

**Please provide a brief description of the research project you would work on during your fellowship (related to your Ph.D. research and/or other areas of research - 500 words max., equivalent to about 3500 characters).**

Building mass organizations, powerful movements, and robust democracies requires investment in the participation of the politically disengaged (Schier 2000, Skocpol 2003, McAlevey 2016, Speer and Han 2018, Hersh 2020, Boulding & Holzner 2021). My dissertation, *Soft Skills and Hard Work*, asks when that investment, commonly known as organizing, is likely to happen. I center the stylized fact that organizing is fundamentally building and mobilizing relationships, and therefore dependent on underlying social skills. I then investigate how this property of the work affects individuals' capacity and willingness to organize and, in turn, how the pool of potential organizers is shaped by the economic demand for social skills. To get leverage on this question, I employ a broad mix of evidence from the US and South Africa, including interviews, original surveys, experiments, web-scraping, text analysis, and panel data.

I begin with interviews of 47 activists in diverse roles: a civic tech founder, a seasoned labor activist, a township organizer, and a Freedom Charter author, among others. The outcome of these discussions was consistent with scholarship on election mobilization (Gerber and Green 2019), labor organizing (Bronfenbrenner et al. 2009), civic engagement (Han 2014), and collective action (Ostrom 2000): the more an actor can build relationships with and between recruits, the better they are at mobilizing collective action. I bolster this claim with original surveys of citizens and activists, text-analysis of advocacy job descriptions, and a review of practitioner organizing guides.

Justifying a focus on the social experience of organizing, I show through four survey experiments a robust null effect of instrumental appeals to organizing's efficacy. Instead, evidence from thirteen original surveys indicates that the choice to organize is largely driven by the social qualities of the experience. This is stable across studies: from a reliable organizing tendency among extroverts to a repeated experimental result that manipulating self-assessed social intelligence increases willingness to organize.

The significance of organizing's social character has implications for perceptions of its skill-level and gender association. Across experiments, the more an organizing job is associated with social skills, the lower perceptions of its absolute skill level. Moreover, my surveys of activists and the general population indicate organizing is coded as feminine and consequently is undervalued. In these findings, the result is that the devaluing of the interpersonal work essential to organizing undermines its implementation, despite the generally high value placed on organizing as a goal.

The final, ongoing component of the project argues that economic demand for social skills affects their development and valuation, thereby shaping the available pool of organizers and the amount of organizing done. Suggestive evidence from the World Values Survey and original surveys show that those employed in work requiring social skills are disproportionately likely to organize. To bolster this, I am building a county-level panel incorporating industrial, skill, and organizing data to evaluate the impact of changes in economic demand for social skills on the supply of organizing.

Overall, my dissertation demonstrates that by understanding the tasks involved with organizing, we can better predict when organizing is likely to happen. Collective action is fundamentally social and requires people with the social skills to organize it.

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The cutting-edge tools for organizing are public narrative spearheaded by Marshall Ganz (2011) and deep canvassing developed within the LGBTQ movement (Broockman & Kally 2016). These tactics show the power of building community through compelling stories and of establishing connections through active listening and genuine vulnerability. Their theory of change is therefore consistent with the central claim of my dissertation that organizing is fundamentally relationship building. My research diverges in its focus on the organizer, their abilities, and their confidence in those abilities – instead of the tactic the organizer adopts. My research suggests that by capacitating activists with generalized social skills, we can enable them to be successful under a variety of organizing conditions. The next stage of this agenda is to turn theory into practice. How can we build these politically invaluable social skills?

Before graduate school, I spent two years working for Equal Education, a social movement organization in South Africa. I have maintained many of the relationships with activists that I developed during that experience and my multiple return visits. Most recently, in fall 2019, I began talks with several local community-based advocacy organizations (Equal Education, Tshisimani, Siyathanda, among others) to implement a field experiment assessing the impact of social skills training on organizing behavior. These collaborations were unfortunately derailed by Covid-19, but my faith in their value was not. As a Democracy Fellow, I will work with practitioners and scholars to develop effective social skills training and experimentally evaluate their efficacy here and in South Africa.

Beyond subject knowledge and activist connections, I am well-placed to implement this study for two additional reasons. One of my principal responsibilities while with Equal Education was the production of training materials for organizers and members. As a result, I have drafted, reviewed, or edited several hundred trainings. This experience will enable me to produce materials that can be effectively implemented under real-world conditions, increasing their validity and our overall confidence in the findings. Moreover, in January 2020, I designed and co-taught a workshop series at MIT on building collective power, which incorporated many of the social skills components I expect in the RCT.

Furthermore, for the last five years, I have been a member of MIT Gov/Lab, a team of scholars collaborating with practitioners to produce and assess programs and technologies designed to increase engagement and government accountability. Among other experiences, as part of Gov/Lab, I managed the implementation of an RCT conducted in every county of Kenya. I further assisted in evaluating a digital civic training program in South Africa. In addition, through Gov/Lab, I have received training specifically in researcher-practitioner collaborations. Thanks to these opportunities, I am confident in my ability to manage the logistics of the proposed experiment.

For my dissertation to matter, it has to translate into actionable tools for practitioners. My time as a Democracy Fellow, and the community of change-oriented scholars I will be a part of, will give me a chance to create those tools.

**The Ash Center is devoted to developing constructive solutions to problems in democratic governance. What are the substantive or procedural problems in the world that you address through your work? What are the solutions or approaches to addressing this problem that you seek to understand? E.g., environmental degradation, interest group capture, corruption, unequal representation, inequality, etc. (500 words max.).**

The best way to understand the desired impact of my work is to follow the course of my scholarly career. In the wake of the 2008 recession, like many, I grew concerned over the magnitude of economic inequality in America and its implications for the quality of our democracy and of our lives. While the economy recovered, the fundamental imbalances in vulnerability and power that the crisis exposed only worsened. Increasing automation and globalization were and are causing the welfare of workers to be less and less essential to the welfare of the economy. The tension this shift in power creates rips at the fabric of democracy and the possibility of equal citizenship. A pattern repeating across the globe. My research begins and ends with the hope that politics can outpace the technological and geopolitical disruptions we face.

My first major foray was my master's thesis – "Organized Labor in a Globalized World." I asked under what conditions governments were more likely to respond to globalization's detrimental effect on economic equality and labor share. I demonstrated using cross-national data that active labor market policies, in response to globalization, were positively associated with the strength of labor unions. Then, using decades of records from the UK's Trades Union Congress, I found that advocacy from unions in response to globalization was conditional on their relative exposure to international competition. My lesson from this project was that collective need alone was not sufficient for a policy response. We require organized action, particularly by those directly affected by the issues.

However, the deck is stacked against mobilization by the world's most vulnerable. Apart from limitations of resources and opportunity structures, these actors interminably face a collective action problem. This constraint created by our rationality led me to launch three projects. In "The Mobilization Toolbox," I synthesize diverse literatures to create a novel typology of non-rational motivations for citizen engagement. From this framework, I could better understand the types of interventions that might be expected to overcome the collective action problem absent selective benefits. In "Innovations in Collective Action in the Labor Movement" (under review), I used web-scraping and text analysis to scour the media for seeds of collective action germinating among America's workers. Finally, in "Organizer-in-Chief" (under review), I used panel data and differential exposure to Obama's community organizing-informed campaign to show that thick mobilization significantly and durably increased political engagement. From these projects, I developed an empirically justified faith that we have the tools, the seeds, and the potential to create the people power necessary to respond to society's most pressing problems. The only thing missing is gardeners.

So, my dissertation asks, "who is willing and able to organize?" Because if we can answer that question, maybe we can figure out how to cultivate more organizers. If we can cultivate more organizers, maybe we can achieve more collective action. And, if we achieve more collective action, maybe we can build the democratic power necessary to take on the crises our society faces.

**Are there other projects/activities you plan to engage in during the fellowship? E.g., other (smaller) research projects, conferences, events, etc. If yes, please provide a brief description (250 words max.).**

I plan to expand two additional aspects related to my dissertation as a Democracy Fellow. First, due to differential gender socialization in the development of social skills, it is plausible that, in addition to organizing being perceived as feminine, women actually are on average better organizers. While some existing research is suggestive of this (Carpenter & Moore 2014; Verba, Schlosman, Brady 1995), these findings are generally unexplained or reduced to contextual anomalies. I intend to establish the pattern of differential organizing capacity more firmly and tease out its mechanisms. To do so, I plan to examine decades of unionization drives, re-analyze GOTV studies, and incorporate a gender lens into the social skills training RTC discussed previously.

Second, I seek to better establish the empirical basis for the normative argument that organizing is essential to a healthy equitable democracy. While the strategic utility of organizing is now fairly well established, studies of the impact of organizing on overall political engagement are scant and generally limited to qualitative studies. In an article now under review, I begin to fill this gap by demonstrating how Obama's unique organizing-informed campaign significantly and durably increased political interest. I will expand this finding by studying how civic organizations which adopt an organizing strategy affect political engagement and by evaluating variation in the effect of labor unions on engagement conditional on their mobilization model. By rigorously establishing the power of organizing to bring people into politics, I hope to entreat other scholars to invest in understanding and promoting this phenomenon.

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