



SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK  
WORKING GROUP ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
SERIES ON

***HOW ORGANIZATIONS DEVELOP  
ACTIVISTS: CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS &  
LEADERSHIP IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY***  
BY HARRIE HAN

MOBILIZING IDEAS

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[HTTPS://MOBILIZINGIDEAS.WORDPRESS.COM/2015/02/02/HOW-ORGANIZATIONS-DEVELOP-ACTIVISTS-THE-CHALLENGES-AND-POTENTIAL-OF-COMBINING-ORGANIZING-AND-MOBILIZING/](https://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2015/02/02/how-organizations-develop-activists-the-challenges-and-potential-of-combining-organizing-and-mobilizing/)

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# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:13 AM

## How Organizations Develop Activists: The Challenges and Potential of Combining Organizing and Mobilizing

Series Introduction by [Lina Stepick](#) (guest editor)

For *Mobilizing Ideas*' February essay dialogue, members of the Scholars Strategy Network [Civic Engagement Working Group](#) join leaders of prominent movement organizations to comment on the contributions of Hahrie Han's book [How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations & Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century](#) (Oxford University Press, 2014) and to discuss contemporary challenges and opportunities for combining mobilizing and organizing.

The contributors address the book's central question of how organizations can successfully blend transactional mobilizing with transformational organizing to build civic participation in the face of resource constraints and environmental challenges.

The contributors who work as organizing leaders note how directly applicable Han's analysis and accessible writing is to their work, providing an explicit framework for the implicit theory that often drives movement strategy. They discuss how Han's analysis should drive funding for organizing training, leadership development, and conscious reflection. Several contributors point out that her work is particularly timely given contemporary tensions inherent in incorporating online organizing and mobilizing tools into field and community organizing strategies.

The essays grapple with the big questions for movement organizations and social movement scholarship including: What are the implications for American democracy and civil society of lower-cost member engagement through solely mobilizing those already most likely to engage? What encourages organizations to engage in transformational organizing? If strategy is path dependent under what circumstances can organizations change their practices, cultures, and structures? How can these strategies transform campaigns into broader, deeper, and longer-lasting movements?

Many thanks to our distinguished contributors for their insightful essays, which reflect a wide range of scholarly and practical expertise:

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:10 AM

## Making the Implicit Explicit: A Framework for Organizing and Mobilizing

By [Vanessa Rule](#)

Anyone who has been an activist for a long time has probably lamented that the level of change they have witnessed is relatively small compared to the vision that propelled them to action in the first place. They might also tell you how hard that work has been and how volunteers tend to cycle in and out of their projects. Most activists do their work without a road map they can follow, or a framework of skills they can learn, apply, and teach others, to effectively build power and strengthen the movement.

In [How Organizations Develop Activists](#), Hahrie Han provides such a framework, with clear examples and best practices, so newcomers and seasoned organizers can see where they are in the process of building power and what the next steps are. Han's clear and concise writing is accessible and extremely relevant to a range of audiences, from people who are volunteering in a civic association for the first time, to organizations interested in learning what they can do to build, and keep, new volunteer capacity, to seasoned organizers and social movement scholars. The book examines how different civic associations have been able to leverage the latent power of interested volunteers to build power and effect change. Han draws best practices from the case studies she lays out at the beginning, and she illustrates them with real life situations shared through first person voices of organizers describing where they succeeded or failed, and why. I found myself easily relating to these situations, having been in similar ones myself, and thus able to imagine how I would apply these lessons to my own work.

One of the most challenging things about organizing is getting perspective on where one is in the process, and finding the space needed to reflect and learn. This book provides such a space. Reading it triggered many "aha" moments of understanding and ideas for how I, and the volunteers I work with, can improve our practice to become better organizers. For those of us who began our organizing work intuitively, or fell into it by accident or necessity, this book is like putting on a pair of glasses; instead of feeling your way around, you see clearly where you are in the process and what your options are. It makes the implicit explicit. For those who are new to organizing, it offers tools and concepts to start on the iterative and experiential path of learning how to organize, and serves as a manual one can go back to clarify and deepen learning.

Han provides concrete examples, down to the call log of an organizer's coaching session with a volunteer and an analysis of what transpired. She gives advice on some of the more challenging questions facing organizers, such as how to increase volunteers' level of commitment and participation without burning them out. She clarifies the difference between organizing, mobilizing, and "lone wolf" strategies and how to balance them within your own organization. Quoting Joy Cushman, the Campaign Director for PICO, Han writes, "The organizer thus makes two [strategic] choices: 1) to engage others, and 2) to invest in their development. The mobilizer only makes the first choice. And the lone wolf makes neither."

Han's book describes the secret to building grassroots power: it lies in how people work together to find agency and achieve purpose. In her example of groups that have successfully engaged and trained leaders, she describes how they first build relationships with each other, form interdependent teams working to achieve common, time-bound goals, bring their respective resources to the table and together develop a common story, train and coach each other to become more effective in their roles, and in turn, teach others how to do the same.

This book comes at a critical time when many people have forgotten how to organize, and the balance of power is heavily weighted on the side of money and corporations, not the people. The road map and tools in this book can be used to revitalize our collective spirit, and serve as a lifeline to our fading democracy. One might assume that the crises we are facing would be enough to move people to action, much less do it in an organized fashion. Han writes, "The [external] pressures alone were not enough to guarantee that the chapters would adopt an organizing approach... the experience and willingness of the core leaders, the organizational narratives they created, the understanding about power, and the structures that were in place also mattered."

Organizing is hard and messy. *How Organizations Develop Activists* is a short read but packed with concrete and applicable information about how to think about organizing and practice it. It pulls the strands of good organizing together into an elegant framework explained through real examples and concrete steps organizers can take. It will become a trusted frame of reference for activists to understand their experience on the ground and increase their ability to make strategic choices that will intentionally build their people power.

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:09 AM

## Want Scale? Mobilize AND Organize

By [Joy Cushman](#)

If I had a nickel for every time someone in the social change sector pondered how to get to scale I'd probably have enough money to fund the movement myself. In her new book, *How Organizations Develop Activists*, Hahrie Han argues that the only way to achieve scale is to both mobilize *and* organize. Most of the theories I've read prior to this about getting to scale are really about how to *market* to scale, or how to *control* to scale. Hahrie argues that achieving the scale necessary to win transformative social change is not simply about building larger lists or mastering big data, it's about mastering the craft of transforming nascent activists into community leaders.

The debate about the value of organizing versus mobilizing probably goes back as far as the story of Exodus. Did Moses and Aaron squabble over whether to run another action on Pharaoh or spend time going door to door organizing the Hebrew people to believe enough in the power of their God and themselves to stand up and resist? I guess that's where it helps to have God as your coach. Ultimately, as I've learned from Marshall Ganz's reading of the story, which he developed studying a Bible in a jail cell when he was working for Cesar Chavez and building the United Farm Workers union, the Exodus required both organizing and mobilizing. Moses and Aaron started as "lone wolves" taking their plea directly to Pharaoh. When that proved insufficient, they organized the Hebrew people to make a transformational claim on their collective identity during Passover, mobilized them to pack up and march their collective labor power out of Egypt, and organized a new community with new laws and rules of engagement. Moses's father-in-law, Jethro agitated them, pushing them to develop a clearly distributed leadership structure in which leaders were not asked to write letters to the editor of Pharaoh's paper or to hold a corner rally in the desert, but were instead given real responsibility for community governance.

Similarly the great movements in the US—for the abolition of slavery, women's rights, work with dignity, civil rights, the work of the Christian Coalition, and most recently the Tea Party—have all integrated mobilizing and organizing to secure short-term wins and to shape the political landscape in ways that made larger transformative change possible. However, in the last 40 years as politics has become a full-blown industry in its own right, the work of engaging citizens in our democracy has become more and more transactional, driven by a culture of marketing, a pay-to-play funding model, and citizen groups that increasingly operate as vendors for monied political interests. The end result has been weaker civic organizations for whom membership is only a list-building and resource extraction exercise, and a culture that values the mobilizing of what is, rather than organizing the transformation of human potential into what could be. This has been particularly clear in the years following the 2008 election when the political industry and the media generally focused like a laser on the digital and data tools underlying that campaign's mobilizing wizardry, while largely failing to understand that it was the 2 million volunteers organized and motivated to use the tools who actually transformed what was possible in American Presidential elections.

This is the historical and political context in which Hahrie Han wrote her book, a carefully-researched and refreshing

argument about how successful leaders and organizations hold the tension between mobilizing and organizing and integrate them *both* to build power.

Hahrie lays out three models of civic association leadership: lone wolves, mobilizers and organizers. She also defines mobilizing as “strategies intended to activate people already motivated for action,” and organizing as “strategies intended to cultivate people’s motivation, skills and capacities for further activism and leadership.” Her research is framed to look carefully at the choice leaders make whether to organize or mobilize on in the organizations and chapters she studied. With a carefully designed research program she shows that choice doesn’t just happen naturally, and is not inherently shaped by geography, constituency or other factors. The choice about whether to mobilize or organize is one made by individual leaders, shaped by their resource context, their personal beliefs, and their organizational narrative of past success and failure.

Hahrie finds that leaders turn simply mobilizing alone to organizing in two different contexts. The first is resource restraint, where the work that needs to happen requires more leadership than a mobilizer can provide alone. The leadership choice in this instance is whether to keep going with the community, resources, and power one has, or to slow down and train and coach others to recruit new people and to build a stronger relational base in order to have the capacity—and power—to do much more. The second context in which some leaders turned from mobilizing to organizing is resource abundance, where the mood of the moment suddenly floods an organization with volunteers, money and other resources. The choice of a leader in that context is whether or not to trust and invest in others’ leadership in order to absorb all that new raw capacity and transform it into organized power.

Shaped by their context, leaders’ decisions to mobilize or organize are also deeply informed by their personal beliefs about the people they are working with, what Hahrie calls “philosophies of engagement.” Hahrie handles this delicately but it is clearest when she compares the low-bar approach of mobilizing, which tries to minimize the cost to the activist of participating, with a high-bar approach of organizing, which invests individuals with more responsibility than they can actually handle but then follows through with the relationship building, training, coaching and skill development necessary to equip new leaders to do much more. Implicit in this choice is a leader’s belief about their own people: are they too busy and resource-poor to do more than sign a letter or show up at a rally, or are they individuals seeking solidarity and purpose who will commit more the more leadership and responsibility they’re given? Hahrie makes the case that getting to scale requires both low-cost (“easy”) points of access created through mobilization, and the intentionality of high-investment cultivation of leadership through organizing. The craft of the organizer is to develop opportunities for both shallow and very deep engagement—to mobilize broadly and organize deep

In addition to context and leaders’ personal beliefs, Hahrie found the choice to organize as well as mobilize was shaped by organizational narratives about past success and failure. An activist chapter that had won in the past by submitting a legal brief alone had a narrative about how ideas and expertise built power. A chapter that had won in the past by mobilizing and organizing hundreds of people into action would have a shared narrative about the power of people to win change. The upside to this is that once an organization chooses to both mobilize and organize that choice is “sticky.” It makes easier future choices to invest in the leadership and relational capacity of people as a core source of strategic power.

These three factors—external context, leadership beliefs and organizational narrative—raise for practitioners some serious questions about the ways we may be limiting the scale of our power by standing in our own way. What are the implications for our people and our work when our primary orientation is to ask less in order to make things easy? What larger ambitions could we unleash if we dared to ask more? And what sort of capacity would we need to build in ourselves and our people to deal with inevitable short-term losses along the way as we learn together to achieve more? I believe strongly that loss aversion—one of the fears driving our need to ask less of people—is ironically one of the



driving forces of long-term loss because we have too little faith in ourselves and too little clarity about the fact that our power comes from the capacity of our people. What sort of training and coaching support would we have to develop to unleash that human capacity, to have talented strategists in every neighborhood in America instead of a centralized strategic team in DC or New York doling out tactics to local activists? These challenges drive me to a conclusion that we could be winning much, much more if we had the courage to expect much more of ourselves of our people, and the discipline to invest in training and leadership development to scale.

One challenge moving forward for Hahrie and others studying the work of organizing, mobilizing, and social change is to consistently bring to it an explicit racial and class lens. The two organizations Hahrie studied—one organization of doctors and the other of climate leaders—I would expect to be predominantly white and middle to upper class. With stronger and stronger organizations being built at the local, state and national level around immigration reform, mass incarceration, policing, work with dignity, and other issues impacting both communities of color and working-class white people we have the opportunity to look at how our power-building strategies play out more clearly across race and class.

The reason this matters is that I have myself been guilty and have witnessed innumerable times other white college-educated leaders and organizers expecting less of their African-American, Latino, immigrant or low-wage working constituents in particular. It's sometimes subtle, done in the name of protecting our constituents' time or resources, but it's ultimately patronizing and reinforces the racialized and unequal structures we claim to be fighting when we fail to see each other as full human beings. By refusing constituents the opportunity to make their own choices about very much they can commit, it also undermines the self-determination and real agency that fuels the courage, commitment, risk taking, and solidarity required to win big change. With an explicit race and class lens, the choice to only mobilize—to expect less of people and to limit opportunities to participate to what's easy—has really dangerous and troubling implications. If, on the other hand, organizers choose to see their constituents as resource-rich regardless of how many hours they work or how much money they have, then new, more ambitious strategies become possible.

Hahrie's real challenge to practitioners like me is that if we wish to build the power and scale necessary to win transformative change, we need both to mobilize to bring hundreds of thousands of people off the sidelines into civic life, *and* to have the organizing discipline necessary to transform those people from individual activists to interconnected, powerful and strategic leaders. Going back to Hahrie's analysis of the contexts, beliefs and organizational narratives that shape leaders' decisions to organize *and* mobilize, the implications are clear and very challenging. Are we willing to shape contexts at the local, state and national level where our ambition outstrips our resources in order to catalyze the choice among leaders to both mobilize and organize more people? Will we take the time to be more intentional about short-term tactical advances in order to build the capacity for long-term strategic change? Most importantly, will we take the risk of losing absolute power over our organizations and campaigns in order to develop a base of leaders with whom we can share power, who have the relational capacity, structural skills and strategic acumen to move a much deeper, broader network of change efforts, otherwise known as movements?

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:08 AM

## Combining Organizing and Mobilizing and the Need for Conscious Reflection

By [Noah Glusenkamp](#)

Hahrie Han's book "How Organizations Develop Activists" couldn't have come soon enough for people who identify as organizers. As she says, "organizing is hard" and it's easily misunderstood. This book provides vocabulary and distinctions that haven't been articulated with as much clarity or empirical support as they are here. It is certain to impact the world of practitioners in at least three important ways. First, training curricula for organizers should start incorporating Han's distinction between mobilizing and organizing, leading to better trainings for activists. Second, many organizations should increase their budget allocation for the organizing department and supporting tools. Finally, more attention should be paid to developing (and better formalizing) the "conscious reflection" practices that Han shows are central to organizing.

You have to fight for budget allocation to support organizing in an organization. If you can't make your case clear or even adequately distinguish your program from other activities you're going to lose out. I co-founded a startup, Empower Engine, that provides mapping software to field departments in political campaigns. It provides neighborhood-level detail visualizations of field data for volunteers and organizers, not just stakeholders, who typically view campaign data reports at much more macro level. I've found that a smaller than expected segment of our market understands and believes in the importance of "pushing intelligence down" to the organizers and activists on the ground. Han's framework has already made my pitch more effective and clear. I am now much better equipped to explain that our maps support the ongoing training and development of organizers and volunteer leaders, and can communicate how this fits in with the organization's goals.

The success of organizing itself is heavily dependent on one's capacity to communicate one's organizing methodology. A good organizer will help "connect the dots" for people, and convincingly explain how the organization achieves its goals through this specific theory of change. By developing our capacity to articulate the "how" of organizing, Han helps us do it better. I'm positive that Han's work will soon make its way into organizer training materials.

The real-world implications of these ideas can be seen in the role of "offline" vs. "online" organizing efforts in organizations. In election campaigns, these efforts are usually directed by entirely separate departments: "field" and "digital". Each has its own champions and detractors as the departments compete for budget and influence. As with a host of other binaries identified in this book, Han presents the evidence that we're better off if we set down our armaments in the debate between two sides and instead think harder about how they can best work together. Each side can benefit by strategically integrating with the other, when and how it makes the most sense.

The example Han uses for this is a good one. Organizers need as many leads as possible, and these leads can be provided by online mobilizing tactics. Mobilizers need the ability to actually turn people out in the real world in sufficient

numbers, in a consistent way, in order to develop real power. This requires the relationships and deep sense of meaning that organizers build with members. In turn again, the leaders developed through organizing will help build the lists and generate content used by mobilizers. Han helps us see that placing these tactics in the proper relation to one another in a mutually beneficial ordering, is the important thing to consider, not which one is best.

By better establishing the role of organizing in relation to the rest of an organization's tactics, we may be able to carve out enough space to get better at it. If we do see increased investments into organizing it would be wonderful to go deeper into the meaning and character of the "depth" that Han explains is central to the organizer's craft. She correctly points out that relatively little is actually known about how to do it well. How do we get better at the qualitative aspect of what organizers do? This book points us in the right direction, but much more work is needed. Here's why.

Han repeatedly calls attention to the intensely interpersonal work that organizers do. They build relationships, foster community, and provide activists with "a wide range of cognitive, technical, emotional, and motivational coaching." Doing all this well, while maintaining one's motivation (not to mention sanity) is a tall order, even for seasoned organizers. It's informal and can sometimes even border on therapy. It is also often done by the young and inexperienced. This is what organizers are out there doing in the world, even while lacking a robust method for providing this type of deep interpersonal support. It's not difficult to imagine scenarios in which this can go awry, even just prosaic ones in which organizers become just overwhelmed by it all.

Organizers and activists are passionate about the issues they work on often because of perceived injustice in the world. This motivation – to right the wrong – is often spurred by first or secondary trauma from encountering it in the world. War, poverty, the effects of a broken criminal justice system, these things cause real pain and suffering in peoples lives. If an organizer is effectively supporting the "emotional needs" of an activist they're bound to encounter secondary trauma. How can they do so in a manageable and healthy way? Are we including *that* content in our trainings? My experience tells me that we haven't done so adequately. I've filled the gap for myself by drawing on resources like Mindfulness, Non-Violent Communication, and Trauma Stewardship, but it's a cobbled together, largely individual pursuit. It would be fruitful for practitioners and scholars alike to look more deeply at formalizing the methods of emotional support (both for individuals and communities) in the context of organization-driven activism. One could make the case that there might even be an ethical imperative to do so.

Along these lines, Han mentions the practice of using "formalized reflection" to "develop long-term motivations and capacities" but this section really leaves me wanting much more. It is out of the intended scope of this book, but the need still exists in a very real way in the world of practitioners. Along with impacting budgets and training curricula, I'm hopeful that Han's extremely valuable contribution will also serve as the foundation for more reflection by practitioners and scholars alike on the "how" of formalized reflection in the context of organizing.

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:08 AM

## Bridging Academic and Practitioner Knowledge

By [David Karpf](#)

When I started grad school in the fall of 2003, I was already a veteran civic activist. I had joined the Sierra Club leadership at age 16, and the organization had become my second family. The Sierra Club taught me how to lead, how to set goals, how to communicate, and how to strategize. My years as a graduate student were also spent as a Sierran – first as the organization’s Vice President for Training, and later as a member of its Board of Directors.

Being a young scholar and an old activist created some jarring moments. My activist community asked different questions, resting on different assumptions, than the academic community I was working to join. I found myself searching for bridging texts – research that applied the empirical rigor of academia to questions that fit the lived experiences of organizers.

[How Organizations Develop Activists](#) is exactly the type of bridging text I was looking for. It draws from the deep wells of practitioner and academic knowledge, combines them through a rigorous and sophisticated research design, and emerges with findings that contribute greatly to both.

Hahrie Han’s study pushes us to think long and hard about the agency that organizations and their leaders have in affecting the depth and breadth of their movement participation. It builds on previous research like Theda Skocpol’s [Diminished Democracy](#), which drew attention to the historical decline of membership-based civic associations in America. *How Organizations Develop Activists* goes a step further, diving into the steep challenges and hard choices faced by present-day civic associations.

For academics, perhaps the strongest contribution of this book comes from the distinction Han draws between **mobilizing** and **organizing**. Steven Schier offered a similar distinction in his 2000 book [By Invitation Only: The Rise of Exclusive Politics in America](#). But where Schier critiques “activation” as a hollowed-out form of engagement that cheapens American politics, Han offers a more even-handed assessment of “mobilizing.” Engaging a large supporter list through requests to take small, discrete acts (sign a petition, make a donation, attend an event) can serve a clear strategic purpose. ... Sometimes you *need* a lot of people to take a simple act. And, lacking a large supporter base, it can be difficult to engage in the time-consuming relational organizing techniques that result in a deep and committed volunteer leadership team. These are distinctions that most political scientists and social movement scholars have often glossed over. Too often, we still treat civic engagement as a checkbox on a survey (Have you contacted any public officials or attended any protests or rallies in the past year? Y/N), converting activism into an artificial construct that bears little resemblance to the lived experience of activists themselves.

For practitioners, the book offers two substantial benefits. First, it anchors terms like organizing and mobilizing in clear examples. Every political organization pays lip service to movement-building and organizing. Lacking clear definitions, it is sometimes too easy for organizations that produce nothing but an endless string of fundraising emails to fool

themselves into believing *they too* are organizers. I expect chapters 3, 4, and 5 in particular will lead communications professionals and field campaigners to pause, take stock, and reflect on the nature of their daily campaign techniques.

Second, Hahrie's comparative case studies highlight the return-on-investment (ROI) that organizations can expect from promoting relational organizing. This is just critical. Mobilizing strategies tend by their nature to be cheap. Organizing strategies are costly.

Field organizers and volunteer trainings are costly endeavors. Foundations and major donors tend not to value the critical infrastructure that undergirds a national organizing strategy. It is much easier to raise money for a national advertising blitz than it is to fund trainings or field organizers in key states. And (as I discuss in my book, [The MoveOn Effect](#)) some of the only funding streams for this type of investment (unrestricted direct mail revenues, in particular) are declining in the digital age. For practitioners who are committed to fostering a culture of organizing within their civic association, *How Organizations Develop Activists* is particularly valuable as a demonstration of the ROI of investing in organizing. I expect this book will set the stage for dozens of small experiments and pilot programs among existing civic associations.

The empirical strength of this book rests in its creative, meso-level research design. Han partners with two large, federated civic associations. Her unit of analysis is the individual federated unit (state- or citywide chapters) within each organization. Some chapters are flush with volunteer leaders; others are barely scraping by. Since she is comparing chapters within a single organization, the difference cannot be their mission statement or organizational brand. Hahrie conducts interviews, collects surveys, and runs experiments, all of which point to the impact that specific tactics, routines, and leadership decisions have on fostering a culture that brings more people in and keeps them involved. Organizing is an investment in your members. Mobilizing is an investment in membership. "Lone wolf" tactics (chapter 1) are an investment in your personal expertise.

While the meso-level research design is the empirical core of the book, it also bounds the study and leads us to think about future research questions that are beyond the scope of this analysis: Why don't more organizations invest in organizing, anyway? Why, if organizing produces such benefits, does it seem to be so comparatively rare in the modern American context? Answering these questions will require an alternate research design, one that looks across civic associations, rather than within civic associations, over time. In the spirit of spurring future research, here are three questions that I hope *How Organizations Develop Activists* will inspire the research community to take up:

1. **How do we fund organizing at scale?** In the early 2000s, I was the volunteer chair of the Sierra Club's Environmental Public Education Campaign (EPEC) committee. EPEC was an organizing program. Individual Sierra Club chapters would submit campaign proposals, and the EPEC committee would fund organizers in the 20 most promising organizing sites. EPEC was popular among the chapters, and it met our organizational and campaign goals. We expanded the program, and took pride in it. Then, after a few years, we shut the whole thing down. The reason was simple enough: EPEC ran out of money. It was well loved by everyone except the handful of big donors who we needed to keep the program running. Large-scale organizing programs are a significant expense. Training volunteer leaders in relational organizing and public narrative is only worth the investment if you have flexible money that can be invested. If we want to understand the state of organizing in 21<sup>st</sup> century American politics, we ought to direct some attention to changing preferences and priorities within the large donor networks on the American left and right.
2. **Building a culture of commitment in multi-issue groups.** Both of the organizations in Han's study operate within a fixed issue-space. One is an organization of doctors, who share an interest in improving the health care system. The other is an organization of environmentalists, who share an interest in environmental issues. [Some of the largest organizations in present-day America are multi-issue generalists, though.](#) What unique challenges do multi-issue generalists face when they choose an organizing strategy?

**3. What are the ceiling conditions for organizing? How far can it spread, and among how many orgs?**

Relational organizing requires a particular set of skills, and a substantial level of personal commitment. Those skills can be learned, and that commitment can be cultivated. But, just as there is a limited donor pool for any given issue area, there is likely a limited leadership pool for social movement organizations. At present, very few organizations devote significant resources to relational organizing. There is clear room for growth. But if all civic associations switched to this strategy overnight, they would suddenly find themselves competing for volunteer leaders just as they currently compete for foundation dollars. It is worth thinking *ecologically* about organizing, to consider issues like niches and carrying capacity within broader movement networks.

These three issues represent bridging questions, in a similar vein as Hahrie Han's book. That is one of the best things about a bridging text like this one: by focusing attention on the lived experience of civic activists, it opens up entirely new vistas worthy of exploration.

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:07 AM

## The Urgency of Promoting Organizing in the Digital Revolution

By [Will Conway](#)

Among organizations interested in building power and influence, there tend to be two models of activism: a model which sees relationships with individuals as a means to a final end of success, and a true leadership model, which builds power by engaging and empowering supporters as ends within themselves. In her book, “How Organizations Develop Activists,” Professor Hahrie Han explains exactly how the latter model yields success by engaging and empowering individuals. By comparing successful, high-engagement chapters and unsuccessful, low-engagement chapters at two anonymous organizations, she explains that successful, people-oriented organizations opt for their model and become successful because it has become rooted in the culture and narrative of their institutions.

In the post-2012 political campaign world, much has been written about campaigns’ refusal to spend reasonable portions of their budgets on digital tools. A failure to spend on digital, though, is only a symptom of a larger problem, as digital engagement is not actually about engaging people digitally. Digital tools in politics allow organizations to identify how people are engaging with them (whether online or offline), and engage them where they are on topics they care about.

More than that, the best digital tools actually help organizers identify supporters and cultivate leadership among those willing to engage, and allow those supporters to build and grow their own networks of engaged activists and leaders. The articles that raise the alarm on limited digital spending, then, are actually circling a fundamentally deeper, more disturbing problem: the high-engagement chapters that Hahrie Han outlines are rare gems in a mostly disorganized, marketing-oriented field that fails to focus its efforts on building real relationships and empowering individuals.

This old political model is actually even scarier than it may seem on the surface. It used to be that a single human being was only capable of maintaining [somewhere between 100-230 meaningful relationships](#). That meant that large-scale political infrastructures, geared towards changing people’s minds around politics and encouraging people to vote one way or another on issues and candidates, were institutionally limited to a set number of relationships. This forced parties and campaigns to build two types of conversations. The first type was meaningful relationships, which they reserved only for people who could deliver a major value-add. Traditionally, these people were high-dollar donors and local power brokers, who could provide them the financial resources to fund their operation and the social capital to build influence, respectively. The second type were far less meaningful interactions with the people whom they tried to influence, primarily through media like radio and television ads. When they tried to feign the construction of real, one-to-one relationships with voters en masse, they built field campaigns that tried to identify supporters and influence voters.

What happened next was a little scary. Because high-dollar donors and power brokers were guaranteed meaningful relationships due to their tangible value, they had influence over the political infrastructure. Then, the political infrastructure, which had ingested the values of the elites and was tasked with convincing the public to vote for

candidates who had also ingested those values, influenced the public to buy in. Political infrastructure became a machine for elites to change the conversation. It still works that way and, realistically, it won't change entirely.

But something changed recently that changes the dynamic and empowers political infrastructures to morph and adapt not just based on the views of the elites, but also based on the views of the general public. This allows infrastructures to adapt quickly, build strong coalitions, and ingest the views of the public. It allows them to mobilize more efficiently and effectively, and to charge supporters with leadership and autonomy.

What changed is that political organizations are now capable of using technology to maintain more than several hundred meaningful relationships. Technology has allowed political infrastructures to build, grow and organize thousands of genuine relationships like never before. More than that, political infrastructures can track and maintain relationships at scale across many different engagement platforms as they grow and develop anywhere—whether in the real world or digitally. They can empower locals to develop autonomous networks of leaders and supporters and build real, people oriented movements around issues.

The model these successful, high-engagement organizations use is not new. Organizing, engaging and empowering people as ends in themselves is an ancient approach. The technology that allows it to happen at scale, however, is a concept that revolutionizes democracy itself, as long as it is acted upon.

As a Lead Organizer at NationBuilder – an organizing technology specifically designed to help leaders engage and empower their followers – I help statewide political campaigns and party infrastructures build effective digital engagement strategies. I have seen firsthand that the culture and narrative among activists and political operatives has not yet adapted to the new technological realities of relationship building. Only a very small number of evangelists in the political space truly understand the newly acquired power of digital organizing.

There is hope, though. The people who truly understand – people like Professor Han – conveniently have the concept they understand so intuitively at their disposal to enact change. Indeed, it is the task of every political organizer in the modern era not only to organize around politics and issues about which they are passionate, but to organize around the concept of organizing itself.

It is actually in this effort – one in which people of all political persuasions, policy views or cultures can unite – that we can enact real change; change that can upend and recalibrate the very nature of our democracy. We political organizers have the power to shift the way of thinking of all activists from the old model of activism that empowers only those in a position of power already, to a new model, that allows those with passion and belief to empower themselves.



# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:06 AM

## How LGBT Organizations are Queering Dixie

By [Laura Meadows](#)

Hahrie Han's [How Organizations Develop Activists](#) opens with a straightforward question: "Why are some civic associations better than others at 'getting' – and keeping – people involved in activism?" Through a brilliantly conceived research design incorporating both observational and experimental data, Han methodically dismantles a series of false distinctions surrounding the choices contemporary activists organizations must make in their efforts to get people involved.

According to Han's work, highly active civic associations do not choose between transactional mobilizing or transformational organizing strategies. Rather, the associations most successful at getting – and keeping – an active volunteer base blend the two models. Similarly, highly active associations do not rely solely on offline or online organizing. Han shows that they integrate the two models. Finally, Han argues that civic associations do not need to choose between expanding their membership bases or developing their existing members. Instead, successful organizations invest in members in order to develop their membership.

For instance, Han describes one highly-engaged organization's decision to transition from organizing events to organizing organizers. In doing so, the group was able to leverage transformational organizing in order to develop a motivated cadre of activists for the necessary transactional mobilizing work. In short, the organization succeeded because it invested in members who subsequently grew its membership.

In her conclusion, Han asks how these findings might differ among other kinds of communities. Since Han focused on two relatively privileged activist populations, she leads us to think beyond these types of groups and to take up research questions outside the purview of *How Organizations Develop Activists*: What organizational strategies do groups use to build bases of support in politically-antagonistic settings? How do organizations tailor their messaging and organizational strategies to appeal to multiple and varied audiences? In the hopes of contributing to this conversation, I wanted to offer a finding from my own work that speaks directly to these questions.

For the past two years, I have been immersed in North Carolina's LGBT movement. On May 8, 2012, North Carolina voters approved a constitutional amendment banning marriage equality in the state. On October 10, 2014, a federal judge ruled the amendment unconstitutional. In between and around these two dates, LGBT organizations built a vibrant, though specific, movement within the state. And they did so, similarly to Han's highly-engaged organizational actors, through the development of a cadre of engaged and educated activists. North Carolina's activists were challenged, however, due to the political, social, and cultural realities of the Old North State. As a lawyer representing the ACLU of North Carolina describes it, "North Carolina has the land mass of Connecticut and Mississippi. It also has the demographics and cultural understandings of Connecticut and Mississippi."

In fact, as a region, the South is more rural, more religious, and more politically conservative than the rest of the United

States. But, it is no more straight. The proportion of the South's population that identifies as LGBT is nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the country. However, as the more rural, religious, and conservative among us typically oppose the LGBT movement's goals, Southern activists operate in a unique (and uniquely challenging) environment. Consequently, activists below the Mason-Dixon have developed targeted strategies to navigate this cultural terrain.

Specifically, recognizing that a singular, monolithic message such as "equality" would be ineffective amongst some cultural groups within the state, organizations targeted their messages, and the messengers that delivered them, to multiple publics, including those historically understood in both popular and scholarly minds to be antagonistic to the movement's goals: farm country and churches. Simply put, they spoke to people where they were. And, in doing so, these organizations facilitated the organization and mobilization of what I call *movement publics*. Defined as discursive groupings of individuals and organizations that share a set of political, social, and/or cultural sensibilities in relation to the movement, the conceptualization of movement publics affords a lens through which to reflect on the diversity inherent in most movements and to consider the varied communicative strategies groups use to develop and recruit activists.

Through the conceptualization of movement publics, I argue that scholars need to consider the role of movement organizations in organizing and mobilizing diverse publics within a single social movement. Though political communication scholars have begun to examine the relationship between networked media, electoral campaigning, and social movements ([Chadwick, 2007](#); [Karpf, 2012](#); [Kreiss, 2012](#)), the ability of organizational actors to foster and develop movement identities, especially at the state level, has been understudied. [Fraser's \(1990\)](#) conceptualization of "subaltern counterpublics" has effectively dismantled the notion of a singular public sphere and focused scholarly attention on the centrality of communication in forming and negotiating identities. However, the capacity for established movement organizations to foster discourse through the creation of offline and online spaces has not been specified.

As Han's work clearly demonstrates, organizations play a central role in developing, training, and mobilizing activists. And, as I hope movement publics suggests, the role they play is, and will remain, a fruitful area of scholarly and practitioner study for the foreseeable future.

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:05 AM

## No Turning Back

By [Sarah Hodgdon](#)

In her introduction to “How Organizations Develop Activists,” Hahrie Han argues that “what really differentiates the highly active associations is the way they transform their members’ motivations and capacities for involvement.” Her book articulates the fundamental responsibility of organizers to provide experiences that transform activists’ perspective and ultimately gives them a sense that they have the power to create change in the world.

As a college student at Indiana University, this moment occurred for me when I was working to convince the university’s foundation not to sell land it owned to a company that sought to burn toxic waste near an elementary school. I realized that by working with like-minded people on a well-orchestrated effort that I could influence decision-makers. Over time, this feeling inspired me to choose a career in environmental organizing that led to my current role as the National Program Director of Sierra Club.

I was drawn to the Sierra Club because of our extensive network of committed volunteer leaders who make the decisions, locally and nationally, that set the organization’s course. As philanthropy has changed over the past few decades, we have fewer dollars to invest directly in recruiting, training and nurturing leaders. However, as Han suggests so convincingly in her book, and as I have witnessed, leadership development is at the heart of successful organizations. For organizations that seek to build grassroots power, developing volunteer leaders is not a secondary result or a byproduct. It is the way we win victories today and, crucially, maintain the strength to win victories tomorrow.

This work of recruiting and training leaders can only be done in the context of compelling campaign work. As scientists’ warnings on the catastrophic potential of climate disruption grow direr and more urgent, the Sierra Club puts a premium on identification of local activists who can win local initiatives that move communities away from fossil fuel use and toward renewable energy solutions like solar, wind and efficiency.

Society has never faced a problem as complex and multi-faceted as climate disruption. Thousands of successful efforts knit together give a sense of momentum. Because so many people are demanding change and feeling their power to create it, I believe we are nearing the tipping point that decision-makers will not be able to ignore climate disruption as American elected officials have done for so long.

Like my experience at Indiana University twenty years ago, I believe the sense of satisfaction derived from planning, executing and then winning meaningful campaigns, gives activists a sense of their individual and collective power that will sustain their engagement over time. “How Organizations Develop Activists” lays out in research and hard findings an essential truth that all organizers know: Once a person has played a meaningful role in creating change that improves their community, there is no turning back.

Hahrie Han makes a vital case for organizational investment—and I also hope philanthropic investment—in leadership

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:04 AM

## Ignore at Your Peril: Why Developing Your Grassroots Matters

By [Tom Baker](#)

The first campaign I was involved in was Jubilee 2000.

I remember the record breaking petition, the sense of excitement as the latest newsletter would come through my parents letterbox with an update on our progress, and the delight when we heard we had succeeded in getting the G8 (the meeting of the worlds most powerful governments) to cancel the unpayable debt of developing countries.

It took the Jubilee 2000 campaign over 2 years to collect the 22 million signatures that formed the record-breaking petition we handed in.

Anyone who collected those signatures will talk of the hours spent collecting petitions at the back of churches, at street stalls and in student union bars across the UK, winning the signatures one conversation at a time.

Many look at it as a golden age of campaigning on international poverty issues in the UK and in some ways it was.

Fast forward fifteen plus years and the landscape for campaigning has changed dramatically, in no small part thanks to the rise of the internet, which has revolutionized the ease with which individuals can connect with each other around issues. But the work of building grassroots power and influence has been overlooked by many in favor of online campaigning.

That's where I've found Hahrie Han's book "How Organizations Develop Activists" so valuable, and have been recommending it to everyone since reading it.

It would be easy for Han to look at the organizing approaches of online movements like MoveOn.org (or its UK equivalent 38 Degrees) and how they've combined online tools with offline organizing, or the rising effectiveness of groups focused on Alinsky inspired organizing approaches like Industrial Areas Foundation or London Citizens here in the UK.

Lessons from both are valuable but Han has turned her lens on what she describes as national associations, which appear to be organizations with longstanding programs of grassroots work linked with grassroots influencing. Though neither organization is mentioned by name, with one organization working on health and on the other environment, you get the impression the lessons are widely applicable.

While there are certainly differences between our approach to grassroots campaigning in the UK as compared to the US (for example less of a focus on state/local level activism) we're generally keen to learn from trends in the US. While enjoying the book I was reminded of the lessons from [Theda Skocpol's study](#) on why the push to get action on climate

change in 2010 failed in part because it focused too much on grassroots lobbying, rather than the slow work of strategically building power, a sobering lesson for any organization that nurturing your grassroots matters.

Turning the pages, in the book Han hits the sweet spot on the challenges faced by anyone who works with local chapters or groups. The characterization of groups categorized into 3 types—Lone Wolves, Activists and Organizer—rings true for anyone who's been involved in working with local groups.

Lone Wolves are those who chose to [‘to build power by leveraging information — through legal briefs, public comments, and other forms of research advocacy’ while ‘mobilisers and organizers, by contrast, choose to build power through people’](#).

For many it is easy to see activism and organizing as the same, but as Jim Coe points out in [his review of the book](#), the ‘two strategic models are in fact based on radically different philosophies and approaches’.

This central idea is one that I found most challenging in the work that I do. I often find myself using the words interchangeably, but as Joy Cushman suggests in the book, “The organizer thus makes two [strategic] choices: 1) to engage others, and 2) to invest in their development. The mobilizer only makes the first choice. And the lone wolf makes neither”.

The study is full of practical ideas and evidence-based insight. For me 5 things stand out as challenges and opportunities for those working in ‘traditional’ organizations or associations looking to build grassroots networks;

1. **The need to focus on transformational and transactional outcomes** – Han refers to this paper on [Metrics that Matter](#) suggesting in the rush to prove to funders—and if we're honest often others in our organizations—the value of our work we can spend too much time focusing on transactional outcomes (the number of emails sent for example), but we need to focus more on transformational outcomes that reflect the often ‘invisible’ work of building capacity and how people have been altered through collective efforts.
2. **Develop the approach of a coach when working with supporters** – Groups that had adopted an organizing approach were ones that Han demonstrates understood the need to create a ‘network that grows.’ As staff at the heart of an association it is easy to revert to an activist approach, but we should focus on coaching those involved in groups about how to overcome specific challenges or situations that they are facing.
3. **Question the narrative** – Han talks about the way she observed different chapters making meaning of their work through past experiences “Remember when we got 100 people to attend the meeting”, suggesting it's more than just the ‘we've always done it this way’ perspective but a sense of believing that we develop a ‘taste’ for specific approach. We need to challenge this.
4. **Bring people together for fun** – the research finds that the most successful chapters or groups were those that combined political and social activities, deepening commitment and a sense of shared values. Perhaps this is a lesson that feels obvious in the cold light of day, but is too often overlooked in my experience.
5. **Make our approach sticky** – making the time to invest in leadership development isn't easy, but for chapters to succeed the rationale for adopting a particular method of change needs to become ‘sticky’ so that is passed on from one generation of leaders to another.

I found this book to be exactly what I need as a practitioner. Practical, accessible, readable, applicable, and challenging.

There were some areas where I would have been interested in further reflection, for example is it possible to turn a group from being run by a set of 'Lone Wolves' to one where another approach is the norm? Overall though, I strongly recommend this to anyone interested in effective approaches to supporting the building of effective grassroots networks that deliver change.

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:03 AM

## Want to Truly Mobilize Ideas? Han Explains—to Several Audiences—Why We Must Mobilize \*AND\* Organize

By [Jennifer Oser](#)

When I met this week with Sarah\*, my first potential graduate student advisee as a new faculty member at Ben-Gurion University in Israel, I was thrilled for this particular student that she would be able to learn from Professor Hahrie Han's recently published book *How Organizations Develop Activists*. As I began to describe the book to this student – a master's student who is interested in communication and political advocacy – it became clear to me that Han's book makes valuable contributions for at least five distinct groups of people that I'll simplistically describe as students, activists, scholars, policy experts and decision-makers. In this post I first summarize key aspects of the book that allow it to speak meaningfully to such diverse audiences, and then I consider some of the book's concrete contributions to these different groups of readers.

### (1) Key Aspects of This Book: Research Questions, Research Design and Findings

Han launches this book with the recognition that getting people to act politically is hard to do. She then asks what seems like a very basic question: how do organizations succeed at getting people to act politically? She studies this question by comparing the local chapters of two civic associations, one that brings together environmentally conscious members to focus on environmental issues, and another that brings together doctors to focus on health issues.

The research design that allows her to make meaningful conclusions about organizational effectiveness is a comparison of the practices of association chapters that differ mainly by whether they are high-engagement or low-engagement in relation to their members. In addition to the comparative work of the practices of high- versus low-engagement associations, Han also conducts a series of field experiments that are designed to further investigate the question of why some organizations are more successful than others at developing activists and leaders to advance policy change. Along with this carefully constructed research design, Han incorporates vignettes that capture typical representatives of different kinds of association members (e.g. the “lone wolf”, the “mobilizer” and the “organizer”). These vignettes are drawn from intensive field work, and the authenticity of the vignettes transforms the book into a living and breathing narrative.

A key finding from this painstaking research is that the most effective and vibrant associations do not only *mobilize* their members to take political action – they also *organize* their members to advance up a ladder of activism and leadership development. The book then dives into investigating the core practices of organizations that succeed in using an organizing approach, including advanced uses of available technologies. Through this research Han finds that the key to success for civic organizations is the development of a strategic plan to both mobilize *and* organize their members.

Since it is so rare for any piece of writing to communicate something meaningful to such a broad group of readers, I think it's worth first pausing to consider what is unique about the book's design and structure. Han successfully combines three main characteristics that are rarely integrated in a single book: (1) Ambitious and important research goals; (2) State of the art research methods and intensive original data collection; (3) A compellingly clear voice and narrative that interprets and communicates the implications of the study. While it can be argued that the first two characteristics are not all that rare, the ability to *combine* ambitious research goals and methods along with a clear narrative is truly a feat.

A final key contribution of the book's design that I think is crucial to note is the way it engages with contemporary technological advances, without becoming single-mindedly focused on time-limited digital tricks. This is quite a challenge, and an important one for those of us interested in effective study and practice of mobilizing and organizing. It would be naïve to simply ignore how technology is changing the way we communicate and organize associational life. Yet, too often research and practice can get bogged down in the specific website or app that will hopefully transform politics as we know it. Han's book does a masterful job at engaging seriously with the technological innovations used by associations, while contextualizing them in the big-picture advances of 21<sup>st</sup> century associational life.

## **(2) Different Groups of Readers**

When I consider the contributions this book can make for someone like Sarah, the graduate student I met with this week, I think we can imagine her as representative of readers that include *activists*, *policy experts* and *decision-makers*. Sarah is in the second year of our master's program with an interest in comparing two key associations in the American Jewish community, namely J-Street and AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee). Although she is working to produce a high-quality master's thesis, she is not interested in becoming a life-long student or scholar, but rather she aims to become a leader in communications and policy change.

As someone who sees herself as a future leader and spokesperson on behalf of the more politically conservative end of the ideological spectrum of the Jewish community in the US and Israel, Sarah's interest in these organizations goes well beyond theoretical curiosity. As a student who consciously enrolled in a program that has a reputation for being more left-leaning on the political spectrum, Sarah has already shown her interest for deep engagement with a broad spectrum of ideas. Although we touched only the tip of the iceberg of her research interest in our first conversation, a clear motivation for her choice of these organizations was to learn about their ultimate effectiveness in advancing their policy interests.

Returning to my role in the conversation as a new faculty member and potential advisor, the usefulness of Han's book to



*students* as well as to *scholars* comes to the fore. I am beginning to face the challenges of developing a syllabus that includes high-quality, challenging scholarship – and that also includes completely readable and compelling writing. As I have climbed a few rungs on the ladder of the academic hierarchy, it seems clear that the higher one gets, the more incomprehensible the writing tends to become. As an academic interested in supporting students to recognize good scholarship and to produce it themselves, Han's book provides a kind of road map for both students and scholars in the field.

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:03 AM

## Building Leaders in Our Classrooms and Communities

By [Melissa Michelson](#)

Extensive research supports the proposition that community service is important and should be encouraged among our nation's young people. It teaches compassion and understanding, building stronger communities. It gives young people a sense of purpose and cultivates adult citizens who are more engaged in their communities and in politics, strengthening our democracy. In his [speech earlier this month](#) promoting the idea of two years of free community college, President Barack Obama called attention to existing programs in Tennessee and Chicago that require their students to do community service, and throughout his presidency has expanded [programs to encourage service](#) by all young people. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, this quotation from Dr. King makes its annual appearance: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: what are you doing for others?"

For many high school and college students, volunteering is required for graduation. At Menlo College, where I teach, scholarship students must perform 30 hours of service a year, and all seniors must serve 15 hours. Researchers find this service contributes to [support for prosocial values](#) (such as the importance of helping others) and to [lifelong commitments](#) to volunteerism and civic engagement. Past graduation, many of the Millennials pressed into service hours in order to graduate are volunteering to continue to serve.

More broadly, however, few Americans are engaged. According to the [Current Population Survey](#), 25.4% of Americans volunteered in 2013, including 26.2 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds and 18.5 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds. At the same time, however, only 36.3 percent of eligible voters went to the polls in 2014, a 72-year low. Even less common are forms of political participation that require more time and effort. According to a recent [Pew Research study](#), only 22 percent of survey respondents had attended a meeting on local, town, or school affairs in the previous year, and only 10 percent had attended a rally or speech. For all of the talk about the importance of volunteering and civic engagement, only a quarter to a third of Americans are truly engaged.

What can be done to revitalize our communities? How can Americans be moved to work with their fellow citizens to solve social problems and change public policy? A groundbreaking new book by Hahrie Han, [How Organizations Develop Activists](#) (Oxford University Press, 2014) uses in-depth observations of and interviews with members of high- and low-engagement chapters of two national organizations to answer this question. Han finds that high-engagement chapters engage in transformational organizing, using strategies that develop the capacities of their members. They focus on building relationships and community, and actively work to transform individuals into leaders. In contrast, low-engagement chapters rely on transactional mobilizing. They find supporters by casting wide nets and identifying individuals with latent skills and interests. While less difficult in the short run, these mobilizing activities do not transform people into activists. Instead, they allow individuals to self-select the level of activism that they are already comfortable with. In the long run, of course, this makes growth and community-building more difficult.

Transferring the findings from Han's book to everyday activism and civic engagement, required student community service can go either way. Schools that take the easy route, helping students identify opportunities for service that they find easy and accessible, may accomplish the short-term goal of fulfilling required hours but may do little to transform today's youth into tomorrow's engaged citizens. Until recently, Menlo College allowed students to fulfill some hours through collecting recyclables: an easy (and not surprisingly, very popular) option for many students. Thankfully, that option is no longer offered. It probably did little transforming, and may have created resentment about and resistance to recycling to boot!

Instead, schools should push students to go beyond their preexisting comfort zones, to engage in community service that transforms them. Han shares the story of Dale, a doctor in the National Association of Doctors (the names of the individuals and organizations are replaced with pseudonyms). Dale started by volunteering at a phone bank but was then asked to organize and run one on his own; other leaders held his hand and taught him how to make the event a success. He was transformed into a leader.

School community service requirements that challenge the emotional and cognitive capacities of students, and create interdependent work that involves strategic autonomy, are more difficult in the short run, but they create leaders and enhanced communities. Pushing today's youth to engage in these sorts of volunteer opportunities—to organize their own food drive, or blood drive, or neighborhood cleanup day—will require more hands-on coaching by teachers and administrators. They will require organizers to reach out to individuals personally, and to build a sense of community and social capital. It's hard work—much harder than collecting a bag of empty water bottles. But as Han's research firmly demonstrates, it will lead to stronger individual leaders and stronger communities. Her insights about the transformational power of organizing chart an inspiring path for those interested in developing a more engaged citizenry and a healthier democracy than the one reflected in recent levels of voter turnout.

# Mobilizing Ideas

BY MOBILIZING IDEAS | FEBRUARY 2, 2015 · 10:02 AM

## Balancing Strategy and Constraint in SMO Practices: Insights from How Organizations Develop Activists

By [Edward Walker](#)

Hahrie Han's [How Organizations Develop Activists](#) represents an important contribution to scholarship on social movements and advocacy organizations. All too often, in my view, studies elide the distinction between thicker forms of engagement that build and enhance relations among participants ("organizing") and forms that mainly involve getting people to take action regardless of whether those relations have been cultivated in a meaningful way ("mobilizing"). Yet, understanding this distinction has serious consequences for a variety of features of advocacy campaigns. It impacts the extent to which interests are established *through* participation rather than necessarily *prior* to action, whether activists feel that their personal efforts are being recognized and acknowledged by others active in the cause, as well as more pragmatic issues about maximizing the potential that activists can most effectively marshal their collective energy and effort into the larger enterprise. The stakes of understanding the organizing/mobilizing distinction are high, I would argue, both for how scholars conceptualize social movements and also for how activists decide their strategy in any given campaign.

This book is also quite timely, given other features of both the shifting advocacy environment and the changing scholarly conversation surrounding it. Many have worried about how the advocacy environment has been altered since the "advocacy explosion" of the 1970s and 1980s, with more groups relying on checkbook-and-mailing-list models of organization. The concern has been, of course, that such groups involve not only less meaningful contact between leaders and rank-and-file members, but, more significantly, that members are less connected to one another. We now see, in some respects, an amplification of these concerns in studies of online activism, although there are some very important counter-trends (It's important to note here that Han's book also offers critical insights on this very count: the mobilizing/organizing distinction doesn't map cleanly onto the online/offline split; it's possible, Han argues, to do real *organizing* online as well as offline).

There are also many thinking through the fluctuating forms of transactional and "plug in" civic and political engagement (again, possible both online and offline), found in studies by scholars including Paul Lichterman, Zeynep Tufekci, Kevin Lewis, Philip Howard, and in some of my own work. Beyond all of these, there's the shift toward supply-side recruitment of activism and the selective targeting of participants by campaigns, aided by new data sources and technologies. I see Han's book as offering substantial new insights that are relevant to all of these debates.

What I would like to highlight is that although not framed primarily as a contribution to organizational theory, *HODA* also makes us think carefully about how best to understand the relationship between strategy and organizational environment.

Notably, the book does have a strong message for advocacy groups and SMO organizers: if you focus your efforts too heavily on "lone wolf" mobilization strategies, you are likely falling short of realizing the full potential of your members'

and leaders' collective capacity. The book suggests that while mobilization is a necessary ingredient in nearly all campaigns – even if not at every moment of it – the strategy of constantly mobilizing without substantial organization-building is usually a recipe for failure. Additionally, mobilizing without organizing is anathema to building civic skills and fostering interest formation for participants (pp. 130-33).

And yet I found myself wondering about how much organizations really *choose* one of these strategies over the other. The book quotes PICO Campaign Director Joy Cushman to support a point found throughout the study: “the organizer thus makes two [strategic] choices: (1) to engage others, and (2) to invest in their development. The mobilizer only makes the first choice. And the lone wolf makes neither” (p. 10).

Sociologists who study social movements and organizations often point out that strategy selection is often highly constrained by environmental circumstances such as the availability of models to imitate, resource constraints, inherent cultures of leadership that vary considerably across SMOs, and apparent vulnerabilities of the target(s) of the campaign (or, for non-political organizations, opportunities for gaining advantage). In short, strategy is endogenous.

To its great credit, *HODA* does highlight that strategy selection is constrained, especially in the third chapter. The argument there is that organizing is hard work, and is not usually chosen as the first option until groups are faced with a major external challenge. For some groups, it's more about resource shortages that require greater use of volunteer labor in place of paid staff, and organizing, in turn, depends on those volunteers. For others, it was more a story of seeking the capacity to play a more extensive role in national electoral politics. *HODA* also very nicely makes clear that once these strategies are adopted, SMOs tend toward path dependence given both the “taste” for certain models of engaging members and also more practical considerations about the transaction costs of adopting an alternative model. As Han argues, “the structure in place provides incentives for cultivating activists... Strategic choices about where to locate responsibility, in other words, can condition subsequent choices about how to cultivate activism that make mobilizing or organizing more likely” (p. 79).

Where does this leave us on the question of “choice?” My estimation is that Han's book gives us an image of strategic choice that is constrained but far from determined by environmental conditions. Although I think that I would place a bit more emphasis on the “structure” than the “agency” side of this particular equation, *HODA* does give us a strong sense about the sources and consequences of strategy selection both for SMO leaders and also for the efficacy of their campaigns. Those victories that come through mobilizing without organizing may be satisfying in the short term but may ultimately prove to be, in large part, pyrrhic.

Overall, *How Organizations Develop Activists* is a book that should be read by all scholars interested in social movements, civic engagement, and politics, as well as by activists considering how best to effect policy change through the work of their grassroots membership. Books like Han's are quite valuable to both of those audiences in this time of an unsettled civic landscape with new technologies, rising inequality, and increasingly professionalized advocacy.

# Mobilizing Ideas

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## Reflections One Year Later on How Organizations Develop Activists

By [Hahrie Han](#)

It is both humbling and exciting to read so many responses to *How Organizations Develop Activists*, and to develop perspective on the ways it is being understood, interpreted, and put to use in the world. When I was finishing graduate school and deciding whether to stay in academia, one of my mentors encouraged me by describing academia as a good “perch” from which to do work that dialogues with both scholarly thinking and practical politics. Although I have strived throughout my career to stay on this perch, it is rare (and gratifying) to have the opportunity to gain such insight into the ways my work fulfills that promise, and the places where questions remain.

I hope at some point to have the opportunity to sit down (virtually or in person) with each author to discuss her/his insights about the book in greater depth, for each essay sparked new thinking for me. Lacking the space to detail all of those thoughts here, I thought I would focus on several themes that emerged across multiple essays and point towards future directions for research. Some of those themes coincide with the ideas I have been ruminating over in the year since I finished the bulk of work on the book, and others represent new streams of thought.

Perhaps the most consistent theme to emerge across reviews from both scholars and practitioners is the question of how we create the conditions that make it more likely that organizations will choose to engage in the work of what I call transformational organizing. *How Organizations Develop Activists* argues that organizations need to do both mobilizing and organizing to sustain high levels of activism. It is much easier, however, for organizations to make the choice to mobilize—it is, relatively speaking, easier to do (though doing it well is still a challenge!) and the outcomes become visible more quickly. When organizations are making decisions about how to allocate scarce resources, mobilizing alone becomes a tempting strategy. And, as Baker, Conway, Cushman, Glusenkamp, and Karpf variously point out in their reviews, those strategic choices themselves are conditioned by structural and environmental conditions within organizations and our political world—such as the narratives we tell about how organizations can build power to win the battles they wage, and the kinds of outcomes funders encourage.

The key question to ask, then, is how do we change those conditions themselves? Conway argues that we need to “organize around the concept of organizing itself” and Cushman asks whether organizations are “limiting the scale of [their] power by standing in [their] own way.” Baker, Glusenkamp, and Rule reference the need to counteract the narrative that the hard work of organizing doesn’t matter, while Karpf and Hodgdon point specifically to the need to shape that narrative in the funding community. For academics, the challenge is to reconsider the debate Walker references between the role of structure and agency in shaping strategic choices by considering the ways structures themselves can change. In her book *Diminished Democracy*, Theda Skocpol argues that elites will not organize masses unless they have the incentives to do so. Emerging from this discussion of *How Organizations Develop Activists*, then, is the question of what kind of work needs to be done to create incentives for elites to do the foundational work of building real citizens who

can be active agents within our democracy. Conceptually and practically, in other words, we should not take the givens about the structures and conditions that shape our political world as a given.

Another theme that emerged from multiple reviews is the question of how the findings from *How Organizations Develop Activists* apply to other kinds of organizations, working in different issues areas, countries, or across boundaries of race and class. Meadows offers an insightful comparison to her work studying North Carolina's LGBT movement, and other authors push us to ask how these findings apply outside the white, middle-class constituencies that constituted most of my sample in the organizations I studied, or in other countries.

At its core, the book makes the case for focusing research on the question of how we create the transformative spaces through which people are able to develop their own agency—to reclaim their citizenship in a political world that has, in ways many reviewers highlighted, stripped it away. As such, questions about the applicability of these findings to constituencies who lack the resources of the predominantly white, middle-and-upper class subjects I studied in *How Organizations Develop Activists* are at the center of my (and, I hope, others') research in the coming years because they should be at the center of the effort to rebuild a robust democracy. In their reviews, Oser and Michelson both point to the ways the book intersected with their work mentoring students. Initially surprised, I realized upon further reflection that the points they make about creating opportunities for young people to practically and conceptually develop their own citizenship are tied to this core theme about the importance of those transformational spaces. Figuring out how to do the foundational work of building those transformative spaces has micro, meso, and macro questions with which scholars can grapple.

I wrote the book in hopes that it could speak to scholars in multiple disciplines—from political science, sociology, and elsewhere—and to practitioners working in many different kinds of organizations. It was a privilege to hear responses to my book from such an august and varied group of people and I look forward to finding ways to continue the conversation that was begun here in the months and years to come.