

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Realizing Democracy Supplement **People Power**

By Doran Schrantz, Michelle Oyakawa & Liz McKenna

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2020

Copyright © 2019 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

with working-class white and black people living on opposite sides of one of the starkest racial-divide lines in the country: Detroit metro's Eight Mile Road. People worked together to lead their own fights based on a shared analysis and a sense of linked fate.

REGENERATING WE THE PEOPLE

Campaigns like these can be building blocks of national strategy. But swing states like Michigan often find themselves targeted by national funders seeking short-term mobilization in pursuit of issue or electoral outcomes. Strategy and tactics are not locally generated but are decided upon by funders, pollsters, and consultants. Under these conditions, organizers and community leaders can find themselves playing the role of brokers or vendors who mediate between capital and community. This dynamic plays out each election cycle, and it undermines the agency and power of the very communities it purports to support.

Committed organizers and communities often find themselves in similar quandaries. Real change only happens when they can anchor their financial, temporal, and human resources within their constituencies, growing organizational sinews that are firm and flexible enough to link local, state, and national strategy, and organizations powerful enough to reassert their agency.

Powerful social movements have depended on their constituencies more than on funders. Public sector support can be a real option as it was with the "community action projects" of the Great Society era or the Action program led by organizers Sam Brown and John Lewis in the Carter administration. The Reagan administration, however, ended these programs under the rubric of "defunding the left." In response, many community organizations turned to full-time canvassing to fill the gap. But this turned out to be another form of mobilizing—not organizing—that turned young people who wanted to learn organizing into a renewable resource. Churches and unions have been key sources of support. They generate resources by creating moral value within their constituencies, not by producing profit in the marketplace. The reality is that solving the democracy problem requires the restoration of significant autonomy to an organized civil society.

Finding our way forward must begin with organizing. We can bring together experienced organizers who are committed to empowering their constituencies at a whole new level. But we will never find our way to regenerating our democracy if we don't begin now. ●

People Power

Powerful organization, rather than efficient mobilization, is the way to re-center people in our political life.

BY DORAN SCHRANTZ, MICHELLE OYAKAWA & LIZ MCKENNA

The continued decline of Americans' active participation in many aspects of public life is perceived to be common knowledge. Voting rates are one measure of citizen engagement, but there are many others, including campaign donations, volunteer hours, protest participation, online activism, and the density of community groups in a given location. Curiously, many of these numbers

The assumption that scale is synonymous with impact should be interrogated—these mobilizations produce scale absent of impact, participation without commitment.

have gone up even as the overall health of our democracy—the policies and institutions at work for the people—has decayed.

In this context, many organizations have designed solutions grounded in a belief in the power of mass mobilization in which they equate an increase in civic activity with a stronger democracy. This logic, however, wrongly assumes "scale" and "depth" to be mutually exclusive. "Scale" means the quantitative breadth covered by an activity—numbers of conversations with likely voters, numbers of names on a list, or numbers of "likes" or "engagements" on social media. The assumption is that the greater the scale, the higher the probability of impact—here, the higher probability of electoral victories or policies passed—in the political or policy arena.

DORAN SCHRANTZ is the executive director of Faith In Minnesota.

MICHELLE OYAKAWA is a lecturer at The Ohio State University.

LIZ MCKENNA is a postdoctoral scholar at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

Furthermore, to achieve scaled programs that can produce these prized numbers, paid civic engagement programs are incentivized to prioritize efficiency in order to maximize the number of transactions over depth of relationships—either with an individual or with a community.

The underlying assumption that scale is synonymous with impact should be interrogated—these mobilization outfits produce scale absent of impact, participation without commitment, and breadth without the depth needed to sustain it. Given these challenges and the reality of a political system unresponsive to the demands of the larger public, programs of action should combine scale with impact.

FAITH DELEGATE STORY

In 2018, the community-based organizing organization Faith in Minnesota (FiMN) eschewed the standard, scaled political programs and instead devised a two-year campaign and strategy around the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) state endorsing convention for governor.

FiMN first elected and then organized a bloc of 207 delegates and alternates, comprising 11 percent of the total number of delegates and the largest bloc at the convention. These "faith delegates" came into the party process more committed to one another, their organization, and to their shared agenda than to any particular candidate or to the party. The delegates remained uncommitted until they voted as a bloc and agreed to only support the candidate that the collective had agreed to together.

FiMN wanted more than politicians' attention. The organization's strategy had four intentions: to define the public agenda for the 2018 governor's race; to ensure that the campaign narrative of the DFL candidate for governor directly addressed Islamophobia, racism, and white nationalism; to prepare the ground for an election that would build a mandate for a "bold governing agenda"; and to ensure that the constituency of FiMN would be in a co-governing relationship with the new governor's administration. With more than 200 organized delegates with voting power at the convention, FiMN had enough disciplined people power to determine the outcome of the endorsing convention—and, more broadly, to shape the agenda and narrative of the candidates for governor in 2018.

In the past, many large organizations, such as labor unions and interest groups, similarly

sought to affect the outcome of the DFL state endorsing convention. Yet when it came time to endorse, they had always failed to hold their bloc together. Several candidate's campaigns and their allies attempted to "split the bloc" of FiMN by appealing to individual delegates, whose personal preferences for each of the three major candidates did indeed vary. Although historical precedent suggested there was no way the bloc would hold, the FiMN delegation was successful.

How did FiMN arrive at this moment of collective discipline? They first invited 500 members of its base to be core organizers of the path to the state convention. Those volunteers were invited to organize others to attend precinct caucuses, to build their own individual "campaign" to become a state delegate, and to remain uncommitted to any campaign or candidate until it was clear how FiMN would act as a collective. These volunteer leaders organized close to 2,000 people to attend house meetings six months in advance of the state convention. Then, FiMN's 500 volunteer organizers trained and transported 3,500 people to attend precinct caucuses, equipped 1,500 FiMN supporters to attend Senate District conventions, and ultimately made it possible for FiMN to secure 11 percent of the total DFL endorsing convention.

The secret of the success of this program was the investment in the 500 volunteer organizers. Most of these grassroots volunteers had never been to precinct caucuses and certainly had never attended a party endorsing convention. These 500 leaders are connected to community-based, member institutions of FiMN such as childcare centers, barbershops, congregations, and mosques. Of the total delegation to the state convention, close to half were people of color, a third were from rural and small towns, a quarter were Muslim, more than two-thirds had never before participated in a party process, and many had never even voted in an election. In other words, communities of people who are constantly politically redlined out of the democratic process were part of the most influential

voting bloc at the Minnesota DFL (Democratic) nominating convention.

TAKEAWAYS FOR COLLECTIVE POWER

While FiMN was leading this strategy, a team of researchers prospectively tracked the campaign to document, analyze, and learn from how the organization built and wielded people power.

Leadership advocating for racial and economic justice in rural and small-town regions makes the difference in whether or not a policy even gets a hearing at the state capitol.

Three takeaways crystalized from the interviews, participant and direct observation, and 10 years of leadership and membership data accumulated by FiMN.

Sustained "super" leadership | Prior to the campaign, FiMN's 500 faith delegates had participated in a median of five activities. Many of the delegates were thus a part of FiMN's

preexisting base of highly engaged volunteer leaders, while others were brought in through the campaign. Since 2010, the base has grown to now include more than 13,000 Minnesotans.

FiMN spends most of the organization's time and energy on leadership development, rather than on episodic mobilizations built around urgent calls (or clicks) to action. What

this means in practice is that a significant amount of organizational resources are invested in developing "super leaders" (reflected in the steadily growing high-engagement line in Figure 1). They are the reason FiMN—a relatively small community organization with a team of 12 paid organizers—was able to reach tens of thousands of

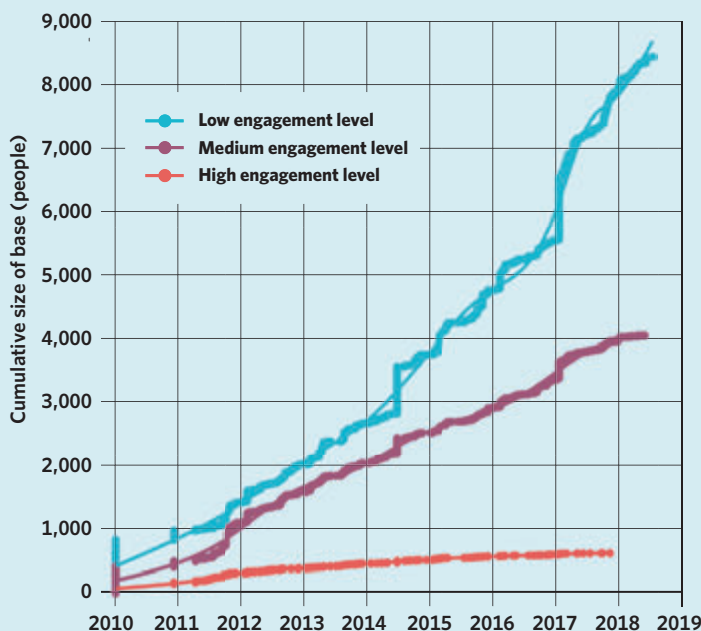
caucus-goers and voters in 2018. Although smaller in number than FiMN's lower-engagement membership, which tend to show the steepest increase in participation around election cycles, the super leaders are the core of the organization.

Wielding people power: a combination of organizing and mobilizing | The researchers

found that it was not only the number of events that FiMN members participated in that was associated with the organization's leadership capacities and political power, but also the quality and sequence of their participation. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, which conceives of most civic-engagement work as voter-facing mobilization work, the findings show that the majority of FiMN's faith delegates become committed—to each other and to the collective—in the organizational context of meetings, trainings, and strategy sessions. At these trainings and meetings, leaders of different races, religions, and social classes related to one another, practiced democratic and public skills, discovered their own capacity to lead, and learned how to engage other people in shared strategic action. FiMN was able to draw on the civic and relational capital it had built over the years to deploy when it counted.

The Power of Super Leaders

The chart below depicts Faith in Minnesota's base growth over time. Since 2010, FiMN's steady growth (scale) has been attributed to an investment in super leaders (depth).



A multiracial, multiregional, and multifith base | The mass mobilization approach would prescribe a strategy whereby FiMN built its programs around “high-propensity voters”—a euphemism often used to refer to middle-class white voters living in places like Minnesota’s Twin Cities. After conducting a power analysis, however, FiMN chose to instead build a state-wide base of leadership that was multiracial, multiregional, multifith, with multiple centers of power that could be networked into shared strategy and called to take collective action, as happened during the 2018 election.

It took five years to build multiple centers of leadership within key regional centers. FiMN now has a presence in small towns, mosques, barbershops, and congregations across the state. The organization now has chapters and teams of leadership growing in the small towns and regional centers that represent a critical constituency for governing power in Minnesota. Leadership advocating for racial and economic justice in rural and small-town regions makes the difference in whether or not a policy even gets a hearing at the state capitol. FiMN’s faith delegate campaign sheds light on how civic organizations can build power by investing in a well-trained base of people who are committed to one another.

But questions remain: What, for example, are the tradeoffs of funneling large amounts of money to civic organizations during election years, while starving them of the funds required to do sustained, relational, multiyear organizing on off-years? And what are the organizational conditions—the structures, routines, decision making, and data practices—that enable members to both have a voice in overall strategy and still act as a disciplined collective? How do we distribute not just capacity but strategic capacity?

Although it is more challenging to document or “measure” depth than scale, FiMN’s faith delegate campaign transformed the level of influence of the organization in the public arena. This new power is shared by the whole base and has caused both an expansion in the capacity to influence policy and systems, but also an expansion in membership and engagement. Those who are volunteer leaders in FiMN have a visceral experience of politics working for them—not just working for a candidate or a particular issue or a cause. This creates a virtuous cycle where more people become involved because those who have had a direct experience of public power invite others to join in the journey. ●

Revitalizing People-Based Government

Revived civic infrastructure at the state level is necessary to realize the promise of democracy.

**BY ALEXANDER HERTEL-FERNANDEZ
& REP. CARLOS GUILLERMO SMITH**

Closer in proximity to citizens than the federal government, states are thought to embody the virtues of decentralization and self-government. Americans, so the argument goes, are better positioned to check the activities of their local and state politicians than those elected to the more distant US Congress. Therefore, state and local policy should be more responsive to public preferences than federal policy. Beyond political representation, having 50 state governors and legislatures competing for public support ought to spur more innovation and experimentation; they should be what Louis Brandeis has memorably dubbed America’s “laboratories of democracy.” But do these rosy assessments of the states hold up under closer scrutiny?

STILL DEMOCRACY’S LABORATORIES?

Recent political events suggest that American federalism is playing exactly the democracy-bolstering role envisioned by the Constitution’s framers. States, for instance, are checking the power of the federal government, challenging the Trump administration on its decisions related to immigration restrictions and implementation of the decennial census. States are also innovating in areas where the federal government has failed to act: on the minimum wage, climate change, and protections for the LGBTQ community.

ALEXANDER HERTEL-FERNANDEZ is an assistant professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and author of *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—and the Nation*.

REP. CARLOS GUILLERMO SMITH represents House District 49 (D-Orlando) in the Florida House of Representatives. His election in 2016 made history as Florida’s first openly LGBTQ Latinx lawmaker, and he currently serves as chair of the Florida Legislative Progressive Caucus.

But at the same time many states are curbing their democratic processes, like taking steps to restrict political participation—either by making it harder for individuals to vote or weakening grassroots associations that organize citizens. Furthermore, in a growing number of states the geographic distribution of voters, combined with partisan redistricting, means that even large majorities of the popular vote do not necessarily translate into legislative majorities, entrenching minority legislative control. And even when large majorities of voters bypass legislatures to approve ballot measures—like expanded health insurance for poor adults, campaign finance reforms, and broadened voting rights—some state governments have rolled back such measures or even ignored them altogether.

For example, after Floridians voted overwhelmingly to re-enfranchise over a million former felons, the Republican-controlled legislature voted to create punitive barriers to ex-felon voting. In recognizing the success of progressive strategies to bypass the conservative legislature and make appeals directly to voters, conservatives in control of the Florida state legislature subsequently approved a bill with onerous new requirements for future ballot initiatives.

Another antidemocratic strategy involves state preemption. Once a tool used to curb conflicts between local government and states by bringing local governments in line with state policy, it is now aggressively used by conservatives to strip local authority from city governments and force an antiregulatory, corporate agenda that disproportionately harms marginalized communities. Examples in Florida from the 2019 legislative session include enactment of legislation that preempts local laws concerning sanctuary cities, wireless internet siting, and inclusionary housing. And an even more egregious use of punitive preemption is an older Florida law that puts local officials at risk of removal from office or fines of up to \$5,000 for adopting local laws to prevent gun violence.

In light of these abuses of state legislative power, it should come as no surprise that recent research documents only a weak electoral connection between state legislators and their voters: state legislators who cast roll call votes out of step with their constituents are unlikely to be punished in subsequent elections. In fact, this kind of legislative accountability is *lower* in the states than in Congress.

Three interrelated features of the states currently undermine their potential as sites for robust democracy. Some are longstanding characteristics of the states, while others are more