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# Prisms of the People

POWER AND ORGANIZING IN  
TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICA

+++++

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## Contents

- 1 Introduction 1
- 2 The Cases 32
- 3 Defining and Measuring Power 65
- 4 The Strategic Logic of Prisms 98
- 5 Building People to Build Power 127
- 6 Democratic Fragility 152

*Acknowledgments* 167

*Appendix A: Previous Research* 171

*Appendix B: Research Methods* 181

*Appendix C: Additional Data from the Arizona Case* 187

*Notes* 195

*References* 203

*Index* 219

# 1 Introduction

It was April 13, 2010. Jeff was at the airport heading home to Arizona when he heard the news.<sup>1</sup> Senate Bill (SB) 1070 had passed the Arizona statehouse by a vote of thirty-five to twenty-one and was on its way to Governor Jan Brewer's desk, where she was expected to sign it. Authored by state senate president Russell Pearce—with the backing of the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)—SB 1070 was an omnibus bill that became known as the “show-me-your-papers” law, because it deputized local police to determine people's immigration status. “It's beyond the pale,” Chris Newman of NDLO (National Day Laborer Organizing Network) told the *Los Angeles Times* when asked about the bill (Riccardi 2010). Brewer had five days to decide whether she would sign it.

“Oh my god,” Jeff thought. “This is really happening.” Even though immigration had been the focus of fierce political conflict in recent years, SB 1070 represented an unexpectedly harsh attack on immigrant communities across the state. The child of an undocumented single mother, Jeff knew he wanted to take action but did not know what to do. He called Michele, a community organizer who had just led a nonviolent direct-action training he had attended in Nevada. Michele had been involved in the DREAMer movement since its founding and spent the two years prior to SB 1070's passage traveling around the country training young people like Jeff in movement building.<sup>2</sup> Although she was bearing witness to the repeated battering of immigrant rights from her vantage point in the national movement for immigration reform, Michele was shocked that a bill as extreme as SB 1070 could be politically viable. Jeff agreed.

“We just trained for this,” he said on that phone call. “What do we do?”<sup>3</sup>

This book is about the strategic choices that leaders like Jeff make in response to uncertain moments that evoke the question “What do we do?” For the pur-

poses of exposition, we name particular leaders making particular choices in this book, but the reality is that these leaders are all rooted in contemporarily broad and historically deep networks of other leaders engaged in similar kinds of strategic choice-making. Every day, across America, thousands of leaders of collective action are making choices about how best to identify, recruit, and develop people to engage in public life, and how to translate that participation into political power over the outcomes they care about. Some leaders are working on local issues in their communities, while others are part of dispersed national networks. Some are working within historic community-organizing traditions, while others are innovating at the edge of new digital technologies. Some are very isolated, while others (like the ones in our study) are embedded in ongoing practitioner conversations about strategies for collective action. Some represent scrappy organizations with minimal budgets, while others are part of formalized nonprofits with extensive resources to match. What unifies all of these leaders and organizations is the fact that at some point they all face a moment in which they ask, "What do we do?"

Our book describes the way leaders of collective action working in different states and on different campaigns answered that question. These are not just any leaders or examples of collective action, however. The leaders and organizations in our case studies successfully met the challenge of building a constituency and turning the actions of that constituency into power—which is no small feat in twenty-first-century America, particularly for the low-income constituencies of color in which many of these leaders organized. In this historic moment, for people across America, the link between participation and power seems broken. The very core of democracy—*demos kratia* in Greek, translated as "people rule"—feels impotent. By bucking these trends and showing how people can become power, the leaders and organizations in our study illustrated a distinct vision of how to make democracy possible.

The story that we tell in this book is an outlier in other ways as well. Our story is one of people beholden to people—of leaders and constituents embedded in organizations, and the strategic constraints and possibilities that those organizational relationships create for exercising power in politics. Given this, we deviate from trends in the study and practice of collective action in two key ways.

First, we focus on strategy in dynamic political environments. Coaches, generals, and CEOs recognize the importance of strategy for navigating competitive, dynamic terrain in sports, war, and business. Politics is similarly competitive and dynamic. The study and practice of collective action, however, often underestimates the way political uncertainty conditions the stra-

tegic choices leaders make. Many familiar models of collective action are based on unitary approaches to strategy that focus on stockpiling resources like people, actions, or money. Whether the goal is achieving symbolic, disruptive, or other kinds of power, these models assess the effectiveness of collective action by the scale of resources (from money to activism to public opinion) amassed. In contrast, our cases showed alternative strategic logics that focused on preparing for inevitable political uncertainty by cultivating constituency bases with certain kinds of characteristics.

Second, we focus on the *collective* side of collective action. Copious research on and practical studies of collective action examine action: how do we generate the actions we need? Research identifies messages, tools, tactics, and technological innovations that are more likely to get people involved. But what makes collective action collective? We argue that collective action is more than the additive sum of individual actions. Instead, the leaders and organizations we studied were able to exert power in large part because they were grounded in constituencies that had committed to standing together, to becoming something new together that they could not be alone. In choosing to stand with each other, these constituencies became cognizant of not only their rights to express their interests in the political process and the organizations of which they were a part, but also the responsibilities they needed to accept to make that possible. These constituencies, nurtured in organizations, were thus able to hold tensions that often seem to contradict each other—commitment and flexibility, ideology and pragmatism—making possible a different kind of politics.

Putting these strands together, our book elucidates a political logic, visible in all of our cases, that we encapsulate with the metaphor of a prism. We use the term *prism* throughout the book to reinforce the notion that what happens inside these cases of collective action (the design at the heart of the prism) determines what kind of power (or light) is refracted outside. Just as not all prisms are the same in terms of how they refract light, not all organizations are the same in terms of how they refract power. Each organization has, at its core, a set of strategic design choices about how to build constituency within the organization. Those choices shape its ability to exert power in the public domain.

Why use the metaphor of prisms? White light enters a prism and, based on the design at the center of the prism, becomes transformed into colorful vectors of light. In our metaphor, the organization (a term we use to refer generally to vehicles of collective action) is the prism that refracts the actions of a constituency into political power. The shape and extent of the vector of power the prism can project depend on design choices internal to the prism.

Why do those choices about internal practice shape the vectors of power projected into the world? There are four key steps to this argument. First, the organizations we are studying are contesting for power in inherently uncertain environments. Second, organizations cannot predict or control the challenges they are likely to face, but they can control the way they prepare for contingency. The best way to prepare is to develop a set of resources they can wield with flexibility and independence when contingency arises. Third, for people-powered organizations, the most important resource they have is people. They need constituencies that are independent (meaning the constituency can spring into action without a donor or anyone else giving the organization resources to activate it), committed (meaning the constituency is loyal to the organization and to each other), and flexible (meaning the constituency will shift with the organization even as the political choices and terrain shift). Fourth, whether a constituency is independent, committed, and flexible depends on the design at the center of the metaphorical prism. In all of our cases, the key patterned choice leaders made was investing in organizational designs that enabled them to build independent, flexible, and committed constituency bases.

We argue that those design choices at the center of the prism shaped the ability of the leaders and organizations in our cases to project vectors of political power outside—not because of the sheer volume of resources they amassed but because of the way they expanded leaders' strategic choice set. Our argument pivots, thus, to contend that power is not a function of organizational resources alone; it is a function of the breadth of strategic choices an organization has to navigate political uncertainty.

Although metaphors are never perfect, in this case, the metaphor of a prism is useful for three additional reasons. First, it underscores the transformative power of the organizations in our study to act not as neutral repositories of activism but as vehicles that transform people's activity and engagement into political power. Second, just as tiny prisms can refract light as far as it will travel, the leaders in our study could exert power at a much larger scale than their numbers might suggest, because of their internal organizational designs. Third, prisms emit both visible and invisible light. While we assert that some forms of power are measurable in new and interesting ways, we also acknowledge that power operates in complex ways and is therefore often difficult to measure using the traditional methods of social science. In sum, we argue that the organizations in our case studies exhibit a mutually reinforcing relationship between, on the one hand, constituencies equipped to exercise rights and responsibilities within a collective and, on the other

hand, the capacity of their leaders to exert power strategically in the public domain.

Throughout our book, we describe what prisms of the people are and how they work. But first, we must finish our story about Jeff and Michele. What did they do?

### The Pushback against SB 1070

The phone conversation Jeff and Michele had could have gone in many different directions. The two were not nationally known leaders in the immigration reform movement. If reporters from the *New York Times* were looking for someone to help them understand how advocates would respond in Arizona, they would not have called Jeff or Michele. If philanthropists or wealthy donors wanted to give money to someone to fight back against SB 1070, they would not have called Jeff or Michele. While Michele had an affiliation with the Reform Immigration for America campaign, a national multimillion-dollar effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform under the Obama administration, she was a trainer, not a nationally known spokesperson.

Jeff and Michele could have easily said, "Let's wait and see what the leaders in DC say," or "Let's wait until we can raise the money to fight." They could have fallen back on tried-and-true strategies for grassroots political action, such as petitions and phone banking. They could have said, "Let's start a petition, and get everyone we know to call Governor Brewer to stop her from signing the bill." These familiar, broadly accepted techniques likely would have drawn widespread support from inside and outside Arizona. Given their existing networks and national attention on SB 1070, they likely would have generated large numbers to demonstrate the breadth of support for their position.<sup>4</sup>

Alternatively, they could have chosen despair: "What's the point?" Jeff and Michele were, at best, midlevel organizers in a complex national fight about one of the most polarizing issues of the day. They had marched in the 2006 immigration protests. Despite being the largest mass mobilizations in the United States at the time since the anti-war demonstrations of the early 1970s, the 2006 marches did little to quell the bitter fight around immigration (Andrews, Caren, and Browne 2018). In 2008, with the election of Barack Obama as president and Democratic control of both houses of Congress, professional immigration-reform advocates hoped their moment had come. Yet by 2010 Jeff, Michele, and others were experiencing the flailing decline of comprehensive immigration reform—despite what scholars would have identified as a favorable political opportunity structure for it.

In Arizona, the immigrant community had not only good reason for despair but also good reason for fear. The passage of SB 1070 buoyed anti-immigrant hard-liners in the legislature. Self-appointed minutemen patrolled the borders with assault weapons. US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers raided workplaces, day laborer centers, and other gathering sites. One interviewee told us that the national news media accounts “actually sort of soft-sell the story. . . . They looked like death squads, the Phoenix police. They would literally patrol when we’d do marches . . . alongside of us with squad cars, with people wearing black ski masks . . . [and] there were demonstrations of white nationalists on the lawn of the Arizona capital with actual M16s.” Arizona’s immigrant community had good reason to fear for their physical and material well-being. Passivity in the face of threat would have been understandable.

Jeff and Michele chose none of these options. Their conversation went in a different direction.

“I remember saying, well . . . what do the people need?” Michele said.

“I want them to see our faces,” Jeff replied.

SB 1070 directly challenged everything Jeff, Michele, and other immigrant rights advocates in Arizona had been working toward. Faced with a decision about how to respond, they chose not only collective action but also a specific kind of collective action that bucked conventional wisdom. After their phone conversation, Michele coached Jeff as he worked with a team of leaders to organize a vigil on the lawn outside the Arizona State Capitol. The vigil started with seven people. “By lunch [on Sunday, April 18], we were 30; by night 100. On Monday, 200; Tuesday, 300,” Jeff remembered (Garcia 2010). On April 22, the numbers swelled as local students staged mass walkouts to support the protest. Michele said, “[We knew that] if the vigil [was] not growing every twenty-four hours, it [was] dying. [So we had] to get [people] there. A whole team of people was reaching out in the schools, in Latino businesses, and phone banking. . . . And people were scared . . . people didn’t want to come to the vigil at that time, because in those moments, it was very scary.”

The vigil continued for 104 days without interruption, persisting even after Brewer signed the bill. An interviewee who is sometimes called the “father” of the Arizona Tea Party told us that immigration is “the number one issue for a lot of the Tea Party type people,” but “I almost feel like the intensity is stronger on [the other] side . . . during the 1070 fight, . . . in the [Arizona] Capitol demonstration, there [were] more people on the pro-immigration side.”

In this uncertain moment, Jeff and his allies made an unconventional choice. Prevailing wisdom would dictate that they should wait for the big money, get more powerful spokespeople to speak on behalf of their constitu-

ents, test different messages with moderate voters, or instigate actions that could spread virally. At the moment when their constituents were at their most vulnerable, however, these leaders chose to call the people who would be most affected by the law out into the open on the Arizona Capitol lawn. Once the vigil began, they realized they could use it as a leadership training ground to build an immigrant rights movement in the state. They learned to ask more of the people who attended, instead of having them be just another body for a head count or media headline, as is often the case at protests. Through 114-degree heat, using ice cubes to cool their faces, young people and a group of undocumented women became the core of the vigil. Jeff reflected on the shared leadership that these “terrible moments” demand: “There isn’t one person that launch[es] a movement; it’s a collective effort where people step in and out of leadership. It’s a collective moment that is fueled by multiple actors, seemingly unrelated but all sharing a vision, a struggle, a hope.”

At first, this shared vision, struggle, and hope seemed in vain. On April 23, 2010, Brewer signed Senate Bill 1070 into law. But many newly engaged protesters refused to go home, pledging to stay put until the law was struck down. “Oh shit,” the organizers thought. By creating a collective context in which women, high school students, and other young undocumented leaders became committed to each other rather than to a fleeting legislative battle, the vigil had more downstream consequences than they initially imagined.<sup>5</sup> Now, the organizers could not leave the people to protest alone. They realized that they had to build the organizational infrastructure that would translate the rawness of the moment into longer-term political power. At one point, the notoriously anti-immigrant Sheriff Joe Arpaio came and threatened a group of women who were in a prayer circle. “And an undocumented woman walked up to him and put her hand up [to his face], and she was like, ‘Respect. We’re praying right now,’” an interviewee remembered. The three-month-long action became a crucible for learning, leadership development, organization building, and strategizing that laid the foundation for a broader immigrant rights movement in the state.

How can we make sense of the choices that Jeff, Michele, and other leaders in Arizona made? Because Brewer signed the bill into law, the vigil may seem, at first, like a defeat. We take a broader view, however, that centers the question of power, instead of any one policy fight or election. After SB 1070, a wide network of leaders and organizations emerged throughout Arizona to harness and develop the leadership and capacity that had been seeded during the fight. Over time, this ecosystem of leaders and organizations matured into an interconnected movement able to contest for political power. As one national leader told us, “I get to work with immigrant rights organizations all around

the country. There's nothing like it. There's nothing like the leadership development that has occurred in Arizona in the last ten years." Organizations like Promise Arizona, LUCHA (Living United for Change in Arizona), One Arizona, Poder in Action (formerly Center for Neighborhood Leadership), Puente, and many others developed, creating a cohort of immigrant leaders in the state whose understanding of how collective action could build power stemmed from the leaders' strategic response to a sudden attack on their community.

Even if the vigil did not stop Brewer from signing the bill, it became a crucible for developing the collective capacities that made prisms of people power able to participate in the ongoing contestation for power in Arizona. This book unpacks how and why investing in the collective capacities at the heart of the prism is strategic by examining six case studies. We have intentionally selected outlying cases that represent instances in which ordinary people helped build the power they needed to influence the outcomes they cared about—an all-too-rare occurrence in twenty-first-century American democracy.

### Our Question

How do vehicles of collective action build and exercise political power, given the improbability of their success? The organizations, movements, networks, and associations that build and sustain collective action—which we will generally refer to as organizations, broadly defined—play a unique role in American democracy. These organizations reach simultaneously inward to develop the capacities ordinary people need to act as agents of change in society, and outward to pressure decision makers to heed the concerns of these constituents (Andrews and Edwards 2004; Fung 2003; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). Whether these vehicles take the form of formal bureaucratic organizations or more dispersed movement networks, all of them operate as intermediary institutions between the mass public and governmental institutions. Yet, given the strong status-quo bias in American politics, in most cases, collective action fails. Nonetheless, the centrality of these types of organizations to the democratic project calls for more research unpacking the core logic that makes it possible for them to translate the actions of their constituency into political influence.

Most existing research focuses more on *what* vehicles of collective action need rather than on *how* they turn what they have into what they need. One stream of research, for instance, has focused on the free-rider problem. In 1965 Mancur Olson's canonical book *The Logic of Collective Action* positioned the free-rider problem as the central problem to be solved in collective action.

Namely, given the availability of public goods like clean water or neighborhood policing to all people in a given jurisdiction, how can individual temptations to free ride be overcome? As Olson argued, most people can enjoy the benefits of clean water without doing the work of obtaining it, thus free riding off the work of others. This framing of the collective action problem focused considerable subsequent research on the question of how organizations generate collective action at scale: How can selective incentives (benefits available to only those who help earn them), notions of civic duty, culture, relational ties, mobilizing structures, and other factors ameliorate the temptation to free ride (Olson 1965; for syntheses, see, e.g., Walker 1991; Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Buechler 2000)?

A parallel stream of research focusing on social movements has examined the conditions and resources that vehicles of collective action need to effect change. This work has outlined a broad set of material and human resources (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977, 2001; Cress and Snow 2000); contextual conditions, such as state capacity, opportunity structures, inequality, or levels of cognitive liberation within a constituency (e.g., McAdam 1982; Tilly 2000; Meyer 2004); and cultural factors (Jasper 1997) needed to make collective action politically influential (for syntheses, see Amenta et al. 2010; Andrews and Edwards 2004; Baumgartner et al. 2009; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Some research on organizations building civic capacity has started to examine the development of particular human resources, such as the organizing practices used to build constituencies' capacity for action and develop leaders (Warren 2001; Wood 2002; Oyakawa 2015; Delehanty and Oyakawa 2018; Flores and Cossyleon 2016; Cossyleon 2018). All of these factors create important constraints and opportunities but focus more on the resources needed than the strategic choices leaders can make to turn resources into power (see, e.g., Ganz 2000; Tarrow 1998; and Morris and Staggenborg 2004 for articulations of this critique).

As a result, a funny puzzle about collective action remains. Without more research on how resources are combined to achieve power, it is as if we are giving a cook a list of ingredients without a recipe for how and when those ingredients should be sourced and combined. Scholars have conceptualized the explanatory problem as a question of what the right ingredients are instead of as a question of where they come from and how to combine them. Yet, organizations and leaders who make strategic choices that translate resources into power need better theory to guide those choices—the answer to the question “What do we do?” (Ahlquist and Levi 2014; Ganz 2009; Clemens 1997; Hansen 1991). There is still more to learn about the range of strategies that enable or-

ganizations and leaders to translate collective resources into actual power to achieve the change that they seek.

This is the puzzle our book intends to address. The cooking analogy only goes so far; collective action will never be as formulaic as a recipe. For instance, the book describes the work of leaders and organizations that have emerged through well-established schools of community organizing and are embedded in the legacies of struggle and leadership of generations of organizers who have all developed theories of how to build collective action and power. Our argument is not that any one of these methods is superior to the others.<sup>6</sup> Nor do we offer a stepwise formula for making collective action work. Instead, we uncover core principles that bring coherence to alternative logics of collective action. We show why choices like the ones Jeff, Michele, and other leaders made make sense if we take seriously the effort to build political power.

The question is not merely an academic exercise. The practice of collective action in twenty-first-century America often emphasizes an accrual of resources over questions of how those resources are used, and this has real-life consequences for organizational leaders. Grassroots organizations are under enormous pressure to demonstrate the breadth of their public support, the number of dollars they have raised, or the number of votes they can turn out. Is that, however, the only way to make collective action powerful?

#### **Our Analytic Approach: Studying What Is Possible**

This book is devoted to examining how people can, with intention, build and strengthen organizations that make the democratic promise more plausible. To understand the strategic logic of powerful collective action, we examine outliers. Specifically, we bring an analytic lens to six case studies of improbable collective action, including the story in Arizona. Our analysis focuses on grassroots organizations in four states—Arizona, Minnesota, Ohio, and Virginia—that have been able to (1) build capacity by engaging constituents in the everyday work of democracy and (2) translate those actions into effective political influence. We also examine two additional cases in Kentucky and Nevada that provide insight on the internal organizational practices that make such work possible. We deliberately chose organizations that were working on different issues, in different political climates, with different constituencies—thus allowing us to vary the factors commonly known to affect the outcome of collective action. Despite working in such varied environments, each of these cases demonstrates success. We asked, Are there shared prin-

ciples or practices that characterize their work? What can we learn from examining cross-case commonalities?

#### **AN OUTLIER: LUCHA'S IMPROBABLE 2016 FIGHT FOR MINIMUM WAGE IN ARIZONA**

The practices of building constituency and power that undergird our cases are grounded in diverse research traditions on social movements, interest groups, management of common-pool resources, labor studies, faith-based organizing, and so on (Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000; Skocpol 2003; Wilson 1973; Lipset 1956; Ahlquist and Levi 2014; Andrews et al. 2010; Ostrom 1990). Similarly, the leaders we describe were all cognizant of the way they borrowed practice and insight from contemporary and historical networks of other organizing leaders from whom they had learned and who had waged similar struggles in the past. Despite these roots in traditions of scholarship and practice, our cases still stand out against dominant models of politics in the twenty-first century.

Consider, for instance, ongoing work in Arizona. Since 2010, the organizations and leaders that emerged from the pushback against SB 1070 have been central to a series of battles around policies affecting Arizona's immigrant community, battles that highlight some core strategic disputes. These organizations and leaders ran various kinds of campaigns, including ousting Russell Pearce—the architect of SB 1070 and the first statewide leader to be recalled in Arizona history—in 2011, electing allied officials to a majority of seats on the Phoenix City Council, passing minimum wage legislation, and ultimately voting Sheriff Joe Arpaio, the self-proclaimed “meanest sheriff in America,” out of office after his twenty-four-year reign (Mydans 1995). Throughout all these campaigns, grassroots leaders' strategies put them in conflict with parts of the mainstream political establishment in Arizona and across the country.

Proposition 206, also known as the Fair Wages and Healthy Working Families Act, exemplifies some of these tensions. Proposition 206 was designed to gradually increase the minimum wage in Arizona from the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 in 2016 to \$12.00 by 2020, with cost-of-living increases thereafter. In addition, Proposition 206 proposed giving forty hours of annual paid time off to employees of businesses with fifteen or more employees, and twenty-four hours to those of businesses with fewer than fifteen employees. Employees could use this paid sick time for a wide range of reasons, including medical care, dependent care, and personal emergencies, such as incidents of domestic violence.



Initially, some progressive funders, party leaders, and unions were reluctant to put the minimum wage campaign on the Arizona ballot in 2016. The coexecutive directors of LUCHA and its 501(c)(3) counterpart ACE, Alejandra “Alex” Gomez and Tomás Robles—both of whom became career organizers in response to SB 1070—described to us the origins of the Proposition 206 campaign. In 2012, the Fight for Fifteen, a national campaign backed by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), sought to raise the minimum wage by organizing fast-food workers. This bold move to “organize an unorganized private sector workforce numbering in the millions” (Gupta 2013) began with a one-day strike in New York City. By 2015, it had spread to 340 US cities. In April of that year, the Fight for Fifteen brought some sixty thousand people to the streets in what was reportedly the largest protest by low-wage workers in US history (Ashby 2017; Greenhouse and Kasperkevic 2015). After consulting with the members of their base, who told them that fair pay was one of their most urgent priorities, Tomás, Alex, and several of their allies within the state decided to bring the campaign to Arizona. Tomás and Alex noted that some philanthropists, national network representatives, and even union leaders told them that raising the minimum wage in a statewide ballot measure was neither possible nor strategic. “People would tell us, like, this is not an issue in Arizona. ‘Why don’t you do an immigration one? Why aren’t you doing criminalization, or voting?’ Nobody cares, and nobody thinks in Arizona you could pass an initiative for \$15 an hour, or raising the minimum wage, or whatever,” Tomás said.

LUCHA’s constituents, however, made clear to Tomás and Alex that minimum wage was the cause they wanted to undertake, despite this skepticism from movement and party elites. “From our members and from those workers,” Tomás said, “[We heard] ‘Why don’t we just raise the minimum wage ourselves?’” Even after LUCHA’s team had laid the grassroots groundwork for a campaign, however, funders, some unions, and other political leaders continued to doubt they could win the campaign. “The number one thing that people would say to us is, ‘You all are too young—Alex and I. You all do not have the experience or the strategy to be able to get such a monumental thing done. And if you go for this, you will fail. You will set progressive politics in Arizona back at least fifteen years [if you fail].’” Indeed, another statewide leader told us, “A lot of Dems didn’t want [Prop. 206] because they didn’t think they could win. They didn’t want to spend their money on it. They wanted to spend money on other stuff and then maybe do [minimum wage] in 2018 where they could use it as a turnout driver.”

The skepticism from funders and other mainstream political leaders was not unwarranted. In 2015, Republicans in Arizona had unified control of state

government, holding the governorship, both houses of the state legislature, and the majority of seats to Congress. The Arizona Chamber of Commerce and the restaurant association pledged to fight a minimum wage increase. Over the course of the campaign, a business coalition against the minimum wage increase filed lawsuits challenging the signatures that got the initiative on the ballot and launched a public campaign called “Protect Arizona Jobs.” Many of the low-wage workers who would benefit from the bill were under continued threat because of ongoing immigration battles, and those who were eligible were never considered reliable voters. A careful analysis of structural factors made investing in what would eventually become Proposition 206 seem risky, at best.

Nonetheless, LUCHA stubbornly persisted, fighting to obtain the resources they needed and to ensure that one of their own would formally lead the campaign. “[These] white organizations,” Tomás told us, “some of them would be like, ‘Well, we will fund you, but we want somebody else to run the campaign. We want somebody else to do it. We want basically an old white man or old white consultant from DC.’” These potential funders wanted to bring in establishment campaigners with “more experience.” Initially, LUCHA wanted Alex to head the campaign for Proposition 206. “But it was just, like, a *woman, Latina*, absolutely not . . . [we] said, well, we’re not gonna win that fight. . . . We have to organize all of our partners in the state to not let this moment slip from LUCHA’s hands, and at least have Tomás be the campaign manager,” Alex said. Alex and Tomás leveraged their relationships with other organizations in the state, including organizations the national funders knew they needed to have on board if they were to have any chance of winning the campaign. LUCHA’s coexecutive directors thus built a coalition with these organizations to form a unified front, and then they pressured national leaders to name Tomás the Proposition 206 campaign manager.

Having won the battle to be in charge, Alex and Tomás were able to develop the strategy for the Proposition 206 campaign. Tomás knew winning the ballot initiative would be an uphill battle:

I knew that the very first counterargument would be, “You’re gonna screw over small businesses.” So we felt, “Hey, what if we organize small business, and what if we bring them together?” . . . [In the public,] initially there was fear, right? “You’re asking me to support something that will affect my bottom line for the greater good.” And so it did take multiple conversations. [But] we ended up, with all the conversations we had, about 350 small businesses endorsed the campaign. . . . And so we really utilized one-to-one relational building, organizing in the campaign.

Alex and Tomás's ability to build and leverage this coalition both grew from and enhanced the work they had done to build their constituency base. Tomás further described the distinctions between the work they did and that of traditional campaigns:

We did not want this to be a traditional campaign. Nowadays, tradition goes to hit heavy on social media and paid media, commercials, digital ads, mail pieces. And then, the last two or three months of the campaign, you give some funding for people who do door-to-door canvassing. And we were really against that. We saw this as an opportunity to build [the organization], and the only way to build is if you empower organizers to have meaningful conversations [with constituents] around the issues that resonate with them, that go deeper than just voting for an initiative. And so we fought to have organizers instead of canvassers.

Now we did have canvassers, and they did come, and they knocked on doors. But the first iteration of the field campaign was grassroots organizers. . . . In addition to that, in places where we could, we assigned a LUCHA organizer. . . . And so these organizers [could build on the work of Prop. 206]. We would collect information for voters, but LUCHA organizers would follow up, we would talk to them not from Prop. 206, but from LUCHA. And as LUCHA, we talked about how we're leading this Prop. 206 campaign, but also, this is how we organize, these are the additional issues we organize. Would you be interested in becoming a LUCHA member?

After a grueling campaign, Proposition 206 won with 58 percent of the vote in November 2016 as the single highest vote-getter of anything on the ballot. It represented a significant victory for many immigrant and low-wage workers. The reaction of business interests after Proposition 206 passed in 2016 demonstrated the extent to which it was a meaningful loss for them. They immediately appealed to the Arizona Supreme Court to void the initiative (the appeal ultimately failed), and they turned to House Republicans to try to restrict future citizen-ballot initiatives like Proposition 206 altogether. As one interviewee told us, progressives in Arizona hadn't been a force in the state since the 1950s, when Barry Goldwater's election to the Phoenix City Council marked a hard rightward shift in the state's politics. In this historic context, the passage of Proposition 206 was an unqualified victory for the movement.

The battle between LUCHA's leaders and the philanthropists and other political leaders who supported them highlights the strategic dynamism that underlies any political fight, especially improbable ones like Proposition 206.

At every step of the campaign, Alex and Tomás were told that they should not work on minimum wage, that they could not win the campaign, and that they could not lead it. Alex and Tomás had to fight not only to run the campaign but also to do it on their terms, never certain about whether LUCHA would obtain the resources and support it needed in order for that to happen. Like Jeff, Michele, and the many other leaders who led the fight for immigration reform in Arizona, Alex and Tomás had to develop strategy while the odds were stacked against them, making risky choices that had unclear outcomes.

#### WHY STUDY OUTLIERS?

We specifically chose to study outliers like LUCHA because they stand out from an overwhelming narrative—namely that the democratic project has eroded in twenty-first-century America. The rhetoric of democracy promises government “of, by, and for” the people, but in practice the link between democratic participation and power seems broken, especially for those structurally disadvantaged by economic inequality, racism, or both. Most people find politics distasteful (e.g., Eliasoph 1998, 2011), are affectively turned off by people who hold different views (e.g., Mason 2018), and are increasingly segregated into homogenous communities that circumscribe the information they receive and the kinds of social interactions they have (e.g., Enos 2017). Even if people were more informed, deliberative, and engaged, however, the government would be unlikely to care (Gilens 2013; Bartels 2008; Achen and Bartels 2016). Elected officials are more polarized than ever before (e.g., Sides and Hopkins 2015; Lee 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2020), increasingly beholden to special interests (e.g., Drutman 2015), and gridlocked at every level.

Racism and nativism thread an ugly line through all of this data: trade books have popularized research showing we are predisposed to recoil from people who are different from us (e.g., Chua 2018); elected officials stoke the fires of parochialism to win elections (e.g., Haney Lopez 2013); and long-standing legacies of structural inequity make reform projects challenging at best. The prospects for changing people or institutions are equally bleak. Most evidence shows that persuasion of any kind is a hopeless task (e.g., Kalla and Broockman 2017), the algorithms and institutions that govern our public lives are beholden to incentives that drive people away from the public good (e.g., Tufekci 2015), and the civic associations that should be Tocquevillian “schools of democracy” are mostly incapable of engaging people in agentic action (e.g., Lee 2015; Skocpol 2003; Blee 2012). Copious, well-executed, and important research has taught us that humans are racist, petty, short-sighted,

self-segregating beings who are impervious to change and more likely to build institutions that instantiate the privilege of certain groups instead of equalizing it.

Our argument does not refute these realities but instead posits that there is value in bringing the tools of social science to understand the alternatives—and that the democratic project desperately needs such insight. Social science is predisposed to uncover what Jewish theologian Maimonides called “the necessity of the probable” instead of the “plausibility of the possible.” “Hope,” he argued, “is the belief in the plausibility of the possible, as opposed to the necessity of the probable.” For good reason, the intellectual architecture of mainstream social science focuses on what is likely to happen. If we only study probable outcomes, however, we cannot understand change—the status quo is always the most likely outcome.

In studying what is possible, we also bring civic and political organizations back into the conversation about the decline of democracy. These organizations used to be at the heart of the study of American politics in the early to mid-twentieth century (e.g., Dahl 2005; Truman 1951; Schattschneider 1960; Key 1956; etc.). The behavioral revolution, however, focused on more individualistic approaches to understanding the American political process (Downs 1957). This approach put more emphasis on voters, elected officials, and elections, and less on the role of intermediary organizations in shaping the relationship between the public and government (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Anzia 2019; Pierson and Schickler 2020). Our study reexamines these organizations to understand the possibilities they contain for shaping collective action in ways that take seriously the narrative that democracy is broken but also show a pathway through which the capacities of people-driven politics can be strengthened.

Our book thus brings an analytic lens to the audacity that sits at the heart of the democratic promise. In *The Federalist*, no. 51, James Madison states, “But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary” (1788). Although the founding fathers enacted an elitist notion of democracy, they understood that the goal of democracy is to create a process that overcomes the undemocratic instincts people naturally harbor. Democracy itself, in other words, is not about accepting the “necessity of the probable” but about creating a process that enables the “plausibility of the possible.” We contend that when people come together in prisms of people power, they can make the implausible possible and make democracy real.

### Our Argument: The Strategic Logic of Prisms

What are prisms of people power? We use the term to refer to the two-way relationship between the ability of grassroots leaders and organizations to exercise power in dynamic political environments and the extent to which these leaders are accountable to an independent, committed, and flexible constituency. At the heart of the prism is a set of design choices organizational leaders make about whether and how to create accountability to an independent, committed, and flexible group of people. Those strategic design choices then shape the power these organizations can exert in the external world. The strategic logic at the heart of people’s prisms, then, rests on recognizing the interconnectedness between the internal design choices and the way they prepare leaders to strategically negotiate power externally, even in changing, unpredictable political environments. Our book argues that the leaders and organizations across our cases exemplified the logic of such prisms. Scholars and practitioners alike have long recognized, but under-studied, the importance of both the strategic exercise of power and the work of building constituency internally. Our contribution is not in highlighting each on its own but in showing the way they operate in mutually reinforcing and transformative ways, like the light that enters and exits a prism.

The logic of our argument proceeds as follows:

- First, organizations seeking constituency-based political power are working toward political outcomes that are dynamic and fragile. The fragility is particularly heightened for low-income constituencies of color that have been historically marginalized. Their efforts to build political power are always uphill. Thus, achieving political power requires sustained work over a long period of time, and strategic creativity to overcome long-standing structural hurdles. Because political environments are inherently dynamic, we focus our analysis on leaders who make strategic choices about how to deploy the resources they accrue.
- Second, given the dynamism and fragility of their work, and their inability to anticipate all the challenges that will come their way, the most strategic choice that leaders seeking durable political power can make is to cultivate resources that will give them the most tools in their toolbox to respond to contingencies. In other words, we argue that even as leaders are buffeted by large structural patterns out of their control, one way they can exercise strategic agency is by expanding the choice set available to them in any given situation. Our argument thus shifts the

focus from asking what resources organizations have to asking what strategic choices are enabled by the resources they have.

- Third, for people-powered organizations, the resources that expand their strategic choice set are constituency bases that have three key characteristics: independence, commitment, and flexibility. *Independence* means they possess resources that are not beholden to another person or group's assessment of value. Organizations whose power comes from raising philanthropic dollars or elite access, for example, will always be dependent on philanthropy or elite access. *Commitment* means the members are loyal to the organization. *Flexibility* means that the constituency can adapt as political circumstances shift. When sitting at the proverbial negotiating table, the leaders in our case studies confronted questions like "How confident am I that I can deliver my base? Do I have the commitments and relationships I need to engage them in action?" The answers to those questions depended on prior choices leaders had made about not just whether to engage constituents in action but also how. Leaders who had cultivated constituencies with independence, commitment, and flexibility had a broader array of strategic choices they could deploy in negotiations over power.
- Fourth, prior choices leaders had made about how to design their prisms determined whether they had independent, committed, and flexible constituencies that were prepared for uncertain negotiations for power. These leaders recognized that in order to develop constituencies as an independent source of political power, they could not treat people's engagement like a spigot that could be turned on and off. Instead, these leaders had to be accountable to and in a durable relationship with that constituency. By staying rooted in and responsive to the needs of their constituency, the leaders in our cases were constrained by those needs but also confident they would have the kind of commitment they needed to exercise power over time. To maintain that kind of relationship, however, they had to build a set of relational ties, cultivate a set of bridging identities, and distribute the work of strategy in ways that would give their base ownership over and capacities for engaging in the work of collective action. Constituency-building practices thus constituted the defining characteristic of people's prisms.

What do these prisms look like in practice in the twenty-first century? Table 1.1 summarizes the differences between mainstream approaches to collective action and our argument about prisms, differences we detail throughout the book. To be clear, we are not arguing that one is better than the other. Instead,

our position is that the dominant models of collective action have crowded out alternate pathways to realizing the promise of powerful collective action in the twenty-first century. Understanding how prisms of the people work is a necessary and urgent task, particularly for constituencies that are historically marginalized in America. Table 1.1 compares and contrasts the two models, demonstrating the variant assumptions each approach makes and the practices each engages in with regard to power, strategic leadership, and constituency building.

Although we cannot isolate the causal impact of any one strategic choice leaders like Tomás and Alex made, we can elucidate an underlying logic that we saw as a pattern across our cases. Like Tomás and Alex, all the leaders in our case studies faced, at some point, an unexpected challenge to their power. They all experienced many moments like the one Jeff described when it was not clear how to proceed and, indeed, times when they were on the losing side of a negotiation. Given the inherent improbability of success that characterizes their work, the leaders in our cases recognized the need to ready themselves for such challenges. The leaders could not always control when, where, and how these difficult moments appeared and unfolded, but they could control how they prepared for them and what options would be available to them if they lost.

That strategic logic of preparation is core to our argument. For leaders like Tomás and Alex, their method of prepping for contingency was to develop their constituency as a source of power that could be wielded in flexible ways over time. Cultivating collective capacities within a constituency became the strategic choice, because those practices generated the commitment, flexibility, and capabilities constituents needed to stay loyal to organizations like LUCHA through all the ups and downs of the fight for Proposition 206, or any battle for political power (Hirschman 1970). Alex and Tomás could not predict how the campaign for minimum wage would unfold. The gamble they made, however, was that they would be better able to weather whatever challenges came their way if they had an organization full of leaders and constituents with particular skills, capacities, and commitments to one another. Alex and Tomás made a strategic investment, then, in building LUCHA's constituency in a particular way. Their design choices about how to build a constituency in their prism were key to building power. People who have a say over the decisions that affect them are more likely to have the kinds of capacities and commitments that leaders like Alex and Tomás needed to build LUCHA's power over the long term.

Leaders like Tomás and Alex made certain choices about how to cultivate their constituents' voices because they recognized that the uncertainty of the

**Table 1.1.** A Comparison of Prisms of People Power to Dominant Models of Collective Action

	Dominant Models of Research on and Practice of Collective Action	Logic and Practices of Prisms of People Power
<b>Power</b>		
Assumptions about political context	Baseline expectation of responsiveness from political elites	Focus on the likelihood of unpredictable challenges
Central challenge	Minimizing free riding and activating likely supporters	Generating constituent loyalty, flexibility, and resilience
<b>The Strategic Logic</b>		
Focus of power building	Accrue resources needed to generate proximity or access to decision makers	Develop an independent source of power that does not depend on access to elites
Allocation of resources	Investment in tools to generate action	Investment in civic feedbacks, or the downstream consequences of constituency engagement that feed back to shape the strategic position of the organization over time
Nature of strategy	Unitary	Flexible and pragmatic
Style of learning	Individualistic and operational	Collective and strategic
<b>Constituency Characteristics</b>		
Nature of relationships	Horizontal relationships are mostly preexisting; vertical relationships are created	Horizontal and vertical relationships are shaped and expanded by the organization
Nature of engagement	Task-oriented	Distributed strategists
Nature of commitments	To outcomes: policies, candidates	To people, to one another; flexible about policies and candidates
Nature of identities	Fixed, bonding	Changing, bridging

political battles they were waging meant they were essentially engaged in a repeat game, or long-term relationship, with constituents. To prepare for contingency, leaders had to build their constituency in ways that allowed them to go back to their base repeatedly as political circumstances changed, creating a potential threat that forced decision makers to be more responsive. All of these organizations built learning loops into their work to enable this repeat game. Thus, representation in this context was not a simple matter of discerning what people wanted and then acting accordingly, but instead a mutual relationship of accountability between leaders and constituents that created both opportunities and constraints for both. Leaders who understood that their ability to continually move people is the source of their power had to build relationships with constituents that would allow them to go back to and regenerate that resource again and again.

Distinct assumptions about the contingent nature of political power thus led to distinct leadership choices. We develop a concept we call "civic feedbacks" (Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2019) to understand how leaders prepared for the uphill battles they knew they faced. The concept of civic feedbacks suggests that power depends on not just having constituents take action but also *how* leaders engage them. In particular, how leaders choose to engage their constituency feeds back to shape the strategic position of the organization over time by affecting the range of strategic options a leader has. Instead of focusing only on one election, policy change, or other outcome, these leaders developed their constituency with an eye toward the long, unpredictable fight ahead of them. Expecting setbacks, these leaders wanted to build an independent, committed, and flexible base, because that would enable them to exercise not only plan A but also plan B, C, D, and so on. Building a prismatic constituency maximized their chances for having multiple strategic options available when they faced obstacles.

Prismatic bases have a resilience that enables positive civic feedbacks, because they are more likely to exhibit the commitment and flexibility that allow leaders to independently exert power. In prismatic constituencies, people are power, not props. Individuals exercising the rights and responsibilities of prisms cannot be treated as interchangeable bodies. Instead, leaders cultivate constituents' capacity to exercise voice, thus constraining themselves via member accountability but also making it more likely their constituencies will stay loyal. Given this, the way that the organizations in our study engaged with constituents is distinct from the way that organizations that believe people need only be moved episodically engage constituents. The organizations in our study sought to build constituencies through a relational logic that gives people a sense of their own agency and makes it more likely they

will stay involved over the long term by binding the fate of one to the fate of many. This means creating commitments that are more flexible across issues and candidates by (1) grounding the work in a set of values and relationships, (2) engaging people as strategic agents of change through distributed structures, and (3) seeking to shape people's identities through the work they do.

Prisms of people power thus link the practices of building a committed and flexible constituency base (one that is willing and able to weather the inevitable ups and downs of any effort to make change) to the effort to exert power in the public arena. In the cases we examine, a leader's ability to turn collective action into power depended on prior choices leaders had made about how to identify, recruit, and develop a constituency. These leaders could not always anticipate what challenges to their power would emerge in the campaigns they were waging, but they could prepare for the certainty of challenge. By enmeshing people in relationships, giving their base ownership over the work, and cultivating identities that enabled flexibility, leaders made these improbable bids for power more strategic.

#### RELATIONSHIP TO PREVIOUS ORGANIZING TRADITIONS

Some readers, looking at the prisms we describe, may argue that these prisms are synonymous with community organizing. Certainly, all of the groups in our case studies were rooted in the organizing tradition. Likewise, the leaders themselves were deeply embedded in interpersonal and organizational networks and were aware that they were part of a set of historical organizing traditions that have been constantly evolving as politics and society have evolved. In public and scholarly discourse, however, the word "organizing" has been commonly used to refer to any effort that organizations make to engage ordinary people in public life. Everyone, from those working in the tradition of Saul Alinsky to marketing-based social entrepreneurs, from union organizers to get-out-the-vote canvassers, has used the term "organizing" to describe what they do. It often seems like anyone seeking to engage the mass public in any sort of activity adopts the label of "organizer," rendering the term too vague for our purposes. We thus use the term "prisms" instead, to emphasize our focus on a particular kind of collective power building.

Our argument is not that any activism creates power but that a particular kind, in which people learn to stand with one another with the commitment and flexibility needed for political struggle, may very well do so. The practices we describe are akin to community organizing in many ways but also grounded in scholarly and practical traditions that emphasize the duality of

the rights and responsibilities of collective action. The design choices leaders made to build constituencies in our prisms were not just about getting people to exercise their right to action but also about cultivating the responsibilities people have to act with others in community. These prisms become "strategic," we argue, because they enable the exercise of power.

#### SCHOLARLY SKEPTICISM AND STRATEGIC PRAGMATISM

Some skeptics may object to our argument about prisms, treating it as a biased and naive exaltation of insurgent examples of collective action. We seek to address possible causes of bias by gathering data from multidimensional sources that give us independent perspectives on what the leaders in our cases did. Instead of just taking leaders at their word about what power they built, we sought to develop independent measures of political power and get perspectives on their work not only from their allies but also from their opponents and political targets. We discuss the issue of potential bias at greater length in chapter 2.

To address the point about naivete, it is worth spelling out that we are *not* arguing that ideologues are more likely to win. In both academic scholarship and journalism, many depictions of community organizing, social movements, and other instances of collective action treat adherents and leaders of such movements as dogmatists, unwilling to compromise, and impractical in their arguments about how political change is made. These portrayals, however, conflate preference with strategy, assuming that preferences on an ideological continuum determine what kind of strategies people are willing to adopt. This framework thus often presupposes that moderate or centrist political positions are inherently more strategic. We challenge this assumption. While it is true that the ideological and issue positions of organizations in our case studies were, in many cases, to the left of mainstream public opinion, we found that holding ideologically left views did not preclude pragmatism or compromise. Our argument, in other words, partially unlinks preference and strategy.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the leaders in our case studies exhibited a kind of political pragmatism that debunks commonly held perceptions of activists. This pragmatism emerged because the leaders recognized that their power came not from proximity to political elites but from their relationships with their constituency. These leaders understood that their ability to exert power in relationships with political decision makers depended on their ability to deliver a base repeatedly over time (Hansen 1991). While access to decision makers might

have been an indicator of their power, it was not the source of it. These leaders had the most power when they were accountable to constituents. For these constituents, however, the fights were not abstract. These were people who had problems to solve; their pragmatism came from a desire to solve those problems.

As Tocqueville argued almost two hundred years ago, the transformative power of democracy is not only in the way engaging in collective action transforms people's interests, motivations, and capacities but also in the way leaders transform the resources of individuals into political power by strategically linking those resources to the interests and choices of decision makers (see, e.g., Fung 2003). This book describes the way leaders' choices about how to cultivate democratic proclivities in a constituency constrain or expand their ability to transform those proclivities into power.

An old adage argues, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." We are not arguing that prisms of people power will lead automatically to power, but they are one compelling way organizations prepare for opportunities to exercise influence under conditions of uncertainty. Even as we describe the patterns that emerged in our cases, however, we recognize that the work these organizations and leaders do to realize democracy in twenty-first-century America is rare, difficult, and fragile. Nonetheless, instead of accepting the necessity of the probable, these organizations have made the possible plausible. Our job is to document how.

### Previewing the Book

How do organizations translate the action and engagement of their constituents into political influence? What patterns do we see across our cases? Are the rare instances in which organizations break through to achieve meaningful victories for their constituencies completely idiosyncratic, or are there systematic choices that help explain how they achieved their goals? We observe commonalities, particularly in how the organizations in our study strategically translated people into power—even in highly contingent political circumstances. Our argument unfolds in five additional chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 detail some of the methodological choices in the book, including how we defined and measured political power. Readers less inclined to focus on such questions may want to concentrate on chapters 4 and 5, which describe the core characteristics of leadership and constituency that constitute the design choices at the heart of the prism.

## CHAPTER 2: THE CASES

This chapter introduces our cases and the research design (methodological details are further elaborated on in appendix B). The study is a qualitative, inductive case-study project that seeks to elucidate the capabilities organizations can intentionally cultivate to make it more likely they will build the power they need to achieve their goals. Across all of our cases, we collected primary and secondary information, combining interviews and ethnographic observations with a close analysis of organizational and secondary data. We collected these data from not only the leaders and constituents in the organizations we were studying but also the political targets they were seeking to influence and the allies with whom they worked. We were thus able to develop a 360-degree view of these organizations. We also conducted in-depth fieldwork in each case, observing the organizations we were studying and the communities in which they worked. In addition, we fielded two surveys of political and corporate elites in Ohio and Virginia to understand network dynamics in the power-building campaigns we studied; we analyzed state-level legislative data from the National Conference of State Legislatures to understand trends in immigration bills in Arizona; and we used text-as-data methods to analyze the impact ISAI AH (one of the organizations we studied) was having on public narratives in Minnesota.

When selecting cases, we took a "most-different" approach (Gerring 2007; Seawright and Gerring 2008) to identify four sets of organizations in Arizona, Minnesota, Ohio, and Virginia that met two criteria: (1) they had built some measure of political influence, and (2) they were distinct from one another in terms of the geographies, issues, constituencies, and political targets they engaged. This selection strategy allowed us to maximize difference on the socioeconomic conditions, political opportunity structures, resources, and individual traits of constituents known to shape the ability of organizations to achieve their political goals. By maximizing difference on external conditions, we hoped to see what (if any) internal characteristics were shared across organizations that built power in varied circumstances. To select cases, in the fall of 2016 we interviewed a set of key informants and analyzed a variety of socioeconomic and political data (see appendix B).

In addition to the case study of immigrant leaders in Arizona that was introduced in this chapter, we had three other core cases: a statewide organization called New Virginia Majority that helped win voting rights for formerly incarcerated citizens; a faith-based organization in Cincinnati, Ohio, called AMOS that led the field campaign to pass a ballot initiative for universal pre-

school in 2016; and ISALAH, a faith-based statewide organization in Minnesota that sought to influence narratives around race and class in the 2018 gubernatorial election. Two additional cases allowed us to go into greater depth on some of the internal organizational capabilities that made it possible for these groups to exercise the capacities of prisms: a case involving a coalition of organizations in Nevada that worked together in 2015 to counterbalance the power of corporations by advocating for (and passing) a corporate-profits tax law that would provide \$1.5 billion of support for public education and services, and a case involving a group in Kentucky focused on multiracial organizing across urban and rural constituencies in the state. We selected the Nevada and Kentucky cases because of their unique internal structures and governance processes.

Our book analyzes the patterns that emerged across all six case studies. We aimed to select cases that would provide some analytic leverage in generating propositions about the way these organizations build power. Nonetheless, our design has inevitable limitations, which we discuss in chapter 2. While we work carefully throughout to describe and make visible the ways in which these organizations build power, we cannot definitely and precisely estimate the size of the causal impact these organizations had in any one case. All of them are working on complex issues in a contingent ecosystem of civic and political actors, and isolating the causal influence of any one organization in a given campaign is nearly impossible. Even so, studying the success of these organizations provides insight on key questions about the everyday practice of democracy.

### CHAPTER 3: DEFINING AND MEASURING POWER

This chapter focuses on our assessment of the extent to which the organizations in question built power. Our study is premised on the idea that they did—so how do we observe it? After all, the question of how to define the extent to which interest groups and social movement organizations achieve political power is a topic of copious debate among both scholars and practitioners (e.g., Giugni 1998; Amenta 2006; Pierson 2015). These organizations are not only seeking to win elections, pass policies, and win executive orders that favor them—they are also seeking to rebalance power. This chapter builds on existing conceptualizations of power to provide some additional empirical ways to observe its shift.

Across all four of our core cases, we look for—and find—evidence of organizations shifting power. Given that the campaigns and goals of each organi-

zation were distinct, we use slightly different approaches to measure power shifts in each case study. What unifies our approach to each, however, is a focus on measuring power shifts not only in terms of the visible gains that were made but also in terms of changes that are largely obscured from immediate view. We examine data showing changing networks of power relationships in a community, shifting narratives around race and belonging in elections, and changes in state legislative agendas over time. We draw on network surveys, analysis of public statements and media coverage, and analysis of legislative action in state legislatures.

### CHAPTER 4: THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF PRISMS

This chapter analyzes the strategic choices that leaders in our cases made, given the uncertainty of their political environments. If we accept the idea that power is contingent, it necessarily puts a focus on leadership, because leaders are the ones who decide how to exercise power (or not). Thus, this chapter examines the choices leaders made to expand their strategic capacity. We divide our discussion of this into two parts. First, why is investing in prisms of people power strategic? Second, what leadership choices emerge from that strategy?

We ground our discussion of the strategic nature of prisms by distinguishing between the effort to build independent political power and the effort to gain access to power. Departing from dominant models of collective action that conceptualize the goal as gaining access to power, we argue that leaders in our cases wanted to gain access in ways that enabled them to build and wield an independent source of power at the negotiating table, much as Tomás and Alex did during the minimum wage campaign. These leaders wanted to be able to push decision makers without having to worry about jeopardizing their access. This desire for an independent source of power propelled them to focus on constituency as their key resource, even and especially when they made headway in institutional settings, and to focus, in particular, on building a constituency with characteristics that would maximize their strategic flexibility at the negotiating table.

We show that all of the organizations in our case studies engaged their constituencies with an eye toward the downstream (or feedback) effects of their actions. Instead of thinking just in the short term about the number of people they activated or the volume of action they generated, these organizations considered what choices they would have (and which would be foreclosed) down the road as a result of these actions. Leaders analyzed their



political situations in terms of a long-term focus on political power and, as a result, decided to strategically invest in building their constituency to prepare for contingent negotiations over power.

#### CHAPTER 5: BUILDING PEOPLE TO BUILD POWER

Having examined the extent to which each of these organizations built power and the strategic leadership choices that made this power building possible, we turn to the implications for base building. In this chapter, we focus on four interrelated characteristics that we see across all of our cases.

First, the bases built by these organizations were populated by members in deep relationship with one another. A complex latticework of relationships undergirded all of this work and constituted the glue that held the base together. By creating settings in which constituents entered into relationship with one another, the organizations we studied invested in their most important source of influence (an organized base of people) and enabled the learning, action, and commitment that helped shift political power configurations. Second, these structures allowed these organizations to develop their constituents as strategists—the second characteristic we saw across cases. Constituents in these organizations were not just following directives from organizational leaders; they also acted as independent strategists.

Third, these practices led to constituencies that were simultaneously committed and flexible. A constituency base that is committed and flexible has made the choice to act together to build power for its members but is adaptable about the pathways to achieving that goal. The importance of social relationships in shaping civic action is nothing new (e.g., Sinclair 2012; Rolfe 2012). Our study, however, analyzes how relationality and the kind of commitment described above interact. The fourth and final commonality of the constituencies in our study is their ability to build bridging identities. We find that these organizations circumvented a kind of narrow identity politics (in which some groups of people build power to act in opposition to others) by drawing on relationships as sites of deliberation and learning. This approach unlocked people from rigid silos and created solidarity across racial, class, age, and geographic differences. As one of our interviewees said, “You are not doing your relational due diligence to other people in your community if you are not talking to those who are different from you.”

#### CHAPTER 6: DEMOCRATIC FRAGILITY

Throughout the book, we try to be realistic about the challenges faced by organizations seeking to give voice to the interests of low-income constituencies of color in American democracy. Our final chapter zooms out from our specific cases to examine the broader context within which these organizations work. We begin with the idea of fragility: when we look across our cases, perhaps the most obvious observation that emerges is that power is often tenuous. For constituency-based organizations like the ones in our study, power is a constant negotiation. Given the long-standing asymmetrical distribution of resources in American politics, grassroots organizations are always fighting for their toehold on power. Moreover, the more powerful these groups become, the more they become targets for either co-optation or outright hostility from the opposition. If we imagine the effort to gain power as a scale these organizations are trying to tip in their favor, many factors tend to keep them on the losing side. Only occasionally can they move the fulcrum so that the scales lean in their direction—but when they do, they have to fight to keep the balance on their side. In all of our cases, we examine the ebbs and flows of power these organizations achieve over time, as well as the concessions they had to make along the way, showing how fragile their power is in the broader political context within which they are working.

The final chapter also discusses the ways our findings are distinct from previous research and conventional wisdom on collective action. Because the data in the book come from studies of a relatively small set of civic organizations, we discuss the external validity of these findings, examining publicly available data on other organizations to show there are important commonalities across them. We then discuss how existing research on social movement organizations and collective action might be recast in light of the findings from this book. The conclusion also discusses the implications of our findings for practice. We hope the book will provide actionable research that can inform the strategic choices organizers make. Our work illuminates a broad range of options that leaders of collective action have at their disposal, perhaps broader than they may realize, and, in doing so, helps address the failure of strategic imagination in much of contemporary politics.

#### The Challenge of Realizing the Democratic Promise

In documenting the implausible work of organizations seeking to give ordinary people a real voice in politics, we define an alternate logic of politics, expressed in the prism metaphor. Prisms of people power develop alternative

pathways to power that are often underrecognized in twenty-first-century politics. Given this, the focus of this book runs counter to the political and scholarly contexts that shape modern-day democracy. The organizations we study all seek to accomplish the vision that is contained—but unrealized—in the promise of democracy. We accept the likelihood that the most probable outcomes will prevail, but nonetheless argue that there are some systematic ways to make the possible more plausible.

By probing the organizational foundations of people power, this book offers insight into ways the everyday practice of democracy can be realized. As we confront a long list of seemingly insurmountable challenges—from rising inequality to deeply rooted racism, from increasing social disenfranchisement to intractable issues of sustainability—the task of making democracy work seems simultaneously more urgent and more remote. When people take to the streets to agitate for change, reformers too often respond (if they respond at all) with attempts to manage or narrowly fix these problems. These attempts may offer temporary salves, but they ignore the underlying corrosion of people's ability to exercise voice in our political system. Our book steps into this gap and speaks to larger questions about revitalizing democracy.

The articulation of these alternatives, even if they are improbable, is important to making them more visible so that they can become more likely. The relationship between constituencies and the democratic system is a function of both supply and demand—the demands that people put on the political system shape the supply of participatory opportunities it affords, just as the opportunities that are supplied shape the demands people have. Lacking voice in the larger marketplace of politics, constituents become like fish wondering why they have no choice but to keep swimming. "Who invented water?" the old joke begins. "I don't know, but it wasn't a fish." A system focused solely on aggregating actions to build power creates a supply of participatory opportunities that simultaneously responds to and reinforces people's instincts for the thinnest forms of participation. Dominant models of collective action conceptualize it as the additive sum of individual behavior, thus shaping both what organizations ask people to do and what people expect to do. This approach, we argue, makes it less likely these organizations or individuals will build power. As constituents get locked into a set of invisible structures that deprives them of any real voice in the political system, the probable becomes inevitable.

With this book, we hope to shine a light on an alternative. Like Jeff, Michele, and many others in Arizona, all of the leaders in our case studies made strategic choices that may initially seem baffling to outside observers.

By digging deeply into these outlying cases, however, we are able to describe the strategic logic that knits these choices about how to engage people in action to their ability to build power. In doing so, we hope to recover a tradition of democratic self-governance and show how it can work in twenty-first-century America.