

THE POWER OF PARTICIPATION

excerpt from "Tools for Radical Democracy" by Joan Minieri and Paul Getsos

We live at a time when the dominant culture, including the media, elected officials, and corporate advertisers, herald individualism. The stories we hear in school focus on the heroes and heroines of history, rarely on the collective power of organized groups. Although it is true that good stories rely on strong characters, promoting individuals helps those in power to play down the stories of how mass movements, collective struggle, and community-based campaigns have moved resources, shifted power, and improved the lives of many people.

Change through Collective Power

If you want to make a difference, you're not alone – and you can't do it alone. Individuals make a big difference when they act together strategically, peacefully, and in large numbers. . .

What is radical democracy?

Radical means going to the source or the root; democracy is rule by the people.

In radical democracy, people at the base of society participate in all aspects of the political system, from holding elected officials accountable to running for their local planning boards. Radical democracy is ordinary people participating in active community institutions where they discuss politics and ideas as they work for a better neighborhood, city, state, and beyond. . .

The fundamental way you build power is by getting people to understand the source of their social or political problems, then devise solutions, strategize, take on leadership, and move to action through campaigns that win concrete changes.

What Are the Components and Principles for Building Community Power?

The following are what we believe to be the essential elements for building power that is strong and deep, regardless of the problem, issue, or setting. These are core components that we think organizers and leaders need to incorporate into their work in order to be effective.

1. Build a base of members: more people means more power.
 - *Get people involved.* An organizer gets people involved. This is ongoing work and it never stops. You go to their homes, their jobs, the institutions and agencies where they congregate, and you talk with them. You don't tell people what they should do, you help them figure out what they want to do and can do to address problems collectively and in their communities. You get people to see that it is worth their time to talk to their neighbors or coworkers, come to planning meetings, think, learn, and evaluate. You align them as members of

your campaign or organization, keeping track of what they do and what support they need. You build their confidence and help them realize their potential, both for their own personal development and for a larger, collective good. You support their participation and recognize and respect them.

- *Move powerholders with numbers.* In democratic societies, powerholders respond to large numbers of people making demands of them. By powerholders we mean those decision-makers, such as elected officials or CEOs, who are the targets of community power-building campaigns. Numbers are ultimately the bottom line, so you keep many people involved and active in campaigns and the organization.
 - *Get members to make decisions.* You engage members in making decisions about how to move campaigns forward and how to develop their own organization. They come to meetings and give their opinions; you also call them periodically to check in. When people have a stake in the outcome and others are listening to them, they stay involved.
2. Get members to understand what organizing is: action fosters commitment.
- *Guide members to see the roots of problems.* An organizer helps people understand how their problems are based in policies, programs, or practices. You convene people with others who have the same problems as theirs so they can see what connects their experiences.
 - *Move members to action.* Action shows people what organizing is all about. It is essential to engage members in direct actions—planned, collective activities in which you confront, challenge, and negotiate with a person who can give your community what it wants. You run actions that have clear objectives to move a campaign forward.
3. Develop members to be leaders: leaders learn by doing.
- *Let leaders do the work.* An organizer develops members to be leaders by training and supporting them to facilitate meetings, manage campaigns and their own organization, and by engaging them in the social justice movement. You make sure that members and leaders represent the organization publicly to allies and the media.
 - *Conduct political education.* An organizer moves leaders to understand who has power in society and how government, corporate, and private powerholders operate. With this knowledge, leaders make better decisions and engage in more effective planning and campaigns.
4. Implement strategic campaigns: campaigns deliver wins.
- *Run winnable campaigns.* A campaign is a planned series of strategies and actions designed to achieve clear goals and objectives. You guide members to enter into a campaign based on extensive research and a carefully considered

strategy. When people get involved in community power-building campaigns, they understand what the objectives are, and they see and understand how their involvement makes a difference.

- *Analyze power.* Power analysis is a distinct process fundamental to an effective campaign. It is a systematic way of looking at who is with you, who is against you, and how important their support or opposition is to the campaign. Members use this information to make honest assessments of their own power and their ability to achieve their objectives. If you implement a campaign based on an inaccurate power analysis, or worse, with no power analysis, it is likely to fail. This only burns members, leaders, and organizers.

5. Engage members in the social justice movement: neutrality is not an option.

- *Build the movement.* Successful campaigns and organizations engage in the larger social justice movement. You build relationships with other community leaders and organizations and expand your community's base of power. An organizer guides members and leaders to engage in movement-building in order to develop them more deeply.
- *State an ideology.* Corporations, the military, the wealthy, and elected officials all have a clear vision of the world they want to create. They put this vision forth as an explicit ideology or worldview and galvanize support for it. An ideology includes not only the world you envision but how you believe you can realize it. Organizers work with members and community leaders to put forward their own view of the world, including people who are struggling to articulate what they believe or who agree with the vision of your organization but have been convinced by misinformation or lack of access to information to support an ideology that is not in their interests.

What Are Some of the Main Concepts of Organizing?

action | a collective action, which we often refer to simply as "an action," is a public showing of an organization's power, such as a march. Actions take place during campaigns. In addition, a person can "take action" as an individual to support a campaign or organization, such as signing a membership card or writing a letter to an elected representative.

mobilization | the essential process of moving people to action

power | the ability to act and to make things happen

strategy | in a campaign, strategy is the way or ways that a community powerbuilding organization uses its power to win what it wants. Effective organizations are strategic in everything they do.

public relationships | community power-building organizations exist to build members' collective political power, not their personal social status. The result is a network of "public relationships."

political education | political education is a form of training about issues as well as about social movements and history that you do both formally in workshop sessions and informally in daily or regular contact with members and leaders. Through political education, you communicate and develop the ideology or worldview of the organization.

winning | organizing focuses on winning. It results in positive, concrete change in people's lives.

evaluation | evaluation is the process of assessing your actions and determining what worked, what didn't, and what you would do differently next time. Evaluation takes place after every substantive event, from a day of recruitment to a phone conversation with an ally. Frequent and honest evaluation builds the skills, standards, and excellence of everyone in the organization. We sometimes refer to an evaluation that follows a specific activity as "debriefing."

movement-building | in movement-building you use your resources to engage in border social justice activities that are not solely connected to winnable campaigns or the self-interest of community members

Effective Movements

The impact of organizing on the social and political landscape is evident both historically and into the present. In our view, organizing has been critical to creating major socioeconomic shifts through nonviolent means, both in the United States and across the globe. . .

Here are some examples: In the United States in the 1860s, the civil War and the abolition of slavery were preceded by radicals organizing to raise public consciousness to the need to end slavery. The socialist and populist organizing of the late nineteenth century across the industrialized world won, in the United States, the eight-hour work day, child labor laws, and the minimum wage. Also in the United States, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s galvanized leaders and activists who had been training and organizing for years in their own communities. This movement expanded the right to vote to African Americans and caused a seismic shift in domestic and social policy. It also laid the groundwork for the movement to end United States military involvement in Vietnam. In the 1980s, across Eastern Europe, student and labor organizing led to the dissolution of totalitarian governments. Currently, movements in Latin America, led by indigenous communities and workers, are gaining control of governments, changing local politics, and challenging globalization.

Additional campaigns of the last 25 years that have galvanized into movements include the following:

Living wage and corporate accountability. Starting in the 1990s at the local level across the United States, these campaigns have used strategic alliances among community organizations, labor unions, and religious organizations to win fair wages that allow low-wage workers to live above poverty as well as additional improvements in their lives. Growing out of this work, local community organizations have spear-headed campaigns to ensure that economic development is equitable and includes community members— winning jobs, community benefits, and more community control in development decisions.

ACT-UP. In the 1980s, amid one of the greatest health crises in the century, ACT-UP speeded the development of treatments for AIDS while working to end discrimination and vilification of those who suffer from the disease. It used creative, massive direct actions focused on clear targets and a combination of other strategies, including media, not only to get the nation to understand and feel compassion for those with AIDS but to change the drug-approval process. This activity led to saving and extending the lives of hundreds of thousands of people with AIDS. Even today, AIDS activists across the globe, inspired by ACT-UP, work to ensure that AIDS drugs are available to everyone who needs them.

Student and community movement for corporate divestment from South Africa. The United States movement to divest from white-governed South Africa grew from student organizing in the late 1980s. Students demanded that their colleges and universities stop investing in companies that were doing business in South Africa. This movement soon expanded beyond campuses to include religious and community-based organizations, galvanizing the general public. While it eventually became a celebrity cause, the students who organized on their own campuses were an important component in getting the United States government and U.S. corporations to understand that investing in apartheid was unacceptable. Their efforts also supported local movements in South Africa.

The Right Wing Rise to Power

Right wing Republicans in the United States have successfully used grassroots organizing to gain power to implement their agenda, using techniques similar to the ones we describe in the book. The right wing has successfully shifted the parameters of the debate, resulting in moving both moderate Republicans and Democrats to target low-income people, people of color, women, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community. We've seen the federal government as well as state and local governments abandon their role to provide for people in need while providing huge tax relief to corporations and the wealthy. We've seen the government limit individual rights while allowing corporate power to consolidate in ways that not only influence the political process and the financing of electoral campaigns but also drastically curtail the rights and benefits of the workers whose cheap labor feeds corporate profits. We've also witnessed the expansion of the United States military and police power across the globe.

The right wing has been strategic, focused, and well financed. In addition to grassroots organizing, it has worked extensively with membership institutions such as churches. It has funded and supported public policy think tanks and conservative media outlets and focused on winning electoral and appointed positions of power at the local, state, and regional levels. The fact that the right wing uses organizing tools to advance its agenda only supports the need to identify, train, and activate the broadest possible base of people for our own work.

The Field of Community Organizing

. . . In *Democracy in Action: Community Organizing and Social Change*, published in 2004, Kristina Smock describes five types of community organizing approaches: the power-based model, the community-building model, the civic model, the women-centered model, and the transformative model. Smock observed these models as she examined the experiences of ten community organizing groups in Chicago and in Portland in 1998 and 1999. The following is an overview of the models, which offer a way to understand the spectrum of strategies and techniques that organizations are using to achieve change at the community level.

Power-Based Model. In this model, the community views its problem as a lack of power within the political decision-making process. Therefore, it builds its clout so that it can get its interests better represented in the public sphere. In a power-building model, organizers and leaders create a large, formal people's organization and use conflict and confrontation to demonstrate their power and pressure powerholders to concede to their demands.

Community-Building Model. In this model, the community views its problems as stemming from the deterioration of its social and economic infrastructure. Therefore, it rebuilds itself from within and connects to the mainstream economy. In a community-building model, organizers and leaders create collaborative partnerships among stakeholders, including businesses, nonprofits, and government entities, in order to be publicly recognized as a legitimate representative of the community as a whole.

Civic Model. In this model, the community views its problems as being based in social disorder. Therefore, it restores stability by activating both formal and informal mechanisms of social control. In a civic model, organizers and leaders create opportunities for neighbors to meet and problem solve in order to get the city services system to respond to neighborhood problems.

Women-Centered Model. In this model, the community views its problem as stemming from institutions at the core of the community that are unresponsive to the needs of women and families. Therefore, it conceptualizes household problems as public issues and builds the leadership of women to pursue collective solutions. In a women-centered model, organizers and leaders create small support teams and provide safe, nurturing spaces for community members to gather and build shared leadership. From this base of support they can interact

one-on-one with staff and administrators of public institutions and get them to be more responsive to community concerns.

Transformative Model. In this model the community views its problems as symptoms of unjust political institutions that especially disempower low-income people. Therefore, it challenges the way institutions work. In a transformative model, organizers and leaders develop an ideological foundation within the community so that a broad-based movement for social change can emerge and change the terms of public debate.

In our view, an organization can incorporate elements from more than one of these models—with independents being more likely to experiment with different techniques and strategies. . .

The conditions for organizing on your issues and in your community differ from those in other communities and issue areas. Especially when starting out, you examine the various models of organizing and the tools you can use. Understanding how different organizations work is very helpful when you start to build your own campaigns and, potentially, an organization.