions, or to examine these dimensions as ordinal or continuous variables, but the simplified differentiation of three dichotomous dimensions offers a useful first attempt at systematizing the study of perception profiles.

*Open windows model.* Some activists may find all three windows of opportunity open: they view state elites as receptive to their cause, institutional venues are open for collective action, and the context is ripe for mass mobilization. Consensus movements, such as Citizens Against Drunk Driving in the 1980s, are examples of this profile (McCarthy

and Wolfson 1992). These movements expect and receive wide social support, combining institutional politics and social movement tactics. Elites and political institutions rarely deny their demands.

*Elite-insider model.* Some activists believe institutional politics are fruitless and do not see any hope for engaging in contentious collective action, but they do perceive state elites as approachable and potentially receptive to activist causes. This form of activism works behind the scenes to influence state elites. Before the recent upheavals in the Middle East, for example, Arab business groups seeking economic and political liberalization sometimes lobbied rulers for top-down reforms, in the absence of meaningful representative institutions and opportunities for popular mobilization from below (Moore 2001; Perthes 2001).

*Elite-outsider model.* This profile views institutional paths as blocked, but believes opportunities for contentious collective action exist to bring the people’s demands to the attention of a potentially sympathetic elite. Russia’s Bloody Sunday is a famous example: on January 9, 1905, workers in St. Petersburg marched to the Winter Palace to submit their petition to the Tsar, demanding better working conditions and citizenship rights. Their petition blamed the state bureaucracy and pleaded with the Tsar, their symbolic father, to institute the necessary reforms. Their march ended in a massacre when troops opened fire on the demonstrators (Ascher 2004).

*Political-negotiation model.* Actors who consider incumbent elites receptive toward movement demands and view institutionalized politics as relatively open, but who believe conditions for mass mobilization are unfavorable, may conclude that the movement should pursue its demands through dialogue, bargaining, and negotiation with state elites through political institutions. An example of this model is the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1970s, which saw black liberation

**Table 1.** Perception Profiles

	Open Windows Model	Elite- Insider Model	Elite- Outsider Model	Political- Negotiation Model	Political- Institution Model	Political- Activist Model	Radical Model	Counter- hegemonic Model
Optimism toward state elites	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Optimism toward political institutions	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Optimism toward contentious collective action	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

as possible within the U.S. political system and urged African Americans to organize themselves as an interest group, using tactics such as “coalition building, black-white alliances, and effective mobilization of the black vote” (McCartney 1992:152).

*Political-institution model.* This profile views state elites as resistant to a movement’s demands and sees no opportunity for contentious collective action, but it identifies channels for activism within institutional politics. An example is the reformist wing of the German Socialist movement in the early twentieth century, represented by Eduard Bernstein. In contrast to revolutionary socialists, Bernstein argued that socialism would be achieved through the democratic institutions of capitalist society, such as parliament, municipalities, and trade unions. He and his faction advocated parliamentary tactics instead of strikes and revolutionary actions (Kołakowski 2005).

*Political-activist model.* Some activists perceive opportunities in both institutional politics and contentious collective action—they combine insider and outsider tactics to bring pressure from below on political institutions. The U.S. civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is a classic example. Its primary leaders pursued institutional change through electoral politics and judicial processes while simultaneously staging sit-ins, boycotts, and other forms of contentious collective action.

*Radical model.* Activists with no hope for elite or institutional openings may turn exclusively to mass mobilization. This is the classic revolutionary situation: with all other avenues blocked, a movement seeks revolutionary change (Goodwin 2001). The African National Congress in South Africa exemplifies this model: after the failure of political and judicial tactics, the movement adopted armed struggle as a last resort (Mandela 1994).

*Counter-hegemonic model.* Finally, activists who face a hostile state elite, closed institutional politics, and calamitous conditions for contentious collective action may focus on grassroots organizing and consciousness raising, hoping to transform people’s mindsets and expand activist networks until an opportune moment arrives for contentious collective action. This profile resonates with Gramsci’s war of attrition. Gramsci (2001) argued that political struggle to capture the state must be preceded by struggle against the state’s ideological armor in civil society, such as the church and educational system. The Black Consciousness movement in South Africa provides an example: contrary to the African National Congress, which engaged in direct action, Black Consciousness activists viewed confrontation as disastrous and instead engaged in awakening black identity (Marx 1991). Feminist activists during periods of “abeyance” provide another example: when the political climate was not receptive to feminist activism in the mid-twentieth century, feminists created organizational niches that allowed activist networks to survive, sustained their repertoire of tactics, and fostered a collective activist identity (Taylor 1989).

Activists may switch from one perception profile to another as perceptions of conditions change (Koopmans 2004). I argue that as perceptions converge, the potential for alliance increases. Actors who perceive and respond to their political environment in similar ways are more likely to generate similar strategies (Jasper 2012; Maney et al. 2012) and tactics (Wang and Soule 2012), increasing the chances of cooperating on shared projects. Similarly, as perception profiles diverge, activists disagree in their assessment of the environment and advocate different strategic paths. Both the opening and the contraction of political opportunities are mediated through the convergence and divergence of perception profiles. For example, some dissident groups may respond to repression by concluding that working through existing

political institutions is futile, whereas other groups may remain optimistic about achieving their goals through institutional politics. Studies of splits between radicals and moderates in the later phases of protest cycles have singled out this process (DeNardo 1985; Koopmans 1993). Opening of political opportunities by officeholders may have the same effect, if some groups perceive these openings as worth pursuing but others maintain their previous perception profiles and consider the opening a sham (Bueno de Mesquita 2005). Alliances are more likely to disintegrate under these conditions. Threat and opportunity indeed matter, but dependent on whether actors perceive them similarly or dissimilarly.

## THE IRANIAN REFORM MOVEMENT

The Iranian Reform Movement of 1997 to 2005 presents a particularly strong case to examine the puzzle of changing alliances in social movements. Like many movements, it comprised a complex set of organizations—a clerical reformist party, two main lay reformist parties, a student movement, and two main nationalist groups (see Table 2). In addition, the case offers momentous shifts in alliances among these groups. From 1997 to 2000, the main alliance in the movement was between the clerical reformists, the lay reformists, and the student movement. This coalition broke down after 2000, and a new alliance formed between lay reformists and the nationalist opposition. I propose that these shifts in alliances were associated with shifts in perception profiles.

All of these groups sought to implement democratic reforms in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Republic came to power in Iran after the revolution of 1979, creating a unique hybrid of elected institutions—the presidency, parliament, and municipal authorities—and unelected institutions such as the office of the Leader and the Guardian Council. Elected institutions control some portion of power in Iran, but unelected institutions occupied by conservative forces have had the

upper-hand on paper and in practice. The constitution gives the Leader control of the armed forces, national radio and television, and appointment of the head of the judiciary and the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council vets candidates for elections, supervises elections, and has veto power over parliamentary legislation. The Reform Movement in Iran, which consisted of four main currents, aimed to empower elected institutions and hold unelected offices more accountable.

*Reformist clerical party.* The Assembly of Militant Clerics, the main reformist clerical party, was founded in 1988. In the factional politics of the Islamic Republic, the Assembly belonged to the left wing—it advocated state intervention in the economy and took an anti-imperialist position on foreign policy. The Assembly gained a majority of seats in the third parliament (1988 to 1992), but most of its candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council in the 1992 parliamentary election. In the 1990s, the Assembly gradually modified its views, emphasizing popular sovereignty and civil rights. In 1997, Mohammad Khatami, a leading member of the Assembly, won the presidential election, bringing the Assembly back to center stage. With the reformists' landslide victory in the 1999 parliamentary election, Mehdi Karrubi, another prominent Assembly member at the time, became the speaker of parliament.

*Reformist lay parties.* Two lay reformist parties were particularly active in Iran's Reform Movement: the Participation Party and the Organization of the Mujahedin. Along with the Assembly, members of the Organization of the Mujahedin were part of the left wing in the 1980s and were barred from elections in the early 1990s. At that time, the Organization shifted its leftist and anti-imperialist views toward more democratic themes. In the 1997 presidential election, the Organization backed Khatami, and after the reformist victory in the 1999 parliamentary election, two prominent members of the group became deputy speakers of parliament (2000 to 2004). The Participation Party was formed in 1998



**Table 2.** Main Groups in the Iranian Reform Movement

	Student Movement	Clerical Reformist Party	Lay Reformist Parties		Nationalist Opposition	
Persian name	Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat	Majma'e-ye Rohaniyun-e Mobarez	Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Eslami-ye Iran	Jebhe-ye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami	Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran	Fa'alan-e Melli-Mazhabi
English name	Office for Strengthening Unity	Assembly of Militant Clerics	Organization of the Mujahedin of the Islamic Revolution of Iran	Islamic Iran Participation Front	Iran Liberation Movement	Nationalist-Religious Activists
Year founded	1979	1989	1979 (reestablished in 1991)	1998	1961	1999
Prominent leaders	Ali Afshari, Reza Hojjati, Nima Fateh	Mohammad Khatami, Mehdi Karrubi, Mohammad Musavi-Kho'eyniha	Behzad Nabavi, Mohsen Armin, Mohammad Salamati	Mohammad Reza Khatami, Mostafa Tajzadeh, Mohsen Mirdamadi	Ebrahim Yazdi, Mohammad Tavassoli, Hashem Sabbaghian	Ezzatollah Sahabi, Habibollah Peyman, Morteza Kazemian

by staff members from Khatami's 1997 presidential campaign. The Participation Party soon grew into the largest reformist party, with the highest percentage of representation in the sixth parliament (2000 to 2004), and many of its members served as deputy speakers and deputy ministers in Khatami's cabinet.

*The student movement.* The student movement and its main organization, the Unity Office, were active in Khatami's 1997 campaign and later political events. This organization was affiliated with the left wing in the 1980s, when it helped the regime purge university campuses of Marxist students. With the rise of new intellectual trends in Iran in the 1990s, this organization adopted a more democratic discourse, championed liberal goals, and began to mobilize oppositional events on university campuses. At the same time, the organization democratized its internal regulations, allowing the student body at each university to elect representatives to a central council of the Unity Office.

*The nationalist opposition.* Two additional lay organizations were prominent in the Reform Movement, both of which emphasized nationalist themes. Founded in 1961, the Liberation Movement was the oldest political party still active in Iran. It has long espoused liberal views, opposing authoritarianism before and after the revolution. In 1979, just after the revolution, members of the group participated in Iran's interim government, but they were pressured to resign within a year. The Liberation Movement had some members in the first parliament (1980 to 1984) but was not allowed to run in any election since. A second group, the Nationalist-Religious Activists, shared the Liberation Movement's pro-democracy stance but favored welfare-state economics, instead of a free-market model, and held a more critical view toward the West in their foreign policy.

Much scholarship about Iranian reformism focuses on structural factors that supposedly explain the emergence and outcome of the

movement or the resilience of the Islamic Republic. Major explanatory factors in such studies include the political institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Arjomand 2009; Bashiriyeh 2005; Brownlee 2007; Brumberg 2001; Gheissari and Nasr 2006; Keshavarzian 2005; Tezcur 2010); the country's class structure (Bashiriyeh 2006); and the ideology and discourse of the Reform Movement itself (Ansari 2006; Arjomand 2009; Kamrava 2008; Kashi 2000). Another body of work argues that the trajectory of reformism was not preordained, but was due largely to the movement's strategic decisions (Alamdari 2008; Bayat 2007; Hajjarian 2005). Some scholarship on the reformists recognizes the coalitional nature of the movement and tensions within it (Ansari 2006; Arjomand 2009; Bayat 2007; Keshavarzian 2005; Mashayekhi 2001), although these distinctions are treated as secondary to the main focus of the analysis. Here, by contrast, I treat organizational diversity within the movement as a crucial factor mediating other explanatory approaches.

I examine perception profiles before and after a single historical moment, the contraction of political opportunities in 2000, which was a major turning point in the experience of the Iranian Reform Movement. At the time, activists identified these changes in perception profiles as a rejection of their previous statements about the political environment, and these changes were widely discussed in the Iranian press. The rest of this article is organized around these two phases, showing how the various wings of the Iranian Reform Movement perceived opportunities and threats, and how these perceptions were linked to alliance formation and fracturing (summarized in Table 3). Each section documents how perceptions of a shared set of political developments—both expansions of opportunity, such as elections, and contractions of opportunity, such as crackdowns—varied among different groups within the Reform Movement. Because the Reform Movement offers synchronic and diachronic variation across different variables of repression, goals, institutional access, perception

**Table 3.** Perception Profiles in the Iranian Reform Movement

	Student Movement	Clerical Reformist Party	Lay Reformist Parties	Nationalist Groups
The Era of Optimism 1997 to 2000	Political-negotiation model	Political-negotiation model	Political-negotiation model	Political-activist model
The Era of Disillusionment 2000 to 2005	Radical model	Political-negotiation model	Political-institution model	Political-activist model

Note: Alliances are outlined with dark lines.

profiles, and coalitions, it is well-suited for a diverse-case comparative approach that tests hypotheses regarding these factors (George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007).

I test several alternative hypotheses, along with my original hypothesis about the effect of perception profiles on coalitions. One alternative suggests that political opportunities may affect both perceptions and coalitions, rendering the effect of perceptions on coalitions spurious. I address this hypothesis by considering each group's level of access to government positions and comparing this variation with shifts in coalition formation. A second hypothesis holds that repression affects coalitions directly, without mediation through perception profiles. I test this hypothesis through an examination of the timing of repression and coalitional shifts. A further hypothesis holds that groups with similar ideologies are more likely to form alliances with one another, regardless of perception profiles. This hypothesis is tested through a comparison of group ideologies, as identified through manifestos and other statements, with shifts in coalitions.

## DATA AND METHODS

This study is based on speeches, interviews, writings, and public statements by organizations and leading members of the Iranian Reform Movement between 1997 and 2005. I collected these materials through the Namaye electronic database, which contains the full text of articles from more than 1,300 Iranian journals, newspapers, and magazines, covering virtually every periodical in Iran other

than academic journals and tabloids. This database covers the Iranian political spectrum from left to right, including national and local periodicals and nonpolitical periodicals about science, industry, tourism, culture, economy, and religion, among other topics. To find relevant articles, I read the titles of all articles in Namaye's political categories; if the title was not clear, I skimmed through an article's content to see if it contained relevant material. I looked for discussions of political opportunity, threat, movement strategy, definitions and goals of reformism, and related themes. I selected articles based on my reading rather than the automated use of search terms. These articles cover all major episodes of the Reform Movement, often from multiple perspectives. I supplemented the views of the Iranian student movement, which was underrepresented in the Namaye database, with material from the Iranian Student National News Agency (ISNA), whose online archive includes statements of the Unity Office, its branches, and interviews with student activists, as well as considerable material from other reformist political groups. In addition, the study draws on books published in Iran during the reform period, including collections of statements by reformist organizations, writings by activists, collections of news articles, and secondary sources. These multiple sources provided almost 900 contemporaneous statements as evidence of perception profiles in the Iranian Reform Movement, covering all four wings of the movement.<sup>2</sup> These public statements are consistent with the private perceptions I

witnessed as a participant in the Reform Movement, and with the retrospective interviews I conducted with selected movement leaders in 2006 and 2007.

I focus on the perceptions and strategies of organizations, not individuals. This is common practice in the social sciences, which have long treated groups and organizations as actors and studied their strategies (Ganz 2000; Minkoff 1999; Schock 2012). Nevertheless, we must take care that the evidence responsibly reflects organizations' positions. I distinguish between four types of statements: statements by organizations, statements by individual leadership cadres, statements by individuals informally affiliated with organizations, and statements by nonaffiliated individuals. I use the first three types of statements to represent organizations' perception profiles, placing more emphasis on statements by organizations and leadership cadres. I use statements by individuals who were members of, or informally affiliated with, organizations to examine whether rank-and-file members and sympathizers shared the views of an organization's leaders. This method is similar to other recent contributions in social movement studies (Einwohner 2003; Maher 2010). I coded each statement for themes related to movement goals and assessment of the political situation. Out of these themes, I identified three perceptions of political opportunity in these texts: optimism or pessimism about state elites, optimism or pessimism about state institutions, and optimism or pessimism about contentious mobilization.

This analysis does not assume that organizations are unanimous in their views. Certainly, an organization's members may disagree with one another. However, this study addresses internal debates only if they were important enough to affect an organization's official position or actions. The most important example of internal disagreement in the case of the Iranian Reform Movement involved the student movement in 2004 to 2005, when several local branches contradicted the central leadership's position on the 2005 election, affecting the student movement's ability to act collectively. I discuss this internal conflict and its implications in the empirical section.

## THE ERA OF OPTIMISM, 1997 TO 2000

The catalyst for the Reform Movement was Mohammad Khatami's presidential campaign in 1997 and his unexpected landslide victory. Khatami won 70 percent of the vote despite the establishment's support for his rival. Khatami's campaign resonated with the rising demands of the middle class, youth, and women, who turned out to vote in record numbers. His candidacy was backed by a coalition of 18 groups that later formally created an umbrella organization called the May 23 Front (*Jebhe-ye Dovvom-e Khordad*), May 23 being the day of the 1997 election. The Assembly, the Mojahedin, and the Unity Office—all of which grew out of the regime's left wing in the 1980s—were important members of this Front, and their cooperation around Khatami's candidacy prevented splits among the reformists. The Assembly and the Mojahedin provided funds and campaign expertise, and the student movement provided grassroots campaigners around the country—resource sharing that fits the definition of a coalition in social movement studies. In 1998, when the Participation Party was founded, it joined the May 23 coalition. These groups all agreed on the reformist goals of promoting the rule of law, holding officeholders accountable, and strengthening civil society (Ansari 2006; Arjomand 2009; Bayat 2007; Mashayekhi 2001). Even the student movement, which was more rebellious than other coalition members, adopted these reformist goals:

Since the Islamic student movement believes that democratic relations should rule over the country and people should determine their destiny, it continues to support Mr. Khatami's administration. The important issue now in the student movement is the emphasis on the rule of law. (*Jahan-e Eslam*, January 2, 1999)<sup>3</sup>

This alliance held together for the next three years, despite assaults by conservatives and tensions within the coalition. The alliance

campaigns for overlapping lists of candidates in the 1998 municipal election and 1999 parliamentary election. For a summary of key events in the Reform Movement and each group's strategy at each juncture, see Table S1 in the online supplement.

Almost all major reformist organizations shared a single perception profile in appraising their political context, what I call the political-negotiation model. This view of Iranian politics and political culture suggested that reform should be pursued gradually through cultivation of values of tolerance and dialogue. Negotiation was the best strategy for democratization, in this view, because it would teach Iranians how to engage in democratic compromise. In addition, the strategy of negotiation was based on a fundamental optimism toward the elite of the Islamic Republic. Khatami and most other reformists believed they could persuade conservative opponents of reform to accede to democratization. "We believe there is a rational faculty at the upper level of the regime that has always rescued the country at the edge of the precipice," wrote the official newspaper of Khatami's administration (*Iran*, April 28, 2000). Khatami's allies in the clerical reformist party agreed. "The best way to engage the enemies of civil society is to give them this opportunity to rethink and to let them readjust," one affiliated newspaper suggested. "We should show them in practice that transition to democracy presents greater opportunities than threats" (*Hayat-e No*, June 1, 2000).

In addition to this optimistic view that elite opponents of reform would be convinced through dialogue, reformists also believed that institutions of the Islamic Republic were capable of reforming the regime from within (*Asr-e Ma*, December 1999/January 2000). As a journalist affiliated with the lay reformist parties put it, the political institutions of the Islamic Republic were not "dead-ends." Indeed, he continued, "there is no way to change the world than to act within legal institutions" (*Neshat*, July 13, 1999).

In keeping with this emphasis on working within the system, supporters of political

negotiation were reluctant to encourage contentious collective action. Grievances were so deep, they feared, that mass mobilization would stir up emotions, spawning radicalism and providing hardliners with an excuse for repression, possibly leading to civil war. In addition, these reformists felt, the Reform Movement lacked the organizational capacity to keep public demonstrations under control. A newspaper affiliated with the lay reformist parties wrote, for instance, that "in a mass gathering extremists always take the position of leaders and lead the crowd, people who shout the most radical slogans and agitate feelings and emotions. That's what mass psychology tells us" (*Sobh-e Emruz*, July 27, 1999). Commentators drew analogies from Iran's recent history to show how radicalism had damaged democratic movements in the past (*Bayan*, January 4, 2000; *Neshat*, July 14, 1999). Iran's hardliners stoked such fears by sending agents provocateurs to chant radical slogans at reformist rallies and attacking reformist gatherings with militias and thugs.

The political-negotiation model was shared at this stage by the Clerical Reformist party, the Lay Reformist parties, and the student movement, which cooperated under the banner of the May 23 Front. This perception profile was rooted in these groups' political activities in the two decades before the advent of the Reform Movement. The Clerical Reformist and Lay Reformist parties of the reform era were allies of the conservatives before and during the 1979 revolution, but they split with the conservatives in the intense factional politics of the 1980s. They managed to gain the upper-hand in the executive branch and parliament by the late 1980s, but were marginalized by the conservative Guardian Council in the early 1990s. Their optimism about the democratic potential of the regime's leaders and institutions reflected two decades of negotiating with regime insiders, some of whom were long-time friends and relatives of leading reformists. In addition, as regime insiders themselves in the 1980s, they had witnessed the regime's capacity to repress open protest, and such experiences made

them cautious about using contentious methods (interview with Behzad Nabavi in *Aftab*, August/September 2002). Virtually all protesters who had adopted more radical methods were dead, in exile, or silenced.

The nationalist opposition was the one set of reform organizations that did not share this view of political opportunities. Its perception profile, which I call the political-activist model, was not optimistic about persuading the conservative elite of the Islamic Republic to accept democratization, and it stressed the possibility and necessity of contentious collective action to confront the regime. Nationalist groups encouraged Khatami to adopt the political style of Mohammad Mossadeq, the democratically elected prime minister who mobilized mass support for nationalization of the oil industry in 1950, forcing his better-placed opponents within Iran's political institutions to accept his programs (Iran Liberation Movement, statement #1369, May 19, 1999). Nationalist groups participated in the 1979 revolution, alongside other movements, but were shoved aside within a year and thus had little experience of negotiation with conservative elites. As a result, they had less confidence in their ability to sway incumbent elites than did other reformists. At the same time, the nationalist opposition shared the political-negotiation view that Iran's political institutions offered opportunities for democratization. Accordingly, nationalist groups participated in the 1997 presidential election, despite the fact that their candidates were not allowed to run. The Liberation Movement urged its followers to cast blank ballots, and the Religious-Nationalist Activists implicitly endorsed Khatami (Kashi 2000). Nonetheless, nationalist groups did not act in an alliance with the other three reformist groups. The alliance in this period was only between groups that shared the political-negotiation model.

These perception profiles withstood the first wave of repression that conservatives unleashed in 1998 to 1999. Hardliners tried to undermine the Reform Movement by disqualifying reformist candidates in elections, attacking protest gatherings, closing reformist newspapers, and arresting and harassing prominent reformist figures. If fluctuations in

political opportunities had an unmediated impact on alliances, we would expect to see abandonment of the political-negotiation mode and collapse of the major coalition. However, supporters of political negotiation—the clerical reformist party, lay reformist parties, and the main organization of the student movement—continued to believe that opportunities lay in lobbying elites and working through Iran's political institutions. For instance, when the Guardian Council disqualified many reformist clerics from standing for election to the Assembly of Experts in 1998, Khatami tried to solve the problem through negotiation with the Leader. He failed, but that did not change his views (interview with Mehdi Karrubi, *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, January 26, 1999).

When hardliners imprisoned reformist activists and leaders, shot a prominent reformist strategist, and raided a university dormitory, reformist groups responded by encouraging their constituencies to keep calm and avoid excuses for further repression (Kurzman 1999; Zakariyayi 1999). The leading organization in the student movement, the Unity Office, briefly organized demonstrations to protest the arrest of a reformist cleric, but later canceled them, heeding warnings from other reformists that such a gathering would end as a bloody failure, like the protests in Tiananmen Square in China. When another reformist leader was arrested, lay reformist parties and activists argued that the arrest “might be a plan to agitate emotions, and we should not give any opportunity for repression. Thus, at this time, any [protest] gathering will serve the interests of authoritarians” (*Asr-e Azadegan*, November 29, 1999).

This approach—refusing to mobilize protests in the face of hardliners' repressive tactics—came to be known in Iran as “active tranquility.” One lay reformist party, the Organization of the Mojahedin, which coined this phrase, emphasized that reformists should continue to pursue their demands but maintain tranquility and avoid confrontation, with a view toward gaining the trust and reducing the resistance of conservatives (*Asr-e Ma*, June

2000). The student movement's Unity Office, which was still adhering to the rule of law as its primary goal (*Asr-e Azadegan*, December 6, 1999), was among the first groups to adopt this approach (*Iran*, July 10, 2000).

The nationalist opposition continued to advocate a more activist approach to challenge the conservatives' repressive measures. When the reformist mayor of Tehran was arrested in 1998, a nationalist monthly urged President Khatami to send his followers into the streets in protest: "The biggest source of power for the president is his 20 million votes, so he should think of ways to make this potential force real. . . . When the president invites the people [into the streets], the police will not allow [right-wing] militias to attack the crowd" (*Iran-e Farda*, July 1998).

Khatami never responded to these activist calls to protest. Rather, he and his reformist coalition considered their negotiation approach to have been vindicated by their victory in the parliamentary election of 2000. The nationalist opposition also participated in the election, but not in alliance with other reformist groups. The reformist coalition declared triumphantly that ballot boxes and electoral institutions were still the best opportunity for democratization, not contentious popular mobilization (*Bayan*, March 18, 2000; *Hambastegi*, December 1, 2001). Reformist parties were still optimistic that they could negotiate with conservative elites, including the Guardian Council, which holds the constitutional right to veto parliamentary bills (*Bayan*, May 4, 2000; *Hayat-e No*, December 24, 2000). They continued to favor dialogue as the best means to smooth the path toward democratization (*Nowruz*, August 15 and December 26, 2001).

## THE ERA OF DISILLUSIONMENT, 2000 TO 2005

In response to reformists' victory in the 2000 parliamentary election, conservatives stepped up their efforts to stymie the Reform Movement. The Guardian Council vetoed pro-democratic bills in parliament, and the

judiciary harassed and imprisoned reformist activists, journalists, and intellectuals. Students and the nationalist opposition suffered the highest levels of repression—activists from these groups spent months in solitary confinement and were tortured to make false confessions. If repression affected alliances independently of perception profiles, we would expect groups that experienced the greatest repression to converge. However, the nationalist opposition and the student movement did not ally with one another. Moreover, the coalition between lay reformist and clerical reformist parties, both of which experienced lesser repression, split.

Escalating repression triggered strategic debates and critiques within the Reform Movement, as new perception profiles and calls for new strategies emerged. Intellectuals, journalists, and strategists within the Reform Movement began to question main elements of the political-negotiation model, and debates raged in the reformist press, on university campuses, and among reformist leaders.

One critique, which was rarely voiced prior to this time, accused those aligned with the political-negotiation model of focusing exclusively on elites and political institutions and neglecting the grassroots base of the Reform Movement. According to this critique, all the movement's successes were due to mobilization of the base, and the only way to continue this success was to create pressure from below (*Aftab*, January/February 2000). "We should not look for power at the top. Power is distributed from below. When people at the bottom find each other, micro-mobilization occurs" (*Fekr-e No*, April/May 2000). "The biggest weakness of the reformists is that despite all their claims, they do not believe in people power. The ultimate solution is not surrender, disappointment, referendums, or other insider methods, or any kind of action 'at the top.' The solution is to use people power effectively" (*Seda-ye Edalat*, March 19, 2002).

A second internal critique, from intellectuals and strategists linked with several factions

of the Reform Movement, reflected waning optimism about the potential for persuading conservative elites through negotiation. "This perception that one can change their attitudes with sympathy, by speaking their language, is a mistake that has been made repeatedly" (*Aftab*, July/September 2003). These critics blamed Khatami and the reformist coalition for not utilizing the full powers of their office to encourage hardliners (*Nowruz*, June 6, 2001).

These debates drove the lay reformist groups to shift from a negotiation approach to a political-institutional model. A year after proposing the strategy of active tranquility, the Organization of the Mujahedin adopted a new strategy that it called "active deterrence." This new strategy acknowledged that active tranquility had failed to overcome conservative opposition to the Reform Movement. Active deterrence, in contrast, demanded that reformists in parliament and the executive branch use their institutional positions to oppose the growing repression (*Asr-e Ma*, December 22, 2001). The Participation Party, the other lay reformist party, adopted a similar stance the following year, which it called "the politics of greater activity." "This approach includes all legal styles of critique to counter anti-democratic and anti-reformist methods" (*Yas-e No*, November 13, 2003). This new, more aggressive approach resulted in the lay reformists being disqualified from elections. Still, these groups resisted contentious protest, which they considered inadvisable.

The perception profile of the student movement shifted even farther, from political negotiation to radicalism. In a statement in 2002, the students' Unity Office expressed its disillusionment with the negotiation model: "According to our analysis, the capacity of the current discourse of reformism, dating back to May 23 [President Khatami's election in 1997], has been exhausted, and many of its assumptions have been tarnished" (*Asr-e No*, September 24, 2002). In keeping with this new perception profile, the Unity Office refused to participate in the reformists' coalition for municipal elections in February 2003. The election results took the reformists by surprise: with low voter

turnout, hardline conservatives won many municipal races, including the municipal council in Tehran, which brought Mahmud Ahmadinezhad, the future president of Iran, to office. Shortly after the election, the Unity Office officially left the May 23 Front. Reform from within was no longer feasible, it said:

To speak of the ineffectiveness of the May 23 Front is to acknowledge the reality that the strategy of "self-reforming" the regime has reached a dead-end. Of course, this is not just because of the weaknesses of the reformists. The fact that the hard core of power does not surrender to the process of reform has been one of the root causes of this dead-end. (*Asr-e No*, March 10, 2003)

This shift in the student movement's perceptions owed much to the writings of Akbar Ganji, a prominent journalist, ally of the lay reformist parties, and important promoter of the negotiation model in the earlier period. Ganji was arrested in 2000. In prison, he wrote a *Republican Manifesto* that rejected the negotiation model in favor of radicalism. Ganji insisted that the Islamic Republic of Iran was not reformable. The regime's institutional arrangement was so inherently authoritarian that reform from within was impossible. Working within legal institutions would just waste the Reform Movement's social capital. The only solution, he proposed, was to boycott government institutions and demand the establishment of a fully secular republic through methods of civil disobedience. Prominent members of the Unity Office came to a similar view: "Struggling to reform an unreformable system is futile. In an inflexible power structure and sociopolitical configuration that has left no hope of submitting to the will of people, how can one talk about political action within the framework of reformism?" (*Sharq*, September 29, 2004). The radical model rejected any positive role for representatives in government institutions, because structural constraints would prevent them from being effective in their official positions. As a result, they would not be able



to keep their promises to their constituents and would lose people's trust (*Sharq*, December 2, 2004). This shift in the student movement perception profile coincided with a shift in their goals, from rule of law within the framework of the Islamic Republic to a secular democratic republic.

These shifts jeopardized the institutional access the student movement had enjoyed during the first years of Khatami's presidency. The Unity Office had a member on the Tehran municipal council and half a dozen representatives in parliament, and leading members had acquired government positions through their connections with the lay reformist groups. The radicalization of the Unity Office meant an end to such institutional access.

The clerical reformist party, by contrast, maintained its negotiation profile, even after the Guardian Council disqualified thousands of reformist candidates from the 2004 parliamentary elections, including dozens of incumbents. Yet Khatami and Mehdi Karrubi, the speaker of the parliament, tried to solve the problem through regular meetings with the Leader (*Iran*, October 8, 2003). The lay reformist parties, having abandoned the negotiation model, demanded that Khatami take a more confrontational stance and postpone the elections. Khatami refused, and the lay parties broke their alliance with the clerical reformists, boycotting the election. Prior to this moment, the lay reformist parties and the clerical reformist party had worked together closely. However, the perception profile of the lay reformist groups had changed, and they no longer shared the clerical reformist party's optimism about the incumbent elite. Their new perception profile emphasized the potential for institutional political struggle, whereas the clerical reformist party was still advocating negotiation. This divergence in perception profiles made cooperation difficult.

Soon after the 2003 municipal elections, the student movement began to act on its radical perceptions of opportunity. Several student leaders, along with other activists, issued a statement calling for a referendum on democratic constitutional change. As part of

the campaign, they launched a website with the title "Sixty Million Signatures," inviting Iranians to sign a petition on behalf of the referendum. Other reformists objected to this strategy, not just negotiationists and institutionalists but activists as well. Said Hajjarian, a leading theorist of the activist model, criticized the referendum as delusional. He doubted that reformists had the capacity to change the constitution and compared the referendum campaign with millenarian movements, an analogy that infuriated the radicals (*Salnameh-ye Sharq*, March 2005).

The debate over the constitutional referendum revolved around perceptions of opportunity, trumping even the importance of differing goals within various wings of the Reform Movement. The Liberation Movement, a nationalist group, had been critical of the constitution since it was drafted in 1979 (Chehabi 1990). Its members had suffered state repression on many occasions and were banned from running for elected office; the Unity Office of the student movement was experiencing repression for the first time. Repression transformed students' assessment of the Islamic Republic, but it did not lead the Liberation Movement to ally with the radicals proposing constitutional change. Ebrahim Yazdi, the group's secretary-general, questioned whether real opportunities existed for contentious popular action: "People who seek to change the constitution and the legal structure should explain what power leverage they are going to do so with" (*Gooya*, December 15, 2004).

Shifting perception profiles resulted in a new set of alliances during the 2005 presidential election. The remaining adherents to the negotiation model, the clerical reformist party, backed the candidacy of former speaker of parliament Mehdi Karrubi, whose campaign emphasized his strength at bargaining with conservative power-holders and his intention to pursue reform through negotiation (ISNA, June 11, 2005). Adherents to the institutional model, the lay reformist parties, nominated Mostafa Mo'in. They described the election as an opportunity to resuscitate

and empower the Reform Movement (ISNA, May 14, 2005). Whereas Karrubi's supporters emphasized negotiation and called themselves "pragmatist," Mo'in's supporters called themselves "progressive" and emphasized their willingness to confront the conservatives within Iran's political institutions. For example, Mo'in promised that he would never hold elections with mass candidate disqualifications, as Khatami had done in 2004 (ISNA, May 15, 2005). The nationalist opposition, still adhering to the activist model, nominated Ebrahim Yazdi as their presidential candidate, describing the election as a potential opportunity for democratization (*Sharq*, April 1, 2005). When the Guardian Council disqualified Yazdi, the nationalist opposition entered into negotiations with the lay reformist parties and chose to support Mo'in's candidacy, formalizing the alliance between the lay reformist parties and the nationalist groups. They justified this decision by pointing to the threat they perceived if the hardliners were to solidify control of all political institutions, adding the executive branch to their control of parliament, the municipal councils, and the unelected branches of government. Boycotting the election would only benefit the authoritarian faction. Ezzatollah Sahabi, head of the Nationalist-Religious Activists, the other nationalist group, said that "if we do not participate in the election, the right faction will win the election, and that will be a disaster for the country, as we can observe in the behavior of the mayor of Tehran [Mahmud Ahmadinezhad]" (ISNA, June 6, 2005). This marked the first time the nationalist opposition had allied with other opposition groups since the 1979 revolution, and it resulted in a coordinated electoral campaign on behalf of Mo'in.

Radicals in the student movement boycotted the election, which they viewed as a charade to legitimize the regime, not a real political opportunity. Boycott, in their view, would delegitimize the regime and promote "society-centered" political change (ISNA, May 16 and 22, 2005). But the Unity Office, the leading student organization, was not

unanimous on this subject. A number of branches endorsed Mo'in for president or supported participation in the election without naming Mo'in specifically (ISNA, June 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, and 14, 2005). Their position reproduced the classic political-opportunity thesis within social movement studies, according to which the presence of elite allies and a factionalized state favor the rise of social movements: these student activists argued that a reformist victory in the presidential election would lead to a divided government, and this fracture in sovereignty would open political space for the opposition. Opportunities for reform were still to be found within the system, they said, and activists needed a force within the government to counteract the hardliners (ISNA, May 15, 2005).

The reformist electoral coalition that came together for the presidential elections of 1997 and 2001 and the parliamentary election in 2000 had come undone by the parliamentary election of 2004, when the lay reformist parties and the student movement refused to endorse the clerical reformist party's candidates. In the 2005 presidential election, two groups that shared similar perception profiles—the lay reformist parties and the nationalist opposition—came together to support a reformist candidate, Mostafa Mo'in. The clerical reformist party supported a different candidate, Mehdi Karrubi, who was less confrontational toward state elites. Much of the student movement boycotted the election. If all of these factions had maintained their coalition and supported a single candidate, it is likely that Mahmud Ahmadinezhad would not have been elected. Karrubi would have outpolled Ahmadinezhad with less than one million of Mo'in's four million votes.

Several years after the collapse of the Iranian Reform Movement, massive protests emerged in the wake of the disputed presidential election of 2009. With hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in the streets, the opposition alliance reformed under the banner of the Green Movement, this time coalescing around an activist perception profile. In 2013,

a pragmatist reformist alliance, similar to the 2005 coalition, backed the moderate candidate Hasan Rouhani, and made him the winner of the election. Both the Green Movement and the 2013 election echoed some of the strategic debates from the reform era, but their complicated trajectories and contingencies deserve their own treatment, and I pursue this as a separate project. The current study, accordingly, provides a genealogy of such strategic debates within the Green Movement.

## CONCLUSIONS

Recent scholarship has focused renewed sociological attention on alliance formation and disintegration in a variety of political and organizational fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). Much of this literature suggests that opportunities and threats are crucial to the emergence and success of coalitions. This article argued that opportunities and threats are indeed important, but they are mediated by perceptions, either perceptions of circumstances within the system (McAdam 1999) or perceptions of viable alternatives outside the system (Kurzban 2004). In the absence of such perceptions, favorable circumstances will not lead to the mobilization of coalitions. However, these perceptions may not go hand-in-hand—actors may see an opportunity in one area but not another. This article disaggregated perceptions into three dimensions: perceptions of the incumbent elite, perceptions of political institutions, and perceptions of the potential for contentious collective action. Challengers may not assess opportunities and threats consistently in all of these contexts. I developed the concept of “perception profiles” to describe patterns of assessment of opportunities and threat. Through a case study of the Iranian Reform Movement, I argued that the convergence and divergence of perceptions affect shifts in alliances.

The Iranian Reform Movement began its campaign to democratize Iran in 1997, with a coalition between the clerical reformist party, lay reformist parties, and the student movement. By 2005, this alliance had disintegrated, and a new coalition had formed between lay

reformist parties and the nationalist opposition. These shifting alliances cannot be mechanically explained by factors such as shared ideologies: the nationalist groups and parts of the student movement came to embrace similar goals of republicanism and constitutional change, but they did not ally with one another. Nor can these alliances be explained by similarities in identity: the lay reformist groups and the clerical reformist party shared a similar background as major players in the left wing of Iranian politics in the 1980s and the reformist metamorphosis of the 1990s, yet their alliance did not survive the crackdown that both groups experienced in 2000. If ideology or identity were the key factors in explaining coalitions, we would have expected the coalition between lay and clerical reformists to survive, and a coalition to emerge between the nationalists and the radical faction of the student movement, neither of which occurred. In addition, organizational characteristics such as differences in age and experience fail to explain these groups’ different trajectories: some student organizations radicalized while others did not, leading to a split in the student movement, and some older activists and politicians, such as Akbar Ganji, radicalized their perceptions and strategies.

Repression does not offer a satisfactory explanation of coalition formation either: the initial coalition survived the first wave of repression, and the most repressed groups—the nationalist opposition and the student movement—never partnered, despite sharing republican ideals and the goal of major constitutional change. Why did some factions of the repressed student movement radicalize while other student factions and nationalist groups stayed with the activist model and advocated participation in the 2005 presidential election? Similarly, variation in institutional access does not explain shifts in alliances: groups with the least institutional access, the nationalist opposition, did not radicalize the most, and the group that radicalized the most, the student movement, did so at the risk of losing its access to parliament and government positions.

I propose that these changing alliances can be understood in terms of the convergence and divergence of perception profiles. Escalation of repression triggered shifts in perceptions among three of the four major groups in the Iranian Reform Movement. The reformist coalition of 1997 was built around shared adherence to a political-negotiation model, which saw significant opportunities in engaging with ruling elites and participating in political institutions. Optimism about these opportunities led various movement organizations—clerical reformists, lay reformists, and the student movement—to rally around Mohammad Khatami's presidential campaign and his emphasis on dialogue with the Republic's unelected leaders. At the same time, these organizations did not believe there were significant opportunities for contentious political action, and they feared public protest would devolve into extremism and bloodshed. The nationalist opposition was the only reform faction that saw opportunities in protest at this time; they advocated an activist model that combined working through political institutions with mobilization of popular support.

As conservatives escalated repressive measures and used their institutional power to block reforms in the early 2000s, lay reformist parties and the student movement changed their perception profiles and modified their strategies. The student movement lost hope that negotiation would ever persuade the conservative state elite to accept reform, or that participation in electoral institutions would achieve significant political gains. Instead, the student movement came to stress the effectiveness of popular collective action. Lay reformist parties also lost their optimism about incumbent elites, but they maintained hope that reform could be achieved through political institutions. Only the clerical reformist party associated with President Khatami stuck to the negotiation model. As these groups' perception profiles diverged, their alliance disintegrated. Conservative officeholders succeeded in dividing their challengers, although repression also created a new alliance between nationalists and lay reformist groups, whose perception profile had shifted.

Iran is a particularly useful case for studying perception profiles and coalition shifts, due to the complicated set of organizations that comprised the Reform Movement. However, this analytic approach may also be applied in other instances of coalitions in contentious politics. One example comes from debates in the German socialist movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Reformists, represented by Eduard Bernstein, saw opportunities in the democratic institutions of the capitalist state—the political-institutional perception profile, in the terms this article introduced. Bernstein argued that Marx's prediction about the collapse of capitalism was wrong, and that workers' best hope was socialization of property through democratic institutions. Bernstein looked to Britain as a model: Britain's socialist movement lacked a revolutionary doctrine but had made concrete political gains through parliamentary legislation extending workers' economic rights. Socialist revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg, on the other hand, saw opportunities in both parliamentary participation and, especially, contentious collective action—the political-activist perception profile. For Luxemburg, the general strikes of the Russian Revolution of 1905 provided a model for workers around the world. Mass protest would bring about the collapse of capitalism. At the same time, she urged socialists to engage in parliamentary politics so as to undermine the bourgeois state from within. These divergent perceptions about where opportunities lay was not purely theoretical, but was associated with the ultimately debilitating split between the reformist and revolutionary wings of the German socialist movement (Kołakowski 2005).

Whereas perceptions diverged in the German socialist movement, they converged in the Polish Solidarity movement. For decades, Catholics and secular intellectuals operated as "separate islands of opposition" to Communist rule (Osa 2003). Catholics rejected all hope in communism and sought to prepare society for a post-communist future—the counter-hegemonic perception profile. Opposition intellectuals and students saw opportunities for reform

and “socialism with a human face”—they adopted an activist profile that combined political participation with small-scale protests. In the mid-1970s, however, the perception profile of opposition intellectuals shifted, as they concluded it would be impossible to reform the socialist system from within. They shifted their focus from the state to civil society and replaced their activist model with a counterhegemonic model, laying the foundation for alliance with Catholics in the Solidarity movement.

In each of these cases, perception profiles mediated the configuration of political opportunities and alliance formation and collapse. Political openings and repression affected alliances only through the convergence or divergence of perception profiles. When perception profiles converged, oppositional groups were more likely to cooperate; when perception profiles diverged, alliances became more difficult.

Along with documenting the importance of perception profiles, this article opens questions for future research on the sources of divergent perception profiles. The different reactions of factions of the Iranian Reform Movement to the contraction of political opportunities suggest that activists may respond to similar configurations of opportunity and threat in quite different ways, possibly due to leadership cadres' past experiences, groups' previous exposure to repression, their record of contentious collective action, their connections with other groups and individuals, and the level of repression they endure. This article singles out these factors in explaining why groups perceived opportunity and threats as they did, and calls for focused and systematic study of these factors as the source of change in perception profiles.

This article contributes a new analytic framework for the study of alliances. First, based on previous scholarship on cognitive processes in social movements, I introduced the concept of perception profiles, which offers a systematic way to study how actors assess their environment. The concept of perception profiles applies not just to social movement actors, but to the broader universe

of contentious politics, including democratization, civil wars, ethnic conflict, nationalism, and revolutions. As McAdam and colleagues (2001) note, attribution of opportunities and threats occurs in all types of contentious politics, and the concept of perception profiles presents a systematic tool to study this process. The concept of perception profiles also applies to political parties and interest groups, who are not necessarily involved in contentious politics. This concept allows researchers to periodize the trajectory of political organizations, whether engaged in contention or more institutionalized political activity, through the perception profiles they go through. In this way, the concept of perception profiles helps bridge the fields of social movement studies and political sociology more generally, placing contentious actors within the broader political context and setting the ground for meaningful comparison between contentious and noncontentious actors.

Beyond studies of political action, the concept of perception profiles contributes to other fields of social science that are interested in processes of alliance formation. In organizational studies, for example, the concept bridges studies on how firms perceive their environment (Aldrich 2008; Porac, Thomas, and Baden-Fuller 1989) and studies on alliance formation among firms (Doz 1996; Gulati, Wohlgezogen, and Zhelyazkov 2012; Kale and Singh 2009). In the field of international relations, the concept bridges studies on how states perceive or misperceive opportunities, threats, and enemies (Crescenzi 2007; Press 2005; Wendt 2004) and studies of strategic alliances (Morrow 2000; Sorokin 1994; Walt 1987). Bringing together perceptions and coalitional dynamics, this article suggests future research directions for these literatures, which have studied these two phenomena separately but rarely linked them together.

Within its home field of social movement studies, the concept of perception profiles may also help explain other aspects of contentious politics, in addition to alliances. In the emerging literature on social movement

strategy, perception profiles may mediate changes in the political context and a movement's strategic choices. Perception profiles may address why movement actors choose to make certain claims rather than others in their discursive repertoire. On an individual rather than organizational level, perception profiles may account for why individuals join social movements, and which ones. Perception profiles are not the only subjective factor that matters for social movements. Ideologies, shared goals, symbols, political discourse, and collective identities may also facilitate or constrain the formation of coalitions (Ansell 1997; Arnold 1995; Lichterman 1995; Park 2008; Roth 2010). Yet in at least one case, the Iranian Reform Movement, perception profiles appear to have trumped them all.

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### Notes

1. This article adopts a narrow definition of threat as the opposite of political openings. Other approaches, such as Goldstone and Tilly's (2001) definition of threat as the general harm that protesters face and the cost of action or inaction, are not addressed here.
2. These statements are available from the author upon request.
3. For full citations for all primary sources, please see the online supplement (<http://asr.sagepub.com/supplemental>).

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