

8-2001

Defying Conventional Wisdom: Political Movements and Popular Contention against North American Free Trade – Book Review

Donald K. Alper

Western Washington University, don.alper@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/politicalscience_facpubs



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alper, Donald K., "Defying Conventional Wisdom: Political Movements and Popular Contention against North American Free Trade – Book Review" (2001). *Political Science*. 3.

https://cedar.wwu.edu/politicalscience_facpubs/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social and Behavioral Sciences at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Defying Conventional Wisdom: Political Movements and Popular Contention Against North American Free Trade. By Jeffrey M. Ayres. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. Pp. 209. \$55.00.)

This book examines social movement mobilization against NAFTA in Canada. The narrative is divided into two time periods. The first period spans the

early 1980s to the pivotal “free trade election” in 1988, and the second extends from 1988 through the reelection of the Chretien-led Liberal party in 1997. The main argument of the book is that anti-free trade activism was sparked by changes in the Canadian political environment in the 1980s, only to be weakened by further changes in that same environment in the post-1988 period. The major changes in the political environment conducive to anti-NAFTA mobilization were the 1982 recession, the increased emphasis on economic liberalism by the Progressive Conservative party in the 1984 election campaign, and divisions within the Canadian economic and political elite over North American free trade. However, following the 1988 election campaign, critical shifts in the Canadian political environment worked against the anti-NAFTA coalition. Principal among these shifts were increased support for free trade among Liberals (after campaigning against free trade with the U.S. in 1988), a weakened left-of-center New Democratic party (NDP), the onset of a fierce countermobilization by the business community, and the pro-free trade stance of the province of Quebec.

Ayres employs an imaginative and theoretically rich framework drawn from social movement theory to account for the dynamics of popular sector activism in Canada. Essentially, he argues that analysts of protest and mobilization should pay closer attention to the political context in which such activism occurs. Specifically, his framework, called a political process approach, links the rise of popular coalitions to what he calls “favorable political opportunity structures” (6). Examples include electoral instability, the availability of allies within establishment political and economic institutions, and divisions among elites. Following a theoretical introduction in which he carefully outlines his framework, he analyzes the various phases of popular mobilization in the context of the political process. He considers recent developments in social movement theory (Chap. 1) and concludes that the political process framework is superior to familiar approaches—such as resource mobilization and new social movement theory—because it effectively links internal organizational variables with external institutional variables. In short, “the political process approach is more comprehensive than the resource mobilization and new social movement approaches” (20).

The actual story of anti-free trade mobilization (told in Chaps. 2–5) is fascinating. Utilizing numerous interviews, popular sector movement publications, and government documents, Ayres reveals how the movement gathered steam in the 1980s as traditional nationalist groups joined forces with popular sector church, peace, farm, and assorted citizen groups. This led to the formation of the Coalition Against Free Trade (CAFT) and later, the nationwide Pro-Canada Network (PCN), which eventually included sympathetic members of parliament and provincial legislative assemblies. Access to the parliamentary process provided the movement political opportunities that greatly enhanced its leverage and bargaining power. In turn, access to high-level government officials had the effect of energizing the activists and “the strategic posturing and extensive cooperation that developed between partisan actors and the anti-free trade groups served to legitimize the cause” (88). However, the pro-free trade coali-

tion, with its superior resources and clout from business, turned the tables half-way through the campaign. Disharmony within the ranks of the anti-free trade coalition also developed, especially between the NDP and the broader PCN movement. In the end, the reelection of the pro-free trade Progressive Conservative party deflated the popular movement and, more important, served to close off the supportive political context that existed during the years prior to the federal election of 1988. Ayres concludes, "in the years between this election (1988) and that of 1993, the mobilizing potential of the Canadian political opportunity structure greatly weakened" (117).

The remainder of the book (Chaps. 6–7) discusses the transformation of popular mobilization beyond the Canadian domestic context to the United States and Mexico. Ayres points to the "destabilization of authority and the devolution of governance" as critical factors in moving the locus of social movement mobilization beyond the national context to the international arena (Chap. 7). Thus, with the relative decline of national political opportunities, new transnational strategies developed to oppose NAFTA. By 1993, trinational networking had taken the place of national networking. Ayres concludes that such "transnational mobilization would significantly shape movement strategy in the years to come" (134).

For students of Canadian politics, this is one of the few books that analyzes free trade politics in terms of the dynamic interplay between the so-called popular sector and the governing institutions, the state, and other social and political actors. That said, it is important to note that the book underplays the importance of Canadian regional forces in the success of the pro-free trade coalition and the diminished political opportunities for anti-free trade mobilization after 1988. The realities of regionalism and free trade politics go beyond Quebec. The west—especially British Columbia and Alberta—were key support areas for the Progressive Conservatives in 1988. What makes Western free trade politics even more complex is that in 1988 the area gave record support to the NDP.

Overall, this is a book I highly recommend for students of Canadian politics specifically and comparative politics more generally. Ayres has made a major contribution in advancing our thinking about social movements, and his discussion of "transnational and popular democracy" makes this book very useful for scholars interested in collective campaigns that transcend national borders.

Donald K. Alper, *Western Washington University*