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## 'We tried doing it the protest way': Community Organizing Adaptations as a Lens to Understand Semi-Closed Political Systems

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### **Abstract**

Much is known about community organizing strategies and outcomes (Checkoway 1995, Dewey and Zafar 2014), but as nonresponsive and oppressive governments rise internationally there is a need to better understand organizing as these contexts evolve (Kodrzycki and Muñoz 2013). This dynamic, where formal or informal power appears to be concentrated and reserved for power brokers, is what we refer to as "semi-closed political systems" (Eisinger 1973). Camden, New Jersey, with its historical challenges of governance and disempowerment, is an important case study for understanding how grassroots movements adapt organizing strategies within such contexts, and what those adaptations show us about semi-closed political systems. Through qualitative interviews and analysis, this paper presents a selection of adaptations of organizing strategies used by Camden organizers amidst a semi-closed political system. Camden's organizing efforts reveal how semi-closed systems both shape and constrain organizing practices; this case demonstrates both the adaptive capacity of organizers and highlights the structural limitations they faced.

**Keywords:** democracy, closed system, activism, local hiring

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## Introduction

Community organizing is often a means to address dissatisfaction with governance due to oppression and nonresponsiveness (Kaldor and Selchow 2013). Eisinger (1973) calls political systems where formal or informal power is concentrated and the government is nonresponsive 'closed' or 'semi-closed systems'. Within these systems, opportunities for people to meet their needs through political action are limited (Eisinger 1973, 12).

Much has been written about the implications of such systems for community organizing. Subterranean politics, as elucidated by Kaldor and Selchow (2013), are fueled by grassroots and focused on European systems seen as nonresponsive to residents. In the United States, liberal framing of the danger of Trump in terms of as threat to democracy follows a similar trend (Foa and Mounk 2022) while in Camden, NJ, we coined the phrase "Pragmatic Urban Protest" (Danley 2018) to discuss the organizers' response to democratic limitations and oppression.

Research on closed and semi-closed systems often highlights a) the ways the closed nature of the system serves as a rallying point for this organizing (see Kaldor and Selchow 2013) or b) the ways that the closure serves as a limitation or challenge for such organizing. Less of the research focuses specifically on how community movements adapt to such environments, how effective those adaptations to organizing practices are, or what they tell us about the nature of these semi-closed systems. By examining organizing strategies and their outcomes together, we better understand how both activists navigate structural constraints and what those constraints reveal about the nature of semi-closed political systems.

This paper contributes to our understanding of community organizing within semi-closed systems through a case study of organizing by the Camden, We Choose coalition on local hiring issues. Camden, New Jersey is a small city just outside of Philadelphia that has maintained a tight-knit community while facing many of the wider challenges of deindustrialization, suburbanization, racism, and white flight, as well as a decades-long pattern of decaying democratic rights. Camden has seen a long-standing trend of disempowerment and the stripping of residents' rights, from a 2001 municipal takeover, to environmental justice issues, to ballot design practices that reinforce the power of political parties, to a 2012 financial dispute that resulted in a state takeover of the Camden School District (Gillette 2006; Danley and Rubin 2020; Rubin 2023).

Using interview data from Camden, We Choose members, Camden residents, and a rich case study of organizing in Camden, we show how Camden, We Choose has adapted organizing techniques specifically to function within a semi-closed political context. The successes and failures of those adaptations tell us both about the nature of semi-closed political systems, and about community understanding of the possibilities of organizing within them.

Our findings show that Camden, We Choose adapted existing organizing techniques and tailored them to the specifics of their semi-closed political system. We've identified components that serve as adaptations to traditional organizing approaches that show what it takes to organize within semi-closed systems by a) changing strategies to counter the semi-closed system, b) emphasizing community voice, c) 'cutting the issue', and d) using direct democracy. According to residents, these strategies had varied levels of effectiveness, pointing out opportunities and challenges within the semi-closed political system in Camden.

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## Literature Review

This literature review delves into the interplay between subterranean political theory and Eisinger's frameworks for open, semi-closed, and closed systems. Our study applies these theories to community organizing within the challenging context of Camden and uses the findings from that case study to improve our understanding of organizing in semi-closed systems.

Eisinger (1973) categorizes political environments as open, semi-closed, and closed systems, each of which comprises factors such as the formal political structure, the climate of governmental responsiveness, social structure, and social stability. An open system features high levels of responsiveness and accessibility, while closed systems are marked by concentrated power and low levels of governmental response, stifling the potential for political activism. Semi-closed systems suggest a blend of the two, which still present distinct challenges for community organizing.

Studies of participation, social movements, and community organizing focus on efforts to change conditions and policies within these systems. Rubin and Rubin (2005, 189) define community organizing as "people coming together to fight shared problems." Ohmer and Brooks (2013, 234) write that "Community organizing has often been distinguished over time as either conflict or consensus oriented." The literature on participation makes a parallel distinction, such as differentiation between "invited" and "popular" spaces for public participation (Cornwall 2004). These invited spaces are venues where citizens are summoned by the state to partake in processes, potentially as a remedy for the democratic deficit. In contrast, popular spaces are forged by citizens themselves, often to voice dissent against governmental policies or to foster solidarity and mutual support.

Cornwall stresses that the demarcations between invited and popular spaces are fluid, with each interfacing differently with existing political institutions. Participatory governance can transform power relations and extend democratic practice beyond conventional mechanisms such as voting. The potential for such transformations is dependent on factors like the origin of these spaces, the prevailing governance landscape, and context-specific attributes, including cultural and political traditions.

Participatory processes in government inhabit relatively open spaces. For example, residents contribute to municipal budgets through participatory budgeting (see Shah 2007). In a well-functioning representative democracy, voting processes serve a similar effect.

Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (1971) provides a playbook for confrontational organizing when meaningful space for change is absent. His approach centers on three key strategies: first, cultivating relationships among community members to tap latent mobilization potential, with leaders emerging through relational networks instead of elections (Schutz and Sandy 2011, 492). Second, predicting and harnessing opposition reactions - "the real action is in the reaction of the opposition" (Ibid, 526). Third, polarizing issues to simplify complex debates: "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it..." (Alinsky 1971, 30). This approach strengthens mobilization and converts nebulous problems into tangible, achievable issues. Checkoway (1995) provides a complementary set of organizing strategies that includes mass mobilization, social action, citizen participation, public advocacy, popular education, and local services development.

Drawing on Eisinger (1973) and Cornwall (2017), we identify community organizing strategies in the context of closed systems and nonresponsive governments as a critical area for further study. Just as Alinsky's (1971) *Rules for Radicals* codified organizing practice and Checkoway (1995) typologized organizing strategies, the field now needs explicit community perspectives on strategies that emerge from closed and semi-closed political systems to better understand those systems and the challenges inherent in organizing within them.

## Methods

This research uses a case study of organizing in Camden, NJ – an example of a semi-closed political system – to explore the logic and efficacy of organizing strategies specifically adapted within a semi-closed system and to better help our understanding of semi-closed systems.

We adopted a purposive, stratified sampling approach for interviews (Creswell and Poth 2016) with two primary groups: residents of the city of Camden, and members of the Camden, We Choose coalition who conducted a community organizing campaign focused on local hiring. Camden, We Choose was established in 2018, and comprised various organizations, including the Unity Community Center of South Jersey, Camden County NAACP, CWA Local 1014, the Camden Education Association, Camden Parents Union, Community Doulas of South Jersey, Working Families, NJ and Watu Moja, an organization dedicated to arts, culture, and leadership development. The coalition members were chosen for this study based on their active involvement in the local hiring campaign, while residents were selected to represent a broad spectrum of the community's demographics and experiences. The research includes a total of 16 semi-structured interviews, comprising 5 with coalition members and 11 with residents. The stratified sample was made possible by the positionality of the authors. Stephen Danley is a professor, local activist, and 12-year resident of Camden, NJ. Kathleen Lopez is a student in the Public Affairs/Community Development PhD program at Rutgers-Camden University and met Camden, We Choose organizers through a class project. The existing relationships we had both within the organizer community and the wider Camden community provided the opportunity to interview key actors in the organizing effort and unaffiliated residents.

Boyce and Neale argue that (2006, 3) "In-depth interviews are useful when you want detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviors or want to explore new issues in depth. Interviews are often used to provide context to other data".

The stratified sample allows us to speak to the logic, strategy, and perspectives of community organizers, while interviews with residents give a wider sense of how effective that campaign was in the eyes of residents. This was informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), where Feit (2019) argues that counter stories are an important technique to bring to light the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups often overlooked in mainstream discourse. This is important in semi-closed systems because it is a feature of these systems that these voices have trouble finding traction in formal, invited spaces.

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using an inductive approach (Creswell and Poth 2016). This method involves coding the data, allowing themes and patterns to emerge organically from the interviews themselves. Through iterative rounds of coding, we identified key themes related to community organizing, strategies employed, challenges faced, and the impacts

of these efforts on the community. This approach is particularly suited to exploratory research where the aim is to understand complex social phenomena from the ground up.

### **The Camden Case**

Camden, NJ, serves as a poignant case study due to its experience with oppression and losing political rights – which we argue makes it a semi-closed system.

For those unfamiliar with the city, Camden has faced significant socio-economic challenges similar to many other post-industrial cities, including deindustrialization, white flight, and suburbanization.

In the Washington Post (Danley 2020) Camden is discussed in terms of the well-known city of Detroit, MI:

With more than 70,000 residents, Camden's history parallels Detroit's on a smaller scale. As in Detroit, the city lost manufacturing from companies such as New York Shipping Company, Victor Talking Machine Co. and Campbell's Soup, particularly in the years after World War II. "White flight" and suburbanization sped that disinvestment, leaving behind a bankrupt high-poverty city dependent on state aid since the 1980s.

Camden also features stark contradictions. While communities are pockmarked with abandoned or demolished houses, those blocks are also home to close-knit residents and a resilient cultural arts scene.

This comparison provides a backdrop to Camden's challenging circumstances while situating it within broader narratives of urban American cities facing similar issues. Additionally, Camden's relationship with the state government and the ways in which budgetary constraints impact democratic rights are critical in understanding the context within which community organizing takes place (see Gillette 2006). These constraints provide insight into the hurdles faced by activists and residents in their efforts to effect change.

Camden shares a history with many deindustrialized cities, but because of its size and the severe segregation in New Jersey (see Orfield, Ee and Coughlan 2017), it also serves as an example of extreme political disenfranchisement. Disenfranchisement is a theme across decades of multiple policy decisions in Camden. The city's development is characterized by pressure to accept noxious uses to improve the city's budget (Danley, Jackson and Perry 2021). In 2001, the state provided \$175 million in aid for the city on the condition of a municipal takeover (Gillette 2006). Just over a decade later, the city's education system was taken over by the state and has since moved away from a centralized school district to the highest density of charter schools and school choice in the state (see Danley and Rubin 2020). In 2012, the city's police force was disbanded and replaced with a county force (see Danley 2020), and in 2013, the state passed the Economic Opportunity Act, which funded approximately \$1.6 billion in tax subsidies for businesses relocating to Camden (Gillette 2022). Each of these reforms moved democratic power outside of the city of Camden – a shift made possible not just by Camden's financial dependency on the state and county, but also on New Jersey's particular ballot design (colloquially referred to as 'the line') which gave the Camden County Democratic Party a boost in the ballot box (see Rubin 2023). We argue that these policies show that Camden is a semi-closed system; that while there is democratic government in Camden, it is one with significant limitations.

Despite the challenging context, Camden has a rich history of organizing and a vibrant civic scene. Historical events such as opposition to the state takeover of local institutions, the fight against the construction of a golf course, and the roles of organizations like Camden Organized for Responsible Development (CORD) and Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP) in these struggles are integral to understanding the city's legacy of organizing (see Gillette 2006; Gillette 2022).

### **The Referendum Campaign**

This section provides an in-depth case study of the context, timeline and organizing of the Camden, We Choose coalition for a referendum that evolved in response to the Economic Opportunity Act of 2013. The referendum mandates that businesses report how many Camden residents they hire. We a) draw from interviews with Camden, We Choose organizers to show how the organization adapted organizing approaches to the semi-closed context, and b) draw from interviews with city residents to show effective and ineffective elements of those adaptations. In the conclusion, we analyze what the effectiveness of these adaptations tells us about semi-closed systems.

The 2013 Economic Opportunity Act provided large tax subsidies to companies to relocate to Camden, NJ as part of an effort to revitalize the city. Throughout the mid 2010s, Camden Organized for Responsible Development (CORD) organized around forcing these businesses to create Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) that would ensure part of the investment of tax subsidies would return to communities through local hiring and other initiatives. That effort failed in large part because CBAs typically succeed when paired with government support - which Camden lacked.

The controversy over the tax subsidies erupted again in 2018 when the CEO of Holtec – a nuclear power company which received \$260 million in subsidies to move to the city – made racist statements about Camden residents in response to a question about local hiring:

*"They don't show up to work," Singh said of Camden workers. "They can't stand getting up in the morning and coming to work every single day. They haven't done it, and they didn't see their parents do it. Of course, some of them get into drugs and things. So, it's difficult (Hernandez 2018).*

In 2019, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy launched an investigation and hearings into the program (Catalini 2019). Organizers within Camden, We Choose picked up the effort to increase local hiring as part of their broader organizing effort for accountability and transparency in the city.

### **Adaptation: Responding to the Semi-Closed System**

Camden, We Choose organizers were explicit that their organizing approach was in direct response to earlier failed efforts to promote local hiring in the city.

For example, a Camden, We Choose coalition leader told us, "civic engagement in Camden is hard. We do have historically low turnout rates at the polls." A local NAACP leader describes the challenges more explicitly in terms of the political opposition in a semi-closed system: "I think that what happens is that, from the way I take it, people are pessimistic nothing's going to happen. They [politicians] go and do what they're gonna do anyway. But still we're out here doing." One of Camden, We Choose's leaders tied this together, speaking to the adaptation of their approach, saying "we [tried] doing it the protesting way...things don't get looked into, we don't get

supported." Another echoed that sentiment, saying "We are [in a] politically corrupted city that we know that we have people who look like us that maybe be on a different agenda."

As the coalition pivoted away from previous organizing tactics and brainstormed new approaches, one leader captured their approach stating, "we've exhausted all other options. You've exhausted any other option that there is, and for the first time we've been able to come together and get it done with this petition."

A member of the coalition with experience in state politics shared the same sentiment, arguing that:

In a perfect world, where the politics in the city would have been a little bit different, perhaps there could have been a way to push for [a] community benefits agreement. However, it's not ever that simple in the city of Camden. Because there's different political players that have certain influence.

The renewed efforts to organize were quietly opposed by local elected officials behind the scenes and then publicly, an effort that culminated in a scathing critique of Camden We Choose from the city's mayor, Victor Carstarphen (2023), writing that the work of the coalition amounted to "poverty porn" that focused on all the negatives of the city.

Organizers found themselves fighting a specific battle around local hiring and then using that narrower issue to engage in broader work in an effort to make the semi-closed system more democratic. A leader from Camden, We Choose describes the moment she connected the two saying:

*"They've gotten used to just saying people's signatures are invalid, but no one's doing the work, delayed work to correct those invalid signatures. That's the part that was a lightbulb moment for me. As an organizer, that was a light bulb moment. We have work to do."*

In this quote, the organizer made a connection between a way the political system in Camden is closed – the efforts by local officials to invalidate signatures of registered voters for their petition – and adapted to organize in response. These quotes show how organizers in Camden were intentional about adapting their strategies as a specific response to the semi-closed nature of the system.

Adapting to past failures had mixed results based on reports from community members. For example, one of the major drawbacks in the campaign was simply reaching residents. There are inherent challenges of spreading the word within a semi-closed political system where information does not circulate evenly. This system's inherent barriers made it difficult for organizers to effectively communicate their message and mobilize the community; in fact, many of the resident interviewees revealed that they were not aware that companies have moved to the city, let alone the campaign for a referendum for those companies to report their local hiring. As one resident explained,

*"There were even instances where we were right down the street from certain facilities, and people didn't even know...we were in that neighborhood, and they were like, 'Oh, we didn't even know that was there... no one told us."*

Another echoed this sentiment more broadly, describing Camden as having "a huge information deficit."

These gaps weren't solely about political knowledge; basic awareness was impacted as well. Residents described hearing about issues within Camden as, "...you may hear something on one side of the city and don't hear it on other side," or missing hearing from organizers entirely because, "I'm not opening the door to people with clipboards...leave a document, maybe a one pager or... a QR code that I could scan." Even in neighborhoods where the coalition canvassed more heavily, the information simply did not reach everyone within this semi-closed system where official channels rarely communicate clearly with residents.

At the same time, interviewees emphasized that Camden residents are not apathetic: they are activated when information does fully reach them. As one resident said, "The more people know, the more they react...once we see [the numbers], we're able to move forward." Another described the untapped potential of resident voices as a matter of access, rather than one of interest: "The city would come together if they...just had the valuable resources – if they knew where to get the resources." Far from being disengaged, one resident argued, "people are engaged when you present an issue to them...when it means something to them."

Together, these perspectives help to illustrate how the semi-closed nature of Camden's system constrains the flow of information and limits mobilization, but it also reveals the potential of adapting organizing strategies in response.

#### ***Adaptation: 'Cutting the Issue'***

Focusing on local hiring was a strategic decision by Camden, We Choose that fulfilled multiple objectives: the issue fits the coalition's values, it had potential to deeply resonate with residents, and, as such, was an issue with the potential to build momentum for the wider organizing effort that could challenge Camden's semi-closed political system.

Staples (2012) describes this type of action as 'cutting the issue.' This is the process of selecting a narrow focus for organizing a campaign out of a broad social issue. This approach includes considerations that mirror those of Camden, We Choose, including consistency with mission, unifying the organization(s), organizational growth, educational experience for members, potential of success and credit for victory, among others.

An organizer who went door-to-door describes her own experience, and in doing so, makes visible part of Camden, We Choose' 'cutting' of the issue:

*"One of their promises that I remember them saying was we're gonna hire more people who work in Camden. That was the big thing. A lot of the politicians here were like, these big companies, they're coming here and they're gonna give us jobs. And it's going to open up the gates for people to have more employment. And over the years, people 'til this day are still complaining about not getting a call back from an interview or, or application. They didn't hear an update... they've been calling and calling and getting updates. Nobody's gonna get [jobs]. I don't [know of anyone getting a job] to this day. I don't know one person Camden who can say they work at Holtec, or who works at the American Water, or who works at 76ers building."*

Here we see the power of this specific issue. This volunteer, who was recruited to canvas on the issue, specifically remembered the controversy. In a sense, this is already a success – the issue led to a widening coalition.

A Camden, We Choose leader discussed various aspects of the decision to focus on local hiring. First, she describes the power of the issue itself and its importance:

*"It was a direct punch to big businesses saying, 'how is it that you all have been here all this time, and we still don't know how many people work in your corporation that live in our city?'"*

This quote shows the narrow value of the issue and its fit with equity and organizational values of the coalition. The leader goes on to discuss the political opportunity, saying, "It was the motivating factor, we had built up some momentum, we had certain targets on our mind. We had bad actors and good actors that were in those corporations. But we, more importantly, had an opportunity."

This quote shows how 'cutting the issue' speaks both to the narrow issue of local hiring by corporations who received tax subsidies, but also that it was an opportunity to speak to wider structural issues about Camden's semi-closed political system.

Lastly, the leader talks about how the issue resonates with community: "When we started door knocking, before finding out that people were so disgruntled with the fact that they had applied for those jobs, that they had been trying to get into those jobs for years, and had not been successful."

Community members echoed this sentiment, though with some caveats explaining that local hiring was not only a widely shared grievance but also a deeply personal one. "As soon as I would mention one of the [companies], most people would...be like, 'I tried to apply there. And they didn't even give me a call back.'" These experiences resonated, reinforcing the organizers' decision to focus the campaign on a concrete, relatable issue.

Residents also linked the hiring issue to questions of fairness and reciprocity. One argued, "Hey, if you want to...take advantage of our resources, then...we expect you to hire our people." Others connected the tax subsidies given to companies to the unmet promises they made, with one saying, these companies "came here not because they love Camden, [but] because they got tax advantages...they were to hire the people and make the conditions of life around here better." Together, these quotes illustrate why local hiring served as an effective "cut issue," as it resonated with residents' lived experiences, advanced the coalition's values, and helped build momentum towards broader future challenges to Camden's semi-closed political system.

However, interviews also revealed that residents sometimes framed the lack of local hiring through a narrative of personal responsibility for Camden residents and structural barriers limiting their choices – not necessarily blaming corporations directly. One resident reflected, "I worked hard for what I have and where I am, but everyone doesn't have that mindset...we don't have the access, we don't have access to the things that we need to function properly as a community." Another described how generational stress and exhaustion shape people's capacity to keep going, noting that, "Some people...give up when they don't have that drive...we have to take into consideration the generational curses and all of the mental impact that has been...made for generations." Together, these statements reveal how Camden residents internalize both individual and communal

responsibility while recognizing that enduring inequalities limit the self-determination that they value. In a semi-closed system where resources are not distributed, narratives of effort and morality struggle to coexist in the face of structural constraints.

Despite these nuances, residents who the campaign reached were fired up about the issue. One organizer explained, "We tried doing...social media awareness, we tried...going to different city council meetings, and...[i]t doesn't get answered...with the petition, it basically got a number of people on board...and that was proof that the people here in Camden, all feel the same way." A resident echoed this, saying, "[P]eople want opportunities...who wants to have to travel to Philly every day, pay a toll...to get decent employment?"

Jobs seemed to become the bridge between systemic critique and tangible experience, with a simple demand of hiring Camden residents making the issue legible. The collective experience, then, of door-knocking and petitioning converted those private grievances into public action. Within the context of the semi-closed political system, local hiring functioned as both an economic concern and a political tool. Residents were able to drive a wedge to assert visibility and demand reciprocity from the governing institutions that had long ignored them.

Having cut the issue, Camden, We Choose organizers focused on tactics. In doing so, they drew from a previous successful organizing effort. Their first major organizing effort was to get the issue of having an elected school board on the ballot.

What followed was an example of why Camden is a semi-closed system – Camden's mayor, elected officials, school board, and state-appointed school superintendent all opposed the changes and campaigned against them (Woolston 2018) but the referendum passed easily.

A coalition leader describes the moment this way:

*"Our first really strong fight with this was us come together as a coalition to win the right to vote for a school board. We won that successfully with the help of many people from the coalition but just being on the ground, and being clear about what the residents were saying they wanted to see."*

According to interviews with Camden, We Choose, that success was the foundation for a similar attempt to pass an ordinance that would force all Camden businesses with more than 25 employees disclose the number of local residents they employ, along with their salaries.

### **Adaptation: Direct Democracy**

The choice to focus on a referendum speaks to Camden's semi-closed system.

First, the referendum embraces conflict with existing politicians – an explicit acknowledgement that a more collaborative organizing approach emphasizing community benefit agreements had failed. Often, city officials negotiate Community Benefit Agreements with community organizers on issues such as local hiring (see Epstein 2021; Rosen 2023). Camden Organized for Responsible Development tried this approach unsuccessfully. Similarly, many Camden, We Choose members participated in protests surrounding the Holtec CEO. Ray Lamboy ran for office on a platform featuring CBAs and struggled to gain traction or funding.

For activists, these failures are proof that Camden's political system is semi-closed. In New Jersey, County political parties are particularly powerful units that influence everything from candidate selection, to get-out-the-vote efforts. But the system is not entirely closed. Camden, NJ operates under the Optional Municipal Charter Law (N.J.S.A. 40:69A-185) that allows for a referendum to go directly on the ballot with a certain number of signatures (Ballotpedia n.d.). This option serves as a workaround that allows an issue to be voted on without support from county party infrastructure.

A leader from one of the Camden, We Choose coalition members highlights the link between the semi-closed system and the referendum approach saying, "I think the lack of accountability and transparency kind of signals to me that there's something else going on. I just think the petition is kind of one of those things to hold accountable. Because are you doing what you said you were going to do?"

This leader specifically links the lack of accountability from the political system in Camden to the choice of referendum, framing it as holding existing politicians accountable. A second leader, with a political background in New Jersey, expands on this theme, telling us:

*"We were able to work closely with our attorneys to understand how this language would play out in real life. And one of the good things about doing an initiative and referendum is that you do need to get community buy-in by way of the signatures on the petition. And so, by drafting this, not only do we push for accountability in a way that allows the residents to voice themselves, were able to directly engage with the residents on the ground level, about the issues that matter to them."*

In this quote, we see the strategic elements of the referendum. She highlights a similar theme of accountability, linking that effort to community voice and grassroots organizing. She also introduces the necessity of legal support in a semi-closed system. Without legal support, the referendum likely would have died when the city clerk said it was unenforceable. The coalition was only able to challenge that by taking it to court – something that requires both resources, and for the legal system to be somewhat 'open.'

Lastly, the direct democracy approach allows for a popular issue to skip any steps requiring support from inside city hall, and go directly to people for whom this was a popular issue. A canvasser told us that "it's not fair that you [businesses] don't have to pay taxes when we pay taxes. With that petition, it did get a lot of people aware about what was going on."

The referendum was a strategic choice to circumvent semi-closed aspects of the Camden political system. Or, as one coalition leader states, the "process [had] already been proven to kind of work that they did that they did the same process with the school board a few years ago. Right? That they did it because they knew it would work."

While organizers expressed confidence in the strategy, residents expressed skepticism about the scope of the project, because it did not require companies to hire more residents, it only made them report who they had hired.

### ***Adaptation: Community Voice as Antidote***

Just as with the school board referendum, Camden, We Choose went door-to-door rallying residents to vote in favor of the referendum to require that companies with over 25 employees report the number of Camden residents they employ.

Camden, We Choose organizers describe the success of going door-to-door by contrasting their own values on empowering community voice with a semi-closed political system where residents feel disconnected with government.

A Camden, We Choose leader with a background in politics describes the focus on community voice:

*"The people feel not only good because they're doing something in their community, but they understand that they themselves are part of making change. And that is really powerful, especially for, again, for people who have been surrounded by hopelessness. And the overwhelming thing that we heard from canvassers when they [came] back, and they would say that they were talking to people is that they feel hope, but also the people that they are talking to feel hope. So I think we are politicizing people in a way where they maybe have never engaged before."*

This quote captures the relationship with Camden's semi-closed system. The system is responsible for hopelessness and the feeling that it is impossible to change outcomes. Thus, giving voice on an issue that matters to residents serves to reintroduce hope into a semi-closed system. But the quote goes a step further, talking about politicizing residents. This is the connection between community voice and the wider effort that seeks not only to gain specific policy changes or community outcomes but seeks to challenge the semi-closed system itself.

Similar sentiment is present throughout interviews with Camden, We Choose. A member from the local NAACP chapter says, "Let's get the people in Camden, the referendum to get the people to say what they want, because obviously they're not listening to us. I mean they not listening to the activists."

Another says:

*"A lot of times what happens here at Camden, things get done before they bring it to the people. So we don't even have a say. So, us going door to door and talking to the actual people who live here in Camden and getting their opinions and hearing what they think about this referendum, it gave them the ability to voice their opinion, to stand up for something that they felt was important. Because we haven't been being heard by the government here in Camden. So, we went door-to-door and we talked to ourselves, and we got the right answer for ourselves."*

Both of these comments contrast the act of listening to community by Camden, We Choose with the lack of listening they perceive as happening within a semi-closed political system in Camden.

The leader of one of the Camden, We Choose coalition organizations sees going door-to-door as the antidote for a semi-closed system. He says, "one of the reasons why you do the referendum, or why we chose to do a referendum was because we felt that it was an opportunity for the residents to really voice their opinions on what they would like to see done."

A Camden, We Choose leader ties this effort of building and empowering community voice back to the wider movement goals of the organizations. She tells us that:

*"We want to build our base. The goal is for us to have either the word equity or at least civic engagement in the conversation of every resident that can talk about it from high school up to being a senior citizen. We want folks to let that be the priority in front of them the word either equity, or at least civics on in the - the conversation of every resident that can talk about it from high school up to being a senior citizen.*

*We want folks to let that be the priority in front of them: you're not going to steal my vote. And if someone's [a politician] asking me to come vote or attend something I want to know, Have I ever met you before? Do I know who you are? What have you done for my particular community?*

*Giving people - empowering them to know that we are not the underdog, we are the power. That's the work right now, the work is keeping that in front of them. And if we can get the youngest child of a ninth grader or eighth grader coming into high school, to understand that that's the power that we can keep them acclimated and active in knowing that the least they can do register to vote and know that every election is coming up, we need you to be present."*

The language here is indicative of wider political goals for which community voice is a specific antidote to a semi-closed system that is understood as oppressing residents. The leader uses language that ties to political ideologies – such as “equity” – and specifically focuses on power-building for a wider organizing effort.

This organizing has multi-level goals. The initiative is designed to use a specific issue – here, transparency on local hiring by businesses in Camden – to further a wider challenge to the semi-closed system.

Some residents expressed strong belief in the power of voice among residents. As one resident put it, “I feel like, the more people that do contribute, because they only hear when it's loud...that's just the honest truth.” Others voiced the observation that organizing collectively makes action possible, with one participant explaining, “Sometimes people...may not want to [participate], but once they dig in a little bit...sometimes people have a change of heart...’

Another reflected on the persistence required to keep going: “Service...is a life commitment...the dark side of it...you carry the heavy burden of your community...What motivates me is the small victories.”

These perspectives show that belief in voice can function both as strategy as well as survival. Even within a semi-closed system, residents articulate that participation can be seen as moral work, both as an obligation that sustains hope and challenges the view that Camden’s political disengagement reflects apathy.

Residents also saw their voice as ensuring accountability for local corporations. Access to data and information was viewed as empowering for residents.

Many residents described data almost as a political equalizer, describing it as evidence that could shine light on a system otherwise protected by its opacity. "We live in a data-driven society," one resident said. "And in order to create better opportunities for Camden, this is one way to get the data we need." Another described the information as leverage: "[O]nce we see [the numbers], we're able to move forward...make them accountable for not doing it."

A connection between data and political integrity was reflected in the residents' responses. "If you're going to say something, then the paper should match...now we need to see if your word matches the truth...if not, you have to go." Another long-term resident doesn't pull any punches: "the fact that they don't want to give that information is just like pleading the fifth." When we look at these quotes together, we can see how transparent information can be a tool to empower residents within the semi-closed system, where access to data is generally tightly controlled.

For other residents, the focus on community voice rang hollow and clashed with their experiences in a semi-closed system. This pessimism, stemming from past disappointments and unmet promises, posed a significant hurdle in rallying community support and belief in the potential for change.

Residents spoke of deep-seated frustration and fatigue. As one coalition member observed, "[A] lot of people, they feel like nothing is changing. A lot of them don't participate." Another described the emotional toll of repeated disappointment: "People...get demotivated once they don't see anything happening. It's just like, okay, we did all that for nothing." This negativity extended to perceptions of corruption and performative politics. One resident said simply, "Corruption is king in Camden." Another resident noted, "They'll say something, and then there's another meeting behind closed doors...everything that they said just went out the window."

These reflections suggest that negativity is not just a byproduct of cynicism but one born from a history of exclusion. Within a semi-closed system, this dichotomy provides a measure of awareness as well as a barrier to mobilization. People are aware that the system is closed to them, but what varies is whether they still believe that it can be forced open.

The referendum campaign faced significant challenges from elected Democratic officials in the city and county. According to interviews, the city challenged and threw out a large number of the petitions gathered by the coalition, including petitions of registered voters who had not voted in recent electives. Similarly, the city delayed sharing information about why the petitions were being rejected. These types of small delaying tactics are considered by organizers to be suppression tactics, making it harder to get an issue on the ballot. Trethan (2022) reports that "More than 1,200 people signed the petition, but the city said in an email that 529 were valid, short of the required 745 signatures. A supplemental petition included 1,422 signatures, with city clerk verifying 233, bringing the total number to 762."

Despite these challenges, Camden, We Choose gathered enough signatures by the deadline for the issue to be put on the ballot in Camden. They were then told by the city clerk that the issue could not go on the ballot because the city lacked the authority to enforce it (Wildstein 2022). It was only when the coalition took the city to court for that rules interpretation that the referendum was accepted.

A Camden, We Choose leader describes the back and forth from the coalition's perspective:

"They said that this petition was dead and that we couldn't do it now. We asked why. How come? Give us an answer why? Why legally is it dead? They wouldn't respond to us. So that's when legal came in and we said, now we have a lawsuit. So, in that lawsuit process with us, you know, taking litigation or with a great lawyer, we were able to still go out and get those signatures during the cure period. We were able to get signatures in that short period within a week and resubmit those signatures to add to the ones that were already valid. Now, we had a new number of valid signatures, we were able to get 1200 more signatures to send back in. And then this time, the city clerk now was disgruntled with us. People were taking our approach to this work personally, and it wasn't personal. So, all the signatures became valid after that."

Despite the opposition from the local Democratic Party at the petition-gathering stage, Camden's mayor and City Council President did an about face and supported the ordinance so that it would not appear on the ballot as a referendum. The city released a statement saying City Council "collectively thought (the petition) had merit and substance" (Trethan 2022). In an interview with a Camden, We Choose leader, she describes the turnaround:

"After all the stuff that they did about being really cruel to us, when we took the second wave of petitions and passed all those petitions, then and only then did the mayor and city council president start to send out a memo saying how proud they were of the residents. That's a mess to me, because we could have linked arms and did this the right way. There was no harm in the city, teaming up with his residents saying we should hold these folks accountable."

The first report on Camden business hiring shows anemic levels of local hiring, including Holtec hiring only 37 of its 1,623 employees in Camden (Borowski 2023). Table 1 shows a subset of relevant Camden employers and their local hiring (ibid).

Company	Total Employees	Camden Residents	Percent Residents in Camden
Adventure Aquarium	143	38	27%
American Water Works Service Co.	584	7	1%
New Jersey-American Water Company	37	1	3%
Amerinox Processing Inc.	76	26	34%
Block By Block Inc.	45	37	82%
CAMcare Health Corporation	211	58	27%
Camden City School District	1,423	333	23%
Camden County Municipal Utilities Authority	125	6	5%
Campbell Soup	1,141	7	Less than 1%
Center for Aquatic Sciences	51	17	33%
Conner Strong & Buckelew Companies LLC	402	6	1%
Cooper Health System	7,779	770	10%
Coriell Institute for Medical Research Inc.	111	2	2%
EMR USA Metal Recycling	648	186	29%
Holtec International	1,623	37	2%
IPAK Inc.	108	66	61%

LEAP Academy University Charter School	224	39	17%
Live Nation (Freedom Mortgage Pavilion)	531	75	14%
Lockheed Martin Corp.	229	3	1%
M&A Holdings Co. LLC dba Camden Yards Steel	46	8	17%
NFI Industries	524	9	2%
Philadelphia 76ers LP	275	11	4%
ResinTech Inc. and Action Pak Inc.	332	118	36%
Rutgers University - Camden	2,332	207	9%
South Jersey Port Corporation	127	10	8%
Subaru	786	10	1%
The Michaels Organization	340	56	16%
Virtua Health	1,997	253	13%
We See You Security	93	58	62%

Table 1: Camden Local Hiring Statistics 2023

## Discussion

Camden, We Choose's adaptations of community organizing strategies within a semi-closed system reveal both possibilities and limits of these strategies. Each adaptation generated openings for community action while exposing structural barriers that can constrain civic engagement and power. Residents and organizers consistently emphasized that focusing on local hiring and gathering transparent data helped to transform long-term frustrations into visible collective action. The coalition's decision to cut the issue into a narrow, winnable campaign allowed residents to participate in politics on their own terms, while belief in the power of voice was its own adaptive success. Participants described feeling heard, sometimes for the first time, even as they doubted that the system would respond or that there would ultimately be an increase in local hiring. Through a petition process and later canvassing to cure signatures, the campaign created a level of engagement that continued to build trust at the community level, even if it didn't fully extend to the institutional one. The coalition also successfully leveraged the limited "openings" within Camden's semi-closed system, using legal and procedural tools (like the court appeal) to force recognition within the structures that historically excluded them.

These adaptations still faced structural limits: residents shared multiple examples of barriers to information, delayed communication, and opaque decision-making. These limits provide examples of how closed systems reproduce themselves through procedural approaches. That said, when taken together, these patterns do suggest that semi-closed systems are not entirely impervious but are instead self-protecting through limited permeability. They allow enough openness to maintain a democratic appearance, while retaining elite control over outcomes. The organizers' adaptations worked when they leveraged the limited openings within the systems and struggled when relying on needing to engage in good faith with local institutions. Rather than withdrawing from a system that treats them as outsiders, Camden residents redefined their engagement through this campaign as one of moral persistence, where they continued to speak, even when unheard.

The case study of the referendum also demonstrates several elements of semi-closed political systems.

First, the nature of semi-closed systems is that there are some openings. In this case, community organizers tried multiple strategies, testing the “closed” nature of the political system. County political parties, for example, remained largely impenetrable. But the existence of non-partisan direct democracy alternatives such as municipal referendums provided a relatively “open” part of the system. Similarly, when a county clerk rejected the signatures on the petitions and the city clerk invalidated the referendum saying it was unenforceable – which organizers argue happened because of political allegiance to the county political party – Camden, We Choose challenged those signatures and rulings in court, leaning on a relatively open part of the political system. The lesson here is that for organizers in semi-closed systems, opportunities are often tied to an institutional analysis that understands where the openings exist.

A second lesson is that the logic of semi-closed systems can be weaponized against itself. Recently, we (Danley and Rosewater 2025) wrote about how much politics has regressed to a teams-based logic in which the critical factor is identifying who is on your team, and opposing those who are not. This is inherent in semi-closed political systems; the enforcement of the system depends on identifying and punishing outsiders. In this case, by carefully cutting an issue around local hiring with broad political support, organizers put elected officials in a difficult spot. The instinct for those in power to enforce the closed nature of the system – by challenging signatures and opposing the referendum – was a political weakness. By the time the referendum was cleared to be on the ballot, it was so obvious that it had popular support that local officials chose instead to support it rather than continuing to oppose it and suffer an embarrassing loss. These officials had learned this lesson the hard way – when Camden, We Choose put their referendum to shift from an appointed to an elected school board on the ballot, elected officials opposed the measure and lost.

For organizers in other semi-closed political systems, this provides a lesson in how to turn the political practice of retribution and opposing community organizers into a valuable tactical tool. By carefully crafting issues with wide popular support, organizers can indirectly put those in power in a position where they must either open up elements of the system to organizers, or get stuck opposing these organizers on issues despite an issues popularity.

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