Theories of Power and Theories of Change: Understanding the Origin of Civil Society Advocacy Strategies

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In many democracies the poor participate less in politics and, as a result, politics is worse to the poor.[1]. Those concerned with this class-bias generally focus on lowering the costs of participation, ignoring class-based motivational gaps. As a result, these interventions often have negligible or detrimental impacts on participation bias, as observed in the case of compulsory voting absent legal sanction (Cepaluni & Hidalgo 2017), easier access to the polls (de Kadt 2017) and greater facilitation of registration (Martinez & Hill 1999).

Existing evidence signals that active recruitment by political entrepreneurs of the disengaged, "organizing," may be a viable pathway towards improving participation equality (Skocpol 2003). Unfortunately, organizing is costly. Potential recruiters, even those seeking to advance the interests of the poor, often instead choose to "activate" the already engaged or "lobby" those with concentrated power in pursuit of their objectives (Han 2014). The impact of this absence of organizing is a "diminished democracy" (Skocpol 2003) and "rule without serious regard to majority preferences" (Schier 2000).

Traditional explanations for the adoption of organizing tend to focus on the social and political structures which influence the relative cost and benefits of these strategies. In this framework, the strategies adopted by policy advocates are governed by social forces such as the structure of networks (Brady, Schlozman & Verba 1999), new technologies (Hersh 2015), the emergence of the middle class (Skocpol 2003), and political institutions (Schlozman & Tierney 1983).

Nevertheless, within contexts and time periods we continue to see significant variation in strategy adoption, with resultant impacts on the composition of the electorate. We cannot explain with this structural framework why the Industrial Areas Foundation or NRA continue to organize, despite most US interest groups shifting towards lobbying (Skocpol 2003). Nor can we explain why organizations with similar goals in the same contexts, such as Reclaim the City and Asiye Etafuleni in South Africa, adopt different strategies. I argue this continued variation is due to the imperfect responsiveness of civil society actors to

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[1]A literature review I have written demonstrating this point is available here

structural forces, which are mediated by their personal, ideological, and cognitive biases. I, therefore, ask **how do *perceptions* of utility and self-efficacy, independent of "objective" resources and balances of power, affect the likelihood and magnitude of efforts to organize?**

I contend that underlying the strategic choices of potential recruiters is their "theory of change;" a belief about how they can bend the arc of history, which is informed by their biased perceptions. This theory of change will bare only an imperfect association with the genuine power structures of society and in its inaccuracy has the potential to change those structures. I identify several potential sources of variation in activists' perceptions of ease and usefulness, including the relative salience of events, elite hostile ideologies, personal backgrounds in proselytizing organizations, training experiences, and social intelligence.

My **empirical evaluation** of these mechanisms will primarily be done in the exemplar cases of South Africa and the United States, nations with broad civil societies yet substantially different political, social, and economic structures. The bedrock of this study will be a set of *interviews* of activists in both contexts during the summer and fall of 2019. I will use these interviews to inform the design of an original *survey* of activists in the US and South Africa, as well as to explore the data these organizations have and the potential for collaboration on a field experiment. I concurrently will work to pilot a *survey experiment,* evaluating the impact of manipulating the salience of particular events as well as feelings of efficacy. This survey experiment will then be embedded in my survey of activists.

The aforementioned potential *field experiment* will further test the impact of organizer trainings, and manipulations within them, on the theories of change of activists. In addition, I propose to test the association between public opinion and theories of change by evaluating the relationship between organizational mission statements/website content, using *text analysis*, and public opinion polls. Finally, I plan to explore the archives of civil society organizations in the US and South Africa, to identify transcripts, letters, and memos with which to test the association between individual's experiences and background and their preferred advocacy strategy.

Theories of change are only a shadow of the actual distribution of power in society, but as a result, they have the potential to reshape that distribution of power. The more advocates view mass action as their source of strength, the more likely they are to organize the disengaged into politics, the more the masses actually do matter to politics. If we take Dahl's definition of democracy as "...the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" (Dahl 1973), it becomes obvious that democracy is dependent on whether or not people believe change comes from the people. Understanding the power of this belief and what predicts its occurrence is the aim of this project.

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