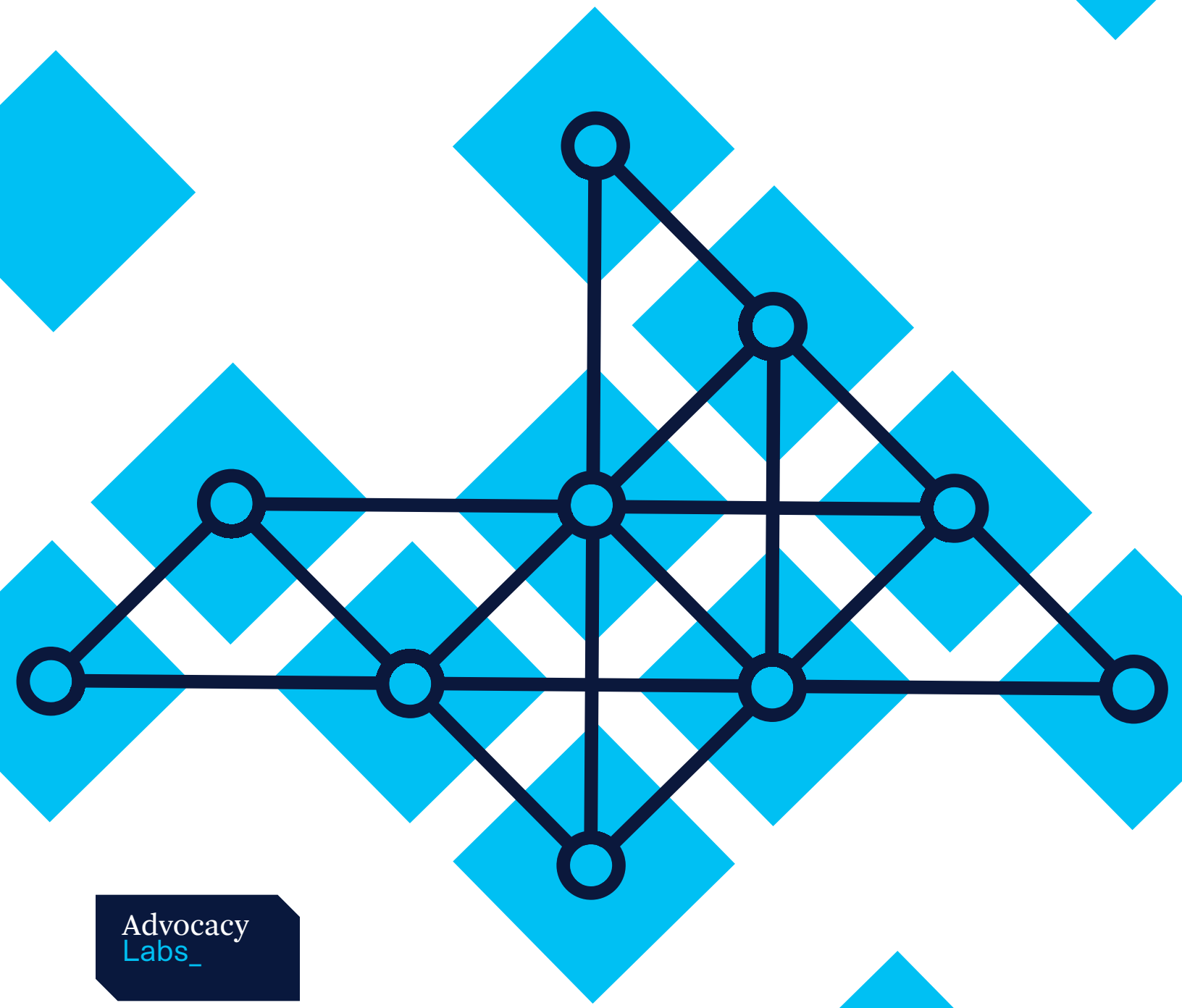
By Marc Porter Magee, Ph.D. October 2023

The Action is the Reaction: Community Organizing for Local Change



Advocacy Labs_

By Marc Porter Magee, Ph.D. October 2023

The Action is the Reaction: Community Organizing for Local Change

Advocacy Labs_

A collaboration between

50CAN FutureEd

About the Author
Marc Porter Magee is the founder and CEO of 50CAN. Over the past decade, Marc has led 50CAN to more than 200 policy victories through advocacy campaigns in 17 states. He previously served as the COO of ConnCAN, research director for the Partnership for Public Service, and founding director of the Center for Civic Enterprise at the Progressive Policy Institute. Marc holds a B.A. from Georgetown University and a Ph.D. in Sociology from Duke University. Email Marc at marc.magee@50can.org or follow Marc on Twitter at @marcportermagee.

Use
The non-commercial use, reproduction, and distribution of this report is permitted. © 2023 50CAN

About AdvocacyLabs
AdvocacyLabs is an initiative of 50CAN and FutureEd that provides insight into how change happens in education policy, using reports, briefs, interviews, and events grounded in academic research and exclusive data from education advocacy organizations to illuminate what works and why in policy advocacy. Follow us on Twitter at @AdvocacyLabs.

About 50CAN
50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now is a locally led, nationally supported nonprofit education advocacy organization committed to a high-quality education for all kids, regardless of their address. Follow us on Twitter at @FiftyCAN.

About FutureEd
FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K–12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU.

Foreword

We created AdvocacyLabs as a joint initiative between FutureEd and 50CAN in 2019 to fill what we saw as a gap in the field: a lack of accessible materials that bridged the gap between academic research on effective advocacy and the practical advice that advocates needed to better serve America's students.

Over the past four years we have highlighted more than 100 research studies across six reports and published 13 in-depth interviews with leading researchers to provide insights on everything from effective lobbying strategies to tips for better engaging volunteers and the best tactics for winning elections.

In this latest report, we dive into the world of community organizing to provide advocates with both a strong grounding in the history of the field and practical lessons that can be put to use right away. Through these six concise lessons, advocates will gain a better understanding of how community organizing efforts work and how to make them work better on behalf of people-powered campaigns that put the needs of students and their families first.

Marc Porter Magee, Ph.D.
CEO and Founder, 50CAN

Thomas Toch
Director, FutureEd

Contents

Introduction

After decades of expert-driven, top-down advocacy, a more grassroots approach to change is resurgent.

We see this close to home in the campaign strategies and tactics used at 50CAN, where over the past decade community organizing has grown from an approach used in 19 percent of our chapters to 51 percent. Moreover, these grassroots efforts are getting results, with campaigns grounded in community organizing winning 13 percentage points above the network average, the biggest positive effect of any tactic at 50CAN.

Indeed, after years of increasingly impersonal tactics in electoral campaigns such as robocalls and banner ads, research is guiding advocates back to the slower, more personalized methods that organizers know well. In his summary of current research, "How Do Campaigns Matter?" Gary C. Jacobson writes, "The most effective tactics are personal: Door-to-door canvassing increases turnout by an average of about 2.5 percentage points; volunteer phone calls raise it by about 1.9 points, compared to 1.0 points for calls from commercial phone banks; automated phone messages are ineffective."

Yet, the field of community organizing is shaped by competing philosophies that can make a single definition hard to pin down. Brian D. Christens, Jyoti Gupta, and Paul W. Speer, in their article "Community organizing: Studying the development and exercise of grassroots power," state the problem this way: the "range of understandings about community organizing is captured by the breadth of terms used to describe forms of organizing—power-based, constituency, youth, democratic, neighborhood, relational, electoral, pressure group, congregational, identity-based, civic, transformative, women-centered, community-building, Marxist, faith-based, labor, consensus, school-based, Alinskyite, internationalist, and more—but such labels are applied inconsistently, without a common understanding of what these terms signify."

At the same time, research into organizing is much more likely to be qualitative than quantitative, and what research does exist is scattered across numerous academic departments, often with little to no interaction across fields.

The goal of this report is not to provide a complete synthesis of all these studies, but instead to apply a framework to make sense of some of the most interesting and relevant research and lift up lessons from this work that can help advocates go farther in their campaigns.

A common framework for exploring community organizing

What do we mean by community organizing? In this report we'll use a definition provided by Christens, Gupta, and Speer:

> *Community organizing is a process through which residents come together and build social power to investigate and take sustained collective action on systemic issues that negatively affect their daily lives.*

There are a few elements of this definition worth underlining. First, they ground community organizing in the importance of place. It involves residents of specific communities and is shaped by their lived experiences in that geography. Second, they call out the role of investigation in the advocacy process.

This is not a top-down process that revolves around a predetermined set of policy objectives, but instead it is an ongoing initiative by residents to identify and understand the root causes of the problems they aim to solve.

Third, they highlight the importance of persistence. Most change only happens through sustained efforts to build and exercise power, and that requires efforts that can be sustained over decades. Finally, they make clear that local participants are the producers, not just the consumers, of the community change they seek. Their leadership—not the work of experts—makes the difference between success and failure. In educational advocacy, this philosophy of community organizing naturally leads to more of an emphasis on the leadership role of parents and students as change makers, given their proximity to the problem.

At the same time, as Christens, Gupta, and Speer point out, research on community organizing has no clear academic home: "The phenomenon of community organizing has received attention from a variety of social-scientific and professional fields, including social work, sociology, community psychology, community development, public health, education, and to a lesser extent, urban/public affairs, and political science," which results in "wide-ranging notions about what community organizing is and is not." Its lack of attention from fields such as economics, that have pioneered some of the most sophisticated research methods in the social sciences, also means that we are still in a "nascent state of organizing research," where case studies dominate and "nearly all work is descriptive in nature." That means that there is "a relative dearth of research that rigorously tests hypotheses," and "there are few quasi-experimental designs comparing different approaches or conditions."

In this report, we aim to make sense of the current research by both grounding it in the historical traditions of organizing and the challenges contemporary advocates face.

Those historical traditions can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century, Neil Betten and Michael J. Austin explain in their book, *The Roots of Community Organizing*. During World War I, "sociologists and adult educators first identified community organizing as a specific field," they write, but it was "not until the 1940s, however, that colleges and universities began to train professional community organizers." Leaders at the time saw community organizing as a way "to counter the static and traditional nature of a community as well as to overcome the people's sense of alienation."

"The role of the community organizer in this context is primarily that of an enabler, who helps a group of people to solve common problems by teaching them concrete organizing skills (e.g., conducting meetings, taking minutes) and the ethical values that are required for building consensus (e.g., respect for divergent views, tolerance for cultural difference)," Betten and Austin observe. "The primary mechanism used by the community organizer is the small task-oriented group."

Out of this focus on citizen-led, direct service efforts at reform grew a more action-oriented approach often aimed at policy change. "The basic strategy utilized in the social action approach is the crystallization of issues and the direct organizing of people affected by the problems in order to take action against an adversary," Betten and Austin explain. "The tactics used in this form of organizing include both conflict and contest in an effort to generate direct confrontation and ultimately negotiation ... Organizers utilized skills in agitating and negotiating in order to serve as brokers between their constituencies and their adversaries."

Many of the organizing traditions that are still with us today emerged in this early 20th century environment: the Catholic Worker Movement and Faith in Action; the Highlander Research and Educational Center; the Cincinnati Unit Experiment; the organizing traditions of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Ella Baker and Marshall Ganz organizing pedagogy; Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers tradition; and the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Alinsky approach.

Six lessons for advocates

Each chapter in the report explores a different community organizing tradition and related research findings that provide a key lesson advocates can put to use in their campaigns:

1 *The action is the reaction.* By provoking the powerful into overreacting to challenges to their authority, organizers strengthen their negotiating position to secure wins.

2 *Get angry, not violent.* Stirring up emotions by

dramatizing injustices helps get people off the sidelines and into your campaign.

3 *Cultivate community.* Community organizing efforts run on strong relationships and only succeed when they have the glue of a singular, compelling mission.

4 *Create leaders.* Investing in training programs organized around proven models and a sense of purpose can help ensure the kind of strong local leadership that gives an effort staying power.

5 *Own your narrative.* Creating a powerful public narrative that conveys the authenticity of an organizing campaign can provide a critical boost.

6 *Don't be afraid to get political.* The tools of organizing can be used to defend these campaigns from pushback, but only if you use them.

Community organizing is challenging but doesn't need to be intimidating to advocates. Every advocate should be able to introduce the lessons in this report into their work. By doing so, they make it more likely that their cause will be both better grounded in the hopes and dreams of the people they aim to serve and more likely to succeed.

1 The action is the reaction

One key approach to community organizing is the use of controlled conflict, where people work together to provoke the powerful into overreacting to challenges to their authority, which strengthens their negotiating position and helps secure wins.

What organizers say

"Power is the ability to act. To make change, you have to be able to demonstrate the power that an organized community holds even if it makes people uncomfortable or angry. In fact, it is when you are pushing people in power outside of their comfort zone that you know your organizing is working."

Nicholas Martinez, Executive Director, Transform Education Now (TEN)

What the research says

"What I have to say in this book is not the arrogance of unsolicited advice," Saul Alinsky writes in his 1971 book, *Rules for Radicals*. "It is the experience and counsel that so many young people have questioned me about through all-night sessions on hundreds of campuses in America. It is for those young radicals who are committed to the fight, committed to life." The book is full of tactical advice, but Alinsky's philosophy is captured in his overarching belief in the power of controlled confrontation: advocacy for Alinsky is a "cycle of action and reaction."

Alinsky's initial theories of social change were shaped by his experiences in the sociology department at the University of Chicago, studying under Ernest Burgess and Robert E. Park. Two of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century, Burgess and Park pioneered a new approach to the field that shifted away from philosophical debates and into a more active, empirical approach focused on documenting and addressing problems in urban America, with Chicago serving as a "city laboratory" for their work.

While Alinsky once referred to Burgess and Park as "men whose names were to be as famous in sociology as the Apostles are in Christianity," he eventually grew disillusioned with their academic approach to social change and began exploring ways to advance urban renewal through the principles of community organizing. A few years later, the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council was born, which would serve

as a laboratory for developing and testing Alinsky's theories of community-led change.

To develop his advocacy playbook, Alinsky borrowed heavily from the tactics of the labor movement of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, which were organized around the idea of "controlled conflict." These tactics included boycotts of stores and products, picketing, sit-ins, and other ways to turn the heat up on the people standing in the way of solutions that would improve people's lives. "He sought to solve problems by changing the power structure of the community," Betten and Austin write in *The Roots of Community Organizing*. "Organize people to demand a better deal. Find an opponent who you can organize against and ultimately bargain with."

At the same time, Alinsky understood that "gaining power for a community-based people's organization was, by necessity, more complicated" than traditional labor organizing. Because the "opposition was not a single employer, but a loosely interrelated power elite," organizers would have to be particularly adept at finding opportunities to create conflicts that would galvanize support for their cause.

In Sonia M. Rosen and Jerusha Conner's 2021 article, "Negotiating power: How youth organizers recast the debate about school reform," the authors capture how this Alinskyite tradition in community organizing is alive and well in the current education advocacy landscape.

The article focuses on the efforts of the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU), a youth organizing group, to disrupt and shift the debate around a planned downsizing of the school district. The downsizing plan was developed by the School Reform Commission (SRC), a hybrid governing body made up of two members appointed by the Philadelphia mayor and three by the governor, that was created in a compromise move in 2001 that brought greater state oversight to city schools in exchange for more state resources.

In 2011, then-Gov. Tom Corbett advocated for and secured a state budget with major cuts to education which fell disproportionately on Philadelphia's schools. Two years later, "under the guidance of superintendent Hite and facing a $304 million budget shortfall, the SRC closed 24 neighborhood schools and passed a 'doomsday budget,' which stripped schools of essential resources, including librarians, full-time nurses, and guidance counselors," Rosen and Conner write. The members of PSU, mostly youth of color ages 15 through 18, felt largely shut out of the debate and began exploring ways to take action that would force district and state officials to address their concerns.

In October 2014, they learned that a member of the School Reform Commission, Sylvia Simms, would be hosting a family appreciation night at school district headquarters, and it would feature a screening of the movie, "Won't Back Down." "Approximately 20 min. into the movie, 25 PSU members, who had been posing as students from an arts program in the city, rose from their seats and began to chant," Rosen and Conner write. "This group of predominantly students of color, which was roughly representative of the district's student demographics, walked to the front of the room, arranged themselves in two rows, and sat cross-legged directly under the screen."

Chanting "Hey, hey! Ho, ho! The SRC has to go!" their "disruptive actions, which made it impossible to hear the movie, prompted someone to turn on the lights. The event's host, Sylvia Simms, then approached them. The movie was stopped. After her attempts to engage them failed and they continued to chant, she paced back and forth in front of the young people, periodically leaning in so that her face was close to theirs, and yelled, 'Y'all probably in failing schools!' and 'You belong in jail!' A parent in the room began to chant 'Lock them up!' The police were called. Before the police arrived, PSU members walked out of the room in an orderly fashion, continuing their chant as they exited the building. This entire incident was captured on video and spread on social media."

The result was a media disaster for Simms and the School Reform Commission, which emboldened PSU and other aligned groups to step up their protests. In 2017, after three years of near-constant protests, the School Reform Commission voted to disband itself and control over the school district was returned to a local school board appointed by the mayor and approved by the City Council.

The lessons

1 Find an opponent you can organize against.

2 Brainstorm their weaknesses and where they are most vulnerable to a confrontation.

3 Use earned and social media to amplify an opponent's overaction and fuel a new wave of protests.

2 Get angry, not violent

Skilled organizers stir up emotions by dramatizing injustices to help get people off the sidelines. Anger can be a particularly powerful emotion to provoke but when that anger leads to undisciplined advocacy and violence it undermines the cause.

What organizers say

"Often in education advocacy we strive to have a dispassionate policy debate and ask people to set their emotions aside. But how can you not be emotional about your child being bullied at school? Why shouldn't you be angry when your child hasn't been taught to read? Anger is personal and it is energizing. It's the first step towards getting results."

Marcus Brandon, Executive Director, CarolinaCAN

What the research says

"A competent union organizer approaches his objective, let's say [it's] the organization of a particular industrial plant where the workers are underpaid, suffering from discriminatory practices, and without job security," Saul Alinsky writes in *Rules for Radicals*. "The workers accept these conditions as inevitable, and they express their demoralization by saying, 'what's the use.' ... Enter the labor organizer or the agitator. He begins his 'trouble making' by stirring up these angers, frustrations, and resentments, and highlighting specific issues or grievances that heighten controversy. He dramatizes the injustices." Community organizing, Alinsky argued, is about taking this approach out of the factory and into the community to take on a wider range of issues.

"One problem that climate change activists have had in trying to mobilize action," Doug McAdams writes in his 2017 article "Social Movement Theory and the Prospects for Climate Change Activism in the United States," is the "difficulty of concretizing or personifying climate change, identifying specific villains to blame for the escalating threat. Instead, the crisis seems to be largely the product of impersonal forces beyond our control."

In their 2023 study, "The strength and content of climate anger," Thea Gregersena, Gisle Andersen, and Endre Tvinnereim look at the importance of having clear protest targets in activating individuals to get off the sidelines and get involved. Drawing on

a survey of 2,000 citizens in the oil-rich country of Norway, they found that the people who said they were angry about climate change were seven times more likely to participate in a climate protest than adults who said they were hopeful. And "identification of a responsible actor is central to anger," the authors write. The Norwegian survey respondents said a lack of actions from politicians or industry leaders was a major source of their anger.

Josefina Bañales and colleagues found a similar pattern in their study of youth anti-racism protests in U.S. schools. In the study, which involved 384 students between 14 and 18 years old, they found that "youth who were encouraged to reflect on how race/ethnicity contributes to who is successful in society, the presence of racial inequality in the United States, social justice and other social issues" were more likely to take action and that "anger toward social injustice ... mediated relations between [these] messages and youth actions."

At the same time, dramatizing injustices and inflaming anger can backfire when it leads to violence. Kurt Schock and Chares Demetriou, in their article, "Nonviolent and Violent Trajectories in Social Movements," explore the idea of different "radical flanks" in an overall advocacy campaign. "A positive radical flank effect occurs," they write, "when the leverage of moderate challengers is strengthened by the presence of radical challengers. A negative radical flank effect occurs when the activities of a radical wing weaken the leverage of moderates." What tips a positive radical flank into a negative one? Violence. While nonviolent protestors draw more supporters into a cause, Schock and Demetriou find, violent protestors push potential supporters away, thus weakening a cause and increasing the odds of failure.

In his study, "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting," Omar Wasow found that this is exactly what happened in the later stages of U.S. civil rights protests: "Counties proximate to nonviolent protests saw presidential Democratic vote share among whites increase 1.3-1.6%. Protester-initiated violence, by contrast, helped move news agendas, frames, elite discourse and public concern toward 'social control.' In 1968 ... violent protests likely caused a 1.6-7.9% shift among whites towards Republicans and tipped the election."

Indeed, in their groundbreaking 2011 book, Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict, political scientist Erica Chenoweth and civil resistance scholar and human rights advocate Maria Stephan explore the consequences of violence and nonviolence in 323 campaigns across the globe over more than a century (1900–2006). On average, nonviolent campaigns were able to attract a broader array of participants, particularly women, which led to "enhanced resilience, higher probabilities of tactical innovation, expanded civic disruption" and, ultimately, more successful outcomes.

Chenoweth and Stephan also found that these nonviolent campaigns were much more successful in the broader, long-term goal of creating "more durable and internally peaceful democracies." This was true even if the campaign failed to achieve its immediate goals. Simply the act of organizing in a nonviolent way built up the civic infrastructure and social capital of a community in ways that had long-term, positive effects for the civic efforts to come.

The lessons

1 Stirring up anger is often the first step in a successful organizing effort.

2 In order for this anger to be effectively directed, you need to identify someone standing in the way of change.

3 Well-organized efforts that keep participants peaceful are crucial as violence almost always backfires on an advocacy campaign.

3 Cultivate community

Community organizing efforts run on relationships. You aren't building an organization so much as a community that will succeed only when it has the glue of a singular, compelling mission.

What organizers say

"If you're not invited to their cookout, they're not showing up to your rally. Effective organizing requires personal relationships and a level of trust that makes a group feel more like a family than an organization. It is through these authentic connections that individuals are motivated to join forces and rally together for a common purpose as one community."

Luis Ortiz, State Grassroots Manager, ConnCAN

What the research says

The first two chapters in this report built upon the organizing tradition that originated with Saul Alinsky. In this chapter and the next we turn to another prominent tradition in the field: Catholic organizing. While Alinsky focused on "controlled conflict," Catholic organizers like Dorothy Day focused on strong community bonds and an appeal to our higher ideals. In some ways, that made her and other Catholic organizers even more of a lightning rod.

"The Federal Bureau of Investigation didn't know what to do about Dorothy Day," writes profiler Casey Cep. "Director J. Edgar Hoover was concerned about Day's onetime communism, sometime socialism, and all-the-time anarchism. After months of investigating—interviewing her known associates, obtaining her driving record and vital statistics, collecting her clips from newspaper morgues, and reviewing the first of her autobiographies, From Union Square to Rome—the F.B.I. decided that the subject of Bureau File 100-2403-1 would not need to be detained in the event of a national emergency."

"Part of what kept her F.B.I. file from getting any larger was the assurances offered by the very hierarchy her leftist friends so despised: as one agent noted, 'Church officials believe her to be an honest and sincere Catholic.' That was putting it mildly: Day took to the Rosary and the saints, the confession and the liturgy, the miracles and the sacraments as, to quote the psalmist, a deer longs for flowing streams.

She felt that the Church had cured her alienation and isolation, drawing her into fellowship with a community of living souls."

This idealistic, relationship-based approach to community-building led Day to create the Catholic Worker Movement, with the goal supporting more just communities founded on higher pay for workers and more social and economic support for those on the margins of society. As Neil Betten and William E. Hersey write in "Religious Organizations as a Base for Community Organizing," her strategy for securing change was simple: "Point to the gap between the Christian ideal and what, in fact, was the social situation and call for action to meet the injustice."

Day and her colleagues in the Catholic Worker Movement combined nonviolent direct action with a strong emphasis on moral persuasion carried out in small groups. At the center of it all was an intense focus on building connections and a common outlook. "The Catholic Worker Movement used retreats, educational forums, and conferences to spread the word concerning the importance of their movement and to teach the Catholic Worker philosophy," Betten and Hersey write.

At the same time, they worked to set up demonstration communities around the county that would serve as proof points for a more just world and a generator of the social connections needed to carry their work forward. "Each commune was owned, administered, and financed locally," Betten and Hersey write. "By the end of the 1930s, several Catholic Worker communes were functioning, and approximately a dozen more arose independently but worked closely with the Movement."

Day's followers also set up "urban settlement houses, both to deal with the problem of unemployment and to win converts to the Movement." Connecting these communities together was a newspaper, which had "a homespun quality that attempted to achieve an intimacy with its readers … Day's columns often discussed her family and her friends within the Movement and seemed to be directed toward an ingroup of readers."

For Betten and Hersey, the Catholic Worker Movement demonstrated the unique advantages of a relationship-focused, faith-based approach to organizing, including "(1) a ready-made constituency, (2) a mission, (3) organizational networks, (4) leadership resources and training capacities, (5) financial resources, and (6) social action models of community organization. These organizational characteristics offered both a base for community organizing and a force for change."

In their 2021 article, "Participation in community organizing: Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of impacts on sociopolitical development," Paul W. Speer, Brian D. Christens, and N. Andrew Peterson explore the community-build aspects of faith-based community organizing and test whether the greater civic engagement and sense of belonging among participants is a selection effect or a socialization effect. To do so, they studied participants over a five-year period (2001–2006) in five locations across the United States who were involved in Faith in Action organizing campaigns. The groups had small staff sizes (2 to 3.5 full-time equivalents) and local budgets that ranged from $120,000 to $200,000 a year. At the time of the study, the groups were working on issues such as ending predatory lending and increasing the availability of affordable housing, after-school programs, and job-training opportunities.

By tracking the behavior of participants in these faith-based organizing programs and a representative sample of non-participants from their neighborhoods, Speer, Christens, and Peterson found "robust evidence that civic developmental processes are occurring in faith-based community organizing settings." Specifically, "Civic engagement behaviors were found to not only be higher among FBCO [Faith-Based Community Organizing] participants at the outset, but this group also saw further increases over time. This is in contrast to the comparison group, which reported slight declines." In other words, community organizing creates engaged and socially connected community members.

In another study published in 2011, Brian Christens and Paul Speer explore the impact of the scale of gatherings on the involvement of prospective members. In their statistical analysis of the actions of 11,538 individuals across 115 groups, they find that "only a third of first-time attendees ever returned to a second meeting during the next three years" and "large group action meetings are negatively predictive of future participation in community organizing" in part because it is hard to generate the in-person connections that create attachment to a cause in these settings. It turns out Dorothy Day's bet on small gatherings pays off. Indeed, as sociologists David Snow and Sarah Soule point out in their 2009 book, *A Primer on Social Movements*, the advantages to

organizing smaller groups is one reason why movements so often emerge from small, intimate settings like churches.

The lessons

1 Lead by listening. Build a moral case for your cause one relationship at a time.

2 Personalize your communications by highlighting the lives of the people who power the work.

3 Use small gatherings to create the kind of social solidarity and strong bonds that keep people coming back year after year.

4 Create leaders

Community organizing must be locally led to be effective. That means building local leadership is critical to its success. Investing in training programs organized around proven models and a sense of purpose is essential to sustainability.

What organizers say

"One of my fellow organizers once told me that the mark of a successful organizing effort is that you organized yourself out of a job. That starts with an investment in training programs so that people can build their skills and policy knowledge to take up the mantle of leadership. Done right, these programs help you create leadership in the places you need power and ensure you have the strength to outlast the opposition."

Steven Quinn, National Organizing Manager, 50CAN

What the research says

"More than fifty years ago I asked my Provincial for permission to make community organizing my ministry as a Jesuit priest in Oakland, California," Father John Baumann wrote in a letter to the Faith in Action community in 2023. "Faith in Action is dedicated to the idea that people can transform the world when they build trusting relationships, listen to their neighbors, inventory their resources, speak directly with decision-makers, and propose and negotiate solutions based on local wisdom."

Founded in 1972 by Baumann and fellow Jesuit priest Jerry Helfrich, over the past five decades Faith in Action has grown into a vibrant organizing network of more than a million families and one thousand congregations working in 150 cities and towns across 22 states. Like the Catholic Worker Movement, it embraces the unique social capital of the faith community but has distinguished itself with its strong focus on leadership development under the guiding principle: "Never do for others what they can do for themselves."

From the beginning, Faith in Action decided its growth would be based on "decentralization and the development of powerful local organizations that could operate largely free of outside interference," write Paul J. Medellin and colleagues in their study of the organization, "Transformation to Leadership." Yet despite some initial successes, many of the local efforts Faith in Action supported in its early years "had very short life spans due to a variety of common

setbacks, including difficulties in hiring and retaining skilled staff organizers and a need for better leadership training for residents."

The Faith in Action leadership team eventually settled on a simple model that could be taught to local leaders around the country to strengthen its decentralized approach and increase the odds of success. Under this model, local leaders are trained to follow the same basic steps in the same order no matter where they live: 1) bringing neighbors together to share their stories about what they are seeing in the community, 2) creating teams to go out into the community and solicit input from other neighbors, 3) bringing this input from the community back to the group, and 4) researching who has the power to make the changes people want and what it will take to hold public officials accountable for results. After taking action to advance these changes, the local leaders then get together as a group to reflect on and refine the process before launching a new cycle of organizational growth.

Through this model, Faith in Action leaders are taught "to trust a method of inquiry rooted in questioning, in probing, in uncovering, in listening to the lived experience of people," Medellin and colleagues write. "It is rooting oneself in what one can learn rather than what one already knows," they say. "Over time, through participation in organizing activities and expansion of experiences and reflection on these experiences, leaders develop a greater sense of self, an understanding of community and the role of the organization in relation to community, and a richer understanding of how systems impact and shape the life chances of people."

This journey as leaders both strengthens local organizing efforts and creates a common organizing language that binds local Faith in Action efforts into a nationwide network of learning and support.

The need for distributed leadership was also a central challenge facing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which operated at the frontlines of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In her article "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization," Emily Stoper writes that "SNCC was obviously not held together by a bureaucracy or bureaucratic incentives. Almost all of its members were activists in the field, and the office staff was kept to a bare minimum."

In contrast to Faith in Action, SNCC sought to overcome the challenges of decentralization not through a common model or leadership training methodology, but through the example of key figures in the organization. SNCC leaned on exemplary individuals such as "Bob Moses in Mississippi, Charles Sherrod in Southwest Georgia, and Bill Hansen in Arkansas" who led through their "moral courage, a quality which gave others a sense of hope for personal and social redemption." This contributed to a vibrant if unstable organizational culture centered on a "priesthood of all believers" where "every member was actively engaged in spreading its message." When it worked, this approach put SNCC at the forefront of some of the most important battles in the civil rights movement.

At the same time, by not investing in formal models and structures, Stoper finds that this "redemptive ethos, so dependent on a particular mix of circumstance, belief, and background, was like a delicate plant. It was not easily transplanted into new soil—nor could it survive, under changing conditions, in the old soil." While Faith in Action continues to grow and thrive 50 years after its founding, SNCC "flowered and died" within a decade without a similar investment in a local leadership model, Stoper writes.

The lessons

1 Recognize from the outset the importance and the challenge of decentralized leadership.

2 Make local leadership development a key investment of every effort.

3 Build training around proven steps for effective organizing and make room for reflection after each campaign.

5 Own your narrative

Creating a strong public narrative that conveys the authenticity of an organizing campaign can provide a critical boost. It can also protect advocacy organizations from the inevitable backlash from those resistant to change.

What organizers say

"In Hawai'i, the concept of 'ohana involves embracing a sense of familial care for the broader members of our community grounded in an understanding that we are all members of the same human family. Amidst the turmoil of the Covid-19 pandemic, we sought to bring this concept to life through an 'Ohana Pods program, where resources flow to local families to create microschools for neighborhood children whose education was disrupted by school closures. Its success proved the power of connecting traditional ideals to educational innovations."

David Sun-Miyashiro, Executive Director, HawaiiKidsCAN

What the research says

In 1962, shortly after founding the National Farm Workers Association with Dolores Huerta, later to become the United Farm Workers (UFW), Cesar Chavez asked his younger brother Richard for help creating a visual identity that could communicate the values of the new effort. Cesar chose the colors black and red while Richard selected an eagle. They refined the design until it was simple enough that union members could make their own homemade flags with the symbol of the UFW. "A symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride," Cesar reflected. "When people see it they know it means dignity."

In their 2023 article "Crafting Public Narrative to Enable Collective Action: A Pedagogy for Leadership Development," Marshall Ganz, Julia Lee Cunningham, Inbal Ben Ezer and Alaina Segura explore the key role that a community organizing effort's "public narrative" plays: it "departs from other forms of self-narrative in that not only can it allow others to 'get' us, but it can also inspire others to 'get' each other, thereby experiencing the solidarity to confront challenges together ... the effectiveness of narrative depends on the extent to which the speaker facilitates an experience of authenticity for the listeners, one that conveys the authenticity of both the speaker and of the moment that the speaker and listeners share."

Ganz and colleagues argue that "through crafting their public narratives, leaders can enact their moral

resources to motivate others to choose collective action" by communicating both why people should care and why they can act.

It is a challenge that the South African youth organizing initiative Equal Education (EE) confronted in its early years. In their study, "'This was 1976 reinvented': The role of framing in the development of a South African youth movement," Ben Kirshner, Tafadzwa Tivaringe, and Jesica Siham Fernández draw on three years of ethnographic fieldwork "to analyze collective action frames that enabled EE youth to assert legitimacy and construct shared aims across locales."

Founded in 2008 in Cape Town by a small group of students, educators and anti-apartheid activists, Equal Education began its efforts by documenting the poor conditions and lack of resources in the township schools. EE's core constituency was the "born-free generation" of South African youth who grew up after apartheid had ended but still suffered from enduring structural inequalities.

This made their narrative more difficult to craft because they were challenging not the white supremacist government that ruled before Nelson Mandela's election but a democratically elected government made up of many former activists who had secured the victory over the nation's fascist rulers. "The born-free term marks not just a generational divide," Kirshner, Tivaringe and Fernández write, "but also a symbolic boundary regarding who has access to 'struggle credentials,' which is to say the moral authority of being part of the century-long anti-apartheid struggle."

As the community organizing effort began to grow in prominence, it came under attacks that questioned its origin narrative and its moral standing. After the release of a particularly damning EE report, "the national Minister of Education released a statement saying, 'to suddenly see a group of white adults organizing black African children with half-truths can only be opportunistic, patronizing and simply dishonest.'"

But, the authors write, "Although it is true that EE's founders included some white college students, the statement did not reflect" the fact that the "overwhelming majority of EE members self-identified as Black" and that it was an authentically student-led initiative. In an environment of "competing claims to legitimacy and moral authority," EE had to push back with counternarratives that would allow it to regain the advantage in its push for educational accountability and reform.

After neglecting a public narrative in EE's initial years, the organization's leadership went to work reframing their efforts to connect the emergent leadership of the "born-free generation" with "a noble and unfinished struggle." In order to more strongly connect the revolutionary struggles of the apartheid years to the present moment, they organized their branding work around the slogan: "Every Generation Has its Struggle."

This slogan was affixed to posters with "an illustration of raised fists, familiar from revolutionary iconography, grasping a ruler, a pen, and a calculator." They chose the colors red, black and yellow to echo the symbolism present in South Africa's new flag: red for the sacrifices made in South Africa's struggle for independence, yellow for the natural wealth of South Africa and black for the native people of South Africa.

In one of their first campaigns under the new brand, they asked students to document the problems in their schools with photographs and then brought all these photos together inside a school gym. Here is how a researcher describes the scene: "We entered the large gym with two basketball courts surrounded by bleachers and covered by a high roof... We stood looking over the scene—lots of young people were standing in clusters by uniform—some of them clapping or chanting in tune with each other. I counted that by the end of the event there were roughly 250-300 people at the event...When I arrived at the gym floor the students had split into two big groups. Each group was being led in a chant and dance by youth leaders... On the perimeter of the gym were displays from each school group about a problem at their schools: examples included broken doors, broken ceilings, holes in fences, decrepit toilets."

They decided to simplify the message to increase its power. They discovered they had captured pictures of 500 broken windows so "broken windows" became the name of the overall campaign. "EE wove together these locally relevant problems with a national agenda for Minimum Norms and Standards," Kirshner, Tivaringe, and Fernández write.

They connected their visual identity and photographic evidence with "the practice of singing struggle songs at meetings and public gatherings ... These struggle songs highlighted youth's power and voice and anchored their contemporary struggles for education in a long history of resistance and movement-building." They adapted well-known songs to their current efforts, with students replacing "words that demanded the use of violent revolution with calls

for ‘education’ to win the revolution.”

This combined effort helped EE transform “their local struggles to a movement linking youth around a shared vision for equitable and high-quality education.” More than 15 years after it was founded, the organization is one of the most significant in South Africa’s advocacy landscape and is regularly held up as an exemplar of effective youth organizing around the globe.

The lessons

1 Choose the elements of your brand—colors, icons, slogans and songs—carefully to capture the spirit you aim to represent.

2 Your narrative is also what you do—the activities you undertake in your campaigns.

3 Where possible, connect to struggles of the past that are aligned with your values and mission.

6 Don't be afraid to get political

Community organizing efforts are most vulnerable when they are successful because they are threatening the status quo. The tools of organizing can be used to defend these campaigns but only if their leaders are willing to get political.

What organizers say

"Challenging the status quo requires standing up to those who benefit from it. This can only be done if you are prepared to stand together and hold those in power accountable for needed change."

Ariel Smith, Senior Director, National Parents Union Policy & Action Center

What the research says

"The American nation is not just a union of states," sociologist Wilbur Phillips asserted in his 1940 book, *Adventuring in Democracy*. "States are not just unions of counties and cities. Cities are not just unions of wards or assembly districts. States, counties and cities are unions of communities, of neighborhoods. The community-neighborhood is the unit of our national life ... It is you and I who comprise these community units which make up the nation called America."

Phillips had concluded earlier in the century that democracy had gone off course by consolidating too much power away from the life of neighborhoods. He set out to restore the balance through a unique community organizing effort called the "Social Unit Organization."

In 1916, working together with his wife Elsie, he organized a national group to fundraise for a demonstration site to test out a new, more democratic approach to solving urban problems. With the support of prominent figures in the progressive movement like Herbert Croly, they secured $135,000 dollars (about $3.7 million today, adjusted for inflation) to pay for a three-year demonstration. After a nationwide competition, they selected the Mohawk-Brighton area of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Writing in *The Roots of Community Organizing*, Betten and Austin describe how this experimental "community-based democratic self-help system ... attempted to organize one twelve-thousand-person neighborhood in order to give its people partial

control over their immediate social and economic life and to provide a way for residents themselves to deal with social problems, particularly public health problems ... Through organizing communities on a neighborhood basis, they hoped to redirect decisions concerning practical social needs away from the politicians and professional social agencies to the people such decisions directly affected."

"Every one of the Mohawk-Brighton district's thirty-one blocks, averaging about four hundred people, had its own Council of Neighbors," they continue. "Each one of these thirty-one block councils elected a representative to an overall Citizens Council, which spoke for the residents of the entire neighborhood. The Citizens' Council determined the social unit policy." At the core of the organizing effort was the block worker, who "carried out the unit's assignment" and was paid "a small salary for eight hours of work a week." Block workers "registered births, arranged for immediate nursing and medical assistance, and reported contagious diseases, illegal child labor, and juvenile delinquency."

Each social unit "sponsored block parties, community sings, picnics, baby shows, a dramatic club, a community chorus, women's classes in gymnastics and swimming, a class in cabinetmaking for men, nutrition classes ... It worked with family problems, began to tackle juvenile crime, sought jobs for residents, and informally handled a multitude of small problems."

"On the whole," Betten and Austin report, "it was successful in achieving its goals a democratic community organization in which the residents solved many of their own problems." For example, in 1918 a community-wide healthy start program ensured that more than nine in 10 preschool children received a medical examination by a physician.

"The influenza epidemic of 1918 (the 'Swine Flu') illustrated the unit's successful preventive medicine program, its cohesive relationship with the various services, and its ability to respond quickly to a crisis," they write. "The unit's head nurse, reacting to an apparently abnormal number of colds, conferred with the executive of the medical council, who immediately wrote up simple instructions suggesting ways to deal with the flu, stressing rest and advising residents to report flu symptoms immediately. On the same day, the unit printed this recommendation in a leaflet, with the approval of the councils of physicians, nurses, and social workers. By late afternoon, thousands of leaflets were in the hands of the block workers, who also received instructions for a verbal explanation of the material. By 6:00 P.M., Phillips could later report, 'the leaflets were in every home in the district, and every family had had a word of advice, in person, from their own carefully instructed social agent.'"

But this successful effort to organize a community around more democratic decision-making and to solve neighborhood problems without government agencies had a big blind spot: Politics.

In March 1919, Cincinnati Mayor John Galvin attacked the unit as "anti-American, fostering unrest and discontent among the working classes," Betten and Austin write. The city health commissioner called the unit "a step toward Bolshevism." He raised the alarm that Wilbur and Elsie Phillips were "building up within this city a separate and distinct government."

The political leaders of the city were joined in their opposition to the unit by the medical profession. Although the city's Academy of Medicine endorsed the unit "as a laboratory or test of preventive medicine," as the experiment grew in influence, the academy feared it was crowding out traditional approaches to medicine and costing doctors money. Wilber Phillips believed there was a simple explanation for the reversal: "We were doing better work than they were." As the drumbeat of opposition grew, funders worried about the controversy and stepped away from their support. Just three years after it was launched, the Cincinnati Unit Experiment was over.

"Why, then, did this experiment fail? Why was the opposition so easily victorious?" Betten and Austin ask. "After all, the unit avoided patronage politics, reduced the scope of government, supported the interests of Mohawk-Brighton residents, relied on experts to achieve greater efficiency, and utilized democratic principles."

"Ironically, a major problem of the unit involved its democratic nature," they conclude. "Many of the urban progressives only talked of democracy, but the Phillipses really believed in it. This constituted a threat to some business and professional interests, since a democratically run organization might choose to replace local commercial services with cooperatives or other alternative systems; the situation also seemed threatening to the politicians ... The Phillipses assumed that good will and a reasonable program would be sufficient for success, and they did not prepare for the inevitable emergence of opposition to the unit. When hostile forces did appear, Wilber Phillips offered long, conciliatory, reasonable

arguments rather than striving to solidify grassroots support ... In neglecting power relationships, the unit courted certain failure."

Reflecting on the legacy of the experiment, Betten and Austin offer enduring advice for would-be reformers: "Overall, the Cincinnati Social Unit served as a salient historical example of the impossibility of achieving a technical solution to social problems without achieving a simultaneous political solution ... If the organizational intent is to create significant change, community organizing must be a political venture in the broadest sense of the term." The close relationships and one-on-one contact of community organizing are some of the most effective tools in local politics. But they only work if you use them.

The lessons

1 It is exactly when your organizing efforts are getting visible results that you should be ready for a challenge from the political and community elites.

2 Organizing efforts can't afford to ignore politics.

3 Only by using the tools of organizing to build political power can they defend themselves.

Selected Articles

Ben Kirshner, Tafadzwa Tivaringe, and Jesica Siham Fernández, "'This was 1976 reinvented': The Role of Framing in the Development of a South African Youth Movement," *Journal of Community Psychology*, 2021, November, Vol. 49, Issue 8, pp. 3033–3053.

Emily Stoper, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization," Journal of Black Studies, 1977, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 13-34.

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, Why Civil Resistance Works: *The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

Gary C. Jacobson, "How Do Campaigns Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2015, Vol. 18, pp. 31–47.

Casey Cep, "Dorothy Day's Radical Faith," *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2020.

James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2011, Vol. 37, pp. 285–303.

Josefina Bañales, Adriana Aldana, Katie Richards-Schuster, Constance A. Flanagan, Matthew A. Diemer, Stephanie J. Rowley, "Youth Anti-Racism Action: Contributions of Youth Perceptions of School Racial Messages and Critical Consciousness," *Journal of Community Psychology*, 2021, November, Vol. 49, Issue 8, pp. 3079-3100.

Kurt Schock and Chares Demetriou, "Nonviolent and Violent Trajectories in *Social Movements,"* in Snow et al*, Social Movements: Second Edition*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2019.

Lawrence J. Engel, "Saul D. Alinsky and the Chicago School," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 2002, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 50-66.

Marshall Ganz, Julia Lee Cunningham, Inbal Ben Ezer and Alaina Segura, "Crafting Public Narrative to Enable Collective Action: A Pedagogy for Leadership Development," *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2023, Vol. 22, No. 2.

Omar Wasow, "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting," *American Political Science Review*, 2020, Vol. 114, Issue 3, pp. 638-659.

Paul J. Medellin, Paul W. Speer, Brian D Christens, and Jyoti Gupta, "Transformation to leadership: Learning About Self, the Community, the Organization, and the System," 2021, J*ournal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 49, Issue 8, pp. 3122-3140.

Paul W. Speer, Brian D. Christens, and N. Andrew Peterson, "Participation in Community Organizing: Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Analyses of Impacts on Sociopolitical Development," *Journal of Community Psychology*, 2021, Vol. 49, Issue 8, pp. 3194–3214.

Sonia M. Rosen and Jerusha Conner, "Negotiating Power: How Youth Organizers Recast the Debate About School Reform," *Journal of Community Psychology*, 2021, November, Vol. 49, Issue 8, pp. 3017–3032.

Thea Gregersen, Gisle Andersen, and Endre Tvinnereim, "The Strength and Content of Climate Anger," *Global Environmental Change*, August 2023.

Wilbur C. Phillips, *Adventuring in Democracy*, Social Unit Press, 1940. November 2013, Vol. 9, pp. 185-205.

About AdvocacyLabs

AdvocacyLabs is an initiative of 50CAN and FutureEd that provides fresh thinking and rigorous insight into how change happens in education policy, using reports, briefs, interviews, and events grounded in both academic research and exclusive data from the field. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook at @AdvocacyLabs and visit us on the web at AdvocacyLabs.org