



RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

STUDY DESIGN

This study was designed as a comparison of six cases of organizing ecosystems to understand how and under what conditions they build power. We deliberately chose cases with points of convergence and divergence with regards to demographics, historical and socio-cultural context, politics, and organizing infrastructure to examine the varied paths to power-building. We focused on three distinct issues in three unique regional sites: criminal justice reform in the South: Florida and Louisiana; affordable housing in the West: Portland, Oregon and Oakland, California; and Medicaid expansion in the Great Plains Region: Montana and Nebraska. Each of the six ballot initiatives, measures, or amendments took place during the 2018 midterm elections. Five campaigns were successful in passing the initiatives (Amendment 2 now requires unanimous jury verdicts for felony trials in Louisiana; Amendment 4 re-enfranchised people with prior felony convictions in Florida; Measure Y closed a just cause eviction loophole in Oakland; Measure 26–199 passed an affordable housing bond in Portland; and Initiative 427 expanded access to Medicaid in Nebraska) and one failed at the ballot (Initiative 185 sought to extend Medicaid expansion and raise the tobacco tax in Montana).

■ We approached our research questions using a case study design because of its strength in tracing processes and mechanisms, and unpacking the “whys” and “hows” questions [21], [22]. The six cases selected for this study are the coordinated efforts to pass a ballot initiative, measure, or amendment by the power-building ecosystems in each of the six locations. We define power-building ecosystems as the network of individuals, organizations, communities, and coalitions that comprised the activation around a particular ballot initiative, measure, or amendment. A power-building ecosystem is generally unique to a location (though it may contain national or out-of-state partners) as well as unique to an issue area (e.g., though there may be overlapping actors and organizations, an affordable housing organizing ecosystem will be different from a criminal justice reform organizing ecosystem, even in the same location).

We used in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data sources for our six cases. In addition, we collected campaign materials and organizational documents related to the issues and campaigns, including websites, fliers and mailers, opinion editorials, advertisements, and news clips.

CASE SELECTIONS

Cases were selected solely from the 2018 midterm elections in order to limit variability of national context. Midterm elections are especially advantageous for studying civic engagement precisely because fewer voters cast ballots in midterms as compared to general election years. As such, organizing ecosystems that engage in electoral work are likely to deploy a wider array and more creative set of strategies during midterm election cycles. 2018 saw the highest voter turnout in midterm elections in over a century [23] (largely attributed to the Trump administration), making these cases particularly ripe for analysis.

To understand how variation in organizing ecosystems shapes power-building, we varied our cases on several dimensions:

BALLOT INITIATIVE ISSUES

Each of the three issue areas—criminal justice reform, affordable housing, and Medicaid expansion—contributes to improving community-level health outcomes. They also impact, and likely draw support from, different constituents or bases. Scholars have argued that incarceration is an important social determinant of health, especially for Black people in the U.S. [20]. Criminal justice reform disproportionately impacts communities of color and especially Black communities. Housing has long been viewed as a key social determinant of health, and stable housing is known to be an important component for positive health outcomes. Those most vulnerable to unstable housing are the poor, working-poor and working-class, and in the context of this study, reside in expensive mid-sized cities facing high rates of gentrification. Medicaid expansion is perhaps the most obvious in directly impacting individuals' health outcomes by providing them access to health insurance.

CAMPAIGN SUCCESS

Both winning and losing campaigns shed light on the different lessons learned by organizing ecosystems in their efforts to improve communities and build power. Campaigns in Oakland, CA; Portland, OR; Florida; Louisiana; and Nebraska were all successful. The ballot initiative campaign in Montana failed, but Medicaid expansion later passed through the state legislature in 2019.

REGION

Regional variation underscores the unique contexts and concerns around civic engagement of the six cases. Two ballot measures took place in the West (Portland and Oakland), two in the Great Plains Region (Montana and Nebraska), and two in the South (Florida and Louisiana). In the West, the municipal ballot measures focused solely on city voters. In Nebraska and Montana, statewide organizing efforts were particularly concerned with urban and rural differences. In Florida and Louisiana, statewide initiatives required organizing across the state. With regards to similarities, five of the six campaigns were anchored in mid-sized cities (Lincoln, NE; Miami, FL; New Orleans, LA; and Oakland, CA), which typically receive less attention from scholars and funders alike, regarding organizing activities and infrastructure as compared to large, well-resourced, and over-studied cities like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. One ballot measure was centered in a smaller large city (Portland, OR), but shares many of the features of the mid-sized cities with respect to attention to organizing.

POLITICS

We chose cases with varying political leanings. Oakland and Portland vote solidly Democratic. Louisiana, Montana, and Nebraska lean Republican at the state level, and Florida is considered a “swing” state since voters’ support for Republicans and Democrats fluctuates [24]. The anchor cities mostly lean Democratic, with the exception of Billings, MT and Lincoln, NE, where voters have traditionally supported Republican candidates but are now leaning more liberal [24]. While all of the issues are traditionally considered progressive, the ballot initiatives enjoyed bipartisan support from voters in both purple and red states.

RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS

We selected cases with demographic variation along ethnic and racial lines pertaining to anchor cities’ and statewide populations, and who was most directly impacted by the proposed legislation and who was targeted for civic engagement. Generally, Oakland and Miami represented the most diverse cities, with significant representation of various racial and ethnic groups and with non-Hispanic whites in the minority [25], [26]. New Orleans is a majority Black city, with non-Hispanic whites comprising the second-largest racial group [27]. Portland, Billings, and Lincoln are overwhelmingly white cities, with small percentages of Black, Hispanic, and immigrant populations [28]–[30]. Though Indigenous populations comprise only about 6% of the population in Montana, these communities were integral to Medicaid expansion efforts in 2018 [31].

CAMPAIGN LEADERSHIP

We chose ballot initiatives in which the campaigns were led by different members of power-building ecosystems. Advocacy organizations led the charge in Montana, Nebraska, and Oakland, CA. Elected officials and housing policymakers were essential in leading the ballot measures in Oakland and Portland. Grassroots nonprofit organizations comprised of and led by directly impacted individuals pioneered the work in Louisiana and Florida. In addition, Black women were central to campaign operations in Florida and Louisiana.

HISTORY AND CULTURE

While the social, cultural and historical features of each case study site are varied and deep, those that are most relevant to the ballot issues are the following: the history of housing discrimination and contemporary dynamics of race, racism, and gentrification in Oakland and Portland; the history of slavery and Jim Crow and current impacts of mass incarceration in Florida and Louisiana, as well as immigration and its resulting diversity in Florida; and the role of farming and rural life in Montana and Nebraska, as well as new waves of immigration to Nebraska and the importance of Native sovereignty and culture in Montana.

² While Montana has leaned Republican for some time, respondents shared that in 2018 it felt more like a swing state than it does now with more and more voters supporting Republican candidates.

MEASURING POWER-BUILDING

Building on the work of the Lead Local Project and the Praxis Project, we understand power-building to be a multi-faceted, dynamic process that has different textures depending on the context [32] and is rooted in community agency, accountability, and solidarity [33]. Traditional ways of measuring power-building based on a snapshot in time are insufficient to capture the many dimensions of building power. **In the context of this research, we see ballot initiative campaigns as important for the policies they change as well as the seeds they plant that continue to grow long after the last ballot has been cast.**

Similar to Speer et al. (2020), we set out to measure power-building based on both its outcomes and its processes [34]. Table 1 provides an overview of our metrics. First, we considered whether ballot initiative campaigns activated new people; galvanized new voter participation; created new organizations, networks, coalitions, or organizing relationships; established new relationships with funders; attracted new audiences to the issue; or shifted who had decision-making power and leadership in the ecosystem. We also looked at procedural metrics, such as whether campaigns adopted new frameworks to explain the issue; employed new organizing models, strategies, or tactics; brought civic engagement knowledge or skills to new groups; and whether they respected community knowledge, autonomy, and accountability.

Table 1-A: Measuring Power-Building

O U T C O M E S		
METRIC	TYPE OF DATA	EXAMPLE
Newly activated individuals	QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE	Description of people who were moved to become active in campaigns for the first time
New voters or communities participating in electoral politics	QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE	Voters casting votes for the first time, based on election data
New organizations	QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE	Description of new organization that grew out of the campaign
New networks, coalitions or organizing relationships	QUALITATIVE	Description of connections or relationships that emerged from community organizing
New funders	QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE	Number of new funders
New audience or increased attention	QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE	Number of celebrities who publicly support, Description of national spotlight on the campaign
New access to decision making	QUALITATIVE	Description of being included on a new committee or getting a vote in a decision-making process
New positional power for communities that have been traditionally marginalized	QUALITATIVE	Description of being recognized as a leader

Table 1-B: Power-Building Process

P R O C E S S E S		
METRIC	TYPE OF DATA	EXAMPLE
New frameworks or narratives in explaining an issue	QUALITATIVE	Description of how the campaign built out a new framework
New organizing models, strategies or tactics	QUALITATIVE	Description of new model for centering those most impacted
Expanding know-how to new groups around ballot initiative or other civic engagement processes	QUALITATIVE	Discussion of trainings, leadership development, capacity building
Community has autonomy and agency throughout the campaign	QUALITATIVE	Description of self-determination and freedom to set direction and make decisions
Community knowledge is respected in the process	QUALITATIVE	Description of community expertise being uplifted, shared, and valued
Accountability to community members	QUALITATIVE	Description of agreements or structures that ensure that accountability is to the community rather than funders, politicians, consultants, etc.

DATA COLLECTION

While our original research design included travel to each of the case study sites for in-person interviews, we altered our approach to conduct interviews via video conferencing due to constraints from the COVID-19 pandemic. **We conducted a total of 72 interviews with 88 individuals.** Eighty-one percent of interviews were one-on-one or two-on-one (with one or both of the primary investigators interviewing a single respondent). Group interviews accounted for the remaining 19%, averaging 3 people per interview. Interviews were conducted between June 2020 and May 2021. Interviews averaged 40 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting 17 minutes and the longest lasting 1 hour and 23 minutes.

Initial interviewees were identified through contacts in the field, as well as research into the ballot initiatives. From these contacts, we implemented a purposeful snowball sampling method [35], [36]. Interview respondents included activists, organizers, advocates, campaign staffers, nonprofit leaders, consultants, funders, and elected officials.

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a format that is open-ended and flexible; this approach allowed us to probe and pursue themes as they emerged [37]. Interview topics included descriptions of organizations (when applicable), respondents' experience working on the issue area, their role and work on the 2018 campaign, their partners and collaborators, organizing strategies and tactics, successes and challenges, campaign outcomes and future goals, lessons learned, and the roles of race, place, history, and culture. All interviews were video and audio recorded, and transcribed. Interviewers also recorded field notes for each interview.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Interview transcripts were systematically coded and analyzed using qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti. Our analytic strategy followed both inductive and deductive logics. We drew on experiential expertise and theoretical insights to track important themes and develop initial codes for analysis. We also developed themes and codes that reflected the questions in our interview guide. Through regular team meetings (with project leads and the research associate) and the practice of memoing, we followed new themes as they emerged organically from the data and developed corresponding codes, in accordance with a grounded theoretical approach. Once major themes were identified, we returned to key respondents and advisors to the project to check our framing and analysis against the knowledge and perspectives of experts on the ground.

Table 2: Overview of Findings













ISSUE	AFFORDABLE HOUSING		MEDICAIDE EXPANSION		CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM	
STATE/CITY	 Oakland CA	 Portland OR	 NE	 MT	 FL	 LA
Win/Loss for ballot initiative/ amendment/ measure	win	win	win	loss	win	win
Ballot Initiative State ³	yes	yes	yes	yes	initiative referenda only	no
Impetus for the Initiative ⁴	Local Policy		Federal Policy		Directly Impacted	
Led by...	advocacy orgs / elected officials	metro / city official / advocacy orgs	Appleseed / advocacy org	hospital association / advocacy orgs	impacted / grassroots	impacted / grassroots
Ecosystem for this issue	robust	robust	semi-robust	semi-weak	strong-developing	weak-developing
Funding	\$\$\$	\$\$	\$\$	\$	\$\$	\$
Built Power	no	no	some	some	yes	yes
Partisanship	blue	blue	red	red	purple	purple
DEMOGRAPHICS (2018) ⁵	 Oakland CA  Portland OR		 NE  MT		 FL  LA	
Population	433,031	654,741	1,904,760	1,041,732	20,598,139	4,663,616
	Native American: 0.9% Asian: 15.5% Latinx: 27% Black: 23.8% White: 28.3% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.6% Women: 51.7% Men: 48.3%	Native American: 0.8% Asian: 8.2% Latinx: 9.7% Black: 5.8% White: 70.6% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.6% Women: 50.4% Men: 49.6%	Native American: 0.7% Asian: 2.3% Latinx: 10.7% Black: 4.6% White: 79.4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.1% Women: 50.1% Men: 49.9%	Native American: 6.2% Asian: 0.7% Latinx: 3.7% Black: 0.4% White: 86.3% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.1% Women: 49.7% Men: 50.3%	Native American: 0.2% Asian: 2.7% Latinx: 25.2% Black: 15.4% White: 54.4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.1% Women: 51.1% Men: 48.9%	Native American: 0.5% Asian: 1.7% Latinx: 5% Black: 32% White: 58.8% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0% Women: 51.1% Men: 48.9%

Table 2 provides an overview of the conditions that our six case study campaigns emerged from, and shows some of the high-level characteristics and campaign outcomes for each state. Moving from top to bottom, it shows whether the ballot initiatives passed, whether or not states allow residents to put initiatives on the ballot, who the campaign's target base was, who led the campaign, how robust the organizing and funding ecosystems were, whether the campaigns built power, and what state partisan politics looked like in 2018.

Building on the work of the Lead Local Project and the Praxis Project, we understand power-building to be a multi-faceted, dynamic process that has different textures depending on the context and is rooted in community agency, accountability, and solidarity.

³ In ballot initiative states, community members may propose to change a state law if they collect a minimum number of signatures from voters and thereby qualify the initiative for the ballot.

⁴ The impetus for the initiative refers to how the ballot initiatives originated and who or what was the driving force behind them.

⁵ Data source: Table DP05: American Community Survey, 2018 5-Year Estimates [38]. This data was collected from 2014-2018. Data universe is the total population. Oakland and Portland data is

from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 QuickFacts [25], [28]. Native American includes respondents who selected American Indian or Alaska Native and not Hispanic or Latino, White includes people who selected White and not Hispanic or Latino, Latinx includes people of any race who selected Hispanic or Latino, Black includes respondents who selected Black or African-American and not Hispanic or Latino, and Asian includes respondents who selected Asian alone. Note that the census asks only if people are "male" or "female" so people who are gender non-binary or non-conforming do not have their identities represented here.