4 *The Strategic Logic of Prisms*

In the context of Minnesota right now ... [other organizations say they] have 20,000 people ... [or] 70,000 members. We don't have a base like that. But they can't deliver that base. Not even close. I mean not even close. If [those organizations] could deliver their 70,000 [members], they could run this state. But they can't.

ISAIAH LEADER, JANUARY 2018

Members of Congress alter their customary patterns of [access] only when events fulfill two conditions. First, new informants must prove their competitive advantage over old informants. Elections must demonstrate that their information and propaganda more accurately reflect the salient preferences of constituents. Second, the circumstances that made the competitive advantage of new informants possible must recur. Politicians must discern a persistent basis of interest mobilization and attention.

JOHN MARK HANSEN, *GAINING ACCESS* (1991, 108)

In 1991, University of Chicago professor John Mark Hansen published a book examining why certain interest groups had greater access to elected officials than others. His case study was the farm lobby in the twentieth century. Why, he asked, were farm lobby groups persistently able to gain influence in the US Congress disproportionate to their size? "Lobbies gain access when, in the judgment of congressional elites, they represent constituents," he concludes (Hansen 1991, 3). Constituency-based interest groups differentiate themselves from others when they are able to establish what Hansen calls a "competitive advantage" with "recurrence." These groups, in others words, must demonstrate to reelection-minded legislators that they can deliver their base.

As Hansen's work would predict, the leaders in our cases recognized that their power at the proverbial negotiating table with political elites depended on their ability to deliver an authentic constituency base. The quote above from the ISAIAH leader exemplifies this idea—ISAIAH knew that its influence rested on its ability to consistently deliver people, not just size or scale. Although none of the groups in the cases that we examine in this book were contesting for power in the halls of US Congress, they were all involved in similar negotiations with city leaders, statewide candidates, elected officials, business communities, and other power players. Across all of these venues, the leaders in our cases recognized that (a) exercising power required negotiation, and (b) their ability to build, maintain, and flexibly deploy a loyal constituency base constituted their power.

How did this recognition of the dynamic nature of political power and the need to link constituency actions to elite negotiations shape the strategic choices leaders made? This chapter examines the patterns we see in leadership choices in order to uncover the underlying strategic logic of prisms. Looking across cases that are operating in different political environments, on varied issues, and with distinct constituencies, what patterns emerge about how leaders identified goals, analyzed their options, and made strategic choices? When we began the project, we thought we might find patterns in the types of plans deployed. Instead, we found that the leaders in our cases shared a strategic dynamism and a clarity about sustaining that dynamism. There was no clear formula for power, no tactic, tool, resource, or action that would guarantee success. Leaders used online and off-line tactics, electoral and nonelectoral approaches, and coalitional and independent strategies. What was common was a strategic logic about how to cultivate people as effective sources of power and stay accountable to them when wielding power in the public domain. These shared patterns emerge through a careful analysis of leaders' considerations as they made choices.

In this chapter, we break our discussion of strategic leadership into two parts. The first part unpacks the strategic logic underlying prisms of people power. Why is it strategic for leaders focused on building power to invest in people? In uncertain political environments, people are the most independent source of power these organizations have that can enable them to earn a seat at the table and keep advocating for their interests. We describe the distinction between having an independent source of political power, one rooted in accountability to an authentic constituency, and having power that is dependent on access to decision makers. Based on this distinction, we then describe how leaders in our cases made strategic decisions with an eye toward their long-term, downstream consequences. Creating organizations that operated with the logic of prisms allowed leaders to engage their constituencies in ways that had positive civic feedbacks—that is, feedback loops that

would strategically position the organization so it could more likely exercise power in the future.

The second part of the chapter describes particular characteristics of prisms that differentiate the choices leaders in our cases made from dominant models of collective action. Across our cases, leaders grounded their strategic decision-making in the needs of their constituency, thus maintaining a focus on power, an openness to a range of traditional and nontraditional strategic options, and a recognition of the long, uncertain battle they faced. An analysis that took all of these factors into account led them to a set of strategic choices that enabled them to act with the flexibility they needed in their David-like bids to beat their Goliath (Ganz 2009). We describe two particular practices that enabled this strategic dynamism: a pragmatic philosophy that balanced ideology and strategy, and a dedication to constant strategic learning.

The Strategic Logic

Our formulation of the prism metaphor examines the strategic linkages between the choices an organization makes about how to build its constituency and its ability to refract political power in the public arena. What are the conditions under which designing people's prisms is strategic for building power? We argue that designing metaphorical prisms of people power is the strategic choice when two intertwined conditions are met: first, when an organization needs an independent source of political power, one that is related to, but distinct from, access to elites or institutional channels; and second, when an organization needs to prepare for uncertainty—which, as we have argued, is almost always the case.

All of the organizations in our case studies were dedicated to building political power, as the previous chapter illustrated. Moving from a conceptual definition of power to a set of actionable strategic goals, however, is not easy. There are no formulas. Most people would chuckle at the idea of an instruction manual for democracy that includes a troubleshooting guide: "If you do not have the power you want, go through steps A, B, and C on page 8." Nonetheless, in the everyday chaos of politics, leaders like the ones in our case studies face numerous pressures to proffer a magic bullet for power. In a world where grassroots groups must constantly compete for resources, leaders face consistent pressure from funders, potential supporters, and the media to identify formulas for success. Worse, some of the leaders in our case studies told us that they often have to repackage their work, depending on funder fads. One executive director told us how she trains her staff to talk to funders:

"[I tell them] don't ever talk about process; the idea that you have 15 one-on-ones and then a meeting and all those people show up and were converted into leaders . . . [funders] don't care. It sounds so small compared to saying you had 10,000 contacts."

We found that the leaders in our study pursued their own strategic pathways for three related reasons: first, they recognized that the source of their potential power comes from, as Hansen observed, the ability to reliably and repeatedly deliver an organized base of people; second, they knew their bids for political power were uncertain; and third, they knew that whatever wins they did achieve would require constant protection. The leaders understood that simply having access to power brokers would not necessarily advance their constituents' interests, particularly when they were advocating for low-income populations of color whose needs historically have not been met by the existing system. They recognized that the only way they could use their access for influence was to maintain an independent source of power that sat outside their relationship with elite decision makers. This independent source of power was their constituency. Their understanding of the uncertain and long-term nature of political power building meant they were constantly making choices about how to invest in their constituency in ways that prepared them for unexpected wins and setbacks. Investing in the accountability structures, practices, and strategic orientation of the collective—what we liken to the internal design of a prism—was how these leaders prepared for uncertainty.

CONSTITUENCY AS AN INDEPENDENT BASE OF POWER

Social scientists studying political influence often use access to power as a proxy for power itself. Important studies have analyzed things like congressional testimony to identify the groups that are recognized by political decision makers as influential (e.g., Hansen 1991; Burstein 2003). While this approach provides a good look at one dimension of power—namely, who has a seat at the proverbial decision-making table—it does not differentiate between those who can use that seat to challenge the status quo and those who cannot.

We argue that investing in the internal design of a prism is strategic for organizations seeking to build power. Why is it strategic? Leaders accountable to and rooted in an active, engaged, and committed constituency can claim power at the negotiating table that leaders without that constituency cannot. One clear pattern that emerged across all of our case studies was the desire by our leaders to ensure that if and when they earned a seat at the table,

they could continue to challenge the status quo without risking the loss of their seat. In part, this was because they recognized that their constituencies were often the kind most likely to get marginalized in political decision-making (Gillion 2013; Strolovitch 2007; Blee 2012). The only way they could maintain an influential position without compromising the representation of their constituencies was to earn their seat by developing what they often called an "independent source of power." Independent political power is strategic because it allows leaders to influence elite power without depending on it. In other words, with an independent source of power leaders had access to resources that they could use to influence decision makers, without those resources' existence depending on funders, party leaders, or other external decision makers. The constituency and its leaders themselves controlled that resource.

Doran Schrantz of Minnesota's ISAIAH described the importance of an independent source of power. In an interview from 2014, she reflected on the growing prominence of ISAIAH in movement circles in the United States. ISAIAH was becoming favored in particular among the large national philanthropies that financially supported much of the grassroots work that organizations like it did. Doran said,

> I'm of the opinion that there's not going to be a significant, people-powered, independent movement funded by foundations. . . . It's just that [the philanthropic world] has its own momentum and its own set of priorities. . . . The thing that's depressing is that you take . . . some of your most talented organizers and you turn all their strategic energy . . . on milking that thing [the world of philanthropy]. . . . And then, that thing can also defang you. It turns you into a celebrity, turns you into a commodity. So, I've also seen that happen to people—that they do really good organizing that becomes this big thing. . . . And then, you get positioned inside that whole system and all of a sudden you could raise ten million dollars 'cause you're the new celebrity. So then you build a big national thing and now you're a hustler. I mean, you hustle—you hustle and broker. But the minute you float up into that thing and you get ungrounded from the base, you turn into something different. And you're still dependent on the base, but instead of it being an authentic relationship, you're essentially buying it.[1]

Like the other leaders in our cases, Doran recognized the difference between having access to power that includes the ability to challenge it, and having access alone. In her analysis, once her relationship to her constituency be-

comes dependent on the money that foundations give her to organize that constituency, she no longer has an independent source of power. She can no longer challenge the donors, because she needs them to give her money (Reich 2018). She is, in her words, defanged. For an organizer to maintain her "fangs," she has to be in an "authentic relationship" with her base. In other words, she has to be in an accountable relationship with them, so that leaders and constituents alike remain committed to a shared agenda. With this kind of shared commitment, grounded in mutual accountability, the leader can deliver the constituency in the recurrent ways she needs to in order to influence decision makers.

Historically, this conversation around the importance of independent political power emerged from a discussion among organizations representing low-income constituencies of color. Many of the leaders in our case studies were part of a group of state-based, grassroots organizations that came into being in the early twenty-first century in an effort to build independent political power. Originally, most of these organizations were grounded in either community organizing or nonviolent direct-action traditions. The community-organizing groups and networks mostly grew out of Saul Alinsky's work in the 1960s,[2] which had traditionally rejected mainstream, electoral politics in favor of more locally rooted organizing based in existing community structures, such as faith communities. Organizers emerging from nonviolent direct-action work also tended to opt for more "outsider" strategies (mainly disruption), arguing that change was better made from outside, rather than inside, the system (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1995).

Leaders building the idea of independent political organization in the twenty-first century argued that the most powerful constituency-based organizations had to do both: blend both organizing and electoral work, and work both inside and outside. Changing organizational structures reflected this shift in priorities—while previous community-organizing or direct-action groups often did not have paid lobbyists or 501(c)(4) sister organizations, many of the groups in our study did. As Tram Nguyen from New Virginia Majority noted in an interview, she realized the importance of building independent political power:

> [In] 2007, in the aftermath of the failure of comprehensive immigration reform, [it was] a time when immigration raids plagued our community much as they do today. A few very smart people realized that if we're really going to change things, for our community and our people, we had to engage in a much more deliberate and strategic way. It wasn't enough to attend rallies,

or hold actions—we had to include voter engagement as part of the core of our work, and that the notion of citizenship and civic engagement for new Americans was going to be pivotal in changing the political landscape.

Across all of our cases, leaders like Tram recognized the importance of having what scholars might call a simultaneous "inside and outside" game if they wanted to build durable political power. Many of the leaders in our cases adopted a "both-and" approach. As Joy Cushman observed in an interview, "the organizations that are building more power are able to wield different types of power. It's not all voting, it's not all civil disobedience." Leaders in our study recognized both the value in articulating clear, measurable strategies for power and the need to do so in ways that maintained their strategic flexibility. Only with flexibility could they respond to the inevitable ups and downs that accompany any campaign for power.

These strategies for building independent political power were particularly relevant for and rooted in theories developed by poor people and people of color. Leaders from these constituencies have always understood that they have to fight for legitimacy and that they are likely to get blocked along the way. For these constituencies, any access to power has been, at best, ephemeral. These leaders therefore developed strategies that expect unexpectedness. And if they stayed grounded in their constituency, then they had a durable source of power they could leverage, distinct from any momentary attention or access they might get from funders, the media, or other power players.

One leader in Arizona gave us an example of the importance of staying grounded in constituency, as opposed to focusing on access to power: "We're no longer okay with a person just has to be Latino or have a Latino name or say good things but has no actual platform, no actual agenda and no actual policy ideas. . . . Even when [our allies like Danny Valenzuela] are elected, how are our community orgs, but also community people, involved [in the decision-making]?" Valenzuela was a city councilman and mayoral candidate who had been elected in 2011 with the pivotal help of a group of undocumented young people. Once in office, however, he did not respond to the constituency's needs in the way they expected. "I remember once we had a roll call protest, where we called all these names," the interviewee said. "[We yelled], 'Valenzuela where's your stance?' and [afterward] he called and was really mad. He said, 'Aren't you loyal to me?' And we said, 'No, we're loyal to our community, not to you.'"

Not all of the leaders from the organizations we studied were people of color or from low-income backgrounds. Yet, even those leaders who were not from the constituency groups they were organizing demonstrated this

focus on constituency power as a hedge for uncertainty. AMOS's Troy, for instance, is a white evangelical Christian who is over six feet tall. He is a former preacher and has a PhD in history from the University of Kentucky. Based on his doctoral work, he coauthored a book about Martin Luther King Jr. Even with this profile, however, he focuses relentlessly on the potential uncertainty inherent in fighting for greater power for his constituents.

In a reflection written on February 7, 2016, that Troy shared with us, he remarks on his experience at a citywide meeting for business, political, and other leaders in Cincinnati:

> Most people in the room . . . have power that is vested and determined by their proximity to wealth and power via corporate leadership. They have to make certain trade-offs with their source of power, which means that they have to be careful what they say and how they say it, lest someone get upset with them and upset their career and livelihood. With organizing, our power does not come from networking or proximity and access to people of wealth and influence. It comes from a base, to whom we are accountable . . . that means we can be prophetic and bold in the public arena in a way that most . . . cannot.

Troy wrote these reflections every week, primarily for himself. His reflection from the following week contains a similar sentiment after he describes, in detail, all the business leaders who have power in the city and the origins of their power: "The biggest lesson I'm learning and reminded of week after week is that when your power comes from organized people and organized money, and is not dependent on proximity to powerful people or trading favors or keeping the elite happy, it frightens the principalities and powers way more than a one-off protest action that they can wait out."

Three notable points emerge from Troy's reflections. First, Troy distinguishes between power that depends on relationships to power brokers and power that sits outside that relationship. In his analysis, access is not the primary strategic goal for leaders seeking to build power in a dynamic environment. He wants a relationship with the decision maker to have emerged because he has an independent resource that the decision maker wants or needs. This independent resource would essentially act as a source of power that gives him the leverage and flexibility necessary to be able to negotiate more effectively with the "principalities." Second, in his analysis Troy recognizes that whatever the source of his power is, it has to be durable over time. It has to be more than something decision makers can simply "wait out." Because they have institutional power, those decision makers have time on their side.

Third and finally, in Troy's analysis, that independent source of power comes from "organized people and organized money." In other words, what matters is not the number of people or the amount of money, but the extent to which those people and that money are "organized."

Sometimes, an organization gains visibility by getting millions of people to sign a petition or to show up for an event. That visibility can, under certain conditions, grant it access to the corridors of power. But in these situations, the constituency base that helps the organization gain access to power often proves illusory. If political decision makers refuse, ignore, or bargain with the movement's requests, its leaders lack what Doran called the "authentic relationship" with their base that is required to move them, again and again and again, with the "recurrence" that Hansen (1991) argues is necessary. Instead, these leaders have to hope that mere proximity to power is enough to get them what they want. When it is not, the millions of names on a petition become mere props rather than collective agents of change. The lists, no matter how large, do not have the flexibility to constitute an independent source of political power.

For all the leaders in our cases, in contrast, a committed and flexible constituency makes up their key independent source of power. Their constituency acts as a self-governing base that has say over the organizational decisions that affect them and, as a consequence, say over the political decisions that affect their communities. The leaders and organizations in our study thus complicated the traditional tropes of mainstream politics through prismatic power. They recognized that power was not simply about having control over lots of some resource—people, access, expertise, or money. Instead, it was about having an "authentic relationship" with an "organized" base of constituents.

Another leader from Arizona further described why these authentic relationships matter:

> When you asked [how big our] membership [is], I'm going to tell you 300 people, and I'm going to be super proud of those 300 people, because those 300 people come to the meetings, those 300 people, I know their children, they know my family. We know their stories, what they went through, and it's taken us ten years to develop those 300 people, and that's a powerful piece. We do membership meetings every Monday. The attendance there is 60 to 100 people every Monday. I could also tell you [that] we have 20,000 likes on Facebook. I could also tell you our email [list has] 120,000 [names], all those sorts of things, but those aren't real. I could also tell you thousands of people have walked through our doors, and at one point or another became

> members or not, or were part of one of our committees, or defense courses. We trained 600 people last year in the defense courses, it does not mean they're members. For us, it's 300 folks are actually super valuable, and we fought and we developed them, and that's membership.

This leader recognized that most organizations want to represent themselves on the largest scale possible. He knew that there were certain metrics he could use to paint that portrait of his organization: 120,000 people on the email list, or 20,000 people in the community on Facebook. In this leader's mind, however, it was the several hundred people with whom his organization was in deep relationship with that really mattered—the members whom he had to "get in front of every Monday and say, 'We've done this' or 'We haven't done this' . . . you're held accountable by the relationship," as he said. These were the people whose stories and families he knew; these were the people to whom he felt accountable, and the people who would be his source of leverage when challenges to his organization's power emerged. These organizations needed an independent source of influence because they wanted to hedge against their constituencies' uncertain hold on power.

CIVIC FEEDBACKS: THE DOWNSTREAM CONSEQUENCES OF CONSTITUENCY BUILDING

At the heart of the leadership choices we observed in our study was leaders' recognition that the effort they put in to build their constituency and leadership base would determine their ability to do the work they wanted to in the public sphere. In some ways, this statement seems so obvious that it is hardly worth saying: constituency-based organizations derive their power from their constituency. What was distinct about the leaders in our study, however, was their recognition that merely *having* a constituency is not enough. And, as the leaders quoted above noted, having an email list and having a constituency are not the same thing. These leaders recognized the importance of a constituency with certain characteristics (discussed in the next chapter), as well as the importance of building that constituency in certain ways. They were clear, in other words, that they needed an independent, committed, and flexible base in order to be able to exercise power in the public sphere.

As we examined organizations building power in the Midwest and the Southwest, in legislative arenas and ballot initiatives, and on issues related to voting rights and immigration reform, we noticed that they all shared the condition of unpredictability. In every case we studied, the leaders and organizations faced, at some point, an unexpected challenge to their power. Their

choices about how to respond to these unexpected challenges revealed a great deal both about the way they understood the sources of their own power and about the extent to which they had the ability to wield it.

Unpredictability in politics may also seem so natural as to not merit discussion. Yet, when we examine the kinds of choices and investments that many political campaigns, organizations, and other investors make, we see that they often discount the likelihood of uncertainty. As Joy Cushman pointedly put it in a 2011 reflection on many organizations' (often funder-induced) obsession with what is often called "sustainable" and "systemic" change,

> There is nothing "sustainable" about change. . . . I am fatigued by campaign leaders I meet who are searching indefinitely for the perfect plan to which they can commit, coming back month after month with some revised version of their plan with little action at all in the interim. News flash: there is never a perfect campaign plan worth committing to. The world is chaotic and unpredictable. There is only the courage to commit to a change worth fighting for, the urgency to create enough of a plan that such courage is actionable in the real world in a purposeful way, and the humility to invite others to join us in action, and ask that they help us figure it out as we go.

Most progressive-change campaigns assume that, if enough people take action, the campaign can demonstrate sufficient power for change. Sometimes, these strategies even take the distribution of those people into account, trying to forecast how many of the right kinds of people will have to act in the right places. These strategies, however, are often too static for the unpredictable political environments in which they work.

Taking unpredictability and the dynamism of political domains seriously changes organizations' strategic calculus because it requires leaders to prepare for contingency. Given status-quo bias, the likelihood that their "Goliath" would win, and the inherent complexity of the political environments in which they were working, the leaders in our case studies never had the assurance that "If I do X, then I will get Y." How, then, could they act strategically?

The leaders we studied tried to maximize the set of strategic options at their disposal so that, when the unexpected challenge came, they would have as much flexibility as possible. For example, when the city councillors in Cincinnati refused Landsman's request to fund a universal preschool program even after he had gathered more than five thousand pledges, he had no further options. Troy Jackson, in contrast, could go back to AMOS's constituency when their first attempts failed and try again. Although neither leader could have predicted ahead of time precisely how their campaigns would unfold, a

leader preparing for unpredictability would ensure that the resources he had built would enable him to switch to plan B when plan A failed.

Leaders' agency, we argue, is a function of the *size and quality of the strategic toolkit* they develop. They cannot control the complex and changing political environment around them. They cannot anticipate every challenge that will arise. But they can ensure that when those challenges do arise, they have many possible options for how to respond. In other words, they have the most agency when they maximize their choice set for down the road. To describe this strategy, we draw on the concept of what we have elaborated elsewhere as "civic feedbacks" (Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2019). The term "civic feedbacks" refers to the feedback loop that exists between constituencies and the groups that organize them. Not only do organizations shape the participation of these constituencies in collective action (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Han 2014, 2016); the nature of participation among these constituencies also feeds back to shape the strategic position of the organization in subsequent negotiations for power. We argue that organizations operating with the logic of prisms have more options in their toolkit, giving them greater strategic flexibility that makes them more likely to be able to pressure decision makers in the ways they want.

ISAIAH's faith-delegate campaign is an example of how civic feedbacks work. To be clear, we are not arguing that ISAIAH's approach to building its constituency base determined the outcome of the campaign. A broad campaign-effects literature recognizes the importance of the sociopolitical and economic context (what political scientists call "the fundamentals") in shaping election outcomes (see, e.g., Sides and Vavreck 2013). Our argument with respect to civic feedbacks is that, given these contextual conditions, it is rational for leaders to prepare for uncertainty by maximizing the strategic choices available to them. Building a prismatic base has downstream consequences (or civic feedbacks) that allow leaders to have more strategic tools in their toolbox.

ISAIAH decided to act in the 2018 gubernatorial campaign because of losses at the end of the 2017 legislative session in Minnesota. At the time, Democratic governor Mark Dayton was facing a Republican legislature. In the chaos of the final days of the session, progressive advocates across the state objected to a flurry of bills. Three in particular drew progressives' ire: one that limited bargaining rights for public-sector unions, one that preempted legislation for paid sick days, and one that restricted driver's licenses for immigrants. ISAIAH was part of a coalition of progressive organizations fighting all three, but Dayton's office was resisting the idea that the governor could oppose all of them. Labor unions lobbied Dayton to protect bargaining rights,

but not to support driver's licenses for immigrants. As an ISAIAH leader told us, "What's going to happen here is that everybody came together to fight this endgame and immigrants are going to be left out in the cold again—as usual." Another leader said, "He traded away immigrants for labor."

One ISAIAH organizer described their response: "So we did this protest. People marched to the capital, and then we decided to do a sit-in, right, outside of [Dayton's] office, and literally invited everyone that we could think of. And then through those sit-ins, those few days of sit-ins, we had people sleep overnight on the floor, and then we literally called a group of over 20 leaders that had been involved for years and sat on the steps and thought, 'What do we do?'" ISAIAH leaders recognized "trading away" one constituency group for another was nothing new. This was, in their analysis, part of a repeated pattern in which certain groups got preferred treatment at the expense of others.

The leaders were furious; for those who had been working on this issue for years, there was no small amount of despair. An ISAIAH leader who had been present that day told us how the experience helped her become clearer about what needed to be done in response:

> So, I'm sitting on the floor of the governor's office, and I am wondering where is everyone? Where is everyone from the sanctuary network? And I'm also wondering where are the 15,000 people who marched on the federal building in response to the announcement of the Trump administration's travel ban? Because this was also an attempt at a travel ban. A different kind of travel ban, but a travel ban of people traveling in their communities and living their lives. . . . [I realized] We're not clear. People are not clear about the policies and the laws that are brutalizing and crushing people and then throwing them out like they're garbage. They're not clear about what's happening, and we're not connected with each other.

One leader explained how she and about ten experienced ISAIAH leaders and allies from other organizations collaborated to figure out how to respond. Confronted with an unexpected rebuff from Dayton's office, they considered the range of tactics in their toolkit. She and other ISAIAH members considered more sit-ins, shutting down highways, organizing press conferences, and a range of other options. Finally, they realized they could organize a boycott of a DFL Party fundraiser, drawing on preexisting relationships they had with allies and party leaders to give this action the leverage it would need. They immediately got a meeting with Representative Keith Ellison and secured his support for a boycott. Throughout this process, ISAIAH leaders drew on a

range of resources ISAIAH had cultivated for many years—from relationships with its base that could move them to action, to relationships with elites. Ultimately, these organizers planned a press conference at ten o'clock at night to launch a boycott of the upcoming fundraiser.

They got the unions on board with the boycott. Now threatened, the DFL Party paid attention, giving ISAIAH some of the concessions it wanted. Doran described the deal as follows:

> So one thing was we want 2018 to be a pro-immigrant election—not just silen[ce] [on immigration], but it should be pro-immigrant, right? And we know that that's hard. So we want you to put money into a set of research communications, you know, polling, that helps us figure out how to ensure that the candidates are running a pro-immigrant election in 2018. So we did that. And then the second thing is they formed like a commission to do audits of all the agencies, of like how can they be more pro-immigrant and protect immigrants? And so then this table got formed between all these different immigrant rights groups who then kind of ran with this commission.

As Doran reflected in our interview, however, the longer-term lesson for ISAIAH was that it had to build its own power base *within* the DFL Party to protect the interests of its constituents: "I think we and the set of the labor unions, a whole bunch of people, had this experience where it was like if we don't construct political power in the party in a radically different way, this is gonna happen again and again and again." Doran realized that without some measure of independent political power within the party, the pattern would repeat itself and ISAIAH would always be scrambling. Thus, heading into the 2018 election, ISAIAH started the process to essentially build what one interviewee called a "party within the party."

In the fall of 2017, ISAIAH leaders launched FiMN, a 501(c)(4) organization (below, we use ISAIAH to refer to both organizations). ISAIAH/FiMN started what leaders initially called a "faith agenda" campaign to influence the 2018 gubernatorial races.[3] Originally, the idea was to bring a group of ISAIAH leaders together in a series of house meetings around the state to articulate a shared agenda that would reflect the values and priorities of ISAIAH's base. To infuse this agenda into the 2018 elections, ISAIAH planned to invite five hundred leaders from Minnesota to run as delegates in the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) caucuses. Those who chose to run would have to organize their own base within their neighborhoods, identifying and recruiting enough people who could attend the caucus meeting and support them so that they could become delegates. Initially, ISAIAH told delegates they could support

any candidate they wanted; their only job would be to try to get those candidates to pay attention to the faith-agenda platform.

The faith-agenda campaign gathered far more momentum than anyone, including ISAIAH, had originally anticipated. In the end, ISAIAH had about 3,800 people across the state attend caucuses and won 140 seats as delegates to the DFL convention. The "faith delegates," as they came to be called, caused a firestorm among the DFL candidates. None of the candidates had expected ISAIAH to control 12 percent of the delegates. Given convention rules, a candidate needed 60 percent of the votes to win the DFL nomination. None of the candidates had enough votes to win without the faith delegates. All of the campaigns thus entered into active negotiations with ISAIAH.

As ISAIAH came to an awareness of the political leverage it had with the faith delegates, it began to pivot its strategy. Its leaders realized that if they could get the faith delegates to vote as a bloc, they would have far more influence with the candidates than if the delegates fractured their support. This, however, required ISAIAH to convince delegates that they had to commit to collectively deliberating about whom to endorse, instead of supporting their individually favored candidates. This was not easy, particularly in the face of the pressure the delegates were facing. "Getting 140 people to vote as a bloc instead of as individuals, when they are getting called every day by candidates, is not easy. So far, we have had five delegate retreats and we are in constant conversation with the campaigns . . . these past few months have been the most intense few months of my public life," Doran said at the time.

ISAIAH and FiMN's ability to pivot from a sit-in at the governor's office to building a party within the DFL to the strategy of getting the faith delegates to act as a bloc would not have been possible without civic feedbacks. Because ISAIAH was in what Doran described as an "authentic relationship" with its delegates, it could ask things of its base that it would not have been able to had the relationship only begun with the 2018 electoral cycle. Had ISAIAH recruited ardent issue or candidate purists who were not in relationship with one another, it would not have been able to suture together a diverse group of delegates to act as a committed bloc.

An interview with one of ISAIAH's faith delegates who was involved in a congressional campaign in Minnesota's second congressional district reveals how ISAIAH built a prismatic base that fed back to shape its strategic options. This faith delegate's experience with ISAIAH came through her church. She told us that when she was first invited to be a delegate, she asked, "'Am I free to vote for whoever I want?' And they said yes at that point, not knowing how successful this was going to be." She entered the race and began organizing people she knew to support her in the precinct caucuses. Because her church

congregation was not in the district where she was running, she had to go outside her church to find support. Nonetheless, this faith delegate entered the caucuses feeling pretty secure. She described organizing people to support her in the caucuses: "Because my church is not where my senate district is, I had to figure out other groups of contacts that I could make in order to [reach] my numbers. . . . I had the organizational muscle of ISAIAH behind me. I have some people that live in [the community] that attend my church, so I had that as a group. . . . That was many hours of organizing and phone calls and talking to people to try to get supporters." One thing that is significant about the work this woman did is that she was doing her own organizing; ISAIAH staff were not doing it on her behalf. In fact, she noted, "I met my staff organizer for the first time [at the Senate conventions]. I had gone there and I had my people lined up." Because of the work she had done with other ISAIAH volunteers through her church, she had a commitment to them that went beyond any loyalty to individual staff.

However, her commitments to the ISAIAH constituency were tested later in the process when she was not able to back the congressional candidate she wanted in the election. She was supporting progressive candidate Jeff Erdmann and had gotten involved with his campaign during the delegate process—she donated money to him, she volunteered at phone banks, and she attended house meetings on his behalf. At first, she thought that Erdmann was going to be the candidate ISAIAH advocated for. "Well, I'm really glad I don't have to make a hard decision," she said. In the end, however, ISAIAH asked its faith delegates to stand together in support of another candidate, Angie Craig, primarily because ISAIAH had determined that Craig had the votes to win, with or without the faith delegates. Craig had moreover demonstrated her openness to a deeper relationship with the organization, offering to create a faith-coordinator position on her campaign. The faith delegates decided, collectively, that supporting Angie Craig would put their constituency in the best possible position to have ongoing influence with a decision maker who would be elected to Congress in the 2018 midterms.

When we asked this faith delegate about her decision to vote with the other faith delegates despite her favored candidate not being chosen, she described the importance of being in relationship with the organization. "It was helpful just to be able to vent all of my feelings about that to a staffer, but there was no question[, of course] I was going with the collective." When we asked her why, she said,

Well, if we don't stay as a collective, we don't have any power. I wouldn't have gotten to the point that I was if we didn't work collectively. It's a place of

hope. Being by yourself, that's not hopeful. I'm also doing this because my husband is a Trump supporter, and it's really been hard in our marriage. I can't be in that place where we don't share the same values. With people who view the world the same way, that's where I need to be. Like I said, it's just all about relationship building from the very beginning. . . . Also, I don't believe that any elected official is going to save us or our families.

ISAIAH's slow and careful building of its base enabled it to develop leaders, like this interviewee, who were prepared to act when the opportunity to be a faith delegate came along. With little prompting, this delegate was able to organize support for the caucus, get herself elected, and get into relationship with other ISAIAH leaders who had backgrounds different from her own. When ISAIAH asked her to support the other leaders' choice instead of pursuing her own candidate—a candidate she had actively supported—she chose to stand with the constituency in favor of the collective. Similar decisions made by many people like her made ISAIAH's faith-delegate campaign possible.

The kind of commitment that propelled this delegate to stand with the other faith delegates was not something that could have emerged overnight. Instead, it was the culmination of years of work. The ISAIAH staff organizer working most closely with this delegate noted the importance of having a set of leaders who had shared experiences that transcended the campaign. She described working with some of the leaders in that senate district on healthcare battles in years past. At one point, they were combatting Republican Jason Lewis, who ultimately lost to Craig in the 2018 midterms and was, according to the ISAIAH organizer, "one of the faces of the repeal of the Affordable Care Act." She said that during that battle, "we were at his office at least once a week. At one point we had 100 people at his office. We had a banner of little people representing the 40,000 people in his district who would lose health care and we just unrolled it in his office and then we sat in his office for two hours and prayed."

The leaders who became delegates displayed variety in their movement experience and in how long they had been involved with the organization. ISAIAH/FiMN keep an internal database of leaders, recording, as much as possible, who comes to what events, how often, and what roles they take on. Although reporting into this database is not perfect, it represents the best picture we have of the kinds of trajectories these leaders follow within the organization. An examination of this data shows that on average the leaders who became delegates had been involved with them for five years and four months and had attended twenty-one events (as compared to an average of three events for the remaining 12,963 people in the database). Of the

seventy-eight delegates recorded in the database, thirty-four had attended one or more of ISAIAH's intensive, weeklong annual trainings, the focal point of the organization's leadership-development work.[4]

Through this depth and duration of organizing, ISAIAH's leaders built a set of relational commitments that they could leverage to hold the faith delegates together. When the delegates were confronted with the challenge of deciding whether they wanted to stand together as a bloc, ISAIAH leaders brought them together to pose questions to them. An ISAIAH organizer would ask, "How much power did we build? Why did we build it? What do we want? And are we going to move as a collective, even if that means voting for the candidate we don't want to vote for?" She would then let the group decide and debate. ISAIAH was holding these meetings, trying to keep the delegates loyal to the organization even as those delegates were being courted by the candidates asking for their vote. In addition, gubernatorial candidates were explicitly asking staff leaders what concessions they wanted, as we described in chapter 3.

Throughout this entire campaign, ISAIAH leaders were very clear that they were operating under a political logic distinct from other campaigns. When we spoke with Doran in May 2018, in the heat of the period leading up to the DFL convention, we asked her what she wanted. "What would success look like?" we said. She replied, "The thing that we're asking for is so different from what they're used to people asking for. They want to know what transaction, 'What do you want? Like, what horse do we trade? Let's trade horses and then you'll give me your people.' That's the conversation people know how to have." But ISAIAH wished for something other than just that transaction.

Doran continued,

I mean the most obvious answer is we want to have significant amounts of political power in relationship to the next governor's administration. And that looks like, more than access, it looks like shaping, you know? . . . It would be, okay, let's say we want to make a major leap forward on family care infrastructure. . . . A governor doesn't come in and wave a magic wand and make that happen. You partner [with the governor], and say, "Over the next four years, what is the scaffolding [we need] for that kind of structural change? And what's our role and what's your role and what's other people's roles and how are we in a strategy together?" Because doing something like that is very hard. It's not just, it's not an issue campaign.

Although ISAIAH's work in the 2018 gubernatorial and congressional races is one of the clearest examples we have of the kind of flexibility and com-

mitment these organizations built, the prismatic approach is not limited to ISAIAH. Through all of our cases, we saw leaders making choices about how to develop their constituency, with an eye toward the long-term feedback loops those choices would create. The ways in which they engaged their base early on enabled greater strategic flexibility when they met unknown challenges down the road. These leaders' investment in constituency was rooted in a recognition that their ability to negotiate for power depends on not only their ability to get access to the decision-making table but also their ability to gain and hold that seat at the table using a source of power independent from their relationship with elite decision makers.

Pragmatism: "It's a False Choice"

Another sign of the focus on strategy and power that pervaded our cases was leaders' rejection of a set of false dichotomies that they described as dominating the thinking of many other political actors. In both the scholarly literature and the popular press, constituency-based activist organizations are often portrayed as extreme ideological purists. Because the groups in our cases are all working on progressive issues, they are part of what establishment politicians will sometimes describe as the "left flank" of the Democratic Party. But instead of being pushed into "you can either do this or do that" mentalities, the leaders in our study pursued alternative approaches. They rejected the idea that you have to make a choice between purism and pragmatism, and sought to ground themselves in a source of power that enabled them to be both ideological and pragmatic.

We found that just as the leaders in our cases argued that they could be in relationship with power while also challenging it, they also argued they could work pragmatically for pure political ideals. They thus rejected a long-held assumption in the social-movement literature that organizations become more moderate as they professionalize or get "channeled" into the arenas of institutional power (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1977; Jenkins and Eckert 1986). Instead, like the groups Elisabeth Clemens (1997) describes in her analysis of women's organizations at the turn of the twentieth century, these leaders saw themselves as using conventional political repertoires to advocate for unconventional stances. Many of the leaders and organizations in our study continued to hold views that are to the left of the mainstream even as they used pragmatic political strategies to realize those views. The idealism, in other words, was grounded in a pragmatic view of how power operates.

For instance, we asked one statewide organization's leader in Arizona how he walks the "tightrope" between "going with the insider strategy and losing

credibility with your base or losing credibility with the electeds." He immediately replied, "I think it's a false choice." He continued at length:

> It's what fucking Wall Street does, right? They go work for the Fed or whatever and then go back to . . . Goldman Sachs. . . . Yeah, they just go back and forth. That's what we need to do. Like you can work for [government] then you go back to [the movement organization] and then you work for [government] and you go back to [the movement organization] and you just do that over, so you're not fighting [government], you are [government]. . . . [When we are in government, we have to recognize that,] "You're not going to have perfect choices, you're going to have to make compromises and you're never going to get everybody, but you are going to do your best to serve and solve and save as many as possible." Then you go back to [the movement organization with people] who are all human beings knowing that it's not a perfect world. And you say, "Guys we did our best and this is what we're dealing with." . . . If you really want to build the power to govern, governing is not simple and clear. It's full of compromises and full of half measures and incrementalism and all that stuff and so what you want is not to send your pragmatist like me into the office. You want to send your craziest, most radical believer and that's the person that then has to figure out how to solve these really complex problems full of imperfect solutions, and to do it in partnership with all of us in the organizational side that are trying to build the power to keep them in so they can keep doing good shit.

He was not alone in his orientation. During our data collection, we spent time shadowing Tram Nguyen at the Virginia statehouse and observed the way she maneuvered among elected officials, advocating her constituents' views while simultaneously inserting herself in the middle of a number of different debates, as revealed in the network maps in chapter 3. At one point, NVM had organized a small protest in which activists advocated for driver's licenses for immigrants. At the time of the protest, Tram was in a conversation with the chief of staff to Mark Sickles, a moderate Democrat who was the ranking House Democrat on the Appropriations Committee. "Why are they fighting for driver's licenses?" the staffer asked. "They can't win this." Tram responded, "[But] this is what the people want." NVM's strategy was to put the issue on the agenda, even if its leaders knew they could not win a vote at the time.

Yet, even as NVM publicly pushed positions that were ideologically to the left of most of the chamber, we also saw the organization operate at the center of other, active negotiations. On the same day as the protest, the Virginia House and Senate were attempting to reconcile bills involving Medicaid ex-

pansion. Tram had worked with two other organizational partners to create a Google spreadsheet of the changes, with each row identifying line items cut from the state house version in the state senate bill. The Democratic caucus then used this spreadsheet to coordinate its members and push back against the Virginia Senate's proposed changes. In this setting, we saw elected officials looking to NVM for talking points and strategy, giving NVM influence over the terms of the debate. NVM was advocating for its values but also making itself indispensable by providing elected officials with practical advice.

At another point that same day, a staffer for one of the ranking members asked to meet privately with Tram. We waited outside while they talked. When Tram emerged twenty-five minutes later, we asked, in broad strokes, what the meeting was about. Tram responded that this staffer was asking her to "clean up" after some other immigration advocates who were creating what the staffer perceived to be unnecessary "drama" around some legislation. She noted, "This is one of the roles I play sometimes, working out issues caused by people who are not as experienced or who are new to the work and don't have the relationships and don't behave in strategic ways."

In March 2018, we observed Tram speaking on a panel at a national gathering of progressive organizers. Panelists from around the country were discussing how they build what they called "governing power" in the settings in which they were working, contrasting this idea with electoral power. One panelist said elected officials want to know "that you understand politics; you're not just an ideologue." Tram agreed quickly: "I cut deals all the time," she said.

However, the willingness of the leaders in our case studies to play the inside game did not preclude outside-the-box strategies. In Nevada, for example, PLAN is known for sometimes blocking traffic in their protests, for their executive director going to trial (during which he faced up to six months in jail for trespassing) for disrupting a meeting on fossil fuel lease sales, and for high-profile bird-dogging actions that target lobbyists as well as elected officials. In one primary-source document from the early 2000s that PLAN leaders gave us, the president of Nevada's AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) sent a dramatic letter dissolving its affiliation with PLAN for what the AFL-CIO saw as the organization's "abandonment of the principle of the 'multiple use' of resources" and "engage[ment] in the process of promoting the interest of PLAN"—in this case, what PLAN viewed as a nonnegotiable environmental-conservation issue—"to the detriment of all others." For these and other reasons, PLAN has earned what one top Democratic official called "one hell of a progressive brand." At the same time, PLAN has its own statehouse lobbyist on staff.

The leaders in our case studies resisted being boxed into a specific kind of strategy, refusing to state either "I am an insider" or "I fight from the outside." They wanted to be able to tack back and forth as the conditions warranted, using their ambiguous position to generate productive tension that would move their agenda forward. Categories such as "insider" and "outsider" set up rules for behavior that work against the interests of marginalized constituencies. To identify with one or the other is to close off possibilities because there are institutional myths and scripts for how "insiders" and "outsiders" should act. These leaders implicitly recognized that the "correct" way of doing things tends to align with the interests of those already with power (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Our case organizations were not willing to restrict themselves in this way, and their clarity around the need for flexibility emerged from their commitment to their constituencies. The needs and desires of their bases, rather than the advice of political consultants and experts, were the lodestar that guided their work.

These unconventional choices sometimes mean that these leaders' work is not very legible to outsiders. The ISAIAH leader quoted in the epigraph to this chapter noted, "I think that ISAIAH doesn't fit the boxes that the political world understands. . . . So it's not uncommon for [another grassroots organization] to get the kind of credit in the press that really should go to ISAIAH. Because the press has some ability to understand what [that organization is]. It's a set of individuals who align themselves with a progressive block of activists in Minnesota. It's essentially the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. ISAIAH is not so easily understood." One cost of not fitting into existing political boxes is that it is more difficult to be recognized as legitimate by other institutions, including the media (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

There is nonetheless significant power in ambiguity, in not being able to be put into an easily interpretable category. In their analysis of the dominance of the Medici family in Italy, Padgett and Ansell state, "Locked-in commitment to lines of action, and thence to goals, is the product not of individual choice but at least as much of others' successful 'ecological control' over you" (1993, 1264). If the leaders in our cases had accepted existing frameworks for political action, they would be submitting to the rules of, and thus be controlled by, powerful political interests. While our case organizations did not necessarily hide their motivations in the same way Cosimo de Medici did, their actions were driven by multiple motivations because they were always working at building an independent base while advancing a campaign. The organizations in our study thus maintained significant flexibility in terms of the types of messages they promoted, the campaigns they undertook, and the tactics they used to win. Their commitment to their constituency instead of to the politi-

cal sphere itself rendered them unpredictable to allies and opponents, thus allowing them to maintain a broad array of strategic options. Those actors whose behavior follows more conventional political practices find their possibilities for action more limited.

Of course, the challenge in maintaining such flexibility is having the capacity to do so. How were these leaders able to make these moves? We argue that strategic flexibility was a function of these leaders' most precious resource—their constituencies. A commitment to power became manifest in specific strategies, not through any one tactic, tool, or resource. These organizations unified their goals by combining a pragmatic approach to political strategy with accountability to an independent constituency, thereby generating the precision and flexibility they needed to attain and influence power.

Learning Loops: Finding Sources of Creativity

As leaders sought to maximize the size of their strategic toolkits, how did they identify the range of options at their disposal? Strategy does not emerge out of nowhere; instead it depends on the narratives people create about what happened in the past, what opportunities for action are in the present, and what is possible in the future. These interpretations, narratives, and explanations are shaped by a complex range of lenses and experiences that people bring to how they view and understand the world around them (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In the *Harvard Business Review*, Henry Mintzberg argues that, while many people think of the process of creating strategy as being one of "rational control" and "systematic analysis," it is better understood as a "craft" that requires "not so much thinking and reason as involvement, a feeling of intimacy and harmony . . . developed through long experience and commitment" (1987, 66). Strategy is thus, as Marshall Ganz teaches, a verb and not a noun (2018b).

Many advocacy organizations draw the range of their strategies from a familiar repertoire of commonly accepted political techniques. Research shows that repertoires are often shared and legitimated across political organizations, implicitly defining the range of possible alternatives (Tarrow 1998). Petitions, marches, rallies, calling campaigns, letters to the editor, voting, community meetings, and house parties are many of the familiar techniques organizations for collective action use. The leaders in our case studies drew on many of the same repertoires but also sought creative ways to deploy them. They sought new techniques that were less familiar to broader audiences. To operate outside the range of commonly accepted techniques, the organiza-

tions had to develop the capability to exercise the "craft" that Mintzberg describes above. Where did that craft originate?

Our data show that the leaders were intentional about building a set of capabilities that would make strategic creativity more likely. They wanted themselves and their peers to learn skills that were not just technical or operational but also focused on the idea that successful collective action is a craft that accounts for the dynamic nature of political power. Their focus on this craft became most evident in how they approached learning processes, building capability, and strategic relationships (such as those within national organizing networks). As Doran put it, "What is missing from [most] power conversation[s]? There are resources required to do this kind of work different than the resources required to organize a base, or the resources required to do civic engagement around an election, or resources required to run a campaign. Money matters, but also leadership. What is the tissue building needed across organizations that make new things possible?" Doran's description of "leadership" and "tissue building" is consistent with what management scholars call "second-order capabilities." Zero-order capabilities are about mastering a set of operational procedures that any organization needs—human-resources management, for instance, or (in the case of constituency-based organizations) coordination of mass communications to members. Second-order capabilities, in contrast, require a level of judgment that can only be taught over time and, as a result, are harder to imitate. That judgment thus becomes the resource that gives certain organizations competitive advantage over others. These distinctions are consistent with Michael Burawoy's (2005) differentiation between "instrumental" and "reflexive" learning. "Instrumental" or "technical" learning is about creating solutions to problems or solving puzzles in service of clients or particular outcomes. "Reflexive" knowledge is "concerned with a dialogue about ends" and thus "interrogates the value premises" that are offered (Burawoy 2005, 11).

We find that all of the leaders across our cases were intentional about cultivating a set of second-order capabilities among themselves and their leadership teams. This commitment became manifest in several ways. First, many leaders had explicit mechanisms for intentional introspection. Troy, for instance, shared with us three years of his written weekly reflections. The entries are organized into sections, such as "Meetings This Week," "What I Am Reading," and "Reflection." For the first year or so of entries, Troy also included a section on "Risks in the Past Week" and "Risks Not Taken." The former would include things like "Biggest risk of this week is the decision to [vote on] the People's Platform—we have our meeting this afternoon at 3:30.

We have RSVPs for the decision-making gathering. While all the people in the room are in relationship with at least one of the AMOS organizers, there are people who will be in the room whom I don't know." A risk not taken might be something like "I went into my one-to-one with [a member of] the board of elections for Hamilton County and a key bundler for Governor Kasich's presidential run without a clear proposition or ask. I thought it was a good [meeting] but I should have gone into it with a clearer sense that this was a power one-to-one. That said, hopefully I've set myself up to lean on [him] for connections to key legislative Republicans at the city, county, and state level in the future." The mere fact that Troy would record weekly risks and reflect on them shows the serious attention he paid to his constituency's uncertain hold on power and the need to reflect on the craft of his own leadership as a way of negotiating that power.

Just as Troy wrote weekly reflections that forced a disciplined consideration of his strategy, other leaders had their own mechanisms for learning. All of the organizations in the study had collective meetings after major moments in a campaign in order to reflect on what had happened, what they had learned, and what that meant for their work going forward. They also had formal processes for cultivating leadership among new volunteers and younger leaders, processes that are very common to community organizing (Warren 2001; Han 2014; Smock 2004; Gecan 2002). They trained leaders to ask particular kinds of questions that forced them to wrestle with tension, make sense of the world, and develop a complex analysis of where they were going.

Burt Lauderdale, executive director of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, described the centrality of learning in his organization:

> Everyone says KFTC is so great, but we are always in learning mode. We are really proud of what we have done, but it is entirely insufficient. I think we are a pretty interesting case study around decision-making . . . [we have a] strong belief around shared decision-making—[it] makes our friends and allies crazy. But we already know how we make decisions. [We need research on] how that might restrict us? What opportunities are we cutting off? Are there other ways we could do these things better that would help us get to authentic grassroots power?

The leaders in our cases were deeply interested in self-critique and learning as means of constantly renewing their strategic capacity. This focus on learning was also evident in the way these organizations processed defeat. In all of our cases, we found that the characterization of certain events—the passage of SB

1070, the failure to oust Arpaio in his first twenty years as sheriff, Murphy's loss to Walz in Minnesota, PLAN coming up short on the mining campaign, AMOS losing on tax mechanism, and so on—as movement failure might have been misleading, even though at face value they appeared to fit that framework (Voss 1998). What distinguished the organizations in our study from other familiar cases in which high-profile defeats caused protesters to go home or accept loss is that the leaders in our study used these moments as opportunities for deliberate reflection and restrategizing. Win or lose, they only took on a fight if they could do so in a way that built their capacity.

Second, in addition to instituting deliberately reflective practices, these organizations devised campaigns that constantly developed their strategic capacities, particularly through cultivating new leadership. Those capacities were usually named as core objectives of the campaign itself. Joy Cushman described this approach:

> And so these leaders are fiercely committed, not afraid of tension, in deep relationship with a base, a people they respect and treat as equals and not as people they're advocating for. . . . You know, they have a moral framework that they are operating from. They believe in good and evil. They want to take on evil. . . . What's interesting to me about the decision they made to run the Arpaio campaign [in 2012] was that the odds were not zero, but they were very, very low, but the environment was moving in the right direction. So they basically made the decision to run the campaign knowing they would probably lose, but to do it in a way that they got more voters registered, they developed more leadership, they built their credentials, so they could take him on again down the line. So it's not just that they were willing to do a losing campaign, because people could take lots of weird wrong messages from that, but since they were likely to lose it, they did it in a way that they built just a lot of capacity.

Joy is describing work among the immigrant rights advocates in Arizona, but her point can be applied to any of the cases in our study. As she indicates, even an unwinnable campaign can be strategic for these organizations if it presents a good opportunity for them to develop the kind of long-term, second-order capabilities that will maximize their strategic choice set down the road.

Another example of this approach comes from PLAN's work helping to pass the corporate-profits tax bill. That victory, in 2015, came after the organization had advocated for over a decade on behalf of a tax on the mining industry. Mining is an enormously powerful industry and lobby in Nevada; PLAN was taking on a behemoth. The first time they tried to tax the mining indus-

try, PLAN and its allies lost by 1 percent. Although this campaign was putatively a loss, it paved the way for the corporate-profits tax bill in 2015. As one key organizer and political operative remembered, "We lost that [mining bill] as well. But the good thing was that we at least got it in the popular mindset and imagination so that no defeat is made up entirely of defeat." She noted that a key result of their earlier fight over the mining bill was that they began developing their constituency's capacity to act on the issue. "I like to think, and I do think, that the work that we did up until that had some impact."

Throughout our case studies, organizational leaders were clear that one of the biggest strategic investments they could make, in any setting, was to develop other leaders. They would intentionally design all meetings, events, and campaigns with an eye to how leaders and members could learn through the process of planning, executing, and reflecting on their actions. For instance, as part of AMOS's Preschool Promise campaign in Ohio, teams of volunteers did research visits with a variety of public officials and other stakeholders relevant to the campaign. We attended a debriefing meeting in a church lounge where thirteen volunteers who had participated in these visits sat in a circle and shared what they had learned. The lead organizer asked participants to break into small groups and discuss the following questions: "What was your experience during the conversations? What did you learn from this? What is their self-interest, what do you think their power is?" After these small-group discussions, each group reported back to the full group. The organizer then asked the full group, "What did you learn about yourself? We were in meetings with people in power in the city, what did you learn about how you act around people in power?" Thus, leaders pushed each volunteer to reflect on both the power and self-interest of the stakeholders they had met as well as their own behavior when confronting power.

An organization like AMOS has the option of having professional staff conduct these meetings with public officials, and then having the staff use the information they gathered to determine a course of action. That approach, however, would have limited leadership-development opportunities for volunteers. The leaders in our case studies chose a different path. The discussion at the AMOS debriefing meeting described above surfaced important insights that helped volunteers grow in their own leadership capabilities. For instance, one leader described what she saw during the meetings with public officials: "There are two different goals—people who are advancing their own agendas and people who come from poverty and know what it feels like." She said that the former group is "not going to shift easily" and therefore "something has to give." Through this debrief, this volunteer was practicing political analysis

and strategy. She and the other volunteers in the room were evaluating their own power and others' power. They reflected on their own behavior, got feedback, and, in the process, built stronger relationships with one another.

Third, and finally, in addition to cultivating learning and reflection within their organizations and selecting campaigns with an eye toward long-term capabilities, the leaders in our case studies all forged relationships with national learning networks outside their immediate cities and states. This meant that the leaders in our case studies were not completely independent of one another. Many of them knew each other, and some had even strategized together. In addition, they were part of shared conversations focused on interpreting the political moment and thinking about different strategies for challenging the status quo. We found that these ecosystems created a broader learning environment where leaders could consider new strategies they might not have been able to identify on their own.

Because the leaders in our case studies conceived of power as dynamic and recognized the inherent uncertainty their constituencies would face in building and maintaining power, they understood learning as a key component of strategy. Through a focus on learning—their own and that of other leaders and constituents in their organizations—these leaders built the craft of developing careful strategy. In other words, when building the metaphorical prism, they made learning part of their design choices because it would help them develop the insight and capacity to act strategically in moments of uncertainty (Ganz 2000, 2009). If there was any practice that was universal among our cases, it was the practice of creating learning loops. Leaders sought to enmesh themselves and their leadership teams in ecosystems of learning that facilitated the kind of strategic creativity they needed to make their improbable bids for power more likely to succeed.

What Makes Prisms Strategic?

In this chapter, we sought to show why it was strategic for the leaders in our case studies to follow the logic of preparing for uncertainty. In other words, what makes the investment in constituency strategic for these leaders? We argued that understanding the distinction between a constituency as an independent source of power and a constituency as a tool for access was key to answering this question. For organizations representing constituencies like the ones in our case studies, the bid for political power does not stop with access to power. Our case organizations knew they would have to constantly work to hold decision makers accountable, and that would necessitate an

ability to wield resources that the organizations controlled. The key resource these leaders could control was their own constituency.

Leaders in our cases thus constantly built their constituency in a way that focused on civic feedbacks, or the downstream consequences of the choices they made about *how* to engage people. It was not enough to get people to take action; rather, they had to get people to take action in ways that would enable these leaders to exercise power in the public domain. These leaders were so deeply aware that their constituencies formed the basis of their power that many interviewees expressed anxiety about anything—including their biggest successes—that distracted them from constituency building. One longstanding ISAIAH leader told us, "I feel like the seeds of our destruction are in our success." The pace of political work is so fast, he was arguing, that it is hard to find time to do the slow work that base building requires: "What I really want to do is have like fifty clergy that I'm actually developing, and like they're becoming, not just better ISAIAH leaders but better human beings, and better clergy, and better pastors," he said. The next chapter explores exactly what it means to do this slow work of cultivating a base that serves as a durable and independent source of political power rather than an ephemeral ingredient of political stagecraft.

Leaders' focus on strategic constituency building led them to make distinct choices about not only how to build constituency but also how to think about leadership. All of the cases in our study had at their helm individual leaders who were at once pragmatic analysts of the political terrain and fiercely committed to the agendas that mattered to their base. The one compromise the leaders in our study would not make was that of undercutting their base, which they recognized as their most important and most reliable source of power. Their investment in this source of power was evident not only in, as Joy put it, "the humility [they had] to invite others to join [them] in action, and to ask [for] help," but also in their commitment to establishing organizational learning loops and civic feedbacks with every tactical decision they made.

5 Building People to Build Power

This conversation is happening in a context of who we are, who we have been as ISAIAH, even before we begin to talk about issues that are affecting our lives. There is a lens that we are approaching these issues with as people of faith. . . . Many of you have been part of this organization for a long time, that's the foundation that we are standing on, that's who we are, that's still there. When we talk about issues, like climate change, we are looking at them through those lenses. . . . We're going to brainstorm demands for the next governor. The question isn't just about climate change, but is connected to the relationships that you are building through the house meetings.
ISAIAH STAFF LEADER

I talk a lot about how I think KFTC was really formative in my identity as a Kentuckian and thinking of myself as a Kentuckian and wanting to stay here after school.
KFTC LEADER

It takes investment. . . . It takes a while, for, like a person like myself, who's even been doing this sixteen, seventeen years now, to learn both how to develop an infrastructure, how to create an organization, how to effect policy change, how to do all these things, how to build power, but there's an authenticity, and a value in having it be ourselves, coming in from our own, because me fighting for my mom, me fighting for my family, is very different than another person who has a theoretical connection to the work, rather than the heart, mind, and complete embodiment of the fight.
ARIZONA STAFF LEADER

What does constituency building look like in the context of prisms of people power? We have argued that the leaders in our case studies were able to trans-