ABOUT OMIDYAR NETWORK:

Omidyar Network is a philanthropic investment firm that invests in and helps scale innovative organizations to catalyze economic and social change. Established in 2004 by eBay founder Pierre, and Pam Omidyar, the organization has committed more than $1.4 billion to for-profit companies and nonprofit organizations across multiple issue areas.

To learn more, visit www.omidyar.com, and follow on Twitter @omidyarnetwork #PositiveReturns.

ABOUT RALLY:

RALLY is an issue-driven communications firm that takes on sticky political and social problems and finds ways to push them forward. Our team consists of experts in political, digital and media strategy and our clients are leading foundations and advocacy organizations, as well as nonprofit and charitable organizations. RALLY worked with Omidyar Network to help answer the question - what makes for a successful issue advocacy campaign? The goal was to discern patterns in successful campaigns and identify best practices, trends, and lessons learned that could be adapted and applied to other issue areas.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the following people for contributing to the research and writing of this report and lending their time for interviews: Dr. Vicki Alexander, Heather Barmore, Martin Bourque, Kenny Bruno, Dan Cramer, Josh Daniels, Julia Dionne, Michelle Dixon, Ernesto Falcon, Andrea Flores, Kaitlin Funaro, Evan Greer, LeeAnn Hall, Hahrie Han, Heather Hurlburt, Margarida Jorge, Liam Kerr, Kristi Kimball, Jane Kleeb, Annie Kim, Richard Kirsch, Dr. Jim Krieger, David McIntosh, Hillary Moglen, Jeff Nesbit, Tom Novick, Khalid Pitts, Lana Ramadan, David Segal, Sara Shor, Sara Soka, Dr. Theda Skocpol, Anthony Swift, Steven Teles, Larry Tramutola, and Alisha Qiu. Without their effort, the completion of this project would not have been possible.
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INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY
As part of its ongoing learning ethos, Omidyar Network commissioned an examination of recent social movements and campaigns of significance to identify the factors that lead to success in an advocacy effort. The goal was to discern patterns in successful campaigns and identify best practices, trends, and lessons learned that could be adapted and applied to other issue areas.

To accomplish this goal, we posed a series of questions about the essential elements of campaigns:

What is the difference between a social movement and a campaign?
Are there conditions that are always necessary for success?
Why do some campaigns fail?
How are issues framed in ways that mobilize and activate supporters?
How have different campaigns effectively used resources like technology, money, or people power?
How do campaign structures differ and what are the advantages and disadvantages of particular organizational structures?
How do campaigns address evolving environments?
What were the cultural contexts that made campaigns particularly timely or resonant?
What defined success?

To answer these sweeping questions, we approached the work systematically.

We grounded our understanding by reviewing social movement scholarship and theory. We gained additional insights from campaign evaluators and foundations that have considered ways to assess advocacy. To deepen our knowledge, we interviewed renowned political scientists and sociologists who have been studying the field for decades. We identified clear distinctions between social movements that took place before the establishment of social media as a key tool, and those that followed Barack Obama’s revolutionary 2008 presidential campaign, which marked a new era for campaign tactics and digital culture. As a result, all of the campaigns we analyzed began after 2008.

We then compiled a list of 30 campaigns that fit our criteria: the campaign had to have taken place since 2008, have an available body of scholarship and research, and have leaders who were willing or able to share their insights. After offering a broad list to Omidyar Network, we refined our research, which pointed to the eight campaigns that you will read about in this report.

The campaigns we studied have taken place over the last 10 years and cover a broad range of topics across the political spectrum, both globally and in the United States. When they’ve succeeded, they’ve captivated the public, transformed opinion, created lasting change, and often achieved legislative success. We also included several campaigns where “success” is still pending, and one in which a referendum failed outright. In all, we reviewed and analyzed 405 articles, books, and reports for this research. A full works cited with all of the reference material is included after each section.

While our research gleans important insights on what works and what doesn’t, it is widely accepted by scholars and practitioners that the task of evaluating advocacy is an especially difficult one. Change is almost never linear. Failing campaigns often lay the groundwork for the success of related movements, help craft the narrative around an issue, and raise public awareness. For these reasons, it is important to understand that there often is no “end” date to advocacy.

This report first introduces fundamental social movement scholarship and research followed by a detailed analysis of eight different campaigns in chronological order.
SCHOLARSHIP REVIEW
SCHOLARSHIP REVIEW

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MOVEMENT AND A CAMPAIGN?

For research purposes, we defined a “campaign” as an organized effort with a specific, concrete goal and a limited time frame. On the other hand, social movements are defined in sociology as group actions focusing on a political or social issue. Their main objective “is to change the public debate so that [progressive] reforms become politically viable” (Dreier 30). Campaigns are an essential element of social movements, as they serve as stepping-stones to further victories within a movement by helping to change the political climate (Dreier 33).

In short, movements are like an ecosystem in which multiple campaigns, which may or may not be affiliated with each other, can be carried out by different advocacy groups concurrently. For example, the LGBTQ rights movement broadly advocates for LGBTQ people in society and demands fair treatment and equal rights. However, the fight to legalize gay marriage is considered a campaign because it had specific policy goals and was led by interest groups. Campaigns and these interest group-led actions have deep roots in social movements, and they should not be separated from the greater context.

KEY SOCIAL MOVEMENT FRAMEWORKS AND THEORIES

We began our scholarship research with a broad scope by reviewing literature on social movements. The following social movement frameworks and theories are the most dominant in sociology and are those we used to analyze and compare campaigns. There is significant overlap among these theories, but we delve into each one separately.

Political Opportunity Theory

Political Opportunity Theory, or Political Process Theory, is considered the leading paradigm for social movement research. It was developed in the US during the 1970s and 1980s as a way to make sense of the various movements of the prior decades, such as the Civil Rights, anti-war, and student movements. Though it was criticized for being overly rigid, newer research has made the theory more dynamic (Caren 1-4).

Depending on the scholar, there may be slight variations but the five key elements of the theory are as follows:

1. **Political opportunities**: This is typically defined as an event or social process that makes the status quo political system vulnerable. Examples include wars, widespread demographic changes (such as the election of more women and people of color to leadership), and weakening of repressive structures.

2. **Mobilizing structures**: These are existing organizations or networks that can mobilize and engage people in collective action. Examples include schools, churches, non-profit organizations, or activist networks.

3. **Framing process**: At a minimum, there are two necessary elements for framing. The first is a persuasive diagnostic frame that can clearly describe the problem. The second is the prognostic frame, which presents a feasible solution. Framing theory is a framework in its own right and will be explained in more detail further below.

4. **Protest cycles**: These cycles denote sustained and clustered protests where large groups participate in increasingly confrontational tactics. These serve as catalysts for social movements.

5. **Contentious repertoire**: Although activists theoretically have an unlimited arsenal of ways to make themselves heard, constraints on resources mean most rely on the tried and true: strikes, demonstrations, and petitions (Caren 1-4).

Resource Mobilization Theory

Resource mobilization theory (RMT) is considered a breakthrough in the study of social movements. Previously, social movements and the people involved with them were
viewed as irrational, emotional, and disorganized. However, RMT considers these players to be rational actors, and it tries to understand how social movements can accumulate resources (see examples below) and turn uninvolved bystanders into adherents, then constituents, then active participants. A crucial component of RMT is the “social movement organization,” a group of professionals trying to achieve social change. Any issue-focused interest group could fall into the category of a “social movement organization.” The theory posits that the greater the mobilizing capacity, the more likely it is to achieve its goals (Edwards 3902).

Though RMT was a prominent theory throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it fell out of favor because it was unable to adequately address social movements that began with fairly substantial resources or movements started by minority groups. However, in recent years, scholars have started to modify the theory due to the increasing prevalence of social media and the role it can play as a resource (Eltantawy and Wiest 1209).

Resources are central to RMT, but definitions for what constitutes a resource vary. Five distinct types of resources are listed below:

1. **Moral:** This includes legitimacy, integrity, solidarity, sympathetic support, and celebrity.
2. **Cultural:** These are broadly defined as conceptual tools and specialized knowledge that though shared widely, are not universally known. They can include knowledge about how to do certain tasks, such as organizing, event planning, getting media attention, and more. Any knowledge or know how needed to mobilize or access other resources can be categorized under this umbrella.
3. **Social organizational:** Comprises two types of resources:
   a. **Infrastructure:** These are the equivalent of public goods that no one “owns,” such as the postal service, roads, or the internet. When working smoothly, they help ease the functions of everyday life.
   b. **Social Network & Organization:** Though they are technically different, both social networks and organizations have access to certain resources that can be denied to outsiders.
4. **Human:** These are the resources that are characteristics of individuals rather than organizations or structures. This category can include labor, experience, skills, expertise, and leadership.
5. **Material:** Money, property, equipment, supplies, office space, and more are all characteristics of this type of resource. This category has received the most analytic study because it is the most tangible of the resources and, importantly, money can be converted into the other types of resources, but not necessarily vice versa (Edwards 3903-3905).

**Framing Theory**

Framing is a theoretical approach in the social sciences meant to aid our analysis of events and rationalize our interactions with the world. According to David A. Snow, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine, framing is rooted in the idea that meaning (of objects, events, and experiences) does not inherently exist and is instead derived through cultural context (“Frame” 1778-9). The theory suggests that frames answer questions like, “What is going on here? What is being said? What does this mean?” Frames focus attention by demarcating what is relevant or irrelevant, tying elements together into a cohesive narrative, and changing the way some subjects are understood within context. (For an example of effective framing, see the section on the Tea Party.)

Framing theory has gained significance in the study of social movements and mobilization, and through its continued usage, six foundational concepts and processes have emerged.

1. **Collective action frames** result when framing activity is applied to social movements. It is the “signifying work or meaning construction” in which activists and other stakeholders participate. Frames herein are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate” the work and campaigns of social movements (Benford and Snow 614).
2. Most frames are specific to the movement, but some called master frames emerge that “color and constrain the orientations and activities of other movements within the cycle” (Snow, “Framing and Social Movements” 1781).
3. The three **core framing tasks** to form frames are:
   a. **Diagnostic framing,** which identifies and attributes the problem
   b. **Prognostic framing,** which suggests a solution and strategy to implement the solution
   c. **Motivational framing,** which is the call to arms to mobilize constituents in collective action
Frame alignment processes are the ways in which activists and organizations align their interests and goals with those of stakeholders, supporters, and other validators. They are:

a. **Frame bridging**, which links two or more frames that are ideologically similar but structurally misaligned
b. **Frame amplification**, which clarifies and refreshes existing values and beliefs
c. **Frame extension**, which depicts an organization or movement’s interests as reaching beyond just their primary interests
d. **Frame transformation**, which changes old understandings and/or creates new ones to change the way things are viewed

Frame resonance is the measure of the frame’s effectiveness. Resonant frames mobilize, while non-resonant frames do not. For example, prior to the emergence of Health Care for America Now as an advocate for health care reform in the U.S., others had tried to mobilize people under the banner of “consumer rights.” This effort ultimately failed to gain traction because it ignored the fact that in order to be a “consumer” of healthcare, one needed to have access in the first place - and lack of access was a major problem the reform advocates sought to fix. (For more information, see the section on Health Care.) Credibility and salience affect frame resonance, as can problems of misalignment, scope, exhaustion, and relevance.

Discursive processes are the written communications and conversations that help articulate and amplify the frame, connecting events and experiences together into one cohesive storyline, while highlighting certain issues, moments, or beliefs over others.

In more detail, the four essential skills are:

1. **Focus**: Identify one concrete and quantifiable goal
2. **Grab Attention**: Stand out on social media with something “authentic and memorable”
3. **Engage**: Create a personal connection with your target audience and move them to care deeply about the issue
4. **Take Action**: Enable others to take action

Other Theories

The above frameworks represent a selection of widely accepted methods of analysis and research in the study of social movements and action, but they are by no means an exhaustive overview of the scholarship. There are additional frameworks, including Social Movement Impact Theory and New Social Movements, which we have omitted because they have fallen out of favor, been subsumed by newer theories, or are otherwise no longer as relevant.

We caution that these frameworks should be used as tools for understanding. In an interview, political scientist Dr. Theda Skocpol warned against overly relying on frameworks as a rigid method of assessment (Skocpol). These constructs are useful for helping parse complex systems and situations, but both scholarship and common wisdom are continuously evolving, whether in reaction to shifts in societal norms or because opponents create counter-strategies, according to an interview with political scientist Dr. Steven Teles. That said, there are certain components that repeatedly appear across successful campaigns, which we will explore in a later section.

1.0 AND 2.0 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CAMPAIGNS

Just like there is a Web 1.0 and 2.0, there is a similar demarcation in the advocacy space caused by new forms of communication. Web 2.0 is commonly defined as “a set of principles and practices that tie together a wide array of sites that have user-generated content and make emphasis on social connections” (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 192). It led to a democratization of information that enabled anyone, not just media elites, to speak to a broad audience.

Both Web 1.0 and advocacy 1.0 are one-directional and hierarchical, with power and information flowing from the top down, while 2.0 is more participatory and open; people are no
longer content to just “consume” (Heimans and Timms). Part of this dramatic shift happened with the leadership transition from Baby Boomers and legacy non-profits to Gen X-ers and newer, more participatory organizations. Much attention has been given to newer, loosely organized groups of individuals working together on a common cause, such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the “Dreamer” movement concerned with undocumented youth (McLeod Grant 21). The graphics below explain the differences between old and new power values and place different companies, organizations, and movements on axes that chart their relation to old vs. new power values and structure.

Social networking has allowed for relationships that cross temporal and spatial boundaries and for the instant dissemination of information. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a prime example of an informal and decentralized movement that differs dramatically from prior advocacy efforts. In the aftermath of the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager, three activists were able to nurture BLM from a hashtag into a social (media) movement and real life activism that resonated with millions around the world (Edrington and Lee 290). As the Dragonfly Effect model shows, it is possible to harness the power of the internet for social change.

However, a campaign that relies on purely 2.0 values and models does not guarantee victory. The internet lowers the barrier to entry to join a movement, but a movement that takes place primarily online is considered a “weak tie” network because it lacks the high level of engagement one would get from an in-person activation. Weak tie networks are generally made up of acquaintances, while a strong tie network consists of small, intimate, and well-defined groups (Granovetter 1361). “Friends” on Facebook are an example of a weak tie network, while a family or a close-knit group of friends would be considered strong tie. A robust weak tie network, aided by social media, has the ability to expose people to news and views outside of those of their close friends (Granovetter 202). However, weak tie movements have been derided as “slacktivism,” where participants expend very little effort into supporting a political or social cause on social media or via online petitions, and engage only superficially (Seay).

MoveOn.org and the 2008 Obama presidential campaign are considered pioneers in advocacy 2.0. Both used the internet as a means to an end, disseminating information widely to cultivate on-the-ground activism, where real power is concentrated. As one Obama ‘08 staffer noted, “I think we had the perfect balance of new technology, old school organization, faith in the people we hired, and trust they were going to get the job done” (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 190).

For our analysis, we intentionally chose campaigns that have taken place in the last ten years — those that exist in a 2.0 world — because of the rapidly evolving nature and increasing importance of digital, online, and other technology tools in social movement efforts. Older campaigns would not have provided insights on these crucial components useful for a modern campaign.

WHAT ARE THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN?

In our own assessment of campaigns, we independently identified a list of conditions crucial for a successful campaign (see Campaign Components section). A framework commissioned by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to evaluate advocacy investments came to a similar conclusion, and though the framework was created with grantmakers in mind, we have included it as a point of comparison.

The Redstone Strategy Group reviewed existing literature on advocacy assessment in order to find common themes and
develop a new framework. They identified nine essential conditions for successful advocacy or policy campaigns.

1. **Functioning venue(s) for adoption**: The relevant legislative, legal, and regulatory institutions need to be in sufficient working order for advocacy to work.

2. **Open policy window**: The sociopolitical context (events or trends) is ripe for the proposed solution.

3. **Feasible solution**: The solution exists, is possible to implement, and has been shown to be effective.

4. **Dynamic master plan**: There is a practical and flexible strategy and plan in place.

5. **Strong campaign leader(s)**: Key figure(s) are available and able to lead execution.

6. **Influential support coalition**: Members of the coalition are able to persuade and influence decision-makers to help the campaign leader in execution.

7. **Mobilized public**: Relevant audiences in the public support the solution and believe in its rationale.

8. **Powerful inside champions**: There are people outside of the campaign who support the solution and believe in its underlying principles and who have the power to influence key decision makers.

9. **Clear implementation path**: The organization responsible for implementing the solution is committed and able to do so (Barkhorn et al 58-61).

While these nine conditions can be viewed as the conditions for a successful campaign, we caution over-prescriptiveness. A successful campaign may not have all of these elements or it may involve conditions that aren’t mentioned in this framework at all. For example, in conversations with Richard Kirsch, former National Campaign Manager of Health Care for America Now and Heather Hurlburt of the non-partisan think tank New America, both stressed the importance of power mapping. Understanding power dynamics, or who holds the power to fix a problem and what it will take to move them to act, is crucial for designing an effective strategy.

All the successful campaigns we studied had a majority of these components. Where there were deficiencies, campaigns had to be exceptional in other ways to fill those gaps. For example, with Brexit, the “Vote Leave” campaign compensated for a lack of organizing capacity by utilizing novel digital tactics to build mass engagement.

**ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### Strategic Capacity And How to Build It

Two of the aforementioned frameworks, political opportunity theory and resource mobilization, are particularly well studied, according to Dr. Hahrie Han, an expert on organizing, movements, and activism. The frameworks provide useful insights on questions of what we might call “structure,” or the “external conditions that shape the likelihood that a movement is going to succeed,” and are more easily studied empirically (Han). Han points out there is a parallel body of work that examines questions not only of structure, but also agency: how and where, given a set of conditions (i.e., the structure), actors can impact their external circumstances to increase their likelihood of success (Han). This other body of work can provide useful guidance to practitioners because it takes seriously the environment of uncertainty in which practitioners work. She argues that building strategic capacity can help practitioners strategize proactively to anticipate and react to unpredictable moments.

> “Although learning about how the environment influences actors is important, learning more about how actors influence the environment is the first step not only to understanding the world, but changing it.”

- Marshall Ganz *Why David Sometimes Wins: Strategic Capacity in Social Movements*

Marshall Ganz, an activist and Harvard professor who is credited with developing President Obama’s 2008 grassroots organizing model, has written extensively about this field of study. He considers strategy to be “how we turn what we have into what we need to get what we want...how we transform our resources into the power to achieve our purposes” (214). Ganz argues that “under conditions of uncertainty, the capability to generate new algorithms, when rooted in deep understanding of the environment, is more strategically valuable than the capability to apply known algorithms, no matter how expertly” (229). Ganz defines strategic capacity as a combination and application of leaders’ motivation, access to relevant knowledge, and quality of heuristic processes (i.e. ability to create and adapt strategy with respect to a changing environment) (216). Ganz considers strategy development a kind of creative thinking and thus uses social psychology’s three key influences...
on creative output — task motivation, domain-relevant skills (knowledge), and heuristic processes — as the foundation for strategic thinking (217-20). In Ganz’s view, motivation affects a person’s persistence, perseverance, level of risk-taking, and energy levels (217). Those who are motivated are more likely to put in the effort to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills (217). Having, or being able to tap into, specific skills and knowledge of a domain or constituency then allows leaders to better handle challenges (220). Heuristic processes allow leaders “to imaginatively recontextualize data or synthesize it in new ways” when faced with problems to solve (220).

The sources of strategic capacity are leadership and organization. Each features three dimensions that feed into the three elements of strategic capacity. The three leadership elements are identity, sociocultural networks, and tactical repertoires (222) and the three organization elements are venues of deliberation, mechanisms of accountability, and resource flows (224). Working with the assumption that strategy is “more often a result of the interaction among leaders” than deriving from a single person at the helm, Ganz examines the strategic capacity of leadership teams, rather than individuals (222).

Identity: Leadership teams that feature “insiders” and “outsiders” as well as leaders with diverse backgrounds (racial, class, gender, generational, ethnic, religious, educational, and professional) possess more strategic capacity than those that do not. Diverse teams are better able to access the skills and heuristic processes they need and “benefit from a diversity of views” (223)

Sociocultural networks: Leadership teams that have strong ties to some constituencies and weak ties to others have more strategic capacity than others (223). Strong ties (with homogeneous networks) provide deeper access to local resources, deeper knowledge, and better ability to mobilize. Weak ties (with heterogeneous networks) provide access to a more diverse group of people and ideas (223)

Tactical repertoires: Leadership teams with individuals possessing understanding of different collective action repertoires have more strategic capacity because those tactics are more readily available and applicable in a variety of situations (224)

Venues of deliberation: Leadership teams that conduct regular, open and authoritative deliberation have more strategic capacity than those that do not (224)

Mechanisms of accountability: Leadership teams that are self-selected or elected by constituencies to whom they are accountable have more strategic capacity than those selected bureaucratically (226)

Resource flows: Leadership teams that mobilize resources, especially human resources, that are generated by an organizational program serving multiple constituencies, develop more strategic capacity than those that do not (225)
Strong, informed, and agile leadership helps organizations adapt to changing norms and circumstances. The strategic capacity of an organization or team can “grow over time if it adjusts its leadership team to reflect environmental change, multiplies deliberative venues, remains accountable to salient constituencies, and derives resources from them” (Ganz 228). Organizations can furthermore compensate for insufficiencies in resources through creative strategy (Ganz 231). Ultimately, by studying strategic capacity, we can build an understanding of how best to build and structure teams that are ready to deal with challenges. Because leaders and organizations are always acting in situations of uncertainty, leadership teams with more strategic capacity can make quicker and more informed choices, which allows them “to take greater advantage of unique moments of opportunity” (Ganz 227).

Building Strategic Capacity

Once there is an understanding of what strategic capacity is and why it matters, there are clear ways to build it within individual advocacy organizations, and more broadly within issue spaces (ecosystems). Implementation ranges from process changes at the micro level to a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of core concepts like resilience at the macro level.

To start, there are things funders can do to help build capacity. Increasingly, experts suggest that capacity building should be taken with the long view mind by embedding capacity-building into grants or providing flexible, long-term capital (Grant et. al.). A resource isn’t solely defined as financial support, as shown in the Resource Mobilization Theory; it also includes strategic leadership, support on the ground, and access to diverse knowledge sets. As can be seen from the Omidyar Network’s First 10 Years report, there is a positive correlation between the degree of impact a group has and the receipt of non-monetary support from Omidyar Network (Bardhan et al. 4).

An evaluation commissioned by the Levi Strauss Foundation on their Pioneers in Justice program came to a similar conclusion. By investing in leaders and embracing a non-linear approach emphasizing leadership development, networking, and collaboration, the Foundation had an impact on more layers of the complex advocacy ecosystem than if it had focused on individual organizations or issue areas (McLeod Grant 150).

New capacity building techniques have recently emerged, including diagnostic tools; engaging teams (rather than individuals); ensuring change management is part of the process; paying attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and helping build capacity at partner organizations (Raynor).

One key way to build and maintain capacity is to pay attention to resilience. In the face of changing circumstances, and in a world where we’re often faced with disaster, building systems and processes that can withstand change or crisis can help us weather the storm. In her book, The Resilience Dividend, Rockefeller Foundation president Judith Rodin examines the ways that any entity, from cities to companies to natural environments, can build their capacity “to prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from disruptive experience” (3).

Rodin posits that there are five main characteristics of resilience, which can be developed by any individual, community, or organization: aware, adaptive, diverse, integrated, and self-regulating. All resilient entities possess these characteristics, though perhaps in different degrees and in different manifestations (13). The three phases of resilience building — readiness, or the preparation before a disaster occurs; responsiveness, or the ability to continue functioning through chronic stress, withstand severe events, and regain function after a crisis; and revitalization, the process of adapting and growing after a crisis — are not sequential, and should rather be approached in a “holistic, integrated, inclusive, and iterative way” (Rodin 53).

As noted earlier, unforeseen circumstances can upend even the best laid plans. Moreover, failure is inevitable in both life and in social movements. Building resilience in the face of those challenges allows organizations to improve existing systems, identify creative opportunities, form new relationships, and rise to new levels of success and performance.

Lack of diversity

Ganz argues that a diversity of views and experiences in leadership and throughout an organization strengthens the organization: “Teams composed of persons with heterogeneous perspectives are likely to make better decisions than homogeneous teams, especially in solving novel problems, because they can access more resources, bring a broader range of skills to bear on decision making, and benefit from a diversity of views” (223). But through our research, we found
that both the practitioner and the academic world still lack racial, and to a slightly lesser extent, gender diversity. Among academics especially, there is also a lack of socioeconomic and educational diversity. Ganz’s assessment makes a strong case that leadership teams must include people with diverse or different backgrounds along many dimensions, including not just racial, gender, and ethnic lines, but generational, professional, religious, and others to have the best chances of success.

Evaluating Success

Evaluating advocacy efforts is remarkably difficult for many reasons. Though it is a best practice for foundations to evaluate a grantee’s work at the end of the campaign (or in ideal scenarios, throughout the campaign), these evaluations are not always as comprehensive or objective as they should be. The outcomes of evaluations also can be affected by who funds and who leads the evaluation. And while some organizations may take it upon themselves to monitor and evaluate their own efforts, most lack the capacity or resources to carry out thorough analyses of their own work (Novick).

With non-governmental organization (NGO) work, the goal is more often than not to affect some sort of change or impact. But change does not usually happen in a linear fashion. Barry Coates and Rosalind David write that change “often occurs in sudden leaps, in unexpected ways, in response to the most unlikely circumstances” (534). They explain that “campaigns cannot be understood as systematic, mechanistic, or pursuing a logical sequence” (534). To this point, having a prescriptive definition of success (or failure) restricts the ways we can understand the impacts of a campaign. This is especially true when considering the time horizon of success. Though tangible outcomes are important, sometimes short-term success can come at the expense of long-term goals. Often, fundamental change occurs in the future (Coates and David 535).

In particular, and most notably in the context of NGO work, the success of advocacy is closely related to how it challenges power structures (Coates and David 533). Dr. Han also argues that campaigns seeking social change are usually attempting to shift intractable systems of power. The best campaigns, she says, are the ones that simultaneously try to affect the decision makers and those in power (e.g. who decides what we vote on or who decides the timing of those choices) as well as the societal norms and underlying assumptions in which we exist (marriage equality, for example). Evaluation is further complicated by the fact that policy makers often are loathe to reveal, much less explain in any detail, how they were influenced or moved (Hurlburt).

Transforming systems of power is incredibly challenging and there often are not clearly identifiable results. It’s quite possible that something “fails” today but has laid the foundation for success twenty years from now. In addition, a metric of success for a social movement is its ability to shape public opinion (Dreier 30). However, empirically measuring a social movement’s impact on public opinion is often difficult or impossible.

There are also innumerable external variables that can affect a campaign’s outcome, either positively or negatively. Even the best, strategically run campaigns can fail (and have done so) due to circumstances beyond their control (Teles). Moreover, advocacy is often undertaken in coalitions, “so it can be difficult to assess the impact of one organization in isolation from others, especially when working on big and broad issues” (Coates and David 534). Many organizations are often working on the same issue, toward the same goal, so we can’t divorce one from the other when considering successes and failures.

With all of this in mind, we highlighted campaigns that illustrate the best of the key components and that advanced social progress. In choosing our campaigns, we looked for a breadth of issue areas across the global political spectrum with different scales of impact. Our chosen campaigns took place in the last ten years, so as to exist within advocacy and web 2.0, but were not so recent that real effects could not be measured. We additionally included both successful and unsuccessful campaigns to provide broad insights. Ultimately, we narrowed a list of more than 30 campaigns down to eight: The “Vote Leave” campaign supporting Brexit in the UK; the national minimum wage increase effort Fight for $15; the campaign to pass the U.S. Affordable Care Act; the opposition to the Keystone XL oil sands pipeline; a ballot measure to lift the cap on charter schools in Massachusetts; the push for federal Net Neutrality regulations; national efforts to pass “soda taxes;” and the rise of the conservative Tea Party movement as a major force in American politics.
SUMMARY

The Tea Party was a movement for a moment and the 2008 election was the fuse that lit the powder keg. For five years, this “small government” conservative political movement was a force to be reckoned with in American politics. Its leaders pushed unsexy issues like lowering the national debt, cutting federal spending, and stopping corporate bailouts front and center in American politics – shutting down the government and getting right-leaning conservatives elected to Congress.

From the outside, it looked like the Tea Party movement was a grassroots uprising – a reaction to overspending in Washington, resentment over the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on everything from employment to housing prices, and the election of an African-American Democrat as president. But the reality was more complicated.

The Tea Party was able to spread so rapidly and effectively in large part because of the groundwork laid painstakingly and stealthily, over decades, by energy industry billionaires Charles and David Koch. The Koch brothers had long desired to capture control of a major political party and remake it with their Libertarian, free market principles at its core. They began working at the state level supporting anti-tax groups seeking to roll back or oppose state and local taxes and reduce the size of government. Simultaneously, the Koch brothers formed an alliance with the nation’s largest tobacco companies to fund and organize local groups to fight taxes and regulations against the tobacco industry. These coordinated organizing efforts, along with large-scale funding provided by the pair through various foundations and nonprofits that obscured the source of the funds, became the support network that allowed the Tea Party movement to seize an opportune political moment.

Context

The Koch-affiliated network of nonprofits, think tanks, and institutions had spent more than a decade priming anti-tax and Libertarian groups across the country to spring into action when the time was right. The spring of 2009 provided the perfect moment for the growing network to explode onto the national scene under the Tea Party banner. President Barack Obama had just taken office. Democrats controlled both the House and the Senate and thus the legislative process. The “Great Recession” was in full swing, leading to federal government bailouts of corporations in the banking and automotive sector deemed “too big to fail.” It also led to a housing crisis that saw steep declines in home values across the country, and the two main government agencies underwriting residential mortgages — Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac — were all over the 24-hour news cycle. Early conversations about health care reform – what was to become “Obamacare” – had begun, and would be turned into one of the major villains in the Tea Party story.

The traditional origin story of the Tea Party is fairly well known. In February 2009, CNBC host Rick Santelli, broadcasting from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, yelled “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore” and called for a Tea Party protest against the government’s funneling of trillions of dollars to bail out private industries (Santelli). Around the same time, Charles and David Koch explained to their hometown newspaper, the Wichita Eagle, that their idea to organize a political movement came that January, right after Obama took office. Their longtime political director, Rich Fink, “advised two of the richest men in the nation that it would be the fight of their lives to stop the government spending spree and to change the course of the country, starting with the 2012 election.” (Wilson, Wenzel 2009)

But before the Tea Party broke through the public
Jeff Nesbit, the former director of public affairs for the Food and Drug Administration and one-time communications director to former Vice President Dan Quayle, was an early consultant to the Koch organization Citizens for a Sound Economy (CSE). Charles and David Koch formed CSE in 1984 as a grassroots political organization pushing Libertarian causes. Nesbit recounts how they formed an early alliance with two of the biggest tobacco companies to fund and organize state level groups across the country to fight taxes and the regulation of tobacco use. This network was primed and ready when the 2008 election sent Obama to the White House and provided a common enemy to conservatives angry with the government (Nesbit).

CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS

Vision

On the surface, the Tea Party’s goals seemed to be fairly simple: shrink the size of government and reduce taxes. These broad goals had great appeal to many conservatives and, because of their simplicity and relatability, served as a rallying cry that created a critical mass of support. That support created significant visibility for the Tea Party nationally and galvanized grassroots activists. On the inside, however, the leaders of the movement had a far larger goal: to take over a major American political party and remake it to reflect the Koch’s Libertarian principles.
Over the years, Fink and others in the organization occasionally discussed what they considered to be the “five pillars” supporting any effort to take over a national political party:

1. An extensive academic network to support it intellectually
2. Policy networks in every state to draw on that intellectual underpinning from hundreds of American universities
3. A true political grassroots alliance that extended to all of the state capitals and worked closely with the academic and policy network
4. A propaganda arm that could bring tightly controlled messaging and narratives to the fore in the state networks, in a way that would appear as if it were independent journalism
5. A national coordinating group that could enforce discipline in what would otherwise be a chaotic, unruly, wildly disconnected political network that ran the gamut of political philosophies from the patriot movement to American exceptionalism

It was an audacious plan and one that the higher levels of the Koch organization kept close to the chest. For years, even Republican insiders did not understand the organization’s true intentions. According to Nesbit, it took Republican leaders six to eight years to recognize that a wholesale takeover of the GOP was happening. Republican politicians and local groups took money from various Koch entities without realizing the funds had heavy ideological strings attached for very specific corporate agenda items (Nesbit).

**Framing**

One of the main ingredients for the Tea Party’s success was its relentless message discipline. The movement had a highly effective message frame that allowed it to couch a wide variety of issues — from immigration and abortion to Obamacare and the debt ceiling — under the same umbrella of “Freedom + Patriotism + Liberty.” The movement created clear good guys and bad guys that allowed it to make an emotional appeal to the public — a classic us versus them scenario.

These narratives were not developed by accident. The core themes of freedom, patriotism, and liberty had been used for decades by the anti-tax groups funded by tobacco companies to fight all sorts of excise taxes and other regulations that affected that industry. The narratives were designed to mask a corporate influence campaign and proved incredibly effective, as Nesbit noted. “An early win for the frame and message of the Tea Party came in 1993 when the ‘Enough is Enough’ campaign became the defining effort of the tobacco industry for the next five years, culminating in a massive national effort in 1993 to block the efforts of President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton to use a national cigarette excise tax as the centerpiece of a huge public health-care reform effort” (Nesbit 67).

The narrative frame was simple, but that simplicity allowed it to cover a wide range of issues and “foes” against which the Tea Party could mobilize. In 2009, the foes were any taxes that supported individuals who were perceived as draining America’s resources, notably young people, immigrants, and anyone under retirement age benefiting from government social safety nets. The Tea Party proposed attacking these foes by reducing taxes, curbing immigration, and cutting funding for social programs. Movement leaders galvanized their members to pressure lawmakers via repeated phone calls, emails, and mass participation at public meetings.

Political scientists Dr. Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson explain that Tea Party activists themselves used emotionally charged terms such as “freeeloaders,” “moochers,” and “take our country back” to describe their motivations. “A well-marked distinction between workers and non-workers — between productive citizens and freeloaders — is central to the Tea Party worldview and conception of America” (65). You could “hear the emotion,” Skocpol adds. “You hear what they’re afraid of, what they’re hopeful about.”

Everything the Tea Party did — from dressing up as the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution to constantly referencing the U.S. Constitution — was framed in terms of patriotism. That created a clear distinction with opponents and a “with us or against us” attitude that fostered a strong attachment and commitment to the movement.

It’s also worth noting that accusations of racism have been leveled at many of the Tea Party’s supporters. As Skocpol and Williamson write, “(r)acial overtones were unmistakable, for instance, when a Virginia Tea Partier told us that a ‘plantation mentality’ was keeping ‘some people’ on welfare” (68).

The message of the Tea Party also framed individuals, candidates, or laws and regulations, as either being pro-freedom or anti-freedom. The solutions the Tea Party proposed...
smaller government, lower taxes, less regulation – seemed to many supporters like a recipe for righting what they believed to be wrong with the American economy.

The Tea Party’s calls to action were also clear and effective: get out, make noise, and call your representatives. Coordinated nationwide protests brought national media attention, while the real work was happening at the state and local level. Tea Party “patriots” – the foot soldiers of the movement – held raucous rallies, dressed in costume as the Founding Fathers, made signs with witty slogans, and put relentless pressure on members of Congress through phone banking and attack ads. Local Tea Party groups ran tight and highly coordinated letter writing and phone banking campaigns where they targeted incumbent Republicans and threatened them with primary challenges. The goal was disruption and focused almost exclusively on confrontation (Jorge). By the August recess of 2009, lawmakers were so terrified of the Tea Party’s tactics of disrupting town halls and staging events that they entirely stopped talking about healthcare until after Donald Trump was elected in 2016.

Skocpol and Williamson estimate that all of this pressure was the result of approximately 160,000 active members of Tea Party grassroots groups — a surprisingly small number for the amount of pressure they leveraged. In an example of campaigns learning from each other across issue areas — The Tea Party piloted the tactics that inspired those of the progressive ‘Resistance’ movement that arose in opposition to Trump and the Republican party in the aftermath of the 2016 election.

**Timing**

Timing was crucial to the Tea Party gaining national prominence. The Koch brothers had been considering the idea of taking over a political party for decades and had been actively working towards this goal since the 1990s (Nesbit). The spring of 2009 provided the perfect storm of opportunities for the Tea Party to become a national movement. In 2008 and 2009, the Republicans were the “out” party in Washington, having suffered crushing losses in the White House and both chambers of Congress. Unemployment was high, homes were in foreclosure, and massive cash bailouts were helping big corporations – not the average taxpayer. The passionate, culturally relevant frame of freedom, patriotism, and liberty came at a time when many Americans, feeling economically insecure and frightened, were fed up and ripe for mobilization. Tea Party leaders successfully mobilized supporters by encouraging the idea that there was a clear dividing line between “good guys” and “bad guys”. The ‘bad guys’ were the urban, coastal, educated ‘elites’ and Washington insiders personified by President Obama (whom many Tea Party supporters believed was illegitimate), Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and more generally “big government,” immigrants, millennials, and to a lesser extent (that would later grow), the mainstream media. The ‘good guys’ in the narrative were ‘patriots’ who supported Tea Party positions, including Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, talk radio hosts Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity, and a handful of early supporters in Congress.

They took advantage of a gap in the political discourse between the Democratic progressives and mainstream Republicans and effectively drove a wedge into the Republican party and built leverage for their own political agenda.
Organizational Structure

Three of the main organizations that shaped and supported the movement — Americans for Prosperity, FreedomWorks, and Tea Party Patriots — were bustling with grassroots activism in the spring of 2009.

Skocpol described how those three organizations, together with the conservative limited-government group Club for Growth were “big-money funders and free-market advocacy organizations” that “used angry grassroots protests to expand their email lists and boost longstanding campaigns to slash taxes, shrink social spending, privatize Medicare and Social Security, and eliminate or block regulations (including carbon controls)” (Skocpol 2014).

Americans for Prosperity (AFP) and FreedomWorks were formed in 2004 after internal disagreement among the leadership of CSE caused it to split into two groups, both primarily funded by the Kochs.

FreedomWorks was the conservative action group initially led by Dick Armey, the influential conservative and former Republican member of Congress, who left in 2012. The group capitalized on the strong appetite for activism among Tea Party supporters by promoting marches and rallies happening across the country. FreedomWorks was creating a ‘hub’ for conservatives that mimicked the activist model of MoveOn.org that the left used so successfully in years prior (Good 2009).

The Tea Party Patriots (TPP) was founded in 2009 by Jenny Beth Martin, Mark Meckler, and Amy Kremer and is most widely known for organizing citizen opposition to the Affordable Care Act at town hall meetings throughout 2009 and 2010. As Molly Ball, *Time* magazine’s national political correspondent and a former staff writer at *The Atlantic* described in 2013, “the Tea Party Patriots runs on a bottom-up model, with hundreds of local coordinators joining a Sunday-evening web conference every week to decide strategy. Jenny Beth Martin, the group’s national coordinator, doesn’t decide what positions the group will take; she puts the question to the local coordinators, who vote online” (Ball 2013).

While the TPP and FreedomWorks embraced the grassroots movement of the Tea Party, AFP took a top-down approach with tightly controlled funding doled out to state-level groups that complied with AFP’s mission.

AFP became affiliated with the Tea Party almost immediately after the movement went public. The same day that Santelli’s anti-tax speech aired live on CNBC, AFP launched the website TaxDayTeaParty.com and went on to organize Taxpayer Tea Party rallies in multiple states. Together with FreedomWorks, AFP was the leading organizer of the September 2009 Taxpayer March on Washington (Good 2009).

Other organizations acted as puzzle pieces that fit together, creating the strategic network of Fink’s vision. The State Policy Network, a network of Libertarian and conservative think tanks, provided research and reports; the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity operated a network of bloggers and reporters who shared the same Tea Party message; and Heritage Action, the lobbying arm of the Heritage Foundation, held Republican legislators feet to the fire. All of these organizations worked as a coalition and received substantial financial support from the Koch network, keeping their strategy and message consistent.

The Tea Party’s grassroots reputation was a critical selling point of the movement and remains largely intact today. Some critics accuse the Tea Party of astroturfing — faking grassroots credentials to mask a corporate influence campaign — but as Nesbit said in an interview, it’s hard to pierce the veil of what’s a true grassroots campaign and what’s not. It’s a difficult task for the media to test a movement for true grassroots credentials (Nesbit).

The majority of grassroots supporters — many of whom found each other on Meetup.com, attended rallies, coordinated bus trips, wrote letters and blog posts — came to the movement on their own. They were able to coordinate and mobilize so quickly because the tobacco industry and the Koch network had been cultivating this grassroots army for years. The messaging and strategy of the movement was centralized at the top and distributed through a network of grassroots organizations at the state and local level. Those grassroots groups weren’t always connected and affiliated. Once the messaging and framework were out in the public domain – they spread like wildfire with unaffiliated pop up groups appearing all over the country.

About 900 grassroots Tea Party groups were active in 2009 and 2010 and many were very politically sophisticated. Local Tea Party groups encouraged socializing, which made the events fun to attend and built social bonds between activists. This type of social engagement was made easier by the demographics of Tea party activists, who were primarily older, wealthier, and white (Skocpol, Williamson 2017).
According to a Heritage Foundation report on the success of the Tea Party, “affiliation is open, porous, and amorphous, with the boundaries for inclusion being vague, undetermined, and un-policed…. These characteristics are common to other movements in American history, such as the populist movement of the late nineteenth century, the progressive movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, more recently, the Occupy Wall Street movement.” The Tea Party “has breathed life into the conservative movement and helped to bring many new faces onto the American political scene” (Hayes 2019). University of Virginia professor of politics and Tea Party supporter James W. Ceaser proudly called the movement “unformed and inchoate” (Ceaser 2011).

Despite the volume of research, it’s still difficult to pinpoint exactly which local groups were funded by the Koch network and which were truly grassroots efforts. Many genuine grassroots groups worked alongside more established or well-funded organizations that were part of the Koch-affiliated networks of AFP and FreedomWorks.

Nesbit writes that many of the grassroots organizers who worked with established organizations that received funding from the Koch network weren’t typically aware that the groups were affiliated with the Koch brothers. The Kochs went to great lengths to hide their involvement even from Tea Party leaders, funneling donations through several layers of foundations and tax-exempt groups.

“None of these local or statewide Tea Party leaders are necessarily or even knowingly doing the bidding of either the Koch donor network or Americans for Prosperity. That isn’t the point. What is relevant, and what almost never makes it into media coverage of the Tea Party movement, is that they are part of a highly organized and leveraged political network that has a great deal of funding behind it” (Nesbit 196).

**Leadership**

The Tea Party had a small group of highly influential public-facing and internal leaders who drove the movement and inspired its activists. Internally, the main visionary for the Tea Party was Charles Koch himself. In an interview, Nesbit discussed how Charles Koch never deviated from his goals. He was determined to diminish the EPA’s influence in the energy industry, and in general disliked any government intervention in business. He was “single minded and committed” (Nesbit). Koch’s longtime political advisor, Rich Fink, kept a tight grip on a small group of leaders with a very small agenda. Internally, dynamic personalities or driven leaders weren’t the ones who inspired local groups to get involved, but rather generous funding that came with a short leash and little wiggle room for deviating from the Kochs’ mission.

This type of top-down leadership ultimately proved to be a flawed strategy. The trust of grassroots activists waned as many grew skeptical about the powers of big money in the movement, creating an unsustainable organizational structure that didn’t allow for the long term stability necessary to sustain the movement.

According to David McIntosh, former member of Congress (R-Indiana) and current president of the conservative economic policy organization Club for Growth, the decentralized nature of the Tea Party initially gave the movement a lot of strength. Many of the movement’s participants were politically independent and didn’t want to align with a political party. Yet, “over time the decentralized nature of it made it really difficult for the Tea Party to have a big impact because ultimately here, and in past social movements, we’ve seen that it needs to be embraced by one or both of the political parties to have a lasting change in our process of government.”

**Power**

The Tea Party’s power came in three equally critical forms – money, influence, and grassroots action.

Many activists joined through grassroots networks, found each other online, or responded to the call of conservative media, including influential talk radio hosts and Fox News, as well as some high-profile politicians. Many others were affiliated with the tightly controlled and well-funded Koch networks. These three levers worked together to create a powerful movement.

1. **Money:**

Broadly, the most active Tea Party groups didn’t suffer from a lack of money. Once the Tea Party reached mainstream status, there were multiple sources of funds pouring in but, by most accounts, the vast majority came from one source – the Koch network.

In 2010, the Americans for Prosperity Foundation and AFP together raised $39.6 million. An audit that same year by the West Virginia Secretary of State gave a window into what AFP was using that expansive war chest on. According to the audit, AFP spent $11.2 million in 2010 on communications and ad campaigns.
with nearly all of it going toward national activities (Bennet).

New Yorker staff writer Jane Mayer undertook an extensive review of the Koch network’s finances for her book *Dark Money: The Hidden History Behind the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*. Mayer writes that David and Charles Koch have a combined fortune of $95 billion, and together, they have put billions into American politics over the years. Much of that money went into CSE (followed by AFP and FreedomWorks) and other advocacy organizations to spread their conservative libertarian message.

Tax records and internal memos pulled by writers like Nesbit and Mayer show that funding to state level groups like the State Policy Network and the Sam Adams Alliance increased dramatically right before the public debut of the Tea Party.

“According to publicly available IRS records, the five essential pillars of just such a Tea Party movement network were all funded and in place by that spring of 2009—the Sam Adams Alliance to direct grassroots efforts; the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity to direct propaganda efforts in state capitals across the United States; the State Policy Network to coordinate funding and free-market policies at state-based think tanks; hundreds of grants from the Koch foundations to American universities that were linked in through SPN; and, of course, CSE’s successor, Americans for Prosperity, built to coordinate the effort nationally.”

“All of them saw their budgets expand significantly as Obama ran for the White House and then took office—months or even a full year before the Tea Party movement erupted into public view. This explains why the Tea Party movement was able to mobilize, spread, and network so rapidly, as if by magic.”

“The Franklin Center spun out from the Sam Adams Alliance and saw its budget go from zero dollars in 2008 to $2.3 million in early 2009, according to IRS records. Today, the Franklin Center coordinated fifty-five interlocked news sites covering politics in thirty nine states that all follow the same antitax, antiregulation, anti-spending Tea Party Script” (Nesbit 2016).

3. Grassroots Action:

The origins of the Tea Party began before the digital revolution, but by 2009 local groups had mastered the power of digital tools like Meetup.com and mimicked many of the tactics used by the left-leaning MoveOn.org. Local activists used meetups to arrange grassroots meetings, coordinate events, and recruit new members.

The Tea Party activists concocted a creative mix of tactics that worked remarkably well. The movement was successful partly because the majority of the activists who participated were older – many were retired and small business owners who generally devoted more time to engaging with the movement than other demographic groups (Skocpol).

In the early days of Tea Party activism, cable news and talk radio were big drivers of the messaging and calls to action. Cable news loved the pageantry of the Tea Party and covered the rallies heavily. Talk radio hosts like Mike Levin and Glenn Beck were early promoters of the movement and repeated Tea Party talking points to their massive audiences daily. Getting conservative and hugely influential talk radio hosts on board early was critical to the Tea Party’s eventual success.

To protest the Affordable Care Act, groups like ForAmerica used Facebook to mobilize their supporters to flood the phone lines of key Republican leaders including Speaker John Boehner, Senator Mitch McConnell, Senator John Cornyn, Majority Leader Eric Cantor, and Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy, who all faced primary challenges from Tea Party candidates.

Tea Party Patriots also held rallies and mock town halls, often with an empty chair to call out the member of Congress who didn’t show up. The distinction in the Tea Party’s tactics is that
they typically used them against members of their own party. They didn’t need to target the Democrats. The Tea Party’s primary goal was keeping Republicans in line and pushing them to the right, punishing anyone who opposed their mission.

Journalist Molly Ball wrote in The Atlantic in 2013 that the affiliated Tea Party groups strategically pressured certain individuals. Referencing the 2014 primary election, Ball wrote: “ForAmerica was the most aggressive, making videos calling out senators as “chicken” — including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, both of whom face Tea Party challengers in primaries next year. Texas Senator John Cornyn, who is up for reelection but doesn’t have a challenger, also got one. The activists knew they didn’t have to make an ad for every Republican senator; once a few got the treatment, the rest got the message. Nobody wanted to be next on the list” (Ball 2013).

Their grassroots engagement tactics worked in part because they were replicable and affordable. “Rallies, protests, town halls, email petitions, call-in campaigns: None of these tactics are rocket science. But deployed strategically, with the coordination enabled by technology, they work. And they’re cheap: ForAmerica and the Tea Party Patriots each estimated their campaigns cost about $200,000” (Ball 2013).

Adaptive Strategies

Ultimately, the Tea Party enjoyed five years of incredible influence but their power began to wane in 2012-2013. The movement struggled to adapt and flow with changes in the political makeup of the country and activists’ interests had swung from economic to social issues.

The network of grassroots groups, some affiliated and funded by AFP and FreedomWorks and others supported by the TPP, was a messy and decentralized network. Similar to Indivisible, ‘Occupy Wall Street’ and the broader ‘Resistance’ movement that appeared after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the Tea Party mobilized in groups but did not build the structures that could help them survive for the long haul.

McIntosh said in an interview that AFP’s failure to embrace the grassroots activism and their distrust of volunteer organizers made it difficult for the movement to stabilize and grow. “The movement needs to be willing to have an organizational structure that will be strategic. AFP kept the corporate structure and didn’t really trust the volunteers to run it” (McIntosh).

The grassroots activists who were drawn to the Tea Party’s message of liberty and freedom were also devoted to social issues. Opposition to abortion, which was not part of the original anti-tax platform, was a central issue for many activists. AFP, focused on economic issues alone, was not interested in taking on abortion. Once the Tea Party activists began to prioritize social issues over financial ones, AFP’s engagement and interest in the Tea Party waned, removing a critical source of funding and structure.

McIntosh describes the movement as lacking a structure that was flexible enough (and less hierarchical) to sustain changes in the cultural and political environment. Top-down corporate control can’t successfully sustain a movement – especially once the initial crises and pent up frustrations that generated it have been addressed. Grassroots enthusiasm eventually fades and the longevity of the movement is dependent on flexible structures that can withstand changes that the Tea Party failed to build (McIntosh).

Additionally, the Republican establishment in Washington struggled to embrace the Tea Party activists and the new members they sent to Congress in 2010 and 2012. Republicans retained their majority in the 2012 elections, but never fully assimilated the Tea Party into the ranks. They wouldn’t let many Tea Party-elected members have a seat at the decision-making table, blunting their influence once they were in Washington. McIntosh estimates that this inaction in Washington drove half of the Tea Party activists away when, after two election cycles, the Republican party failed to embrace the movement and convert it into part of its political operation (McIntosh).

Criticism

Defining success is always tricky and, in one sense, the Tea Party has been a failure. Our national debt in 2019 stands at more than $22 trillion – up from $10.6 trillion in January 2009. The movement failed to block the passage of Obamacare, the Tea Party caucus in the House has vanished (it has resurfaced as the Freedom Caucus, which does not hold as much influence over Congress as the Tea Party once did), and government spending is higher than ever. On the other hand, the Tea Party has made remarkable progress pulling a wing of the Republican party to the right, demonizing ‘establishment’ Republicans and has made significant policy progress at the state level on key, non-
economic issues. Even if they no longer called themselves the Tea Party – activists on the right flank of the Republican party found a new rallying cry during the 2016 election and fiercely supported Donald Trump’s candidacy. During the campaign, many Tea Party activists quickly joined in support of Trump and his anti-establishment populist message.

Political scientist and Tea Party supporter James W. Ceaser called the Tea Party’s “greatest actual achievement” the fact that state governments have taken bold steps to reign in public-sector unions and control pensions in both Republican and Democratic states (Ceaser 2011).

The two main criticisms of the Tea Party’s strategies as a movement are their failure to address key policy priorities that were pushed by the grassroots activists and their failure to adapt to changing conditions. As described earlier, there is ample evidence to show that corporate dollars and organization played a significant role in channeling grassroots energy into a political movement.

However, the firewall between the corporate funders and the grassroots activists was so effective that many activists and organizations receiving funding didn’t even know they were part of the Koch network. Without an open, trusting relationship between the funders and the grassroots, there was no mechanism to channel the movement into the long term.

So when the Tea Party elected-officials in Washington failed to secure key policy priorities and bring home wins for their base – interest and participation among activists waned, causing it to lose influence.

Conclusion

The Tea Party movement is a perfect example of how the right combination of opportune timing, grassroots energy, creative tactics, message discipline, and ample financial support from a single source can create a powerful political force.

In a rare public moment in October 2009, David Koch was filmed giving a speech at the Americans for Prosperity Foundation where he said, “This is remarkable – eight hundred thousand activists since we founded this organization five years ago” [in 2004, five years before the so-called birth of the Tea Party movement].... “When we founded this organization five years ago, we envisioned a movement, a state-based one, but national in scope, of hundreds of thousands of American citizens from all walks of life, standing up and fighting for the economic freedoms that have made our nation the most prosperous society in history. Thankfully, the stirrings from California to Virginia, and from Texas to Michigan, show that more and more of our fellow citizens are beginning to see the same truths as we do”’ (Nesbit 52).

Today, despite a short tenure, the Tea Party’s lasting influence can still be felt across America. The swing right on social issues, under the umbrella message of liberty and patriotism, created an environment that led to the 2016 election of President Trump. It’s long term impact still remains unknown, but the message, tactics, and core beliefs of the Tea Party have left a strong mark on our nation’s discourse and direction.
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SUMMARY

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), nicknamed ‘Obamacare’, is a United States federal law signed by President Barack Obama in March 2010. Often referred to as the Holy Grail of progressive issues, ‘Obamacare’ greatly increased the number of people covered by some form of healthcare insurance, including publicly funded programs; provided subsidies for lower-income individuals to purchase commercial healthcare insurance policies; mandated that all individuals ineligible for public programs to purchase insurance; and required all insurance policies to cover a wide range of medical issues, including pre-existing conditions.

Progressive advocates had tried and failed repeatedly over the last century to enact health care reform. Though no one group or person can take credit for the law’s success, it is widely accepted that Health Care for America Now (HCAN), a grassroots coalition and advocacy organization, played a crucial role in its passage.

The HCAN Steering Committee accurately bet that the best path to victory was getting every single Democrat in Congress on board, instead of courting potential Republican defectors, believing (correctly) that no member of that party would support the legislation. HCAN also recognized that they lacked the financial resources to come close to matching what the insurance industry would spend in opposition. They designed a campaign that would undercut the opposition’s strengths and focus precious resources on moving only those lawmakers in their own party who could be persuaded to support the law. Their decision to invest heavily in field operations is one of the most important takeaways, as it proved that grassroots organizing still had the power to defeat big corporations.

Context

The story of the fight for universal health care is nearly a century old. The first push for national health care came from Frances Perkins, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor and the principal architect behind the New Deal. Perkins was the force behind passage of a breathtaking amount of legislation during her tenure, including the 40-hour work week, federal minimum wage, and Social Security. However, opposition against government involvement in health care led by the American Medical Association (AMA) effectively killed her efforts in that arena, which Perkins considered her biggest regret (Kirsch 26).

Multiple presidents, including Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton, also tried their hand at overhauling the nation’s health care system but were systematically met with defeat at the hands of the powerful AMA, businesses, and the insurance industry. Only President Lyndon B. Johnson was able to win a narrow victory with the passage of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 by giving up a broader scope of reform (Oberlander 1112).

Despite the repeated and public failures, the majority of Americans throughout the 20th century favored reform. However, as national health reform campaigners would learn, a high approval rating does not generate large-scale activism. These campaigns were generally created and executed by elites, who were more concerned with defending themselves from interest group attacks than with grassroots mobilization. Meanwhile, organizers across a cross-section of social movements, from labor, civil rights, feminism, and AIDS awareness, fixated on small—but immediate—changes, rather than a large-scale transformation of the health care system (Hoffman 69).

Health Care for America Now was born in January 2007, when Richard Kirsch, its future National Campaign Manager, met with the leadership of USAction. They agreed that the growing health care crisis and a potential Democratic president presented a window of opportunity. The first step was to get two major national unions, SEIU and AFSCME, involved. This initial group laid out the core policies that would shape reform and the principles for which they would fight. The coalition then brought on additional groups, including the AFL-CIO, MoveOn.org, Campaign for America’s Future, and the Center for Community Change (Kirsch 47-50).
With this coalition in place, HCAN began work acquiring funding. In early 2008, The Atlantic Philanthropies provided planning grants to Families USA, a health consumer group, and HCAN to develop dueling proposals. The end results were two markedly different approaches to mobilization. Families USA focused its energy in fifteen “battleground” states, and it proposed a broad stakeholder coalition. HCAN’s proposal was bolder and more groundbreaking: by prioritizing networking into already existing organizations, it would give it the ability to touch millions of Americans in virtually every single Democratic district in Congress. HCAN wanted to be able to pressure Congressional supporters of reform, not just those on the fence. The last key difference was the approach to agenda – Families USA declined to draft a common agenda for fear that it would lead to in-fighting within the coalition. However, all members of HCAN were required to sign onto their detailed common principles, which aimed to build trust, smooth tensions, and prevent policy preferences from derailing efforts like it had in the past (Skocpol 42). Fatefully, Atlantic eventually chose the 895-page HCAN proposal, which aligned more closely with their desire to take on more organizing work and build more structural capacity amongst progressive organizations (Kirsch 60-61).

In a hyper-partisan world, however, a campaign that strives for incremental change and finding middle ground moves few people. Thus, HCAN operated on a purely partisan strategy – though there were attempts to sway wavering Republicans, advocates knew that their only chance at success was winning every Democratic vote in the Senate. The leaders of HCAN and its funders understood that a passionate constituency that would be willing to mobilize for the Affordable Care Act was more valuable than a bipartisan agreement amongst the elites (Teles et al.).

The “stretch goal” had multiple benefits. The public option helped keep the progressive coalition together by boldly drawing a line in the sand for members that defined where they stood. It also helped generate grassroots and grasstops support within the states. And though the public option ultimately failed, its potential distracted opponents who poured their time and resources into fighting it. It also served as a lightning rod that diverted the opposition’s attention, giving Congress the leeway to include other reforms that otherwise might not have passed (The Atlantic Philanthropies 9).

Framing

A compelling frame is crucial for a campaign of this scale. In order to create a message that would resonate amongst Americans, HCAN took advantage of two years of polling commissioned by a group of progressive leaders before HCAN was formed. The major conundrum health care advocates faced was that polling over the last few decades consistently showed a majority of Americans favoring a government guarantee of health care for all. Yet time after time, health care reform advocates failed to translate approval ratings into meaningful change (Kirsch 40). Part of the challenge was, as Kirsch notes, that people support reform up until the point that they are offered concrete solutions that would become public policy. “Once the public discussion switches from problem to solution, the solution becomes the problem” (31).

However, the polling results of a proposed initiative that HCAN tested called the Guaranteed Affordable Plan were promising. Under the Guaranteed Affordable Plan, health insurance companies would be required to offer a standard comprehensive plan, so it would be clear what would be covered and people would know that their health care needs would be met. Every American would have guaranteed access to a choice of standard, affordable plans, either buying it from a private insurer or from a public plan. Employers and insurers could choose to offer

**CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS**

**Vision**

The importance of a bold and visionary goal in the healthcare movement cannot be overstated. For Health Care for America Now (HCAN), the ultimate goals were the public option and universal public healthcare – which many considered an incredible reach. The public option proposed the creation of a government-run health insurance agency that could compete with private health insurance companies, and it was, as leader Richard Kirsch described, at the very edge of the possible. However, Khalid Pitts, a co-founder of HCAN, stressed the importance of a transformative goal. No one gets excited about baby steps, he noted, while acknowledging that it is challenging to sustain the energy for bold and far sweeping campaigns. From their experience, they knew that the key was to mobilize the mobilizable and persuade the persuadable.

Both Kirsch and Pitts noted that a majority of Americans do not engage in political activity, so trying to appeal to people in the middle who lack strong opinions or ideologies can be a drain on resources with little payoff.
more coverage beyond that of the standard plan, but all plans would have to cover at least the standard package of benefits. Everyone would have a choice of plans, private and public, that would be affordable to them, priced on a sliding scale. It was a plan that centered on inclusiveness and it resonated amongst target audiences, even though it included the very progressive public option (Kirsch 50-51).

HCAN’s focus on the concept of a universal right to basic health care would pay off. History showed that past reform efforts had been hampered because the average American struggled to understand complex proposals and messaging centered around administrative design (Hoffman 72). More importantly, testing revealed that once people were told they could keep their plan, they were much more willing to support reform efforts and help others without coverage (Kirsch 42-43). The assurance that those who liked their current plans could keep them would become a key messaging point for President Obama throughout the battle for health care. Polling also showed that it would be crucial to not scare people about change, as it would be easy for the opposition to weaponize that fear (44).

Another consideration was the inclusive framing of the message as “health care for all.” Previous patients’ rights movements had been described as “consumer movements,” which ignored the fact that one needs access to health care in order to be a consumer (Hoffman 77). Though the media did occasionally refer to HCAN as a consumer group, they were more commonly defined as a grassroots or advocacy coalition.

And finally, the research found that the best way to win support was to make the public angry at the health insurance industry (Kirsch 69). This forced HCAN into a delicate balancing act, as the White House was committed to working with the industry on reform. Though the insurance industry initially positioned themselves as supportive of reforms, they began lobbying against the legislation in the fall of 2009 and gave the U.S. Chamber of Commerce more than $80 million to spend on TV ads that opposed the bill.

A turning point came in August 2009, in a series of “town hall” meetings between lawmakers and their constituents where Tea Party groups arrived in force to protest the pending legislation. Chanting about “death panels” and a “government takeover” of healthcare, the Tea Party members often forced the meetings to end prematurely, and some meetings deteriorated into violence. At this point, HCAN decided to establish the anti-insurance industry frame through aggressive media and field activities (Kirsch 227). These chaotic town halls showed that the message of organized conservative opposition overshadowed the focus group tested message about “quality affordable health care.” Thus, it became imperative to unite existing and cultivate new supporters by focusing on a common enemy – the insurance industry (Oberlander 1114).

**Power**

The biggest challenge to building an organization and a movement is acquiring enough resources (Kirsch 361). HCAN excelled at building power from organizing and building relationships with strong allied groups, but it was weaker in other areas, such as securing funding and generating sufficient, positive media attention.

Kirsch notes that “organizing is the art of creating power out of little or nothing” (Kirsch 12). Medicare was passed in 1965 in part due to senior citizens mobilizing on its behalf. Meanwhile, past efforts by labor groups and the Clinton administration to reform health care failed because they overly relied on professional staff, top-down decision making, and lobbying in Washington, instead of building grassroots allies (Hoffman 72). HCAN’s choice to focus on grassroots activism outside of the Beltway and to partner with existing state-level organizations that could turn out members is seen as one of the primary reasons for its success. As it turns out, you just can’t beat old-fashioned organizing.

The capacity building of these progressive state organizations may have led to success in other areas and fights. In Nebraska, HCAN partnered with Change That Works, which was led by organizer Jane Kleeb (Kirsch 291). Kleeb would later go on to found Bold Nebraska, a progressive group that helped defeat the Keystone Pipeline in 2012 (Elbein).

The members that made up HCAN were also integral to its success. Rather than relying on an open sign-on policy to pad their numbers, HCAN made all of its members sign onto their core principles; gave the Steering Committee, not HCAN staff, decision-making power; and had each Steering Committee member commit $100,000 to the cause. This ensured their buy-in, and in return, Steering Committee members leveraged their millions of constituents, made difficult sacrifices for the common good, and didn’t hesitate to contribute additional money and staffing when funding ran out at a critical time.

The groups within the Steering Committee also had
considerable influence on, and credibility with, Congressional Democrats. The full group, backed by HCAN’s other resources, helped elevate HCAN’s impact (Kirsch 264). One Steering Committee member of note was MoveOn.org. In contrast to the other organizations with “strong-tie” networks (networks developed through face-to-face interaction), MoveOn is an online platform that draws upon its millions of members to fundraise, advocate, and mobilize.

The Atlantic Philanthropies’ strategic gamble was instrumental to HCAN’s success. Atlantic’s philosophy is to give based on opportunities (Bertoni), and in 2008, the potential for a Democratic president and Democratic control of Congress was enough for it to get involved. Its willingness to support messier work like organizing, provide funding for multiple years, and invest in a planning phase all were crucial to HCAN’s victory (Kirsch 60). The long planning phase granted by Atlantic was noted in interviews with HCAN’s evaluators as especially critical to HCAN’s success (Cramer, Novick). The head start that the early funding afforded helped HCAN frame the health care debate during the elections (The Atlantic Philanthropies 3).

HCAN’S financial model also contributed to their success. From July 2008, when HCAN officially launched to when the law was enacted, HCAN spent $46 million, allocating 43% on field, 40% on paid communications and the balance on central operations (management; lobbying; research; social media; press; fundraising; policy). Compared to other national campaigns, HCAN spent much more on field and less on the central campaign. Generally, national campaigns build up a large central campaign staff, but HCAN kept theirs minimal in order to focus their resources on the field (Kirsch).

HCAN relied on an inside-outside strategy to pass health care reform and cultivated strong Congressional champions. Key among them was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who never wavered in her vocal support for reform and twisted the arms of reluctant Democrats for their votes (Kirsch 343). Other members of Congress who experienced HCAN’s grassroots pressure were also converted into staunch public supporters of the bill.

The relationship with the White House was rockier, however. President Obama tended to waffle on his position on the public option, and there was an expectation from the White House that HCAN would take its orders without question. A White House insider told Kirsch that when Jim Messina, Obama’s Deputy Chief of Staff, was asked what the inside/outside strategy to passing health care was, he replied, “There is no outside strategy” (Kirsch 261.) Messina also attempted to get Kirsch fired or contained after HCAN leadership diverged with the White House and openly criticized Democratic Senator Max Baucus’ proposed health care plan (266).

Despite regular, well-attended activations, HCAN had to repeatedly compete with the nascent Tea Party for media coverage and control of the narrative. HCAN members regularly outnumbered the Tea Party at rallies and town halls, executed innovative stunts criticizing insurance industry executives, built relationships with members of Congress, and had a consistent presence at the offices of key Democrats (Kirsch 192). However, the Tea Party was willing to provide a spectacle by aggressively criticizing their elected officials in public. Tea Party activists warned that the proposed health care plan would subsidize undocumented immigrants, pay for abortions, and create ‘death panels’ where bureaucrats would decide who gets health care – messages that were repeated by right-wing media and conservative talk radio. The mainstream media, drawn to a spectacle, covered the Tea Party’s activations at town hall meetings as if they represented the majority public opinion. And the Tea Party, not HCAN, became the dominant force in any conversation about health care in 2009 (Dreier 34).

Leadership

HCAN benefited from strong leadership on its staff and its Steering Committee. A few qualities made National Campaign Manager Richard Kirsch uniquely suited for his role. Kirsch spent 28 years organizing at the state level, helping to lead USAction (and its predecessor group) affiliates in Illinois, New Jersey and New York. That background, shared by some other HCAN leaders, was a model for HCAN’s federated structure and focus on grassroots organizing. In addition, Kirsch’s MBA and the leadership training that came with it was a relatively rare asset amongst nonprofit executives (Chang). Kirsch reasoned that management training could help him build successful organizations (Kirsch 14).

Kirsch also worked on health care reform for decades and had been involved in the failed Clinton reform effort as the head of the New York State Health Care Campaign. Despite its failure, the experience gave him valuable institutional knowledge about the health care fight, and it taught him some valuable
lessons that he would use in 2008 (Kirsch 23): the need to take advantage of a new president’s short honeymoon phase and the need to let Congress work out the details, rather than having the President present a fully baked plan (Oberlander 1113). And though anyone with experience managing coalitions can attest to the challenges that it brings, Kirsch noted that his temperament and emotional intelligence made him an effective coalition manager (Kirsch 63).

Meanwhile, Margarida Jorge, an experienced organizer who had worked with most of the major national unions, was tapped for the Field Director position, a critical role in a field-heavy campaign. Because she had worked with almost every co-chair of HCAN (AFSCME, SEIU, and USAction), Jorge already had their trust (Kirsch 77). Jorge also received strong praise from state partners who worked with her for her willingness to listen to those on the ground and teach. She helped partners learn how to think strategically, direct a statewide coalition, build a base of supporters, and organize events and actions. And Jorge’s extensive organizing background meant that she was familiar with any issues or roadblocks that coalition members came to her with. Finally, the national plan that she drafted was highly regarded for striking the right balance between too much and too little national control (Stier 37).

Organizational Structure

There’s a reason why foundations tend to shy away from organizing work, compared to more communications-based advocacy. In the hands of most people, HCAN could have become an unwieldy, logistical nightmare. The rough hierarchy was as follows:

HCAN was not the first campaign to attempt this model, but it was the first to do it well. Some of the largest actors in HCAN (e.g. SEIU, USAction, MoveOn) were already “federated” organizations, which can mobilize people at the local and state level but also organize a strategy nationally. This inspired the HCAN structure and affirmed their approach (Dreier 30).

When speaking to Kirsch, Jorge, and Khalid Pitts (former Director of Strategic Campaigns at SEIU and an HCAN co-founder) about why HCAN’s coalition efforts were successful, a common theme appeared: partners and members had buy-in. Kirsch said there was an intentional effort to build trust at a grassroots level by updating them every week. By keeping them informed, they could understand the reasoning behind decisions and their corresponding tradeoffs. Pitts elaborated, saying that whether that buy-in was real or illusionary, helping people see the big picture would ensure that they would work together, even in the

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**Healthcare**

- **The Steering Committee**
- **National Campaign Manager**
- **Field Director**
- **Field Managers**
- **Contracted Affiliates**
- **Policy, Lobbying, Communications, & Fundraising Staff**
face of extremely divisive obstacles (such as an anti-abortion amendment that was added to the House version of the bill but dropped in the final legislation). Regular check-ins between organizers across different states also led to a culture of sharing best practices. The calls were results-oriented, and even led to friendly competition between the national unions to see who could get more turnout (Kirsch 197).

This mutual respect led to many of the coalition members rating their experience with HCAN positively, compared to previous coalition experiences where groups never worked together in a meaningful way. Partners helped develop and refine campaign strategies, instead of being given orders, and they also worked together to execute said strategies. And as noted previously, having core Steering Committee members contribute significant dues also added to the coalition’s feeling of ownership in the campaign (The Atlantic Philanthropies 2).

This strong coalition and an integrated field campaign allowed HCAN to react rapidly and appropriately to unforeseen circumstances (The Atlantic Philanthropies 10). For example, the August 2010 town halls were incredibly disruptive, and the Tea Party could have potentially derailed reform efforts by terrorizing elected officials with their tactics. However, in a matter of days, HCAN and its allies were able to out-organize the Tea Party where it counted: the districts of vulnerable Democrats. Their ability to quickly organize to outnumber the Tea Party members consistently helped provide cover for supportive Democrats and ensured that they didn’t lose their support (Kirsch 188).

Timing

If there ever was a time to enact health care reform, 2009 was it. Newly elected President Obama had swept the nation with a platform of hope and progressive change. Both the Senate and House were controlled by Democrats and after eight years of conservatism, progressives were ready to take the stage. To add fuel to the fire, a health care crisis had emerged in the mid-2000s when employer cutbacks and layoffs made traditional job-based health insurance unreliable, or even unavailable for many Americans. In addition, increasing numbers of doctors and HMOs were rejecting Medicare patients because of the low level of reimbursement for services, while numerous state budget crises meant severe cuts to Medicaid (Hoffman 77).

However, the path to reform wound through unexpected minefields. The Great Recession caused a soaring federal budget deficit, which made it more difficult to pass big-ticket legislation in Congress. The battle over health care also quickly took on additional meaning for the now out-party–Republicans. Partisanship, racism, and long-simmering discontent against Obama and his policy agenda united Republicans, their media allies at Fox News, and Tea Party activists. Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) summarized it best when he referred to health care reform as President Obama’s potential “Waterloo.” Killing health care reform meant squashing any hope for a progressive agenda by the new administration (Dreier 34). Despite the challenges, it is a testament to HCAN’s ability to sustain momentum over a long and grueling fifteen months and the tenacity of leaders and supporters in the White House and Congress that the Affordable Care Act was passed.

Adaptive Strategies

When asked to name a critical component of a successful campaign, both Kirsch and Heather Hurlburt of New America pointed to power mapping, which is the exercise of identifying who holds the power to fix a problem and what it will take to move them to act. HCAN’s power mapping was undoubtedly one of the reasons for its success. HCAN correctly ascertained that both conservative and moderate Democrats would need to feel pressure in order to pass health care reform, which led to the boots on the ground strategy. The Steering Committee also knew that most progressive organizations did not have a robust presence in conservative Republican districts. The decision to focus on who HCAN could realistically move helped conserve limited resources (Kirsch 55).

However, a thoughtfully crafted strategy is not a silver bullet, as the road to reform would prove. HCAN’s structural strengths, described in the Organizational Structure section, helped make HCAN adept at reacting quickly to volatile political situations, like the August 2009 town halls; the delay in seating newly-elected Massachusetts Republican Scott Brown in the Senate, which the GOP claimed was a tactic to ensure he would be unable to vote against the bill; and the loss of the public option.

“Once the public discussion switches from problem to solution, the solution becomes the problem”
- Richard Kirsch, former National Campaign Manager of Health Care for America Now (HCAN)
After the August town halls, HCAN was forced to regroup and begin acting more like a grassroots movement and less like an interest group. They doubled down on mobilizing voters, framing the insurance industry as the bad guys, sharing stories of insurance-company victims and whistleblowers, and using stunts to generate media attention (Dreier 32). HCAN was also able to quickly execute thank-you events for members who had supported the bill. Though they had not originally planned for these actions, HCAN was also able to reallocate field and financial resources to air positive ads in Congress members’ districts and enthusiastically greet them with cheers at the airport when they returned home (The Atlantic Philanthropies 10).

It cannot be emphasized enough how the buy-in of HCAN’s leaders and members allowed them to be flexible. Despite the morale shattering death of the public option, which had been a top priority of the reformers, having HCAN’s leadership brought into focus on the big picture helped them overcome the loss and regroup to continue the fight (Kirsch 308).

Another unforeseen challenge was how long it would take for the health care reform bill to pass. HCAN had originally been designed as a short-term campaign, going from 2008 to the end of 2009. However, delays caused by ongoing and contentious negotiations meant that HCAN had to scramble for funding that would allow them to continue on until March 23, 2010, when President Obama finally signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. They were able to do so through the support of their Steering Committee members and The Atlantic Philanthropies, with the former contributing almost $1 million and the later granting an additional $1.5 million. Field partners also contributed by making a big personal sacrifice, agreeing to continue fighting for half the pay. HCAN’s early decision to choose this network model, compared to the typical election-style strategy of parachuting in campaign staffers, allowed it the flexibility to continue the fight past its expected end date (Kirsch 317).

After the ACA was signed, HCAN’s leadership decided that an “HCAN 2.0” was necessary to see it through full implementation in 2014 because the opposition continued to relentlessly attack the law, attempting to create confusion about the new law and weaken it (Kirsch 266-367). Though it had far fewer resources, HCAN fought for consumer regulations to control insurance premiums, defended the ACA’s constitutionality publicly during the 2012 Supreme Court fight, defended Medicare from privatization and pushed for an expansion of Medicaid (Farewell to Health Care for America Now). Though HCAN closed up shop in late 2013, it was revived partially in 2017 in order to protect the ACA from repeal. However, with funding from most major donors having dried up, it relied heavily on support from other organizing groups, including the Indivisible Project, which led the pro-ACA charge (Pradhan).

Pressure

HCAN successfully used consistent and routine activations to sway on-the-fence Democrats and pressure those in vulnerable districts who had committed their support but were feeling pressure from Tea Party activists. HCAN and partners were able to generate thousands of phone calls to Congress and organized marches and demonstrations in Washington, DC.

However, the most effective actions took place in the home districts of elected officials. When Senator Arlen Specter (D-PA) said that he would vote against the public option, the HCAN coalition in Pennsylvania unleashed a flood of calls from constituents to his office in just a few days. The same tactic was used for Senators Patty Murray (D-WA) and Maria Cantwell (D-WA). The message was clear for any other Democrat who dared to vote against public option: By ignoring grassroots supporters and constituents, you were only threatening your chances for reelection (Kirsch 141). Especially effective was having people who had been victims of the insurance industry tell their stories face-to-face with their representatives. This was a departure from past efforts that had relied on research and expertise to make the case for reform (Hoffman 73).

HCAN and its partners also used stunts to generate media attention, but because the White House discouraged them from publicly going after Democrats aggressively, they reserved them for the insurance industry. Some of the stunts included hiring a guerrilla theater group to disrupt a meeting of America’s Health Insurance Plans (a political advocacy and trade association for health insurance companies) with a song about the public option set to the tune of “Tomorrow” (Kirsch 236). There were also creative events that involved driving a moving van with a video screen to an insurance executive’s home and displaying an ad that targeted him for his over-the-top salary while middle-class families had their homes foreclosed due to medical debt (Kirsch 229).

Criticism

An evaluation commissioned by the Atlantic Philanthropies showed that HCAN was widely praised for its outside strategy and
their execution of the field game. However, it also highlighted a few areas where HCAN could have been more effective.

1. Inside Strategy

Throughout the duration of the campaign, HCAN walked a very fine line of being both an inside campaign partner to the White House and an outside entity. Congressional staffers who were interviewed had mixed opinions on its efficacy as an inside-the-Capitol lobbyist and partner. And the desire to follow the lead of the Obama Administration led to a few critical mistakes. Not applying more pressure on the Senate Finance Committee during its deliberations cost HCAN precious time, momentum, and ultimately, the public option (The Atlantic Philanthropies 8-9).

The White House’s desire to partner with insurance companies on the bill and protect conservative Democrats from any attacks also put HCAN in difficult situations. Political scientist Peter Dreier noted that HCAN’s initial decision to follow the White House’s lead was a mistake, and it should have aggressively gone after the insurance industry and conservative Democrats earlier. He also contended that the campaign would have been more effective if HCAN had focused more resources on a few key small and mid-sized states such as Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska, Indiana, Delaware, and Louisiana. These states were home to more “moderate” Democrats who had a disproportionate amount of power, especially in the Senate (Dreier 34).

When Dr. Theda Skocpol and Atlantic-commissioned evaluators spoke to key DC political insiders and staffers in health legislation, both found that they were dismissive of HCAN’s efforts and its impact on passing the ACA (Skocpol 43, The Atlantic Philanthropies 9). This may be in part due to policy makers being highly reluctant to share publicly what influences their decisions (Hurlburt). However, Skocpol concluded that the legislative victory is probably owed to the grassroots pressure wielded by HCAN. Even after the special election of Senator Brown jeopardized the bill, HCAN and partners fought doggedly for the ACA’s passage. Had grassroots activists not consistently held Congress’ feet to the fire, it is likely that Democrats would have lost their nerve right before the controversial endgame (Skocpol 43-44).

2. The Public and the Public Option

Although many agreed that the public option was an important goal, HCAN was criticized for continuing to fight for it long after it was clear it had lost the battle. The laser focus on just one component of the reform also hampered HCAN’s ability to shape other parts of the debate. Others argued that the call for a public option allowed opponents to successfully paint reform as a government takeover. Activists and many others began to conflate the public option with health care reform, which made it difficult for supporters to back the final bill (The Atlantic Philanthropies 10).

Despite polling that showed the majority of Americans supported a public option after it was explained to them, no one was able to effectively frame and message how it would be implemented (Dreier 33). The Obama Administration was also criticized for its inability to maintain strong public support because it couldn’t persuade insured Americans that reform would benefit them (Oberlander 1114). Not being able to successfully control the media narrative was also harmful to the campaign, as it allowed the Tea Party and other opponents to frame health care reform on their terms.

And Kirsch is the first to admit that HCAN’s initial narrative frame was too narrowly focused on health care. He noted that expanding the frame to tell a larger story about the attack on the middle class and the unequal concentration of wealth and power might have helped win the support of more Americans. He also rued the absence of a clear moral force in their framing. Underlining the universal credo of “loving thy neighbor” and caring for each other could have helped provide a moral imperative to the personal stories HCAN shared of people whose lives had been ruined because they did not have access to health care (Kirsch 365-366).

3. After the Battle

Although HCAN saw the ACA through implementation, there are conflicting opinions on whether it did enough to continue to protect it from zealous opponents. As Khalid Pitts noted in an interview, the real measure of success is not the campaign itself, but what happens after.

Skocpol posits that the only reason that the ACA survived the last few years is because of the Indivisible movement that...
picked up where HCAN left off and helped organize grassroots activists to fight for it. She notes that Indivisible was more effective at explaining the ACA and why it was necessary to average Americans (Skocpol). On the other hand, Jorge maintained that though HCAN formally shuttered at the end of 2013, the progressive capacity that they built at the state-level was essential to protecting the ACA in 2016-2018. And though there was scant funding for this work because most donors had moved on to other issues, former field partners came back to join HCAN in the fight because they had been so invested in the original campaign (Jorge). Kirsch also noted that HCAN still played a coordinating role in the 2017 legislative battle (albeit at a drastically reduced scale) by disbursing field contracts, convening groups, including Indivisible, and advising on strategy and tactics. Skocpol acknowledged that at the moment, it is difficult to prove empirically which narrative is true.

It must be noted that HCAN’s fundraising efforts, outside of the Atlantic and Steering Committee contributions, were considered failures. Despite attempts to aggressively fundraise, HCAN struggled to raise additional funding from other organizations, foundations, and individual donors (The Atlantic Philanthropies 10). HCAN’s ineffective fundraising and the Atlantic Philanthropies’ inability to financially support HCAN for the long-term deeply hampered HCAN’s efforts to protect the ACA in the long run.

**Conclusion**

Although it is impossible to conclusively measure the influence HCAN had on the passage of the Affordable Care Act, most would agree that HCAN had a major impact. With old-school organization and the right, strategic people in charge, HCAN did what many thought was impossible. Despite the disappointing loss of the public option, HCAN was able to help pass the most significant health care reform since 1965 and imparted a few lessons along the way. It helped change the public discourse around health care and created a framework that, though imperfect, would be difficult to undo and could serve as a platform for future progress. It showed progressives how to play the inside-outside game more effectively and proved that power does not rest solely in Washington DC or with well-funded corporate lobbies. And it improved upon a model for grassroots mobilization that built progressive power throughout the nation.

Had the health care bill failed, it would have certainly made other progressive reforms that followed far more difficult. Its victory would serve as a stepping-stone for future, more ambitious reforms.

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SUMMARY

In the summer of 2016, voters in the United Kingdom were asked whether they wanted to remain part of the European Union, or leave the unified bloc of nations, which the UK has been part of since 1973.

“Vote Leave” was the long shot campaign, a dark horse that wasn’t expected to win a race that easily should have gone to “Remain”. This referendum — known as “Brexit” — ran headlong into the sudden rise of populism and nationalism across much of North America and Europe. This shift in the political winds, exacerbated by the economic effects of globalization and rising immigration, was also propelling Donald Trump toward victory in the U.S. presidential race and nearly pushed a far-right candidate in France ahead in the race for president.

By just over 600,000 votes, or slightly more than 1% of all registered UK voters, ‘Leave’ eeked out the win. The results took much of the UK — and especially cosmopolitan London — by surprise. “Vote Leave” created the victory against almost impossible odds by seizing the moment and telling a finely crafted story that framed its campaign and values in a way that matched the mood of the country.

CONTEXT

By the early 2010s, anti-European (“Eurosceptic”) sentiment had been growing in the United Kingdom for decades. The anti-EU camp was energized by the continued rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which won the European elections in 2014 after losing (or “nearly winning”) five years earlier (Shipman 10). This Euroscepticism was further stoked by economic uncertainty, along with the linked trend of immigration, which increased significantly as a result of the Eurozone crisis in which hundreds of thousands of unemployed European migrants sought employment in the UK’s stronger economy.

Within this context, then-Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech in 2013 promising fundamental reform to the UK’s relationship with the EU, as well as the possibility of a referendum on rescinding its membership. Two years later, after the UK had lived under 23 years of coalition governments, the Conservative Party won control of Parliament — a result some attribute to Cameron’s pledge. The victory resulted in Cameron reaffirming his pledge to hold a referendum on the EU before the end of 2017 (Walker 4-5).

Negotiations with the EU throughout 2015 and early 2016 secured special status for the UK within the EU, but even as these negotiations were ongoing, Eurosceptics were preparing for a referendum. By the time Cameron announced the UK’s special status and a date for the referendum, several different campaigns had been formed: Vote Leave, Leave.EU, and Grassroots Out (GO).

Though the foundational work and calls for a referendum had been in the works for years, the total timeline for the EU Referendum was less than two years, with Cameron’s Conservative government giving him the power to call a referendum in 2015 and the vote being held just a year later in 2016 (Shipman 529-3). The official campaign period was just 10 weeks and Vote Leave was in official operation for 10 months, launching in October 2015 for a June 2016 vote.

In April 2016, the Electoral Commission designated Vote Leave as the official Leave campaign, but the fight for the future of Britain had already been underway for months (Shipman 228).
CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS

Timing

The Brexit referendum came at a moment when populism and nationalism were on the rise throughout the world, exemplified by the candidacies of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United States and the National Front and Marine Le Pen in France. Tim Shipman, in the conclusion of All Out War, his comprehensive book on the Brexit referendum, writes:

The referendum represented a revolt of the provincial classes — ignored, maligned and impoverished — against the cosy metropolitan consensus on Europe, the benefits of immigration and the belief that national economic prosperity outweighs personal experience of hardship. If the referendum was anything it was a victory for outsiders over insiders, a dividing line that was replacing both left/right and rich/poor as the dominant split in British politics. (583)

Vote Leave’s campaign director, Dominic Cummings, attributes this cultural moment to three forces: the immigration crisis, the financial crisis, and the Euro crisis. First, by 2015, the “EU was blamed substantially for the immigration/asylum crisis,” which provided an easy, tangible scapegoat in a foreign other. Second, the 2008 financial crisis had “undermined confidence in Government, politicians, big business, banks, and almost any entity thought to be speaking for those with power and money” and had left behind a generation of working-class communities. And third, the European sovereign debt crisis (Euro crisis) undermined confidence in the EU as a modern successful force.” These both dimmed the luster of the EU and weakened faith in those in power, and “created conditions in which the referendum could be competitive” (Cummings “Branching Histories”).

These elements were further exacerbated by the increasing prominence of unchecked social media as an apparatus for news and information sharing. These new platforms included sophisticated targeting mechanisms, facilitated by paid advertising, and allowed misleading claims, deliberate misinformation and lies, and extreme views to “go viral” and garner visibility and credibility.

Cameron and his government fell victim to these elements, calling for the Referendum “in response to pressure from a strong Eurosceptic movement … and the potential political threat from the rise of the UK Independence Party,” according to a post-mortem analysis from independent social research institute NatCen Social Research (Swales 4). The Vote Leave campaign, however, successfully identified, targeted, and leveraged them with great effect. Cummings writes in a blog post looking back on the referendum, that “Leave won because 1) three big forces [referenced above] created conditions in which the contest was competitive, 2) Vote Leave exploited the situation imperfectly but effectively, 3) Cameron/Osborne made big mistakes” (Cummings “Branching Histories”).

Under this banner of rising nationalism and economic unrest, Vote Leave launched in early October 2015 with an online video that told viewers “Every week, the United Kingdom sends £350 million of taxpayers’ money to the EU. That’s the cost of a fully staffed, brand-new hospital, or looked at another way, that’s £20 billion per year” (Vote Leave). The video concluded with the campaign’s slogan, “Vote Leave, let’s take control” and cycled through four other taglines (“let’s save money,” “invest in the NHS,” “invest in science,” and “the safer choice”) that clearly defined why staying hurt the UK and what the alternative — leaving — would achieve. These five words clearly conveyed a message that pinpointed the stress of the moment and resonated with the electorate. Cummings told Shipman for All Out War that this message had been successful for years: “We focus-grouped all sorts of different things for the euro and never came up with something which beat ‘keep control’” (54).

‘Vote Leave’ was the long shot campaign, a dark horse that wasn’t expected to win a race that easily should have gone to ‘Remain’.

Though there was, and still is, no truly clear path to leaving the EU, campaign officials were largely unconcerned about implementation. They were opportunistic about their circumstances and capitalized on rising nativist sentiment to positively affect their campaign. The campaign smartly — and correctly — pinpointed a compelling message that struck a chord with the electorate. The alternative, Remain, was the status quo and emblematic of a political and social elite that was drawing backlash across the world. The Remain message, that Britain is stronger in Europe, relied on facts and the economic impact of leaving the EU without any emotional connection.

Vision:

Vote Leave’s goal was simple: for the UK to vote to leave the EU. More specifically, this meant receiving a majority of votes
for “Leave” in the referendum. With the benefit of hindsight, it’s unsurprising that Leave won. They had accurately identified and effectively harnessed sentiments across the country. But at the time, it was the outsider’s choice, a clear rejection of the establishment, of popular wisdom, of the government, and of the most prominent figures in business and the media — the majority of whom were on the side of Remain. Leave was a true underdog.

The goal was bold and ran against the mainstream political and conventional wisdom. Though Cummings argues that “usually the ‘change’ campaign has to start considerably ahead in order to win as it loses support as the campaign goes on,” Vote Leave’s anti-establishment position was advantageous, because it allowed them to channel anti-establishment sentiments throughout the country into their campaign (Cummings “Branching Histories”).

**Framing:**

“People chose between two simple stories. Vote Leave’s was more psychologically compelling” (Dominic Cummings, “Branching Histories”).

As noted above, according to Cummings, three forces caused opinions on the EU to change: the immigration crisis, the 2008 financial crisis, and the Euro crisis. This meant that a year before the referendum, “only about a third of the electorate positively wanted to be inside the EU. Another third strongly wanted to leave and were not worried about the economy” (Cummings “Branching Histories”). It also meant that a significant portion of the remaining third were anti-EU, though they had reservations around the potential negative effects of leaving. Whereas those who supported remaining “saw the economy and immigration as separate campaign battlegrounds,” the Leave side “understood more clearly that they were the same issue” (Shipman 308).

Because Leave understood these two issues as one and the same, they were able to craft a more impactful message to the broader public, which ultimately gained their trust and convinced them that leaving was better than remaining. This was key.

Using five simple foundations, Cummings writes, “Vote Leave exploited these forces.”

1. **Doubling down on an overall theme of “taking back control.”** Based on polling and focus groups, this emerged as the best slogan during the euro referendum and remained so during the EU referendum. The theme runs through all the below

2. Highlighting that the UK sent £350 million per week for EU membership: This tapped into unease around the economy and living standards, and was especially effective because they argued that the money should be repatriated into the financially struggling National Health Service

3. Arguing that leaving the EU would allow the UK more sovereignty over immigration policy, especially with the possibility of Turkey joining the EU hanging in the balance, exploited nativism and offered a tempting solution

4. Arguing that the “euro is a nightmare, the EU is failing, unemployment is a disaster, their debts and pensions are a disaster” and that remaining would mean the UK would be paying the costs for Europe’s economic unrest. This point underscored that leaving the EU would give the UK more control over its own pursestrings

5. Tapping deeply into the anti-establishment sentiment allowed Leave to align with the “public who had been let down by the system” (Cummings “Branching Histories”)

Vote Leave not only framed, but explicitly named, globalism as the enemy of UK citizens and the reason behind their economic uncertainty, arguing that leaving the European Union and taking back control was the only solution to the problem. This was clearly expressed through their campaign slogan “Vote Leave. Take Control,” which explicitly articulated both the call to action and the campaign’s solution, while implicitly pointing to the problem. This demonstrates the power in having a foil against which you can rally. A clear adversary creates tension in framing, and in turn bolsters a compelling narrative.

The slogan was a two-pronged attack, appealing to emotions, fears, and uncertainties, while also putting forward a seemingly logical answer. These arguments were framed as being not just possible but imperative, connecting deeply with voters’ livelihoods and dignity.

**Organizational Structure**

In the lead up to a call for a referendum, despite years of growing anti-European feeling and an increasingly stronger UKIP, “the eurosceptic community had built remarkably little to prepare for the battle” (Cummings “Branching Histories”). In 2015, there was not an existing infrastructure or strong group behind which to rally. Everything “had to be built almost entirely from scratch in an environment in which many of those in charge of the small groups were sure we would lose” (Cummings “Branching Histories”).
From this fray emerged the top contenders for an official campaign, Vote Leave and Leave.EU. Vote Leave was founded by political strategist and lobbyist Matthew Elliott and Leave.EU was co-founded by millionaire political donor Arron Banks and supported by UKIP leader Nigel Farage. Before taking on the Remain campaign, Stronger In, they had to take on each other in a designation fight, in which each campaign had to submit an application to the Electoral Commission. The one deemed strongest would be named the official campaign (Shipman 212-30).

The relationship between Vote Leave and UKIP was heated, with “UKIP HQ [sending] out emails to UKIP activists telling them not to work with Vote Leave and some senior activists were told by Farage’s gang that they would lose their UKIP jobs if they helped [Vote Leave’s] ground campaign” (Cummings, “Branching Histories”). But the designation fight had pushed each group to build capacity and created a stronger overall campaign organization once designation was announced. It ensured that there were Leave public figures other than Nigel Farage, including Douglas Carswell (who at the time was UKIP’s only Member of Parliament). This was doubly important because Carswell was able to reach people who were still undecided, according to Daniel Hannan, a Conservative Member of the European Parliament (Shipman 229-30) and because Farage, compared to other major Leave spokespeople, was most likely to push voters toward Remain (Brett 30).

Speaking to Shipman, senior Vote Leave representatives were “adamant that the designation battle was crucial to the final result” (229-30). Furthermore, a challenge from GO, a grassroots movement that emerged because of the fighting between Vote Leave and Leave.EU, “ensured that Vote Leave had raised its game in the ground war” (230). UKIP campaign expert Chris Bruni-Lowe says, “Because Banks and [Elliott] were going at each other it was competitive. It really helped” (230).

In April, just two months before the vote, Vote Leave was given designation as the official Leave campaign. But official designation did not reduce contention between the Conservative and UKIP wings of the fight. Because Leave.EU remained active, but were not under the Vote Leave umbrella, they maintained the freedom to act how they wanted and say what they wanted, regardless of alignment with the main campaign’s message. Vote Leave could not control Leave.EU or Farage’s actions, and at times the two campaigns contradicted each other. “In the end,” however, “it may have been of benefit to have two ‘Out’ campaigns. Vote Leave was able to reassure swing voters that by backing Leave they were not voting for UKIP, while Farage and Banks were able to use edgier messages designed to appeal to working-class voters” (Shipman 589). That is, the various spokespeople and messages resonated with different audiences, all of whom ended up voting to Leave. Cummings puts it more directly: “One campaign would have meant total bedlam and 60-40 defeat” (“Branching Histories”).

Though the coalition was loose and combative, within Vote Leave itself, high level decision-making came from a small, tight-knit operation, running through a few key people. The grassroots contingent, meanwhile, was given leeway to operate in the ways they thought would work best. Cummings calls it “strategic centralisation, tactical decentralisation,” in which the core message was absolute, but activists on the ground were given “a lot of freedom to do what they thought best” and were encouraged to “network horizontally without reference to HQ” using that message (Cummings “Basic Numbers” 8).

**“People chose between two simple stories. Vote Leave’s was more psychologically compelling”**

- Dominic Cummings, “Branching Histories”

Even as the official campaign outfits were warring with each other, “most activists who wanted to leave the EU did not care ... and happily worked together” (Shipman 421). In fact, “thousands of UKIP activists ... cooperated with Vote Leave contrary to Farage’s explicit orders not to do so” (Cummings “Basic Numbers” 2). This was important because occasionally the local ground operation was the local UKIP branch (Shipman 420).

Though the entire Leave apparatus was complicated and messy, with warring priorities and intuitions about what the best tactics were, the official Vote Leave campaign was guided by one man: Dominic Cummings.

**Leadership**

“Ask most people in Vote Leave why they won, and they have a simple, one-word answer: ‘Dom.’” - Tim Shipman, All out War: the Full Story of Brexit

Matthew Elliott, the chief executive of Vote Leave, hired Dominic Cummings to run the campaign early on, identifying in him the qualities needed to run the campaign: “We needed
somebody in there who was fearless, who was a warrior, who had a great strategic mind, who frankly had the appetite to take something on at a time when no one else thought it could be done. And Dom was the man to do that” (Shipman 37).

Conservative MP Steve Baker, who campaigned for Brexit, describes Cummings as being

“...like political special forces. If you don’t care about what collateral damage you sustain, he’s the weapon of choice. He operates with the minimum of civilised restraint. He is a barbarian. Dominic has undoubted mastery of leadership and strategy and political warfare. But he will not let himself be held to account by anybody.” (Shipman 115)

This forcefulness did not sit well with other leaders on the Leave side, and they attempted an unsuccessful coup to take over control of the campaign. Despite the contentiousness around his appointment, Cummings survived because key staff were on his side and would have left if Cummings were ousted. “They thought he was their best hope of a referendum victory, and they believed he was a meritocrat” who was loyal to and defended his team (Shipman 112).

Cummings himself writes that Shipman’s book “has encouraged people to exaggerate greatly my importance” and gives credit to others who, “unknown outside the office, made extreme efforts and ran rings around supposed ‘experts’ ” (Cummings “Branching Histories”).

Whomever the credit goes to, it is undeniable that Dominic Cummings, whose style Shipman characterizes as “periodically benevolent despotism,” made many of the vital decisions that tipped the scales toward Leave (199).

Cummings combined good intuition and confidence in his strategy, with a clear understanding of the base and an ability to utilize data effectively. This combination, as well as his and his team’s willingness to “risk looking stupid to win,” proved lethal (“Branching Histories”). One clear instance of this intuition was when President Barack Obama came to England in April 2016 and delivered a speech condemning Brexit. Vote Leave initially panicked, but “Cummings walked into the main campaign war room and announced, ‘This will have no effect’ ” and later said “Do not worry about this. SW1 [the London postcode area that includes the Houses of Parliament, 10 Downing Street, and Buckingham Palace — a euphemism for conventional political thinking], hysteria is not the same as the real world” (Shipman 236). His instincts were confirmed by focus groups, which found that Obama was “not good” for Remain (Shipman 236). Further evidence of Cumming’s marriage of intuition and data was demonstrated during the process of naming Vote Leave. The team had originally settled on “Vote Leave. Get Change” but the next morning, Cummings came in and declared it to be “Vote Leave. Take Control,” because “I thought about it last night. I’ve done focus groups on this for years. I know this works” (Shipman 54).

Compared to the structure of the Remain campaign, which had to pay much more attention to coalitions and stakeholders, Vote Leave was able to have a “small war room ... where Cummings, [Paul] Stephenson and [Victoria] Woodcock were able to make most decisions quickly, with little input from others” (199). Not having to take a broad coalition into account or make decisions by committee, the Vote Leave campaign was in prime position to react quickly and agilely to changing circumstances.

**Power**

On balance, the power was in Remain’s hands. It started ahead in the polls (though their accuracy was later called into question), and it had the government’s legitimacy behind them, including the Prime Minister’s office, the Cabinet Office, and other government departments. Remain, through Cameron and his government, controlled renegotiation with the EU, the timing of the referendum, government officials, the Conservative Party and Parliament, and parliamentary procedures and the legal rules. Remain also had the support of most powerful domestic and global leaders in business, politics, and media (Shipman 81-92). This all put Leave on the defensive.

While the Vote Leave campaign was in the political “out group” and operating in a situation where the levers of power were out of their control and directly in the hands of their opponents, they secured a series of wins that helped level the playing field and mitigated some of the power that would have advantaged the Remain campaign. These wins, while not dramatically compelling or mobilizing for an average voter, indirectly affected them, because each win put the two sides of the campaign on more equal footing.

The relevant elements were: changing the referendum question, moving the date of the vote and campaign lead time, maintaining purdah (the pre-election period, typically beginning six weeks before the election, during which the government can not make any announcements that would seem to give advantage to one side or the other), preventing 16-year-olds from voting on the referendum, and keeping the Conservative Party neutral while allowing cabinet ministers to take sides.

Writes Shipman: “None of [these] things was sufficient to win the referendum on its own, but each of them was necessary, and together they may have been decisive” (92).
**Referendum Question:** The question as it was originally written was deemed “doubly unbalanced” by the Electoral Commission, an independent government watchdog that sets standards for well-run elections. It explained only the Remain option and made the “Yes” response the choice for the status quo, and so was changed to “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” Steve Baker, the MP who led the charge to change the referendum question, tells Shipman: “Bearing in mind ICM [a British pollster] thought there was 4 per cent in that question, that battle alone could have won the campaign” (83-4).

**Date and Campaign Lead Time:** There had been plans to hold the referendum vote on May 5, the same day as local elections in England as well as elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, which could have given Conservatives for Remain an advantage in organizing. The date of the referendum was pushed and changed the makeup of voter turnout (Shipman 84).

**Purdah (pre-election period):** “The start of purdah on 27 May 2016 coincided almost exactly with the moment the Leave campaign gained the advantage. It prevented Cameron from using the power of government to grab headlines” (Shipman 87).

**Vote at Sixteen:** The Labour party and Liberal Democrats put forward a bill to give sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds the vote in this referendum, but Cameron’s government saw this as a “precedent that would only help Labour in general elections.” Will Straw, executive director of Britain Stronger in Europe, the Remain campaign, calls the decision “a big mistake” after the referendum (Shipman 89).

**Conservative Party Neutrality:** Pushing for and securing party neutrality meant that the Remain campaign lost the £7 million the Conservative Party would have been allowed to spend — the equivalent of Vote Leave’s entire budget — had they not been neutral. Another consequence of neutrality was that MPs could not access their own canvassing data to target voters (Shipman 88).

**Cabinet Opinions:** Coupled with the Party’s neutrality, allowing cabinet ministers to voice their opinions, rather than holding them to collective responsibility — the convention that says members of the cabinet must publicly support government decisions regardless of personal views (Munro) — allowed major figures to split for Leave, lending the campaign credence (Shipman 89).

Beyond leveling the playing field with those tactics, Vote Leave secured an additional massive win when Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, two significant Conservative Party figures, both decided to campaign for Leave. Writes Shipman, “Of all the things that ensured Cameron did not win, Gove and Johnson’s decisions to campaign for Leave were among the most important. Without them, most people involved think Stronger In would have won easily” (184). Nick Wood, communications director for a Conservative MP says he believes Gove and Johnson were crucial to Vote Leave’s win, saying “they gave people ‘dinner party cover’ to vote ‘Out.’ The fact that two intelligent, thoughtful men kicked against the prevailing metropolitan tide created space for others to come in behind them” (qtd. in Shipman 184).

That is, to gain an actual firm foothold in the country, Vote Leave could not just rely on the votes of the disaffected, it also had to access and speak to the “final third” of whom Cummings wrote -- people who were wary about the EU yet also wary about leaving. Gove and Johnson helped them do that. They were strong spokespersons for Vote Leave and lent the campaign legitimacy, in what otherwise could have been dismissed by detractors as racist and xenophobic. Put another way, “Johnson and Gove … made victory possible by giving the Brexit cause glamour, publicity and intellectual heft that it would otherwise have lacked” (Shipman 600).

Another key lever of power that Vote Leave had in their arsenal was the media, particularly after the purdah period set in at the end of May. This reduced the government’s ability to capture the airwaves and meant that media outlets provided more equal coverage to both sides. Matthew Elliott says purdah “meant [Vote Leave] were able to start dictating the broadcast agenda … because the BBC were giving more balanced coverage to both sides, so the good stuff we were putting out started getting the good coverage it deserved” (Shipman 296). In addition to the purdah period encouraging the media to cover both sides equally, according to Shipman, Vote Leave was “helped by the fact that a campaign that is trying to overturn the existing order in a way that could bring down the government is inherently more interesting to journalists than one arguing for the status quo” (318).
Adaptive Strategies

“Good campaigns are dictatorships, and a strategy is only as good as the campaign manager’s ability to drive it through.”
- Tim Shipman, All out War: the Full Story of Brexit

Throughout the year-or-so-long campaign, Cummings had just one plan: to adhere to a “simple focus on a psychologically compelling message” because it was supported by data (Cummings, “Basic Numbers” 3). Though the message was inflexible, Cummings proved agile and willing to adapt tactics and applications of the message.

Cummings advocated message discipline above everything else, “repeatedly impress[ing] upon Vote Leave staff that ‘You win campaigns like this through message discipline and consistency’.” When MPs reached out to him, wary about using the £350 million figure, Cummings told them, “Stick to your guns” (Shipman 259). By his own admission, “The hard thing was sticking to it despite the sensibilities of many of our own supporters” (Cummings “Branching Histories”).

In the end, this message discipline worked.

According to James McGrory, a Stronger In official, “In focus groups, unprompted, people would tell you Leave’s three top arguments: ‘We spend loads of money on Europe,’ ‘They’re making all the laws out there,’ and ‘Too many immigrants.’ On our side, there was a vague sense that it was good for the economy, but nothing tangible” (Shipman 586). People understood what a Leave vote stood for, and could echo it back, but remained unclear about the real benefits of staying. This is vital when “the public only pays attention to a tiny subsect of issues that politicians and the media bang on about” (Cummings “Branching Histories”). To have them understand their argument but not their opponent’s proved to be an invaluable advantage, because people want to know what they’re voting for and a message that they can rally behind. Vote Leave offered both.

Paul Stephenson, one of Cummings’s chief lieutenants, credits the unflagging commitment to the strategy with Vote Leave’s win: “it was down to Dom setting the strategy, sticking to the strategy, being his obstinate best” (Shipman 586).

Cummings did not compromise on his strategy, despite pressure from prominent and powerful people like Nigel Farage, but his tactics were flexible and broadly applicable because the strategy wasn’t prescriptive. The core of it was to hammer home taking back control, while being able to adjust to societal forces and realities. As he sums up himself, instead of trying to “eradicate” errors, he believed it was more important to ask “how quickly errors are adapted to and learned from” (Cummings “Branching Histories”).

This was even before designation. Though the overarching strategy did not change, and there was a clear-eyed focus on “taking back control,” the tactics and vehicles of implementation evolved. As noted above, the top-of-mind issues for the voting public were the economy and immigration. The central line for UKIP and, by extension, Leave.EU, was around immigration, and urged Cummings and Vote Leave to campaign on the issue. Cummings, however, declined, saying that “A focus on immigration would turn off undecided voters” (Shipman 56). Later on, when Vote Leave finally deployed immigration, Cummings “and others insist he always intended to use the issue nearer polling day,” when Leave had become more generally acceptable (Shipman 56).

Whether or not this is true is largely irrelevant because Cummings and “Vote Leave managed to get the immigration issue to be salient at exactly the right moment” — when the purdah period started, immigration was coming up in public discourse, and postal ballots were arriving in mailboxes (Shipman 296). They seized a moment when the newest immigration figures, which showed actual immigration to be more than three times higher than the government’s target, were released. In response, Vote Leave sent Johnson to do television and radio interviews, a “rare move” for the campaign and dropped leaflets to underscore the divergence (Shipman 286).

According to Cummings, however, “The timing was not ‘a brilliant move’ by me, it was a combination of good luck and seizing a tactical chance to persuade people of something I’d failed to do for weeks, but such things get rewritten as such if you win” (Cummings “Branching Histories”). In this acknowledgment, Cummings demonstrates the flexibility of his plan and his own willingness to adapt to reality and recognize opportunities.

Cummings also quickly pivoted Vote Leave’s digital strategy. Remain outspent Leave by more than £5.6 million but Vote Leave’s powerful, smart, and effective data-based digital operation helped them make more from less (Belfast Telegraph 2017).

With just a couple months to go in the campaign, Vote Leave’s digital operation was failing. At odds with fellow Leavers and with donors growing wary, Cummings “made four decisions to
turn the situation around” (Shipman 415-6): He first appointed Henry de Zoete, who had previously declined the offer to be the campaign’s director of communications, as digital director (Shipman 47). De Zoete and Paul Stephenson then hired as social media experts AggregateIQ, a Canadian political consultancy that had just run the primary campaign of U.S. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX). Cummings then went on to hire three American academics to do data analysis and modelling, and “come at the problem from a different angle.” And lastly, Cummings decided that he would reserve much of their £7 million budget to spend in the final weeks on a web-based GOTV effort.

“Vote Leave’s digital war began weakly, but it would end strongly,” and as we’ll see in the next section, these changes had a significant effect (Shipman 416).

**Pressure**

Vote Leave applied pressure on various audiences, including voters and their opposition, in a variety of ways, whether by acting in secrecy to misdirect and fluster opponents or simply by giving better performances at debates. But pressure was mostly applied to encourage voters — especially the undecided third who were not staunchly Remain or staunchly Leave — to turn out to the polls and vote to Leave while they were there. Tactics included door-knocking and leaflet-distributing, but one of the most interesting pressure tactics involved Vote Leave’s digital strategy. It was code-named the Waterloo Strategy for Wellington’s victory over Napoleon, in which British troops “hoodwinked the French into thinking they were weak by hiding in long grass,” surprising them, and beating them (Shipman 418).

Cummings believes that the campaign’s grassroots component could have been stronger if they had had more time, but they “did what we could given the constraints” (Cummings “Basic Numbers” 2). The campaign “struggled to get volunteers to canvass” (Cummings “Basic Numbers” 7), but even still, it “recruited more active volunteers ... in 10 months than UKIP [had] in 25 years” (Cummings “Branching Histories”).

By law, Vote Leave had £7 million to spend during the official 10 weeks of the referendum campaign. They funneled as much of that budget into digital marketing as possible, and focused most of it “on the last 10 days and on about 9 million ‘persuadables’ — not our core voters — identified by the data science team from a variety of sources with a variety of methods” (Cummings “Basic Numbers” 16). Cummings liked digital advertising because “when things are digital you can be more empirical and control the timing” (Cummings “Branching Histories”). Vote Leave spent the bulk of this £7 million in the last 10 days on Facebook ads, digital ads, and videos, after testing more than 450 different ads and running “loads and loads of experiments for months, but on relatively trivial amounts of money” (Shipman 418). Zack Massingham, Vote Leave’s AggregateIQ contact, describes Cummings as approaching “each ad as if it were its own unique poll or focus group, and would compare those results to what they had observed from the data they had already been gathering” (Shipman 418). Armed with data and insights on which ads were the most effective, the bulk of their budget went into pushing those ads in the last legs of the campaign, creating a targeted onslaught when it mattered most: when people were about to head to the polls.

Even though the canvassing and ground-based elements of the campaign were not as broad as Cummings would have liked, the Leave campaign’s data science team coordinated a get out the vote effort that targeted essential constituencies identified through polling, the ground campaign, and social media targeting (Cummings “Branching Histories”), and reached 96 percent of constituencies through volunteers and mail (Cummings “Basic Numbers” 7). Vote Leave’s digital tactics compensated for a weak ground game.

The pressure, working in concert with their core message, worked. New voters, who had not voted in the 2015 General Election, were “significantly more likely than those who voted in the last General Election to vote Leave.” Remain-leaning voters were more likely to have not voted at all during the Referendum. And Leave mobilized a broader coalition of voters than just the “left behind” (Swales 19).

Of course, it was not solely the Waterloo Strategy, digital advertising, or Vote Leave’s tactics that led to turnout. As Shipman notes, “Credit must ultimately be shared for turning out the vote. Farage and his UKIP army were a key
component, but so too were a Vote Leave field operation and two sets of digital warriors who, like the Guards at Waterloo, got “up and at them’ just in time” (424-5). Leave’s message and its various representatives, sometimes working in harmony and often not, resonated with a broad coalition.

**Criticism**

Whatever else Vote Leave could have done better — from a stronger grassroots infrastructure to a more cohesive coalition — they won, so mistakes are viewed as minor stumbles. But perhaps the biggest criticism that can be leveled against Vote Leave and associated Leave organizations is not about strategies and tactics, and instead about their willingness to act in unethical or illegal ways, communicate misleading or false information, and utilize divisive framing to take advantage of the forces working in their favor.

In July of 2018, Vote Leave was fined £61,000 after being found guilty of breaking electoral law during the campaign (Graham-Harrison) and in December 2018, the European high court found that the campaign’s “corrupt and illegal practices” called the final vote into question (Bowcott). These claims center around just their spending practices, and don’t touch on the other ways in which the campaign allegedly behaved less than honorably, but are representative of the unscrupulous ways Leave is alleged to have worked.

Ryan Coetzee, a strategic advisor to Stronger In, “accused Vote Leave of deliberately tapping into a culture of distrust that was fuelling populist movements across the West: ‘They spent lots and lots of money online and in their literature telling people stuff that is not true. It was designed to make you fear foreigners’” (Shipman 302). Alastair Campbell, once Tony Blair’s Downing Street Director of Communications and Strategy and an advisor to Stronger In, says “[t]he £350 million a week was actually a straightforward lie. I can’t remember campaigns where you mount the campaign based on a lie, and then when it’s exposed, you just keep going” (Shipman 258-9).

But Cummings seemed to welcome the controversy: “Every time there was a row about the size of the cost to taxpayers of EU membership, it simply reinforced in voters’ minds that there was a high cost.” Rob Oxley, Vote Leave’s head of media, says “It was a row we wanted to have” and Bernard Jenkin, MP, added, “It was deliberately controversial” (Shipman 259). Vote Leave was unabashedly willing to mislead and fan the flames of discord.

While this approach was successful, it also holds the potential to be dangerous in a sociopolitical environment like the one that exists today in the United States. Irresponsible rhetoric from some prominent national leaders has triggered a rise in violence as well as overt expressions and acts of racism, including hate crimes. These tactics, at best underhanded and at worst illegal and immoral, are not ones that ought to be considered by any ethical campaign.

**Conclusion**

In the end, a margin of victory for Leave equivalent to just over 1% of registered voters, decided the fate of the United Kingdom and Europe for decades to come. Any number of things could have tipped the scales the other way -- higher turnout, lowering the voting age, or the selection of Nigel Farage as a more prominent figurehead.

In Cummings’s own words:

The closest approximation to the truth that we can get is that Leave won because of a combination of 1) three big, powerful forces with global impact ... which created conditions in which the referendum could be competitive; 2) Vote Leave implemented some unrecognised simplicities in its operations that focused attention more effectively than the other side on a simple and psychologically compelling story, thus taking advantage of those three big forces; and 3) Cameron and [then Chancellor of the Exchequer George] Osborne operated with a flawed model of ... effective political action and had bad judgement about key people [...] and therefore they made critical errors. (“Branching Histories”).

But regardless of what Remain and Cameron’s failings were, it is Cummings’s second point that is most salient. Vote Leave had a clearer understanding of the electorate and the overarching sociopolitical moment, creating a simple and compelling message that resonated within that system and staying true to “Vote Leave. Take Control” above everything else. That message did what it was supposed to do: it mobilized a disaffected electorate to vote at the polls. The development of this message was both data- and intuition-based, and was communicated by various spokespeople effective across a broad coalition of voters. The power was not in Leave’s hands, but they used what they had keenly, and forced the power to shift to them.

It wasn’t one thing that Vote Leave did, or even all of the things that Vote Leave did, that led to the final result. In situations like Brexit, where the only choices are in or out, so
much also depends on your opponent, and that’s something out of any campaign’s control. But if Vote Leave exemplifies anything, it’s that clear-eyed and adaptable strategies and tactics, an effective message and vehicles, and data-backed intuition can win the day.

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SUMMARY

The biggest national labor story in the U.S. in a generation was an effort started by low-wage workers in the retail and fast food industries to advocate for an increase of the federal minimum wage to $15 per hour. The federal minimum wage serves as the legal “floor” for most non-salaried workers in the private sector and has remained steady at $7.25 an hour since immediately after the beginning of the recession in 2009. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents around two million workers, became the main organizer and funder of Fight for a Fair Economy – the precursor to the public Fight for $15 campaign. The SEIU saw the opportunity to use a visible issue that affected millions of workers across the country to create a campaign that would also support the union’s longer term goals:

• First, the campaign sought to change the national narrative around income inequality and stagnant wages.
• Second, it sought to change policy and actually establish a living wage.
• Third, at a time when unions were in decline, the campaign tried to establish a new style of labor movement to drive more recruitment and signifying the rise of “alt-labor.”

The campaign not only achieved a $15 per hour minimum wage in Seattle within one year, but also reframed how low-wage work and workers are viewed in America. The third goal - rebuild dwindling union power - is still a work in progress and it remains to be seen whether that strategy is successful.

Context

The economic downturn left one in every six American workers unemployed. The Tea Party blamed the economic crisis on the federal government, immigrants, and unions and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker launched a union-busting plan. Meanwhile, the SEIU leaders talked about “the 7 percent problem,” or the low percentage of private-sector American workers who belonged to unions (Rosenblum 387).

Jonathan Rosenblum, SEIU campaign director at the Sea-Tac Airport campaign, explains how the SEIU had an “epiphany” at this time to prevent the organization from sliding into irrelevance: “SEIU swung the union’s resources into a massive, $60 million grassroots campaign in 17 cities around the country, deploying 1,500 organizers to reclaim the high ground in the economic debate and to organize workers into unions on a massive scale” (Rosenblum 387). This campaign was the Fight for a Fair Economy, which laid the groundwork for the Fight for $15.

CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS

Vision

The Fight for $15’s vision was to confront income inequality by changing the policy and narrative around a living wage. Long term, the leaders behind the campaign sought to revive the bargaining power of unions after decades of declining membership and recent legislation that weakened their power.

The SEIU began with massive neighborhood canvasses that fed into protests outside banks and inside shareholder meetings. The Fight for a Fair Economy, the predecessor to Fight for $15, blossomed in cities throughout the US in early 2011, and workers from low wage retail, fast food, airport, health care, child care, and other industries merged into the movement. In Seattle, Sea-Tac airport workers organized a local campaign, and in New York City, fast food workers rallied around the call for “$15 and a union,” launching what became known as the Fight for $15 campaign (Rosenblum 388).
Initially, the demand for $15 an hour seemed like a pipe dream. At the launch of the campaign, New York fast food workers only earned between $7.50 to $8.50 an hour, which put them well below the poverty line. The bold demand of $15 an hour helped the campaign resonate with workers who were excited to advocate for a living wage. Keeshan Harley, a member of Make the Road New York, a nonprofit that focuses on justice issues, said “In New York City, it’s kind of impossible to work on $8 an hour when you have $1,900 to $2,000 rents. So we need $15 an hour. That’s the bare minimum. That is just moving toward sustainability in the city.” A vision for a real livable wage engaged low wage workers and captured the attention of the public in a way that a more incremental change wouldn’t have.

Over time, Fight for $15 shifted away from its initial goal of increasing union membership and focused all of its resources on the push for a living wage - believing that achieving a bold policy goal would be its own best recruitment tool.

Framing

One of the biggest accomplishments of the Fight for $15 campaign was its success in re-framing the way that low-wage work and workers are viewed. The campaign borrowed framing from the Occupy movement, which changed the narrative around the wealthy and exposed skyrocketing inequality. Beginning in 2011, the Occupy movement offered new language on income inequality, dividing the nation into the wealthiest 1% and the remaining 99%, changing how politicians talked about the economy and the media reported on economic issues (Dreier). Occupy led to the insertion of income inequality into the broader political discourse and created a receptive audience for Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (“Measuring Occupy Wall Street’s Impact, 5 Years Later”). Further, it made Americans increasingly aware of the exorbitant salaries of CEOs while working class wages stayed stagnant (Dreier).

Fight for $15 framed the solution to workers’ problems as a common-sense, living wage. The narrative appealed to logic, and was presented in a simple call to action: “$15 and a union” (i.e. the right to earn a living wage and form a union). The campaign also had clear villains, targeting industry leader McDonald’s (among others) as the second largest private employer in the world, with a 17% market share and raking in $25 billion annual in sales (Ashby “Assessing” 367). Much like Occupy reframed how we think about inequality, Fight for $15 changed how we think about low-wage work and workers (Juravich). It changed the narrative of workers’ rights and raising wages more than any other labor or workers’ rights movement in our lifetime (Ashby “Assessing” 377).

Organizational Structure

The Fight for $15 campaign used a mix of grassroots organizing as well as top-down leadership. While the SEIU is the main organizer and financial backer, workers’ rights activists in cities and states have also played an important role in bringing the campaign to life by organizing in their local areas. Robert Reich, former Labor Secretary during Bill Clinton’s presidency, noted that the Fight for $15’s organizational structure differs from other labor campaigns as: “It’s more decentralized, for one thing, with lots of people getting involved in all sorts of ways.” While traditional labor campaigns focus on one employer at a time, the Fight for $15 crosses boundaries to involve workers from sectors as diverse as fast food, giant retailers, major hotels and hospitals (Liacas).

According to Tom Liacas and Jason Mogus, strategists at NetChange Consulting, “In 2016, the most talked about campaigns – #Fight for 15 ($15/hour minimum wage), Black Lives Matter, Keystone/Tar Sands/Climate and Bernie Sanders’ election race – are all living proof that it is possible to run networked people-powered campaigns that are focused and effective at the same time” (“Networked Change”). This is due to the fact that campaigns in this group tend to share power and decision-making with their supporters, and organize and align new sources of self-organized power. They’re led by active central command structures that control resource management, framing, and storytelling, while also dedicating significant attention to political moments and media narrative work. These types of campaigns follow a framework Liacas and Mogus call “directed-network campaigning.”

Directed-network campaigning embraces four principles, all of which the Fight for $15 follows:

- **Opening to grassroots power**: The Fight for $15 opened up to grassroots power by allowing local groups to build distinct identities and assembled a wide base of grassroots support to ensure visibility with corporate targets
- **Building cross-movement network hubs**: The SEIU’s campaign to fight for low paid workers in retail and

fast food didn’t stop with its own union membership. They created a broader campaign around the minimum wage that could be picked up by all workers and groups fighting against economic inequality and racial injustice. Fight for $15 was also able to find common areas of interest with the Black Lives Matter movement and the Occupy movement.

**Framing a compelling cause:** The Fight for $15 mobilized supporters around the threat of villains: Walmart, McDonald’s, and other employers.

**Running with focus and discipline:** The Fight for $15 played the long game and spent years working hard to gain success. Although the movement has been active since 2012, it didn’t succeed in getting Walmart and McDonald’s to raise minimum wages until 2015.

**Power**

There is no denying that Fight for $15 pulled strength from the SEIU’s financial resources – in 2016 alone, the SEIU spent $19 million on groups advocating for the campaign (Devaney). But equally, if not more important, was the role of SEIU International President Mary Kay Henry, who served as a powerful champion.

While many in the labor movement worried about how to turn workers into dues-paying union members, Henry focused on building a movement of low-wage workers first and making sure they had a clear set of demands. She said, “Membership is not our foremost question. Our first concern is winning fifteen dollars and a union” (Rolf 93).

In addition to Henry, the Fight for $15 also brought Democrats and other progressive allies into the fold. Since the campaign’s launch in 2012, the idea of a $15/hour minimum wage has become a popular talking point for Democrats in office or those seeking election (Jones). One such Democrat is House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who backed the Raise the Wage Act (introduced earlier in 2019) to raise the federal minimum wage to $15/hour by 2024 through annual increases (Pramuk).

The Fight for $15 counts on support from unions, community groups, and religious organizations, all allies that have participated in the organized strikes and rallies (Dreier). One example of these groups coming together was in New York in 2012, when organizing and union stalwarts like the SEIU, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, and grassroots groups like Make the Road New York and New York Communities for Change, joined forces to help car wash and fast food workers assemble to demand stronger enforcement of wage laws, easier access to joining a union, and annual workplace inspections (Thomas and McKissack).

The large numbers of minimum-wage workers in America, whose precarious economic situation was made worse by the recession, proved to be an audience eager to hear a message addressing their frustrations. That ready audience meant the Fight for $15 campaign was able to mobilize workers in cities all over the country, bringing fast-food workers, big box chain workers, janitors, and other low-wage employees together to demand better pay. Fast food campaigns connected local workers with experienced union and community organizers. The walkouts by fast food workers were “the largest single set of mobilizations by low-wage workers in contemporary history” (Rolf 91).

**Leadership**

There are few publicly available details on campaign leadership. The SEIU served as the main organizer and funder of the Fight for $15 campaign, and was also open to local leadership and cross-movement input. Fight for $15 operates on the financial and staff resources the SEIU provides, and also works with campaign consulting and public relations firms. Campaign leaders used centralized planning to guide local groups towards shared moments and milestones (Liacas). But it is not known, for instance, to what degree the campaign was directed from the top down.

As discussed previously, the SEIU’s International president, Mary Kay Henry, championed the cause and was an outspoken advocate for building a grassroots movement of low-wage workers. A national campaign organizer shared that Henry’s personal commitment to local organizing influenced SEIU’s approach, but little else about Henry’s involvement has been made public.

**Timing**

The Fight for $15 campaign took advantage of the zeitgeist created by two other movements: the living-wage movement had been advocating for increased pay for decades, and the “Occupy” movement, which sprouted up the year before. These populist, worker-led movements paved the way for the Fight for $15 campaign to not only continue advocating for workers’ rights, but also to spread that message at a moment when economic inequality had taken center stage in the national discourse.

In the 1990s and 2000s, workers’ rights advocates began targeting local governments as a way to achieve policy goals.
that weren’t politically possible on a federal level. One of the first victories of this approach took place in Baltimore in the 1990s when a community-labor coalition won the nation’s first “living wage” (Rolf 62). The living wage is an economic policy concept that rejects the notion that the market should dictate workers’ livelihood. It first emerged in the 1870s as an alternative to the labor movement’s goals of abolishing “wage slavery.” There is no single definition of a ‘living wage’ but it is broadly defined as an hourly salary that allows a working family of four to live above the federal poverty line. The living wage movement became “one of the nation’s strongest grassroots political reactions to more than a quarter-century of rising economic inequality” (Moberg).

However, despite the popularity of the living wage campaign amongst workers’ rights activists, it didn’t always lead to the creation of self-sustaining organizations and was not as effective in cities without a strong labor movement or the ability to form a ballot initiative (Rolf 63).

In 2011, the Occupy movement shed light on income inequality as the gulf between the 1% and the 99% continued to grow during the Great Recession. Occupy captured the attention of Americans through unconventional tactics – for example, artists were arrested after days of protesting nude on Wall Street and hacker collective, Anonymous, spread information about hacks on prominent financial websites. The movement went global, with tens of thousands of protesters marching in the streets of more than 900 cities around the world (Rolf 86).

Labor leaders took note of this movement that galvanized the national conversation on income inequality. While in the beginning, union members were reluctant to be involved, the SEIU and other unions did send funding and staff to Occupy protests in dozens of cities (Rolf 86). The timing was right for the SEIU to organize a grassroots campaign that would rally workers to demand a living wage and union representation.

**Adaptive Strategies**

From the start, the Fight for $15 movement was fueled by grassroots-driven advocacy. It leveraged people power and also drew strength from the intersectional networks the movement built, making it a flexible campaign that was able to adapt while maintaining a national focus.

When the Fight for $15 started, the SEIU took advantage of the changing American workplace, one where wages were stagnant and fewer workers had access to a union, and created a solution that fit their specific needs. The SEIU did this by shifting from the typical union collective bargaining strategy to a strategic grassroots campaign.

The Fight for $15 leadership was able to learn – both what worked and what didn’t – from the Fight for a Fair Economy campaign, which the SEIU had been running for several years. According to a senior organizer within the Fight for $15 campaign, one of the main lessons they took from their predecessor campaign was to flip their campaign structure. Where the Fight for a Fair Economy operated with decentralized strategy and centralized tactics – for example, local campaigns had different names and leaders, but were trying to replicate national tactics such as nationwide actions on the same day – Fight for $15 chose a centralized strategy with decentralized tactics.

They operate as a “directed-network campaign” to ensure that central command structures take the lead on resource management and framing while still giving freedom and agency to grassroots supporters (Mogus and Liacas). Per a senior organizer, after the Fight for $15 campaign centralized their strategy, the campaign’s messaging, days of national action, and a digital acquisition campaign allowed them to run a smoother operation in which they recruited low-wage workers online and connected them to organizers who planned the actions.

Throughout the course of the campaign, the SEIU had to shift and adapt. Though there was conflicting information, it seems at the start there were three goals – 1) to raise awareness around income inequality, 2) to achieve a $15 minimum wage through policy change, and 3) increase the union’s membership. But as the campaign gained steam and became the Fight for $15, the third goal was put aside to focus on what looked like a promising chance to secure real policy wins.

**Pressure**

Fight for $15 used tactics that differed from traditional union organizing campaigns. Instead of open-ended strikes, the campaign used one-day strikes. This approach was more effective and better for workers because employers typically do not hire replacements for short strikes, so they had to allow strikers to return to work the next day. Additionally, labor attorney Robert M. Schwartz argues that one-day strikes send a strong message to management and the public, and dramatizes workers anger and determination (Ashby 370). The SEIU has used the tactic of one-day strikes more than other unions.
One-day strikes also attracted media attention, which helped reposition the $15/hour minimum wage from an extreme demand to a reasonable and attainable goal (Ashby 371). The media also shared workers’ stories with the public, personalizing the Fight for $15 and recognizing workers for their activism.

The Fight for $15 has not shied away from using other methods of civil disobedience, a bold and unusual approach for workers’ movements (Ashby 372). An estimated 900 to 1,000 workers have been arrested nationally over the course of the campaign.

While the federal government hasn’t yet raised the minimum wage, there have been many wins in cities and states that have buoyed the movement. Some examples include:

- **In November 2014**, San Francisco voters passed a referendum for a $15 an hour wage
- **In the summer of 2015**, both the city and county governments of Los Angeles voted to raise the minimum wage to $15
- **In Chicago**, the city council approved Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s plan to raise the hourly wage to $13 by 2019 (After Emanuel had opposed a $9 minimum wage when he served as White House chief of staff)
- **In New York**, Mayor Bill de Blasio proposed a $15/hour minimum wage
- **In Massachusetts**, the state legislature raised the minimum wage to $11 by 2017, the highest state wage in the country (Rolf 193)

This steady stream of wins has allowed the movement to keep the drumbeat going.

**Criticism**

The Fight for $15 has faced criticism from progressives who argue the campaign has failed to achieve its third goal of a union contract (Ashby “In Defense”). They point to the worsening of the “seven percent” problem, with the unionization rate in the private sector now down to 6.4 percent (Union Members Summary).

Progressives have also described the Fight for $15 as “pretend power,” a “march on the media,” a “public relations campaign,” a “top down campaign,” and “media hype” (Ashby “In Defense”). Much of this criticism stems from the campaign’s prominent use of the one-day strikes discussed above. These critics have argued that one-day strikes are only “pretend power” for online attention (Ashby 370).

Glenn Spencer, the vice president of the Workforce Freedom Initiative for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, has claimed the protests “aren’t about wages or working conditions, they are about promoting the SEIU’s campaign to unionize the fast-food industry. Yet after investing two years and at least $30 million in these PR stunts, the SEIU still struggles to find actual employees to participate, let alone express an interest in joining a union” (Horovitz and Alcindor). In contrast, Steven Ashby, labor educator and long-time activist, argues that there is indeed a media campaign, and that’s a good thing: “Changing the conversation about the minimum wage is vital. You cannot win without changing the narrative” (Ashby 377).

**Conclusion**

The Fight for $15 campaign shifted labor reform in a way that hadn’t been done in decades. As we wait and see if Congress passes the Raise the Wage Act to raise the federal minimum wage to $15/hour by 2024, we have the Fight for $15 campaign to thank for mobilizing workers across the country and pressuring employers as well as lawmakers to implement a living wage. While it’s too soon to know if this approach will herald a new era for union organizing, the Fight for $15 campaign is an incredible example of a contemporary directed-network effort that was able to remain agile while still effectively mobilizing and engaging the masses.
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SUMMARY

There was no blueprint for how to stop the fossil fuel industry in the U.S. until the Keystone XL campaign came along. It was the equivalent of an environmental David v. Goliath tale—a global oil and gas company seeking to expand its system of pipelines against an unprecedented coalition fighting to stop them. In 2008, energy company TransCanada proposed the building of an 1,179-mile addition to its existing Keystone oil pipeline network that would carry tar sands oil from the fields in western Canada to processing facilities in Nebraska. For TransCanada, the proposed XL pipeline represented a shorter and higher-capacity route for the oil. For opponents like the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Keystone XL “was designed to transport the planet’s dirtiest fossil fuel to market, fast.”

Opposition to the Keystone XL proposal set off seven years of public protests and a well-orchestrated pressure campaign by a coalition of environmental advocacy groups that did the impossible—stop ‘Big Oil’.

The campaign is largely regarded as successful because President Obama denied the permit, but the bigger success was the creation of a twenty-first century climate movement whose impact is evident from the proposed “Green New Deal” and likely will be felt for years to come.

Context

There were two seemingly unrelated events happening in the environmental movement at the end of the 2000s that ultimately coalesced and propelled Keystone as the preeminent environmental battle.

The first was the state of climate change advocacy as a whole. President Barack Obama had been elected after campaigning as an environmental champion who had promised to tackle the serious issue of climate change (Broder). Soon after he assumed office, the first-ever federal cap-and-trade legislation, the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, was introduced in the U.S. Congress. The bill ultimately passed the House but was defeated in the Senate (Center for Climate and Energy Solutions). Five additional pieces of environmental legislation were introduced during that session but none survived the 111th Congress (Center for Climate and Energy Solutions). Following the 2010 election when Republicans regained control of the House, environmental advocacy shifted from offense to defense and President Obama focused on health care and the economy, not climate change. The national environmental movement was fractured and defeated (Lizza 8).

The second series of events related directly to pipeline battles. While Keystone ultimately became the highest-profile infrastructure fight in the U.S., similar battles were happening elsewhere, particularly in Alberta, Canada. The battle against converting and extracting tar sands into usable fuel in Canada was in many ways the inspiration and blueprint for Keystone. Led in large part by Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and eventually with participation by local ranchers and farmers and environmental organizations, these groups joined forces to confront the global oil companies directly (Democracy Center). These early efforts gained media attention but didn’t succeed in changing outcomes. In time, NRDC would join forces as the first U.S. environmental group engaging in the tar sands fight (Swift), with little initial success. Tactics included targeting shareholder meetings of the oil companies, civil disobedience in the Canadian legislature, and exposing Canadian politicians for siding with corporate interests over local communities (Democracy Center).

In late 2008, TransCanada filed a permit with the U.S. State Department to expand its existing Keystone pipeline system over the U.S. - Canada border. This proposed pipeline would carry 830,000 barrels of crude oil per day from Canada and North Dakota down to oil refineries on the Gulf Coast (Plumer...
Two months after the permit was filed, a group was convened—whose members would ultimately form the core campaign strategists: environmental groups such as NRDC, Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation; First Nations (Canada) and Native American (U.S.); activist groups such as Idle No More and Indigenous Environmental Network; and community stakeholders along the pipeline route, including Bold Nebraska and local landowner groups (Adler 5). As Kenny Bruno, former campaign coordinator at Corporate Ethics International and a key strategist and donor liaison said, “There had been a cry for help from Alberta, where small First Nations and a couple of watchdog groups were seeing this massive expansion of the dirtiest project on earth. And almost no one on earth had heard of it” (Adler 3).

Two years of planning and environmental impact review hearings would pass before James Hansen, NASA climate scientist, published an essay called “Silence is Deadly,” arguing “fully developing the tar sands would mean ‘game over’ for the climate” (Adler 5). That essay found its way to Bill McKibben, a former journalist who had been writing about climate change since the 1980s. McKibben became entirely focused on Keystone, saying “You couldn’t find a grosser way to wreck the planet than what we’re doing. If we’re going to do anything about global warming, it’s the poster child for the kind of stuff that’s going to have to stay in the ground” (Lizza 12).

As the State Department dithered, the campaign to block the Keystone permit began gearing up just as President Obama was seeking re-election.

CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS

Vision

From the beginning, the outlook was bleak. Most comparable infrastructure projects get ‘rubber-stamped’ approvals. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had already indicated she was “inclined” to approve the pipeline, a previous pipeline from Alberta to Illinois had recently been approved (Adler 2), and “the lineup promoting TransCanada’s interests was a textbook study in modern, bipartisan corporate influence peddling” (Mayer 2).

Despite all this, the stated goal of the campaign was tangible and bold: to stop the approval of Keystone XL. This was the goal from the beginning, with no tolerance for those who argued for a more incremental approach to make the proposed pipeline safer (Bruno). But the goal was in fact much bigger than that—Keystone strategists and climate activists “want[ed] Obama to use Keystone as a symbolic opportunity to move America away from fossil fuels” (Lizza 29).

Timing

Symbolically, McKibben and others understood this wasn’t about one pipeline project, despite public arguments around the devastating math of the project. Keystone was a moment to help build a climate movement (Shor). The climate movement was stagnant after suffering defeats in Congress, plodding through incremental international climate agreements and watching the Republican party embrace climate denialism (Hestres 4). McKibben in particular had grown disenchanted with the political process given the influence the oil and gas industry had in Congress (Kolbert 2), and began exploring other models. According to McKibben, “…I was struck by the fact that we never really had a movement about climate” (Cohn), and had begun to organize divestment campaigns on college campuses through the newly created 350.org. Building on some early successes, he then focused on the Keystone battle, explaining in a letter to allies “…We don’t have the money to compete…but we do have our bodies” (Mayer 3). Kate Gordon, an adviser to prominent environmentalist Tom Steyer at that time, added “The goal is as much about organizing young people around a thing. But you have to have a thing. You can’t organize people around a tipping point on climate change” (Lizza 9).

Scientifically, around 2010-2011, there was a growing consensus among scientists led by Hansen, that in order to keep global warming below 2 degrees Celsius, most remaining fossil fuels had to remain in the ground—including Canadian tar sands (Adler 6). McKibben later explained, “Hansen gave us the number we needed to work with” (Cohn). McKibben would soon thereafter make the public case in the Rolling Stone article “Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math,” clearly and forcefully elevating Keystone as the environmental battle of our time (Lizza 13).

Politically, if the campaign could shift the terrain from the State Department (where they had been getting no traction) to President Obama, then there was a chance to win given the President’s re-election campaign and need for environmental donors’ support. John Podesta, then an adviser to Steyer stated, “People were beginning to doubt the President’s
commitment” (Lizza 8). Keystone “became the test of the question: Are we going to do anything long term about climate change?, as he had promised in the 2008 election” (Lizza). Also relevant were the election results in Canada in 2015, where strongly pro-Keystone leader Prime Minister Stephen Harper was defeated and replaced by Justin Trudeau. Though Trudeau supported Keystone, he was less enthusiastic than his predecessor and greatly wanted to establish a good rapport with President Obama (Plummer).

Power

The Keystone coalition was unequivocally one of its greatest attributes. It had a rare combination of both inside-power (with DC-based and experienced policy advocates/lawyers) and outside-power (youthful grassroots activists); passionate and committed donors; adaptive strategists at the helm – all infused with an underdog spirit (Bruno).

Mirroring the tar sands efforts in Canada, there was a unique focus on ensuring this effort was about people as much as it was about policy (Shor). Unlike typical environmental campaigns up to that point, communities that would be directly impacted by the pipeline (such as Native communities and ranchers and farmers) were as integral to the strategic direction as the policy-focused environmental groups (Kleeb). This was in large part because Tribal advocates were the ones to initially invite the environmental groups “to the table” (Swift). Having significant engagement by Tribal leaders was important for the coalition, providing “spiritual nourishment” (Bruno) and adding gravity to the fight. That same mentality would inspire the D.C.-based environmental groups to connect with local community stakeholders along the route, specifically Jane Kleeb of Bold Nebraska, in the very early stages of campaign strategy development (Kleeb).

And while there were some tensions and stereotyping among groups who have not traditionally worked together, these were overcome through collective civic actions and ‘in the trenches experiences’ and the role that donor money played in ensuring this diverse coalition worked together (Kleeb).

With this core group intact, the next critical component was to connect to the energy and breadth of the growing number of climate activists at the grassroots level. Here, 350.org “filled the gap between local grassroots activists and national environmental organizations” (Adler 7). 350.org also comfortably assumed the role of the more confrontational part of the coalition - the ones willing to get people arrested [and show up to directly confront Obama at his events] (Shor).

Now the coalition had all the requisite parts: established environmental group to advise on policy and political strategy within D.C.’s hall of powers; ‘strange bedfellow’ stakeholders from communities that cut across partisan lines; grassroots activists (mostly youth) with energy and passion; and strategists that understood the national and local political landscapes; all supported by committed donors who were unified in the collective vision.

Pressure

Few campaigns are able to generate and sustain pressure over long periods of time as successfully as the Keystone campaign. Inspired by the civil disobedience actions from the civil rights
and LGBT movements (Adler 9), McKibben understood “The job of movements is to keep brewing up the gale-force winds that shifted our political landscape” (McKibben). Because the bigger goal was to build a movement, the key strategists created a tone that invited participation and engagement and embraced more of an open-source organizing model allowing for improvisation (Shor). The campaign was mindful of creating various actions suitable for their broad coalition – actions that were authentic for each constituency and served a strategic purpose. The campaign was also particularly savvy about combining online and offline actions using online platforms to expand supporters and offline actions to deepen engagement (Hestres 2). A senior member of the 350.org team described the realization as follows: “We learned from the civil rights and LGBT groups [who] were beginning to make headway pressuring the Administration. Environmentalists were probably the last ones to learn that to make progress on this Administration, you had to push them hard” (Adler 9).

And so they pushed. Beginning in 2011, Indigenous climate advocates began organizing tribal councils to pass resolutions opposing Keystone in communities across the country, eventually to be delivered to the President at a tribal leaders summit (Adler 4). This reinforced the human impacts of the proposed pipeline, particularly for communities connected to the land. By August of that year, 350.org launched the first significant public action in D.C., a typically dead time in the muggy capital (Adler 8). Over a two-week period, 1,253 people were arrested after sitting down in a public right of way in front of the White House to protest the pipeline (Adler 4). Given its size and high profile location, the stunt effectively drew national media attention from political, and not just environmental, reporters to Keystone for the first time. This shifted the attention directly to President Obama and away from the State Department (Hestes 11). Importantly, the actions at the White House weren’t taken only by young climate activists, but also included stakeholders along the proposed pipeline route, such as ranchers and farmers who had never been to D.C. before (Adler 8).

A few months later, the State Department issued a favorable environmental impact statement on the pipeline, so the campaign organized through coalition partners and online engagement tools an impressive 15,000 people to surround the White House in response (Adler 9). This protest coupled with an assessment from the U.S. EPA claiming flaws in the State Department’s analysis, resulted in a delay (Adler 9). At this time, the Republican leadership starting paying attention and assumed the role of the villain, making the issue an interesting partisan political fight (Adler 9). “What really made it the most famous pipeline never built was the GOP, which seized on it thinking it was a weak point for the president,” said Bruno (Adler 10).

By this point, President Obama’s re-election campaign was in full swing. He was being met at every campaign stop with climate activists opposing Keystone. His field offices were constantly hearing from local climate activists and he was getting an earful from environmentally-aligned donors (Lizza 2). When Republicans tried to force pro-Keystone legislation through Congress, the campaign sent over 800,000 messages in a 24-hour period to the Senate (Adler 10).

Obama’s rhetoric on Keystone shifted as the campaign progressed and following his victory in 2012, he gave a seminal speech at Georgetown University where he reframed the terms for approving the project to be about climate impact, not job creation (Adler 11).

The State Department came out with its revised environmental impact analysis in 2014 stating that the pipeline would have no impact on the climate since the tar sands would be developed anyway (Adler 12). The campaign’s response was to organize a week-long series of events on the National Mall in D.C. in April 2014. The theme was “cowboys and Indians” – inspired by an alliance between ranchers and Native Americans that stopped uranium mining in the 1980s. The two groups participated jointly in educational trainings, culminating in a rally and concert. The event was wildly successful. It was the first time the White House acknowledged they had its attention. Kleeb of Bold Nebraska explained, “These faces are not the images you usually have of the environmental movement...We were helping the White House understand that there was political space [to] reject it” (Adler 13).

By the end of 2015, Keystone became synonymous with the Republican Party as oil and gas prices dropped. Also by this time, high profile supporters like the Dalai Lama, Nobel 2).
laureates and musicians and actors were joining the effort to keep the issue in the news and bring in new supporters.

The political landscape had shifted, resulting from constant gale-force winds generated by an unprecedented coalition of supporters in the environmental space united around a clear vision of rejecting the pipeline.

**Leadership**

The strength of leadership is evident both in the strategists referenced above and with McKibben in particular as the public face for Keystone. McKibben created 350.org after being disillusioned by years of Congressional inaction on climate, particularly the failure to pass a federal cap and trade bill. By then, he was “allergic to the inside game” (Kleeb) and felt the only way to combat the fossil fuel industry’s influence was to build a climate movement from the outside (Kolbert 3). He had studied social movements and respected the power of civil actions from the civil rights and LGBT movements (Mayer 3). He had begun to gain some traction organizing at college campuses, just as Keystone was heating up.

In many ways, McKibben saw the bigger view before anyone else – he saw an opportunity to help run a national high-profile campaign to build a movement (Swift; Shor). In addition to his vision, McKibben is acknowledged to have an unparalleled ability to articulate why people should care about an issue that often feels esoteric (Bruno). He evokes passion and commitment in a way that inspires others to follow. He also was described as trusting his team, specifically the younger activists who best understood how to mobilize their peers (ibid). Lastly, he was credited with setting a tone of respect and appreciation for the role each person played throughout this campaign version of David vs. Goliath.

**Adaptive Strategies**

In addition to ensuring coalition cohesion, donors were aligned on the goal but adaptive around the strategies deployed. These core donors, who had initially been engaged around the tar sands fight, understood the strategy would shift as the decision makers for Keystone approval shifted (i.e. from State Department to Congress to the President), and they were confident in the key strategists to navigate those shifts (Bruno).

It also helped that the overwhelming belief from the beginning – from donors to key strategists – that blocking Keystone was unlikely to happen. So there was a freedom of low expectations across the board and a sense of “desperation” to try whatever was needed (Swift; Bruno). It was also always about the campaign goal first and organizational needs second (Bruno).

**Framing**

From the start, the Keystone strategists understood a core tenet of the framing theory – framing was essential to driving mass engagement, and the strongest framing was to make the Keystone fight not about one pipeline, but rather part of a larger desire to fight climate change (Hestres 5). There was a clear segment of the American population, around 18% at that time known as the “alarmed” audience (Hestres 5), “who are already deeply concerned about climate change and who think collective action is necessary to solve the crisis (Hestres 7-8). The framing was designed for that audience specifically. The tone was also intentionally alarmist yet also motivating, influenced by Obama’s 2008 campaign themes, and different than typical ‘gloom and doom’ environmental efforts (Shor).

Importantly, there were phases where other frames dominated the conversation. Proponents of the pipeline wanted to talk about job creation and economic prosperity – frames delivered consistently by both business interests and labor unions (Hestres 12). Keystone opponents effectively countered these narratives by challenging the messengers as corporate interests and elevating safety concerns as more important than short-term job creation (Democracy Center). It was critical to counter those narratives but equally important to return to the desired frame of climate change impacts. And ultimately, that frame prevailed, as illustrated by President Obama’s own language when he announced he would deny the permit: “if we’re going to prevent large parts of this Earth from becoming not only inhospitable but uninhabitable in our lifetimes, we’re going to have keep some fossil fuels in the ground rather than burn them and release more dangerous pollution into the sky” (McKibben).

**Criticism**

The main criticism of the Keystone effort at the time was that it wasn’t the right target, that “…Keystone is at best marginally relevant to the cause of stopping global warming. The whole crusade increasingly looks like a bizarre misallocation of political attention” (Chait 1). The argument went even further, that even if the Keystone XL route was blocked, TransCanada or other companies would use any
of the other 70 oil pipelines across the US-Canadian border to transport the tar sands oil (Plumer 2015). Moreover, by focusing on Keystone, the environmental movement wasn’t focusing on “using the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate existing power plants. That’s a tool Obama has that can bring American greenhouse gas emissions in line with international standards, and thus open the door to lead an international climate treaty in 2015. The amount of carbon emissions at stake in the EPA fight dwarf the stakes of the Keystone decision” (Chait 2).

In retrospect, it seems critics missed the larger movement-building value of the Keystone fight, while also not realizing Obama would in fact use regulatory power to curtail existing power plants. Most of those regulatory actions have been, or are in the process of being reversed by the Trump Administration.

Conclusion

President Roosevelt once told labor leaders advocating for major reforms, “I agree with you, I want to do it, now make me do it” (Lizza 4). Keystone was no different. It set a clear vision, built and managed a powerful coalition unified around that vision, and kept the pressure over many years squarely on President Obama to make a defining political decision.

Keystone successfully helped mobilize a climate movement the U.S. had never seen before, showing it was in fact possible to confront the fossil fuel industry and prevail. “Sometimes you tackle those fights like Keystone XL and the world around you changes, and it catches up to where you are” (Adler 14).

It is unclear how the larger story around climate advocacy will play out over time, or even if Keystone will be built under the Trump Administration. But, there is no doubt the Green New Deal would not be generating the kind of immediate attention and passion, but for the success of Keystone and the community of climate activists it built (Goodrich). There is now a unifying belief this challenge can be addressed and that belief may be the most potent weapon in the advocates’ arsenal.

WORKS CITED


SUMMARY

The growth of charter schools in the U.S. has been a hot-button debate in public education for years. Charters are public schools that are privately operated but publicly funded. Some school districts and states have tried various tactics to limit their growth including placing caps on the number of charter schools or other restrictions on where and how they can operate. In 2016, organizations supporting public charter schools in Massachusetts placed a measure on the November ballot asking voters to approve an increase in the number of charters allowed under state law. The campaign to lift the cap, “Yes on 2” counted on three things they thought would ensure success:

1. A large budget to outspend the opposition
2. Early polling that showed voters supported the measure
3. High-profile support from the Governor

When November came around, voters overwhelmingly decided against the measure – 62% to 38%. While the campaign’s leaders thought they had a winning combination of strategies, they didn’t count on a highly-coordinated, well-funded opposition in the form of the national teachers’ union, which came out in force to oppose the measure. In short, they poked the bear and weren’t ready when it roared back.

Context

National

This election came at a time of incredible tension around the national growth of charter schools and education reform more generally. Charter schools have been rapidly expanding across the country – approximately 6% of all public school students in the country currently attend charter schools (Jason). As the popularity of charter schools grows, there have been concerted efforts to try and block their expansion. Anti-charter advocates claim that charter schools take money away from traditional school districts, forcing teacher layoffs and other reductions in critical spending. Many school districts and states have been fighting back against the expansion of charter schools by employing a number of different tactics including moratoriums, charter caps, and passing legislation to make it more difficult to open new charter schools (Annual Survey of America’s Charter Schools).

State and local teacher unions have been fighting against charter schools for decades, using their political and financial clout to stymie charters (Prothero). Both sides have organized core supporters including teachers and parents who show up at rallies, write op-eds, and lobby school board members and legislators. The union vs. charter dynamic is only growing in intensity as many districts continue to struggle with low quality schools, budget cuts, declining enrollment, segregation, and changes in federal education policy.

Massachusetts

In 2010, an omnibus education bill in Massachusetts increased the number of charter schools allowed to open and operate in the state. In 2012, an initial viability study was done to increase the cap even more. Charter advocates tried to push for a cap increase in 2014, but it was never taken up by the Senate.

In an effort to come up with a legislative strategy to increase the number of charter schools in the state, charter advocates looked for help from Families for Excellent Schools, an advocacy organization. This led to the creation of the ballot initiative, Question 2 (Plaut et al.). Early data left charter advocates feeling confident that Question 2 would succeed at the ballot box.

The ballot initiative called for up to twelve new charter schools a year that could open anywhere in the state. The campaign’s goals were not bold or new – charter advocates had attempted to raise the cap before and fights about charter growth have taken place all over the country. But the campaign was bold in that this was a test case – the first time the charter cap would potentially be lifted through the electoral process. “While
emphasis has been placed on legislative prescriptions to improve schools, taking the fight to the people in the form of a ballot referendum remains relatively rare” (Plaut et al.).

In hindsight, the choice to use a referendum during a highly politically polarized election season ultimately proved to be a bad decision. “On Election Day, Question 2 fell along party lines with Democrats consolidating behind the No on 2 side and Republicans failing to fully back the Yes side: 73% of Democrats and 70% of Clinton voters voted No on Question 2 while only 57% of Republicans voted Yes” (Plaut et al.).

CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS

Framing

The campaign framed lifting the charter cap as a benefit for students in Massachusetts – it would give families more choices and access to a high-quality education. They framed the solution in a straightforward way: raising the cap on charters would expand choices for a great education.

The Yes on 2 campaign’s message was directed at the racial and class prejudices of white suburban voters who vote in higher numbers than urban voters of color (Mahoney). Governor Charlie Baker, who was the main face of the campaign, said raising the cap would provide a vital alternative for families trapped in failing urban schools (Scharfenberg). He tried to appeal to suburban voters with messages of education equality and opening up opportunities to urban students who may not have the same opportunities as wealthier, suburban kids (Mahoney).

However, the public was not easily convinced by the Yes on 2 campaign’s message. Many parents saw traditional public schools as already giving their children a great education and would rather “fix what we already have” rather than introduce more competition. They saw the businessmen who would profit off of charter schools as the villains and were not convinced that raising the charter cap was in the best interest of their children. The opposition’s winning messaging tapped into the anti-Wall Street, anti-corporate sentiments that were prominent at that time with the presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders, and leveraged parents’ fears that businesses would make a profit from charter schools (Mahoney).

The opposition also smartly shifted their messaging from a focus on attacking charter schools to a focus on protecting traditional district schools. They used the messaging that charter schools expand at the financial expense of district schools. In addition, they addressed the misconception that urban parents were unhappy with their district schools. They mobilized parents of color who canvassed and acted as spokespersons on forums to push the message that their students need more resources for their district schools, not less (Mahoney).

Ultimately, both the Yes and No sides had messages that resonated. Eighty-four percent of people heard the message that parents should have a choice and 85% heard the message that districts lose money to charter schools. But the No on 2 campaign’s messaging created enough confusion about the funding and operations of charter schools that it dissuaded people from voting yes and persuaded them to keep the status quo because they saw it as the safer choice (Plaut et al.).

Power

The Yes on 2 campaign’s greatest advantages were having more money and the governor on its team. Typically, these two important aspects of a campaign would indicate being on the path to victory, but overconfidence in these advantages backfired, and the opposition’s grassroots organizing left the Yes on 2 campaign’s seemingly significant advantages in the dust.

The Yes on 2 campaign relied heavily on its financial advantage and initial high poll numbers. The single largest funder, New York-based Families for Excellent Schools, poured $15 million into the campaign (Levenson). The campaign was well funded, but more significant is the fact that its leaders didn’t count on the opposition being as well-funded and coordinated as it turned out to be.

The MA teacher unions were the main force pushing the No on 2 campaign. They received a large sum of money from the national union, the National Education Association (NEA). The teacher unions not only had more resources than expected but they used them strategically and steadily over time. The opposition had a robust digital campaign, while Yes on 2 relied mostly on TV advertisements which were not as effective in the digital-heavy climate of 2016. The Yes on 2 campaign also was criticized for taking donations from out-of-state donors that opponents attacked as “dark money” because they were not
required to release donors’ names (Kennedy and Mosley). This fed into national narratives of charter schools being pushed by faceless billionaires to support their free-market agenda.

In 2017, after the dust settled from the campaign, Families for Excellent Schools was fined a record-breaking $426,466 for failing to disclose the identities of its donors. Those donors turned out to be wealthy business owners from New York and Massachusetts, and two Baker administration officials (Levenson).

The Yes on 2 campaign’s most visible spokesperson was Governor Baker who was elected in 2014. Despite being the highest ranking state official, he also proved to be a fateful choice. Some voters distrusted him due to his business background and linked it to the claim that charter schools operate as corporate interests (Plaut et al.). Additionally, he was a Republican, which helped reinforce a bipartisan split on the issue as well as amplify the split between the governor and the mayor of Boston, the state’s capital and its largest city. While these two leaders were usually in agreement when it came to education policy, this time around, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh spoke out against lifting the charter cap while Governor Baker campaigned for it (Kennedy and Mosley).

The Yes on 2 campaign struggled to mobilize the public, which became polarized throughout the election with Clinton and Trump at the top of the ballot (Plaut et al.). It also didn’t help that the public was not well-educated on the issue. Few people had a thorough knowledge about the role that charter schools play within the public education ecosystem or understand how they operate. While seeking out more information, many parents had conversations with their children’s current teachers at district schools who convinced them to vote “No” because raising the charter cap would theoretically hurt traditional district schools.

The No on 2 side was able to capitalize on the support of powerful allies and influencers including the state’s teacher unions, which organized effectively against raising the cap and more than 200 local school committees passed resolutions against raising the cap. Teachers engaged in a coordinated campaign to draft op-eds, letters to the editor, and appear in local media in opposition to the measure. Although the Yes side was able to get the support from the editorial boards, it was not enough to outweigh the voices of teachers.
Leadership

The Yes on 2 campaign was led by Families for Excellent Schools, an advocacy organization with offices in New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Families for Excellent Schools led campaigns in support of school choice including the campaign to double charter school enrollment in New York City from 100,000 to 200,000 students (Chapman and Colangelo).

Jim Conroy, who also managed Governor Baker’s 2014 campaign and served as his top political adviser, led the Question 2 ballot initiative (Miller). Conroy had a background in electoral campaigns, not grassroots organizing. Although Families for Excellent Schools was driving a lot of the work, Conroy had the ultimate say as campaign manager despite the fact that he did not have an expertise in running ballot initiatives.

The opposition leader was Barbara Madeloni, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Union. Madeloni’s leadership rallied thousands of teachers across the state to act to save public schools (Mahoney). In an interview with Dissent Magazine, Madeloni spoke about the coalition formed in 2015 that was ready to fight against the charter advocates putting Question 2 on the ballot, comprised of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, the Boston Teachers Union, NAACP Northeast Regional Office, Boston Education Justice Alliance, youth organization out of Boston, and Citizens for Public Schools (Jaffe and Madeloni). She said, “We won because we knocked on doors and made phone calls across the state. It is amazing how much of this is about conversations. We won because parents stepped up and joined educators in the struggle, because labor was totally unified in this and really came out strong for us” (Jaffe and Madeloni).

Madeloni also addressed racial disparities in public schools and prejudices within the teaching core (Mahoney). She recognized the Yes on 2 messaging and adjusted to it, while charter advocates did not adapt their own messaging throughout the course of the campaign. In the interview with Dissent Magazine, Madeloni discussed the advantage of using messaging that undercut the Yes on 2 messaging: “We were able to get as much engagement as we did [in the No on 2 campaign], because we made it a local issue, and identified the local threat that charter schools represented” (Jaffe and Madeloni).

Organizational Structure

There is no denying that the Yes on 2 coalition was fractured. There was no unifying leadership nor was there a grassroots campaign. Charter school advocates did not speak up in the debate on Question 2.

There was almost no mobilization of charter school teachers or parents because the cap didn’t affect existing charters and because the Massachusetts Charter School Association was hesitant to involve itself in the campaign. Charter schools and networks that didn’t plan to expand and wouldn’t benefit from raising the cap thought getting involved would create tensions with policymakers and harm the reputation of their schools (Plaut et al.). Essentially, they had much to lose and little to gain.

In contrast, the No on 2 campaign mobilized a sprawling field operation. They brought together hundreds of teachers and liberal activists who reached about 1.5 million voters statewide over the course of the campaign (Scharfenberg). Teachers were activated by union leaders to spread the message that Question 2 would hurt their public school system, and they appeared everywhere: classrooms, commercials, newspapers, and their communities (Plaut et al.). Deborah McCarthy, teacher and president of the local MTA Hull Association, visited her district’s three schools to talk with members there; held a No on 2 sign at busy intersections; gave out buttons, bumper stickers, and yard signs; phone banked; and knocked on doors (Winslow).

Timing

In early 2016, Governor Baker proposed a bill to expand the number of charter schools in Massachusetts by up to 12 schools a year in low-performing districts which would not be subject to the existing charter school cap. The Senate dismantled the Governor’s bill with poison pill provisions and countered with their own bill – which was opposed by charter representatives (Schoenberg). This killed any progress and any chance for negotiation in the state legislature.

Charter advocates saw November 2016 as the perfect timing to put forth a ballot question and let the voters decide whether to lift the cap. They abandoned the legislation and encouraged the House to drop the Act because they thought they would have more success taking the issue to the ballot box (Plaut et al.). Charter school advocates thought they could write
the law and simply have voters approve it at the ballot box, with no chance of adverse amendments. Taking a legislative route would give charter advocates a linear process, a clear timeline, and an unambiguous result (Kerr and Griffin). Additionally, charter advocates had early research that indicated that Question 2 would pass, making them confident that the time was right.

However, it is important to note that the national conversation about charter schools at this time was fraught with tension. As discussed previously, while charter schools continued to expand, anti-charter advocates and teachers unions raised their voices against further charter expansion. They continually used the argument that charter schools take money away from district schools and zero in on the fact that some charter schools are privately managed. Anti-charter advocates also drew attention to the wealthy philanthropists and funders who contributed to the Yes on 2 campaign and painted them in a negative light (Mahoney). The No on 2 side spread awareness about how Families for Excellent Schools received donations from Wall Street and hedge funds across New York and Connecticut (Mahoney). This further depicted charter advocates as the villains siphoning money away from the district schools.

Pressure

The Yes on 2 campaign relied primarily on TV ads to raise awareness and persuade voters to vote yes (Plaut et al.). They aired a series of TV ads that pushed back on the argument that charters steal financial resources from school districts. In one TV ad that ran towards the end of the campaign, Governor Baker made a direct appeal to white, suburban voters: “Massachusetts has many great public schools. And we took it for granted that our kids would go to great public schools. But some kids aren’t so lucky. Where they live, they don’t go to a great school and they have no choice” (Scharfenberg).

A poll from late October suggested the TV ads had some success, but the No side had made significant headway by then – they had persuaded more Democrats, independents, and women than they had in the spring (Scharfenberg).

The opposition could not match the TV spending by the Yes side, but they countered with resources that had a larger impact. Opponents spent their budget over a long period of time, even before Question 2 was on the ballot, to develop relationships that far outweighed the benefits of TV ads. They built up the support of school committees and advocacy groups (Kerr and Griffin). They convinced the school committees in many districts to pass resolutions condemning Question 2 (Plaut et al.). The Boston Teachers Union and Massachusetts Teachers Union sent email blasts to teachers encouraging them to speak out against Question 2 and speak with parents (Plaut et al.). They also convinced school committees to pass resolutions against raising the cap. And they used their digital budget more effectively to target voters with a digital ad buy that resonated more than TV ads (Plaut et al.).

Adaptive Strategies

The efforts to raise the Massachusetts charter cap had been brewing in the state for several years. In 2012, charter advocates started studying the possibility of how to execute on a charter cap campaign. They hired ballot consulting firm Winner and Mandabach to do the initial research. The results indicated that Question 2 would pass.

Winner and Mandabach made the recommendation to use messaging that leveraged the favorability charter schools had (the majority of Americans, 67%, do support school choice) and to push the message that all students should have the opportunity to attend a high quality school of their choice (Plaut et al.).

They placed too much confidence in initial polling, without accounting for changes that would happen along the way – such as opposition messaging that effectively painted them as partisan in a highly political environment. In August 2016, 36% of Democrats and 52% of independents thought charter schools helped the state’s education system. But by the time the election came in November, the public became more divided with two polarizing candidates on the ballot – Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton (Plaut et al.).

Although Republican Governor Baker supported the campaign, Republicans did not carry it across the finish line. Democratic support bottomed out: 73% of Democrats voted ‘no’ compared to 42% polled in August. And prominent Democratic leaders including Senator Warren, Senator Sanders, and Mayor Walsh came out against it (Plaut et al.).

The campaign failed to appropriately pivot and adapt when presented with a roadblock in the campaign. The opposition hit the Yes on 2 coalition with digital ads, successful messaging, grassroots mobilization, and effective messengers. The Yes on 2 team kept running their existing strategy and failed to
adapt, even when it was clear that the attacks were working. It was possible for the leaders of the Yes on 2 campaign to know that they were failing, yet they chose not to adapt their strategy. If the Yes on 2 campaign had successful adaptive strategies, they would have tweaked their messaging, engaged new spokespeople to refute negative messaging and engaged teachers and parents showing deeper community support. Their inability to adapt to changing circumstances, especially a different electorate than was initially polled, put them in a very weak position on election night.

**Criticism**

The Yes on 2 campaign existed in a polarizing environment that they could not control, but they did not adapt their strategy when it was evident their message frame and spokespeople were not motivating key constituencies. The Yes side overestimated the power of their initial polling and their large budget, and undervalued the power of relationships and messaging from trusted sources. They were determined to stick to the initial messaging developed by Winner and Mandabach, despite the fact that messaging relied on a strategy that assumed the public understood the benefits of charter schools and trusted those messengers.

**Conclusion**

The Yes on 2 campaign showed the limits of a top-down approach that didn’t embrace a grassroots or digital movement. The Massachusetts example is a microcosm of the broader charter school conversations playing out across the country as advocates on both sides find the most successful strategies. The defeat of the Yes on 2 campaign was followed by successful teacher strikes across the country, and in many places, successful pushback to well-financed charter strategies. While the charter expansion movement might be well funded, the unions have people power working on a viscerally emotional message, and that can’t compare with money. These fights will continue to happen – large and small – and this campaign provides a window into what happens when a campaign fails to adapt.

**WORKS CITED**


SUMMARY

In 2015, The Federal Communication Commission (FCC) imposed network neutrality (“net neutrality”) regulations on Internet Service Providers (ISPs), barring them from discriminating against and charging more money based on user type, content, or platform. That means ISPs couldn’t play favorites with big, well-funded companies that can pay more for more speed, or to block smaller or independent websites and competitors. That historic FCC ruling, which was widely hailed as a triumph by public interest communities, was short lived. In January 2017, President Trump changed the makeup of the appointed FCC board and chose Ajit Pai, a former commissioner and vocal opponent to net neutrality, as its new chairman. The new FCC Chairman quickly began to undo the net neutrality regulations.

“Team Internet,” a coalition formed by Fight for the Future (FFTF), Free Press Action Fund, and Demand Progress in 2014, played a critical role in generating pressure on the FCC and Congress in 2015 to pass the original regulations and were now faced with the same fight all over again.

This time around, because of Team Internet’s advocacy, what was once an issue misunderstood by most Americans became one of the most talked about modern issues -- with millions of people across the country taking action to press for net neutrality rules. Their campaign is also considered a blueprint for other digital-based movements such as the Parkland Teens who used social media in the #NeverAgain campaign seeking stronger gun control regulations opposed by the powerful gun lobby.

Although the research analyzed here reflects campaign components that took place in 2014 - 2015, it is primarily focused on the 2017 campaign, because the effects of the ruling are still felt and debated today.

CONTEXT

In 2010, the FCC, an independent government agency that consists of five members appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the U.S. Senate for five-year terms, approved the Open Internet Order, which banned cable television and telephone service providers from preventing access to competitors or websites (Falcons). The following year, they added six net neutrality principles: transparency, no blocking, level-playing field, network and mobile management, and vigilance. However, because of wide disagreement, the FCC did not rule on preventing ISPs from charging higher prices for faster access (Open Internet Order). At the time, this campaign to preserve internet freedom only gained the attention of media rights activists and not the public at large (Falcon).

In January of 2012, internet activists organized an “Internet Blackout Day,” which succeeded in halting the passage of two bill in Congress: the Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA) (“The Day the Internet Stood Still”). Both of these bills were intended to address the sale or distribution of pirated copyrighted material via online sites. However, many thought that measures in the bills infringed on online freedom of speech as provisions in the bills “would allow for removal of enormous amounts of non-infringing content including political and other speech from the Web” (“SOPA/PIPA: Internet Blacklist Legislation”). The formal online and offline protests led to over 14 million calls to lawmakers and the bills were subsequently removed from further voting in 2012.

The net neutrality debate flared up again in 2014 after the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled against the FCC in Verizon Communications Inc. v. FCC (2014) and determined the FCC had no actual authority to enforce net neutrality rules against common carriers (Ruane).

In the fall of 2014, internet activists like Free Press Action
Fund, FFTF, and Demand Progress, mobilized 40,000 partner websites to pressure the FCC commissioners and politicians to pass the 2015 Open Internet Order under Title II of the Communications Act, which would prevent the blocking or prioritizing of any internet traffic (Perr). The initial grassroots mobilization and national media attention asking people to flood the FCC with comments greatly influenced these commissioners appointed by the Obama Administration and led to this reclassification in February 2015, which became the strongest net neutrality laws to date.

However, regulatory issues are not enshrined in law and can be quickly undone with a change in administration. The status of internet protections changed radically shortly after President Trump’s inauguration in 2017, when he appointed Ajit Pai as the Chairman of the FCC. Pai immediately began to roll back policies that had been implemented during the Obama administration, freeing broadband providers to block or throttle content as they saw fit (Romano). This created a moving playing field for Team Internet. In 2017, Fight for the Future created BattlefortheNet.com to mobilize an internet-wide movement to pressure policymakers to support free speech and free markets online through meaningful, enforceable net neutrality laws.

**CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS**

**Framing**

In recent years, those opposing net neutrality have tried to frame it as a partisan issue, calling the regulations “heavy-handed micromanagement,” from government agencies which “prevent small businesses from succeeding in the internet industry” (Pai). In contrast, Team Internet created a messaging framework rooted in quintessential American values like freedom of speech and freedom of expression to unite progressives, conservatives and libertarians in the fight for a free internet.

If framing theory, in brief, is the packaging of information to the public in a way that focuses on the issues at hand rather than the nuts and bolts of a particular topic (Ritzer), Team Internet’s 2016 campaign exemplifies that definition. They created the campaign slogan, “the internet is under attack” (Wes). Team Internet vs. Team Cable became a visceral issue, with the “us” being the hundreds of thousands of people who use the internet and the adversary – “them” – being the “4 big cable companies that people already hate” (Greer). Their call to action highlighted “neoliberal patterns of increasing corporatization on one side and marginalized rights and visibility of ordinary citizens on the other” (Quail & Larabie). Team Internet successfully made internet users feel like they needed to protect internet usage for “ordinary” people. The Battle For The Net site asserted, “Big cable companies want to force us to use their products to watch their content. And if we don’t like it, too bad; with limited competition, they can charge us unfair fees and decide who does — and doesn’t — get Internet service”.

This activating language exemplified a core campaign strategy, claims Evan Greer, Deputy Director of Fight for the Future: “This site is for you if you use the internet.” One lobbyist for Big Cable asserted that Battle for the Net framed the issue as a “religious war” — a label that FFTF embraced. “We had a mercenary mindset, our goal was set in our core values,” said Greer.

Similar to Health Care for America Now’s campaign, which framed insurance companies as villains that prioritized private profits, supporters of net neutrality argued that nearly everyone has had a bad experience with their cable or phone company (Kirsh). So when Big Cable told customers that ending net neutrality wouldn’t slow their service down or create fast lanes (Brodkin), net neutrality activists tapped into people’s distrust of big business to fight back. “We drew our narrative upon broader values of economic justice, patriotism and freedom of speech” (Greer).

This framing touched millions of people across the nation, including the Supreme Court which observed that internet platforms “can provide perhaps the most powerful mechanism available to a private citizen to make his or her voice heard” (McSherry).

**Power**

According to Resource Mobilization theory, social movements with large mobilizing capacity are more likely to achieve their goals (Ritzer). The net neutrality campaign was a textbook example of this: Team Internet leveraged technology and digital tools to engage uninvolved bystanders and turn them into advocates.

First, Team Internet used digital tools to demonstrate widespread public support for net neutrality. Each coalition partner played a unique and critical role. Demand Progress brought together “large and diverse coalitions that transcended political lines” and coordinated the Team Internet events protesting the proposed changes to net neutrality (“About
Demand Progress”). They launched an interactive map that organized protests and meetings with representatives in key districts. The map led users to a Facebook group to connect with others who were passionate about net neutrality. Fight for the Future’s role was “as organizers on a mission to win a campaign. We are not DC Insiders, or lawyers, we’re organizers, activists and technologists with the ability to build online experiences at a mass scale” (Greer). Their team educated members to move them up the engagement ladder. FFTF team members often posted subreddits about Net Neutrality and answered common questions and debunked myths on various threads within the platform (Greer). These tactics often recruited new members or equipped current constituents with the knowledge they needed to become validators on other websites or offline in their local district (Greer). These combined efforts fired up the average person to join the fight.

Second, FFTF found that “filing a comment on the FCC website was extremely complicated and time consuming” (Greer). To combat this, their team created easy-to-use widgets which made filing comments easy and understandable. They also created form sheets that allowed activists to easily pressure members of Congress with calls and emails. “When millions of people call and email their representatives, Congress listens. That’s why we developed a widget that website owners can place on their site, giving their site’s users the opportunity to contact Congress. And we’ve created art assets that will allow individuals to spread the word on powerful social media platforms” (“Battle For The Net”). The site also led users to a micropage for each member of Congress, where voters could see whether their congressional representative supported or opposed the policy. Additionally, they provided resources to help people schedule in-person events, protests, meetings, and canvassing efforts to mobilize constituencies (like veterans) to whom lawmakers would listen within their own districts.

The below image shows a micropage hosted by Battle For the Net of Rep. Jim Costa. Users could read about how much money their representative accepted in donations from ISPs and could easily contact members via phone, email or tweet.

A third form of power was the ability to create a viral message. Importantly, the coalition was both broad as well as included cultural influencers. Members included MoveOn.org, Free...
Press, Consumer Federation of America, AARP, American Library Association, Public Knowledge, the Christian Coalition, TechNet, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Greenpeace, and various tech companies. They were joined by individuals widely respected in the internet community like John Oliver, Tay Zonday, Bernie Sanders, Vinton Cerf, and Tim Berners-Lee. With this large base of supporters, Team Internet captured a cultural moment from unified messaging and massive public support (“Battle for the Net”). “100,000 comments would flood the FCC in one day alone because a graphic would go viral” (Greer). Allies generated public and media attention through in-app messages directing users to battleforthenet.com, by posting Net Neutrality explainer videos and graphics, and through sharing site-wide alert GIFs asking their users to contact the FCC and Congress through battleforthenet.com.

Fourth, Team Internet used social media to leverage the slow loading icon to symbolize the implications of losing net neutrality. Sites like Netflix, WordPress, Vimeo, Upworthy, and Reddit displayed loading symbols on their front pages to show their support for equal treatment of all the data flowing through the Internet. While pages didn’t actually load more slowly, they symbolized warnings of what the internet could look like if ISPs were allowed to discriminate between different kinds of content. “People trying to access these sites understood that they could be kept waiting as more bandwidth is devoted to paying customers like entertainment companies” (Chant). “This moment was huge for our success. Because of the viral connection between the slow loading symbol and the Net Neutrality Protections, people began to have a broader understanding of the issue” (Greer). Once people had a deeper understanding on why net neutrality was important, Battle for the Net leveraged the minimal commitment required of individuals for online participation and parlayed wide scale participation into a large-scale impact by:

- Changing their social media avatars and profile pics
- Making a video about net neutrality, or using the Battle for the Net video bumper to help spread the word
- Posting their banner ads to websites/blogs to let users know about the issue
- Linking BattleForTheNet.com whenever possible so others can easily contact lawmakers
- Deploying the updated Battle for the Net widget to let users contact Congress without ever leaving a site (“Battle for the Net”)
Finally, in December 2017, Free Press Action Fund helped generate public attention and media interest by working with other left-of-center groups like the ACLU, the Center for Media Justice, CREDO Action, Color of Change, Common Cause, Popular Resistance, National Hispanic Media Coalition, and the Nation to protest outside the FCC’s headquarters (Voices for Internet Freedom 2017). After Net Neutrality was repealed, the organizations coordinated more protests with Team Internet outside of Senate offices to advocate for a reinstatement of the federal regulatory regime while also hosting a petition drive urging Congress to reinstate the Obama-era regulations. Both these protests sustained national media coverage and were attended by hundreds of people (Wes).

Organizational Structure

While the coalition itself took a decentralized approach to decision-making, each organization led their own campaign that fell under the overarching goal of protecting the internet. This worked in large part because the main organizations under Team Internet had strong leaders with a deep understanding of and commitment to protecting the internet. The value and benefit of having staff steeped in the space was vital to their success. Falcon notes that because there was not a steep learning curve on the issue and members were unwavering in their support, these organizations and nonprofits were able to focus their time and energy on the campaigns rather than on training staff and other logistical issues that come with frequent turn over (Falcon). Specifically, Free Press Action Fund was created by lobby experts in 2003 to give people a voice in the crucial decisions that shape the internet. Demand Progress and Fight for the Future formed in late 2010 to early 2011 and organized an alliance-building campaign and internet-wide strike against the web censorship bill SOPA (“About Demand Progress”; “Fight for the Future, Defending Our Basic Rights and Freedoms”). The same members who pressured the FCC in 2015 were active in 2017 when Chairman Pai reversed Title II regulations (Falcon).

Demand Progress’ leaders led campaigning efforts and guided partner organizations. David Segal, Demand Progress co-founder, explains that his background in politics and experience as a city council member in Providence, RI played a pivotal role in ensuring members of Congress understood the political magnitude of the issue (Segal). Segal guided the coalition to narrow their focus on mobilizing key voices to influence and pressure representatives who could be swayed if they understood their seats were at risk.

Free Press Action Fund handled the press, media relations and public protests while Fight for the Future led the mass online mobilization efforts. Because leading members worked in tandem, the groups were agile and flexible. “We were consensus based. When our organization wanted to go a certain way to address some new challenge, we would change our tactics and just give the others a heads up”, claims Greer. Segal echoed the sentiment that the “collaborative spirit and network intelligence” of their coalition was helpful in wielding power. Every group that came to the table excelled at their specialization whether lobbying, policy construction, or online mobilization (Segal).

Timing

2016 was a particularly important turning point for grassroots mass mobilization efforts. The 2015 protections established during the Obama Administration helped people understand how they wanted the internet to operate (Ernesto). Abolishing internet freedoms fired up internet users to take action. After the “Restoring Internet Freedom” ruling was published in the Federal Register in February of 2018, 800,000 people wrote in opposition of the rollback (Daugherty).

Meanwhile, for many, President Trump’s election in 2016 brought a new threat to core American values like freedom of speech. The fight for net neutrality fit seamlessly into this shared identity as Americans and united people from across the political spectrum. Understanding that the web has evolved into a “highly-visible tool for public engagement,” Team Internet launched digital tools that reached people where they were and re-framed the fight for net neutrality as a fight for our core democratic principle of free speech and economic justice (Greer).

Adaptive Strategies

Team Internet was successful in easily adapting strategies in large part because their broad coalition allowed them to engage in new strategies as different pressure points arose. One of their key strengths was their ability to mobilize constituencies from nearly any demographic that was relevant for key decision makers, from MoveOn’s list of over 3.5 million progressive members, to more conservative small business owners.
Team Internet first began working on net neutrality in 2014 after the ruling in *Verizon Communications Inc. v. FCC* (2014) vacated significant parts of the Open Internet Order of 2010 (*Verizon v. FCC*). Seeking to influence then-FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler, they mobilized the organizations that would be most impacted by the loss of a free and open Internet. This included influential tech companies such as Etsy, Kickstarter, Reddit and Tumblr, as well as dozens of public interest groups and civil rights leaders. This initial enlistment of large corporations created a consistent drumbeat of messages focusing on free speech, opportunity, diversity, and innovation (Aaron).

The 2016 election and rollback of Title II classifications created a new fight with a new emphasis: internet rights are civil rights (“ACLU Comment on FCC Plan to End Net Neutrality”). Team Internet and their allies, capitalized on the fact, as noted earlier in the framing section, that the internet had become a “highly-visible tool for public engagement” and re-framed the fight for net neutrality as a fight for our core democratic principle of free speech (Greer). In one instance, Free Press Action Vice President of Strategy and Senior Counsel, Jessica J. González, tied this fight with the U.S. government’s long history of discrimination and racism. In a speech she delivered before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Communications and Technology she claimed that:

> “people of color have been some of the most vocal critics, in part because we have more at stake. Never before in history have barriers to entry been lower for us to reach a large audience with our own stories in our own words; to start small businesses; to organize for change. The end of Net Neutrality means that [our] voice might be drowned out by corporate media that can pay more to access [the] audience: some of the same corporate media that have failed spectacularly to represent us” (González 2019).

The fear of losing something that has become so fundamental to our daily lives resonated strongly with people and particularly with communities of color. People don’t want to lose what they have and this messaging reminded them of how central the internet had become to our way of life — and how vital to our basic freedoms it is (Falcon).

FFTF also adapted their online strategy in 2017 in response to the claim that net neutrality was anti-business. Over the years, FFTF’s used its apolitical messaging to build lists that encompassed a broad range of people from across the political and ideological spectrum including, but not limited to, veterans and the religious communities. This structure helped Team Internet organically organize people from diverse backgrounds and allowed them to harness existing online networks to broaden their reach and deepen their impact (Greer). The team pivoted to a pro-business angle by reaching out to people who could refute this claim: small business owners. FFTF sent out SMS texts asking these members to engage online and sent them letters about in person events they could attend to influence their Republican representatives (Greer). Thus, small businesses and start-ups joined leading tech companies in explaining how net neutrality not only promoted businesses of all shapes and sizes, but fans the flames of innovation (*Small Businesses Oppose Repeal of Net Neutrality | Small Business Majority*). Notably, these efforts led to the defection of three Republican Senators in 2018.

When efforts stalled out at the federal level, the campaign focused on state legislatures. In September 2018, California firefighters who worked to contain the largest blaze in state history, joined together in support of net neutrality protections after Verizon virtually cut off the Internet to their command-and-control trucks that were working to coordinate real-time responses to the crisis (Falcon).

As a result, firefighters were disconnected from vital communications that were needed to receive calls for help and coordinate equipment transfers. “The incident was the most clear-cut demonstration of the shortcomings of industry self-policing in the post-net neutrality era” (Falcon). California lawmakers like Scott Wiener used the momentum to help pass SB-822 into law, which included key net neutrality provisions in 2018 (Sullivan).

Lastly, campaign members understood they had to sustain momentum to keep people together regardless of whether or not they believed a tactic would work. As an online movement, offline moments were especially important to bring people together and help them feel connected to the issue. On the day of the December 2017 vote, Team Internet supported the Net Neutrality Wake-Up Call Rally hosted by the Voices for Internet Freedom coalition outside the FCC building even though they knew the vote would fail. The goal was to energize people so that, even after the unfavorable FCC vote, they would continue to pay attention to and mobilize around the next phase of the movement (*Voices for Internet Freedom 2017*). In 2019, with new Democrats in the House of Representatives and 2020 presidential candidates putting internet protections on their platforms, Falcon says the fight for net neutrality on a federal level is still alive and well.
Criticism

Criticism about net neutrality protections came primarily from Big Cable and ISPs on both the concept of net neutrality and the campaign itself. Arguments against net neutrality ranged from “Internet protections are not needed and the Internet has functioned well without it” (Shaffer 2011), to “antitrust enforcement against the telecommunication providers, instead of new legislation, is the best approach by forcing competition and better services” (Becker et al.). Others companies like IBM, Intel, Juniper, Qualcomm, and Cisco among FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, called Net Neutrality anti-business, claiming that net neutrality would “discourage investment” into broadband infrastructure. They argued that data discrimination is desirable for reasons like guaranteeing quality of service (Singer; Finley).

During their campaign efforts, Fight for the Future received some criticism regarding “internet-mediated political engagement” that was considered largely impersonal and therefore possibly ineffective (Morozov). For example, the individualized pages for each member of Congress provided a “somewhat anonymous critique of those members of Congress who did not support net neutrality.” These critics believed FFTF’s in-person protests and visits to politicians’ offices were a much stronger way to persuade legislators (Dunham).

Some claimed that internet activism engenders “a lackadaisical approach to indicting social change” (Lentz).

Lentz continued that, “being called upon to participate in episodic media policy struggles, to sign petitions, contribute to issue campaigns, retweet arguments, or take part in protests at opportune flashpoints does not an educated digital citizen make."

Conclusion

Team Internet has been successful both in making this a rare bipartisan issue and finding innovative ways to leverage high public support into broad engagement. A 2017 public opinion poll conducted by Mozilla found that “over three quarters of Americans (76%) support net neutrality. Eighty-one percent of Democrats and 73% of Republicans are in favor of it” (Mozilla). Those numbers are not significantly different from earlier polls, but what is different is the progression from public support to mass mobilization to protect the internet. Much of this public mobilization can be attributed to Team Internet’s unparalleled efforts in coalition building, messaging and engagement in communities big and small across the nation. These campaigns in totality have been widely understood as a historic and triumphant movement for both media rights and civic activists.
WORKS CITED


SUMMARY

For decades, public health advocates have sought to reduce the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB), which many point to as a key contributor to increasing levels of obesity and Type 2 diabetes worldwide. One approach in the United States has been the soda tax, which is a tax or surcharge on sugar-sweetened beverages intended to reduce public consumption.

Initial attempts to levy soda taxes in cities like New York City, El Monte, CA, and Richmond, CA failed. The American Beverage Association (ABA), the industry's trade organization, and its partners used their deep pockets and influence to turn the public and legislators against the tax, mobilizing around the themes of personal choice and freedom. For years, the ABA was undefeated in shutting down local soda taxes across the country.

In 2014, that all changed. The city of Berkeley, CA re-energized the movement and passed the first soda tax in the United States. The campaign, which its strategists named “Berkeley vs. Big Soda,” countered the beverage industry with the message that children and consumers needed to be protected from greedy corporations and their unscrupulous marketing tactics. The message resonated and the ballot measure passed with 76% of the vote. The successful campaign served as a blueprint for six other cities that would use Berkeley’s model to pass their own soda taxes, putting the beverage industry on the defensive.

Context

The idea of taxing sugar-sweetened beverages has been around since 1914, when President Woodrow Wilson first proposed a special revenue tax on soft drinks and beer to build up the war chest for World War I (Blakey). More recently, the Obama Administration explored levying an excise tax on SSBs as part of a health care reform package in 2009 (Adamy), though the attempt was abandoned after the ABA spent $7.3 million lobbying against the initiative. The ABA was used to winning. Before Berkeley’s success, the ABA boasted that it had defeated no fewer than 40 municipal tax efforts. (Paalberg et al. 2).

However, between 2012 and 2014, a few things changed that would lay the groundwork for a victory in Berkeley. The first was Bloomberg Philanthropies’ decision to start funding campaigns to reduce SSB consumption in 2012, giving advocates the resources to mobilize and lobby. The second was the nationwide victory of a soda tax in Mexico in 2013, credited in part to a $10 million donation to the campaign from Bloomberg Philanthropies. The success in Mexico would inspire both Berkeley and San Francisco to pursue SSB taxes in 2014 (Paalberg et al. 3).

The “Yes on D” campaign grew out of a community effort to save school and community gardening and nutrition programs after the federal government slashed funding to the California Nutrition Network in 2012 (Dugdale). In the spring of 2012, parents learned that the federal government had pulled the plug on these successful and beloved programs and mobilized. Health and school officials and city council members joined in, and by fall of 2013 the coalition finally had a name: The Berkeley Healthy Child Coalition (BHCC) (Alexander).

The BHCC brainstormed how to raise funds for school and community nutrition education programs after the federal government slashed funding to the California Nutrition Network in 2012 (Dugdale). In the spring of 2012, parents learned that the federal government had pulled the plug on these successful and beloved programs and mobilized. Health and school officials and city council members joined in, and by fall of 2013 the coalition finally had a name: The Berkeley Healthy Child Coalition (BHCC) (Alexander).

The BHCC brainstormed how to raise funds for school and community nutrition education programs and came up with the idea of a soda tax. The tax would not only raise funds, but also raise the price of sugary drinks to discourage children from buying them (Daniels). Dr. Vicki Alexander, co-president of BHCC, said the coalition, which was comprised of other concerned residents who had been personally committed to addressing health inequities in Berkeley, knew that the soda tax would work to improve community health because they had seen higher prices lead to reduced sales for tobacco (Alexander). Now they just had to get the measure passed.
CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS

Vision

Given the long history of failure when others have tried to pass a sugary beverage tax at a local and state level, the Berkeley Healthy Child Coalition’s goal of raising money for children’s health and nutrition programs by charging distributors a penny an ounce on beverages sweetened with sugar was considered bold for its time (Daniels). However, Joshua Daniels, then-Berkeley School Board president and Martin Bourque, Executive Director of the Ecology Center, were sure of its success. Both cited Berkeley’s history of progressive actions and higher than average education levels as contributors to the success of the ballot measure. And unlike other soda tax campaigns, the tax only affected beverage distributors, not consumers, so there was no clear reason why it would fail.

Framing

One of the most important things an advocacy campaign must do to succeed is to change the frame and shift the blame. The status quo is preserved when people blame the victim for their misfortunes (e.g., lung cancer from smoking is a result of consumer choice, unemployment is due to laziness), but a movement can take off when people start to question this frame and start blaming bad public policy instead (Dobson 9). For years, the food and beverage industries had successfully reinforced the idea that obesity is caused by people’s “bad” behavior and choices (Cheyne et al., 3). Taking notes from the tobacco industry, they focused on personal responsibility as the cause of America’s unhealthy diet and implied that government action threatened Americans’ personal freedom. These points resonated with Americans, as it referred to core American values of personal responsibility and freedom (Brownell, Warner 265).

This was only exacerbated by government-led, anti-childhood obesity campaigns, like Boston’s Fatsmack and New York City’s “Pouring on the Pounds,” which relied on shock value, while still putting the onus of childhood obesity back on the child, instead of lax regulations on a predatory industry. It was only when campaigns, including Berkeley’s, began subverting this frame that victories followed.

The Berkeley vs. Big Soda campaign had an advantage in that it spoke with Dr. Jeff Ritterman, the former leader of the failed campaign for a soda tax in nearby Richmond (Bourque). He informed them about the nature of the ABA’s tactics and how the message frame should be built on a combination of emotion and logic. Both these frames, while seemingly contradictory, were needed to address the spin tactics and misinformation of the opposition.

This conversation led to Berkeley vs. Big Soda’s use of two overarching frames. The first was logical and public health driven: 40% of kids will get diabetes in their lifetime, soda is the primary cause of this epidemic, and this tax will address it (Healthy Food America). The second was emotional and tapped into Berkeley’s progressive identity and distrust of faceless corporations.

The first public health frame has proved crucial in soda tax ballot initiatives. Scholars who studied New York’s failed portion-size cap, the proposed limit on soft drink size in New York, found that proponents had not clearly or repeatedly emphasized the policy’s health benefits, giving opponents the space to successfully push a government takeover narrative (Donaldson 2208). This is an important point that was illustrated in Berkeley and San Francisco’s different approaches and results in 2014. In Berkeley, advocates had strict message discipline and focused on the health harms to children caused by SSBs, a frame that researchers had found most effective for ballot initiative soda taxes. However, just 10 miles away in San Francisco, where the 2014 measure failed, messaging was centered around the revenue a soda tax could generate and how it could positively impact community health by funding health programs (Somji et al. 6-7). Though raising money for community health programs was important for residents, San Francisco’s decision to frame the tax as a way to generate revenue proved to be ineffective for their voter audience.

Conversely, researchers found that if soda tax proponents are pursuing a tax through City Council votes, using a revenue-driven framing is more effective, because it leads to more public spending, which means more public ribbon cuttings before the next election (Paarlberg et al. 4). This approach proved effective in Philadelphia and Seattle, where the majority of city councilors approved a soda tax (ibid.; Policy Profile: Seattle).

The second frame also proved extremely effective. Berkeley vs. Big Soda called out the beverage industry’s behavior as immoral, mirroring the shift seen in the anti-tobacco debate
in the early 1990’s, where public health advocates focused on “denormalizing” the tobacco industry and positioning its products as harmful and its intent as malicious. Even the campaign’s court case-like name, Berkeley vs. Big Soda, evoked the idea of justice.

The community responded overwhelmingly positively. “We know that they are going to come out swinging. But our kids’ health is more important than corporate profits,” said Marian Mabel, PTA Co-President at Malcolm X Elementary and a member of the Berkeley Healthy Child Coalition (Press Releases | Ecology Center). Coalition members were vocal about “Big Soda” spending millions of dollars on lobbying, advertising, and political contributions to kill soda tax initiatives. Bourque said “it’s much easier to get people to vote against something than to get people to vote for it. So we made it a negative frame even though people needed to vote yes to pose it as the community versus the corporation.” This approach was especially effective on social media. Facebook and Twitter users were twice as likely to engage with Berkeley vs. Big Soda’s posts if they were about the industry’s problematic behavior (Somji et al. 17).

Lastly, BHCC continued to remind the community that the purpose of the tax was to raise revenue for important programs as a response to slashes in federal funding. The soda tax could help regulate a harmful corporate industry and benefit the people. This broader understanding was pivotal to its success (Daniels).

**Power**

A lack of resources had always been an issue for proponents of soda taxes across the country. Prior to Berkeley, soda tax campaigns had been outspent, outmobilized, and outmaneuvered by the well-funded beverage lobby. However, Berkeley was the first city to turn this around, thus affording it the first win.

In the past, cities had been dramatically outspent time after time by the beverage industry. In the 2010 campaign in nearby Richmond, the beverage industry spent $2.5 million and won by 34 percentage points (Frizzell). Mayor Quintero of El Monte, CA who led a doomed soda tax initiative in 2012 was only able to raise $57,000 and he later said, “To be competitive in a race like this, you’ve got to raise between $1.5 and $2 million...And for a local official, that’s just unreal.” (Paarlberg et al. 3).

The ABA also recognized that the stakes were high in Berkeley because a win would likely inspire more cities to propose taxes on sugar-sweetened beverage consumption — explaining why it put more than $2.4 million into the “No Berkeley Beverage Tax” campaign (Dinkelspiel). “If a soda tax can’t pass in the most progressive city in America, it can’t pass anywhere. Big Soda knows that, which is why it’s determined to kill it here” (Reich).

However, outside philanthropists saw an opportunity to get a big win that could drive momentum for other taxes across the country and provided Berkeley vs. Big Soda with sizeable funding for its campaign. Bloomberg Philanthropies donated $657,000, a wealthy couple from Texas provided an additional $70,000 (Paarlberg et al. 3), and the campaign would end up spending a total of $927,000 (Healthy Food America). Though the ABA spent close to triple that amount, $2.4 million, to fight the tax, it was not enough in the face of an organized and well-resourced pro-tax campaign (Paarlberg et al. 3). Bourque even noted that their campaign team capitalized on the industry’s tactics by issuing press releases with updated spending figure from the soda lobby, which only helped to attract more national attention to the issue.

It is important to note the crucial role that outside funders play in local soda tax campaigns. Even though the ABA still outspent Berkeley vs. Big Soda by over 2:1, Dr. Jim Krieger, executive director of Healthy Food America, noted that this was a vast improvement from past campaigns where the ratio was closer to 20:1. Berkeley vs. Big Soda’s outside funding was not an issue for this homegrown campaign for two reasons. The first was that the Bloomberg name was not seen as toxic in this particular community as it would be in more conservative areas. The second reason was the timing of the donation: both the Arnolds and Bloomberg Philanthropies did not contribute to the campaign until a month before the election. This was in part intentional, as Larry Tramutola, the campaign strategist, had requested that the Arnolds commit the money but not give it until later on in the campaign because he knew that the opposition would turn the funding against them (Tramutola).

Bloomberg Philanthropies would take on a bigger role in the 2016 San Francisco and Oakland soda tax campaigns, donating almost $20 million in total to both and making the campaigns some of the most expensive local measures in California history. This support turned out to be crucial, as San Francisco and
Oakland were much larger cities than Berkeley. The ABA had learned from their failure in Berkeley and countered with more sophisticated messaging, a heavy direct-mail campaign, and extensive ad buys. However, despite external funding, soda tax advocates knew that it would be impossible to outspend the ABA’s propaganda so they funneled their resources into labor-intensive canvassing instead. This personal touch proved especially effective in communities that had firsthand experience with diabetes and was seen as a significant advantage in Oakland and San Francisco (Tramutola).

Berkeley vs. Big Soda avoided another common pitfall experienced by failed campaigns by building up a broad bench of advocates and supporters. In the past, pro-tax spokespeople quoted in the media were primarily city officials and public health advocates, while opponents (financed by the beverage industry) were more diverse and included local community groups, business owners, and religious leaders (Nixon et al.). In El Monte, a large minority community (25 percent Asian, 69 percent Hispanic), residents were inundated with anti-tax billboards, and radio and TV commercials in both English and Spanish. And though Richmond had developed a reputation as a city even more progressive than Berkeley, racial tensions caused complications in the campaign. Richmond’s child obesity rate is highest amongst black children, which prompted longtime African American councilmember Nathaniel Bates to lambast the soda tax campaign for “using the Black community to pass a measure for us without consulting us.” Not only was City Council split, but Latino and African American community leaders would also criticize the campaign for pushing for measures that would affect their community without consulting them (Onishi). The NAACP and the Hispanic Federation even publicly opposed soda tax efforts in Richmond and New York City for effectively levying “sanctions” against low-income communities of color.

However, in Berkeley, there was an intentional effort to cultivate support amongst minority populations. Berkeley vs. Big Soda won the support of the NAACP and local Latino organizations (Packer). In addition to support from health, education, and community organizations, Measure D was endorsed by every local official, as well as grocers and restaurateurs. ABA created an astroturf group, Californians for Food & Beverage Choice, that paid people to pass out anti-soda tax literature at public transit stations and go door-to-door to try and convey the impression in the community that neighbors did not support the
soda tax. However, unlike the beverage industry, Berkeley vs. Big Soda had surrogates who were authentic and respected by Berkeley voters. These prominent supporters included inside champions like Councilmembers Linda Maio and Laurie Capitelli and the YMCA of the Central Bay Area, individuals and groups who were greatly respected in the city for their community work and strong leadership (Ecology Center).

And in the local media, a dramatic increase in supportive editorials points towards a shift in how SSB regulation was talked about. In Richmond and El Monte, not a single newspaper editorial in favor of the soda tax was published. Yet, just two years later, half of the unsigned editorials about the soda tax in Berkeley and San Francisco came out in support of the campaign (Somji et al. 18).

**Leadership**

Local measures, like the soda tax campaign, are best led by people who know and are a part of the community they are trying to change. This was one reason why the Healthy Child Coalition, which was led by a steering committee that included local public policy experts and community leaders, was so successful (Daniels). The campaign strategy was designed by local community members Joshua Daniels and Dr. Vicki Alexander, and campaign manager, Sara Soka, before the election began in late Summer 2014. Their strategy was later executed in consultation with Larry Tramutola, a veteran political strategist, who stepped in after the previous political consultant was fired by the coalition and then hired by the ABA to fight San Francisco’s soda tax (Bourque).

The different team members brought different skill sets and expertise that would make the Berkeley soda tax successful. Joshua Daniels, who was a Berkeley School Board member, lawyer, and steering committee member credited his background in policy and law as a primary reason behind the success of the campaign. He played a key role in writing the bill early on in the campaign, which helped the coalition focus on building support through outreach, education, raising awareness of “Big Soda”’s dirty tactics, and mobilizing people on the ground. Daniels stated that because he was passionate about the campaign, he devoted 20-30 hours a week to the campaign, on top of his normal working hours. Likewise, Dr. Alexander spoke about the campaign at council meetings and in public rallies and lead the work with respect to the public health aspects while Soka managed logistics, volunteers, canvassing as well as securing endorsements from key stakeholder organizations (Daniels). For grassroots campaigns short on staff and funds, the importance of volunteer leaders like Daniels, Dr. Alexander, and Soka cannot be overemphasized.

However, Berkeley vs. Big Soda still needed someone who could focus on the campaign strategy. To fill that need, the steering committee brought in Larry Tramutola who would manage the on-the-ground mobilization (Bourque). Tramutola had years of experience leading Californian tax initiatives, making him uniquely suited for this role. In addition, as a resident of the Bay Area, Tramutola had an in-depth knowledge of the Berkeley community and deep connections within it that would help propel the campaign to success. For example, in the beginning, when the coalition barely had any funding to keep the campaign going, Tramutola convinced organizers and local print shops with whom he had relationships to take IOU’s and defer their payment until the end of the campaign, when funding from the Bloombergs and Arnolds came through (Tramutola).

Tramutola’s experience in Berkeley also helped contribute to the success in Oakland and San Francisco. Not only did he have institutional knowledge about the issue and how the ABA operated, he had won the trust of the Bloomberg Philanthropies. Bloomberg’s $20 million investment was substantial and they executed their own strategies for mail and TV ads. However, because Tramutola had led the successful campaign in Berkeley, they trusted the Tramutola-led efforts in San Francisco and Oakland to carry out their own ground strategy (Tramutola).

**Organizational Structure**

The importance of deep community support cannot be understated for campaigns like the soda tax. Past failed efforts to curb SSB consumption, such as El Monte, New York City, and the national soda tax considered by the Senate Finance Committee in 2009, were all led by government officials or public health wonks. This worked against campaigns as it fed into a narrative fueled by the beverage industry that big government was overstepping by trying to protect us from ourselves (Mankiw).

However, authentic grassroots activation proved to be a successful antidote to that fear. Compared to Richmond, where the organization fighting for the soda tax was accused of trying to push it through from the top-down (Onishi), Berkeley’s entire
community helped drive its “Yes on D” campaign. Galvanized by Richmond’s failure in 2012, community leaders, elected officials, parents, academics, doctors, health organizations, local nonprofits, and more came together to launch the grassroots Healthy Child Coalition. For most of 2013, the coalition focused on drafting the bill and laying the groundwork for their 2014 ballot push, all while staying under the radar of the powerful soda industry. All their work culminated in a dramatic and emotional city council meeting on February 2014. “I will never forget that night,” says Vice-Mayor Linda Maio. “The comments from the public and fellow council members were inspiring. Berkeley spoke with a single voice: we need a soda tax.” The Berkeley City Council voted unanimously to place Measure D on the ballot (Ecology Center).

After the measure was placed on the ballot, the entire community stepped up. The Ecology Center’s youth interns conducted door-to-door outreach in Berkeley neighborhoods, and community and education organizations from diverse groups like the Berkeley NAACP, Latinos Unidos de Berkeley, the entire school board, the League of Women Voters, food experts and local influencers like chef Alice Waters and professor and author Michael Pollan, and many more voiced their support of the effort. Berkeley vs. Big Soda’s anti-corporate messaging was extremely effective as it resonated with Berkeley residents who already had a deep distrust of large corporations. Bourque remarked that drumming up community support was incredibly easy, as residents would pull out No on Measure D signs from the ground unprompted (Bourque). This community-led approach would be replicated successfully in ensuing soda tax efforts, from San Francisco, Boulder, and more.

Timing

A few serendipitous events and factors helped pave the way for a victory in Berkeley. The first was the relative maturation of the movement to reduce SSB consumption. By the time Berkeley residents headed to the polls in 2014, dozens of soda taxes had been proposed and soundly defeated locally, state-wide, and nationally for over five years (Hamburger & Geiger). Despite the consecutive public losses, these initial attempts would prove instructive for future campaigns, including Berkeley.

Second, the beverage industry had been forced to show its cards in multiple fights across the country. But what the ABA saw as a playbook on how to beat soda taxes ended up being used against them. Grassroots advocates in Berkeley noticed patterns and recognized that the beverage industry had adopted tactics used by the tobacco industry, and began to fight back accordingly.

The third was the Bloomberg Philanthropies’ decision to begin funding soda tax campaigns in 2012. Their monetary support of a soda tax in Mexico resulted in victory, and in turn, emboldened Berkeley and San Francisco to try to implement it in their cities. Though Bloomberg provided key financial support to Berkeley’s campaign, they declined to fund San Francisco’s effort because they believed the ballot initiative was fundamentally flawed (Paarlberg et al. 3). San Francisco’s 2014 ballot measure was designed to earmark revenue from the tax to a specific program, instead of the general fund, and would have required over two-thirds of the vote to pass, instead of a simple majority. Meanwhile, the Berkeley campaign was cognizant that a supermajority would be much more difficult to obtain, so they intentionally wrote the measure so that revenue would go into the general fund and a citizen oversight committee would direct where and how those funds would be used (Tramutola).

The fourth was when federal funding for popular community programs was cut in 2013. The cuts sparked a backlash amongst the Berkeley School Board, community members, and political leaders and created near unanimous support for the SSB tax within the Berkeley community (Daniels). All of this culminated in the historic passage of Measure D in Berkeley.

The victories in Berkeley and Mexico opened the proverbial floodgates for other cities. Six cities, including three Bay Area neighbors and Philadelphia, followed in Berkeley’s footsteps. A study of the soda tax’s effect on Berkeley after the first year was extremely promising. It was the first study examining a SSB tax’s impact in the United States, and it showed that SSB consumption in low-income neighborhoods had dropped by 21% in the first year, compared to a 4% increase in comparison neighborhoods, a statistically significant contrast. Furthermore, water consumption in the city overall increased in comparison to other cities (Falbe et al. e5). And lastly, the soda tax brought in over $1.4 million to Berkeley in its first year, which was funneled to popular community programs and school-based prevention efforts (Healthy Food America). The Boulder campaign even leveraged the success of the Berkeley soda tax in reducing SSB consumption as one of their main messages (Healthy Food America).
Adaptive Strategies

As in any successful movement, soda tax advocates learned from the successes and failures of those before them in order to create stronger and more adaptive campaigns. The Healthy Child Coalition was granted a clear understanding of the industry’s tactics from their conversations with the leaders of the failed Richmond campaign (Bourque). This allowed them to proactively learn from Richmond’s mistakes and address common Big Soda spin tactics, even before the ABA created their astroturf campaign team (Bourque).

Most importantly, the coalition dispelled the myth that this kind of tax would hurt low-income minority communities. They created messaging to address misinformation and included credible validators from the African-American and Latinx communities as part of the leadership team. “These are the same communities that are suffering from disproportionate rates of diabetes, obesity, and heart disease,” says Xavier Morales, Berkeley parent and Executive Director of the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California.

In contrast to past failed campaigns, the BHCC drew a clear connection between the tobacco industry and the beverage industry in order to strengthen their narrative. These new talking points gave health experts, allies, coalition members, and politicians the ammo they needed to build a stronger case against Big Soda. Holly Scheider, Outreach Coordinator for the Healthy Child Coalition and former Tobacco Policy Coordinator for Contra Costa County was a powerful validator claiming, “the sugary beverage industry is doing exactly what the tobacco industry did: everything in their power to quash local initiatives” (Ecology Center).

Tramutola had also intentionally designed the campaign to be an easily replicable model that could help sustain the soda tax movement past Berkeley (Tramutola). This strategy worked as other cities and campaigns began to learn from the Berkeley vs. Big Soda model and customized it to fit their local communities. Seattle and Boulder named their pro-tax coalitions the “Seattle Healthy Kids Coalition” and “Healthy Boulder Kids” respectively, similar to Berkeley’s Healthy Child Coalition. Undoubtedly inspired by Berkeley, neighboring Albany, CA went one step further, by using a nearly identical poster design and campaign.

And finally, San Francisco learned from both their own loss and Berkeley’s victory in 2014 to successfully pass a soda tax in 2016. They brought on Tramutola, the political strategist behind Berkeley’s campaign, and made a few key changes to their campaign. First, they designed the ballot initiative to deposit funds into the general fund, instead of an earmarked fund (Healthy Food America). The former required a simple majority to pass, whereas the latter requires a two-thirds vote. San Francisco’s decision in 2014 to direct funds into an earmarked fund was why the Bloomberg Philanthropies declined to donate to the effort and partly to blame for their loss (Paarlberg et al. 3).

Second, they made diverse voices a priority. The campaign was led by two women of color, supervisor Malia Cohen and campaign manager Monica Chinchilla, who were leaders in the community. Their reputation helped bring more community members on board. They also made it a point to invite communities of color into discussions (Healthy Food America). This was crucial as the ABA had gotten much better at targeting people of color by attempting to reframe the soda tax as a “grocery tax” and featuring people of color in their ads and as community spokespeople (Tramutola).
And finally, they fine tuned their message, making it more in line with Berkeley’s messaging. Instead of focusing on how a soda tax could positive impact community by raising money for health programs like they did in 2014 (Somji et al. 7), advocates focused in on the frame of the “Health of Our Kids vs. Big Soda” profits.

It’s hard not to feel a sense of deja vu when looking at the campaigns that followed Berkeley’s. Though each community has its own unique set of circumstances, it’s clear that ensuing campaigns thought that Berkeley had cracked the code and were eager to learn from it.

**Pressure**

Compared to other campaigns, ballot initiative campaigns have a clear start and end date, which allows advocates to concentrate their energy and resources into a set timeframe. Since the target of elections is voters, Berkeley vs. Big Soda kept a drumbeat of events, editorials, and social media posts in support of the soda tax, while hammering at the beverage industry for its deceitful tactics (Bourque). Unsurprisingly, Berkeley’s pro-tax group was far more engaged on social media than the anti-tax faction and leveraged the grassroots capacity building power of social media platforms to publicize events and canvassing opportunities and share information (BMSG 4). Other cities used tactics that best suited their communities. Due to the city’s small size, advocates in Albany were able to canvass the entire city.

Conversations with Berkeley advocates ruled out the idea of an overarching strategy to get the soda tax passed nationally. However, the win in Berkeley, followed by the quick and consecutive successes in six other cities, clearly unnerved the beverage industry. Seeing the tide turn against them, the beverage industry was forced to go on the offensive and spend over $7 million to ban local soda taxes for the foreseeable future in California and Washington state in 2018. In California, the ABA helped introduce a statewide ballot measure that would have restricted cities and counties from raising any taxes without a supermajority vote from its citizens. During backroom talks, the ABA’s lobbyists promised that they would withdraw the measure from the ballot, which would have made it nearly impossible for cities and counties to raise revenue for projects, if lawmakers put a stop to further local soda taxes. Faced with a difficult choice, California lawmakers struck a deal with the ABA and passed the local soda tax ban (Dillon).

**Criticism**

Early soda tax supporters were commonly criticized for their top-down heavy approach. Though their policies would primarily affect low-income communities of color, advocates in New York, El Monte, and Richmond failed to appropriately engage these communities in the decision making process (Donaldson et al.). Berkeley made a conscious effort to engage communities of color and bring a diverse group of stakeholders to the table, and other cities followed suit.

Moreover, after Berkeley’s victory in 2014, many criticized this win as having limited public health significance, “since this small city of just 80,000 registered voters was unusually liberal, and relatively affluent,” Berkeley was also “only 41 percent non-white” and per capita soda consumption was low to begin with (Paalberg et al.). Bourque also notes that an overwhelming majority of Berkeley residents were college graduates, making them less susceptible to the ABA’s “scare and confuse” tactics (Bourque; Woldow). So, while some critics could see this victory as too specific to a uniquely progressive city, it would be a mistake to write this off as a uniquely left coast victory. If true, that cities like Berkeley were the only kind that could beat the industry, then larger municipalities with the low-income populations most prone to health risks from sweetened beverages might never be able to use this policy tool. However, since Berkeley’s 2014 win, many larger and more diverse municipalities have copied their blueprint in 2016 including Oakland, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Cook County, Illinois to success (Paalberg et al.).

**Conclusion**

Five years after passing a soda tax, Berkeley residents have cut their consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages by half and in one year alone Philadelphia residents cut consumption by 38%, showing that these taxes can and do work (Anwar) (Ducharme) to improve public health. Dr. Krieger predicts that there will be a slate of additional local soda taxes in 2020, and in Connecticut, the governor has made the soda tax a part of his revenue package. That makes the lessons from Berkeley and other cities’ campaigns even more important (Krieger).

The first learning is that advocates must know their audience and use an appropriate frame. Passing a soda tax through City Council is more successful with a revenue-focused message, while the general public, whom you would target for a ballot measure campaign, is more receptive to a public health
message. Furthermore, the movement will become even more successful if we change the framing, moving the conversation from victim blaming to a discussion about bad public policy. A more recent example of this shift is the American opioid crisis, where over the span of a few years, we stopped blaming victims of drug addiction for their situations and started talking about the pharmaceutical industry’s exploitation of the medical system and a lack of regulation.

The second is that failure is just another way to lay the groundwork for future victory. Advocates in Seattle tried for eight years before they successfully passed a soda tax (Healthy Food America). San Francisco failed to pass a measure in 2014, but the public education they undertook during this campaign helped propel their 2016 initiative to success.

And finally, local campaigns need outside funding but must maintain their homegrown credibility. It would have been near impossible to pass soda taxes in large and heavily populated cities like San Francisco and Oakland without external support from funders like the Bloombergs and Arnolds. However, all of their campaigns maintained local credibility because they were led by people from the community who advocated for the tax.

In 2018, the ABA and their allies began throwing their support behind a “blackmail” ballot measure in California that would have required cities to have a supermajority vote in order to raise any taxes, making it extremely difficult for local governments to raise revenue. The ABA-led coalition offered to drop the ballot measure in exchange for a ban on local soda taxes (Dillon). Under this heavy pressure, California lawmakers reluctantly passed bans on local soda taxes for the near future. And in Washington, voters approved a statewide ban on future local soda taxes after a fierce campaign where companies like Coca Cola and Pepsico outspent public health advocates $20 million to $13,000 (Splitter). However, regardless of their success or failure, soda taxes are attempting to change social norms around sugar-sweetened beverage consumption. No one has studied yet the perceived norms around sugar-sweetened beverages over the last decade, but it would be a safe bet to say soda taxes have played an important role in how we think and talk about this aspect of public health.
HIGHLIGHTS & CONCLUSION
Money Isn’t Everything

Access to financial resources is important, of course, and can often give campaigns a jumpstart or the ability to sustain momentum. In the case of the effort to pass health care reform, early dollars from deep-pocketed donors allowed the campaign to conduct an essential planning phase that set them up for success from the very beginning. Committed environmental donors pivoted from supporting a campaign to end Tar Sands Oil extraction to focus on the Keystone XL pipeline; union dollars helped the Fight for $15 get off the ground in Seattle; and large amounts of money from Charles and David Koch sparked activism that evolved into what we now know as the Tea Party.

While money still matters, it has never been the only lever of power. One clear antidote to deep pockets is large coalitions with people power and effective leadership. In the Keystone campaign, the large and organized coalition of activists helped to defeat the money of the well-resourced oil and gas industry. Soda tax campaigns in cities around the United States were regularly outspent by the beverage industry by a ratio of 2:1, but learning from failure and experience, strong grassroots support and genuine local leadership gave activists an overwhelming home-field advantage. As demonstrated in the unsuccessful attempt to expand charter schools in Massachusetts, access to lots of money doesn’t make for a winning campaign. In this case, the opposition had less cash but more convincing messengers (teachers) and spent months building a passionate big tent coalition.

It’s impossible for campaigns to succeed without money, but overestimating the importance of financial resources can create unconvincing and overconfident campaigns. Put simply, you can’t buy passion, community, and people’s commitment to their values.

Framing, Clarity and Values-based Messaging

Framing is a theoretical approach used in sociology to help us analyze events and rationalize our interactions with the world. Many campaigns framed issues around villains to help people better understand who they were fighting against. The Net Neutrality campaign rallied people against big cable and the health care movement argued that big insurance companies didn’t actually have people’s health in mind. Keystone gained support by highlighting Big Oil’s disregard for the environment and public health and the Tea Party stoked fears about big government and “freeloaders” taking resources away from hard-working Americans. Anti-charter activists portrayed charter school supporters as out of touch billionaires. These frames drew a clear line between ‘us’ and ‘the other.’

Creating an enemy is important, but often coincided with clear messaging that connected to people’s values. Successful messages spoke to people’s core identities and their fundamental beliefs about how the world should be, allowing campaigns to gain committed supporters that followed their beliefs.

Vote Leave convinced voters that leaving the EU would allow them to take back control of Britain at a time of great economic and identity anxiety and connected people back to the idea of
a cohesive British identity in a time of acute chaos. Proponents of healthcare reform argued that human life is inherently valuable and therefore should not be susceptible to corporate greed. The Tea Party reminded its adherents of American roots in individualism and freedom from tyranny. The fight for Net Neutrality employed a clear message about the need for freedom of information against censorship. The Fight for $15 deployed a message around fairness and economic dignity. These messages were simple and helped people understand what was at stake through resonant values-based messages.

From an academic perspective, the research around the effectiveness of positive and negative framing is inconclusive as it is challenging to determine the various elements that impact persuasion and can be difficult to completely isolate positive or negative messages in an experimental environment. While negative framing can be effective, successful campaigns often strategically deployed both positive and negative messages at the same time to different audiences. Several practitioners including Jeff Nesbit of Climate Nexus spoke about the need for polling and message testing, ideally in real time, to ensure that messages are resonating with key audiences.

**Visionary Leaders**

Winning campaigns had visionary leadership that seized a certain political moment or had the foresight to recognize the future opportunity for success. These leaders saw opportunities where others didn’t and had the skill and confidence to unify large groups of diverse populations around that vision.

For example, advocates for health care reform recognized an opportunity to pass universal health care after the Great Recession caused a drastic increase in the number of uninsured Americans. A newly elected Democratic Congress and a Democratic president bent on making his mark created an environment ripe for activists to plant early seeds for an organized grassroots movement. Richard Kirsch, the bold leader behind the health care reform movement, with the help from philanthropic donations, used his knowledge of the health care space to jump-start planning and build the infrastructure necessary for a successful campaign.

The Keystone campaign arrived at a time when climate action was stalled in Congress and Bill McKibben felt the only viable antidote was a large-scale grassroots climate movement. Activists on college campuses were already engaged on the issue through a nation-wide college divestment campaign and were eager to mobilize around climate change in bigger ways. The fight to stop the pipeline became the vehicle to mobilize those activists and build that climate movement with President Obama as the target.

The Tea Party movement exploded on the national scene at a particular moment in history. With high unemployment, growing fear about the economy, and the recent election of an African-American Democratic president, the Koch Brothers found their right moment to harness anti-government energy to advance the broader agenda of limiting the federal government. In a noticeable failure to recognize a political moment, leaders of Yes on 2 did not account for the fact that in an extremely polarized 2016 election, the progressive Democratic voters in Massachusetts viewed expanding charter schools as a Republican cause and rejected the referendum.

The combination of vision, understanding a political climate, a magnetic personality, skilled diplomacy and ability to manage large (and diverse) factions and groups of people, proved to be crucial for successful campaign leaders.

**Iteration Matters**

Willingness and ability to adapt was the difference between success and failure for many campaigns. Having a structure in place to receive inputs to understand evolving landscapes and make quick changes was key. For the Vote Leave campaign, though they relentlessly stuck to their message, campaign leaders were nimble in their tactics, exemplified in their pivot on immigration. Though they did not employ immigration as a message in the early stages of the campaign, leader Dominic Cummings eventually recognized the need to start deploying it as a key message. Brexit also transformed their failing digital strategy by hiring new leadership late in the campaign. Their ability to recalibrate helped propel them to victory. In contrast, the leaders of the Yes on 2 charter campaign failed to change their strategy and tactics, despite warning signs that they were going to lose the referendum. They overly relied on initial polling data that showed that they would easily win, failed to effectively use digital and did not organize a successful ground game despite facing a powerful one from their opponents. The Fight for $15 was initially designed as a union recruitment effort, but once they started to gain traction around the wage issue, they harnessed this passion and
shifted their efforts to focus on raising the minimum wage for all workers, regardless of union affiliation. A willingness to push beyond tried and true tactics and try unusual or out of the box ideas helped campaigns adjust and adapt to the changing whims of a political or social moment.

**Build Community; Build Movements**

Smart issue advocates know these challenges are big and complex and that meaningful change takes time. These advocates, therefore, leverage campaigns to build communities united around core values, not just communities dedicated to a specific campaign. While there has been a lot of attention on digital innovation in campaigns, in-person community building moments, though costly and time-consuming, are essential to building the kind of communities that last beyond individual campaigns. For instance, in the Tea Party movement, people regularly connected with each other offline at in-person rallies and meetups that brought people together under the shared values of patriotism and freedom. These meetups encouraged fun and socializing — building stronger connections among activists. Many of these local groups formed the base of Trump supporters eager to “Make American Great Again.”

On the other side of the aisle, Keystone utilized effective in-person protests with diverse groups, including young activists, ranchers, and indigenous people, to create internal solidarity and project a unified movement. It is this community of activists that fueled the initial excitement over the Green New Deal and are elevating climate as a key issue in elections. Fight for $15 in Seattle ignited a movement of mass demonstrations across the country to raise the minimum wage and spurred a national conversation around economic inequality. It is these communities of activists that are demanding bold economic policy proposals from Democratic candidates running for president in 2020. The same is evident in Net Neutrality and health care advocates who stay engaged year after year, even when the landscape shifts and new challenges need confronting. These advocates feel connected to a community loyal to the bigger cause. These campaigns recognized that in order to achieve real progress, it was less about the success of particular tactics and more about building a community to create the infrastructure and commitment for more permanent change.

**The Need for Diversity**

Finally, diversity is essential to the ability to iterate and see different opinions and points of view. This research showed clear instances from the soda tax to the Keystone XL campaign where having a diverse decision-making table allowed the campaigns to reach new audiences, try new tactics, and ultimately build a more successful campaign. The Berkeley “Yes on D” coalition earned credibility in the community by having leaders that reflected their constituents, and in turn reached a new audience of potential voters and allies. The Keystone XL coalition relied heavily on the voices of Indigenous People and local communities near the route who would be directly affected by the planned oil pipeline. By bringing together Indigenous People and established DC environmental groups as full strategic partners - the Keystone coalition had a strength and credibility that contributed to its success. This type of diversity at the decision-making table is unfortunately lacking in the majority of campaigns researched for this report. However, in interviews, every woman and person of color we spoke with reiterated that diversity was not optional if campaigns are going to be successful in the future.
In our research, we found that there is a gap between the academic study of campaigns and social movements and work of those on the frontlines. A lack of a shared experience and common language leads to distrust between academics and practitioners. Academics like Skocpol assert that academics are better suited than practitioners for this kind of evaluation work because they have a firmer grasp of quantitative research and are viewed as neutral parties, and can earn the trust of all stakeholders along an ideological spectrum. However, Dan Cramer, a practitioner and evaluator, said that having a similar background as the evaluees (i.e. the practitioners) has helped him gain their trust and helped distinguish when interviewees are being untruthful or overstating their impact. This divide is important to acknowledge, because unchecked, it leads to culture of reticence and withholding, which in turn leads to weaker advocacy.

We find that this gap mainly occurs because of and along three dividing lines, outlined below.

**Practitioners and Academics**

In an interview with Richard Kirsch, former National Campaign Manager of Health Care for America Now (HCAN), Kirsch commented that academia is too divorced from the day to day and argued that academics use artificial constructs to study campaigns. Margarida Jorge, of HCAN, agreed. She remarked that despite multiple academic studies of HCAN, not a single researcher reached out to her, the architect and executor of its field operations, to learn more about her work.

Part of this disconnect is caused by a faulty theory of change. Some researchers may be misguided in their belief that new findings or reports will inevitably lead to improved policy outcomes. Others are not interested at all in their findings being used to promote change. While some see research as inextricably linked to improving advocacy and mobilization efforts, others strongly prefer to keep their research politically neutral (Klugman 154). Skocpol noted that this tension is an especially big problem amongst progressives. She contended that compared with conservatives, it was very difficult to get the left to listen to academics and their findings because everyone believes that they are already an expert on the topic (Skocpol).

**Progressives vs. Conservatives**

Progressive and conservative organizations rarely openly share learnings and best practices across ideological lines. Further compounding the siloing of information, for-profit vendors, such as political consultants, align themselves with either Democrats or Republicans. Though this jealous guarding of knowledge is done for obvious reasons, there have been instances when trans-partisanship has led to positive outcomes, despite a highly polarized political climate (Hurlburt).
Practitioner to Practitioner

Though it may seem like everyone in the progressive advocacy world knows each other, multiple interviewees noted that there is rarely active knowledge sharing from practitioner to practitioner. Responses to why there is not a culture of knowledge sharing varied. Margarida Jorge hypothesized that it had to do with who was commissioning this knowledge, i.e. the funders. She surmised that this might lead to campaign staff exaggerating their impact in order to impress a funder or hide their shortcomings (Jorge).

And fundamentally, no mechanism for delivering new research to nonprofits and community activists currently exists (Klugman 154). In an interview, Professor Steven Teles of Johns Hopkins University noted there was a need for a center on advocacy with a database that could train activists, carry out case studies, and build up a progressive organizing infrastructure.

Imagine if there was an ongoing effort to understand campaigns from multiple perspectives over an extended period of time, sharing these learnings widely and regularly convening the people doing the work to discuss their insights and experiences. Campaigns could be more efficient, less expensive and more effective if we close this knowledge gap.

By approaching this with an eye for advancement, weaving together past learnings and insights, it is possible that we can improve campaign methodology and make the sector richer over a sustained period of time.

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