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Leaders and the Work of Democracy

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Abstract

The community organizing tradition in the U.S. and elsewhere sees itself as providing local schools of democracy, where leaders learn about power at the local level and build their capacity to act. Leaders in these organizations are thus directly involved in local democratic practice and in efforts to make local governments and public officials more accountable to their communities. What do leaders learn about democracy as they do this important work? What can the rest of us learn about the practice of democracy from these key leaders?

This paper is based on more than thirty qualitative interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021 with local leaders of broad-based community organizations from the same national network. The paper analyzes these leaders' responses to questions about how their work relates to democracy and politics and how the political circumstances of the pandemic and of ongoing structural racism and injustice shaped their views of their work. Leaders discussed their ideas about power and democracy and their faith in the organizing work they were doing. We argue that leaders in community organizing in the United States have much to contribute to our understanding of the ongoing work of defending and practicing democracy.

Keywords: leaders, local democracy, leadership development, power

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Introduction

Studying the empirical practices of local broad based community organizations is one way to develop new understandings of democratic political life and of grassroots democratic engagement (Bretherton 2015). This study draws on recent research on community organizing, particularly work that focuses on some of the unique features of organizing work (Han, Baggetta, and Oser 2024; Woody 2022). One key feature of community organizing is that part of its purpose is the development and training of leaders in addition to bringing about political change (Han 2014; Han, Baggetta, and Oser 2024). Organizing seeks to develop leaders through relationship-building, research, and other public work that the organization facilitates (Han, Baggetta, and Oser 2024; Woody 2022; Metro IAF 2022). As Han, Baggetta, and Oser outline, the point is to develop “skills and capacities” of leaders, help leaders build relationships with other leaders and with public officials, and provide ways for leaders to shift their own self-understandings to make their work more effective (Han, Baggetta, and Oser 2024, 147). As the Metro IAF, an umbrella organization of local power organizations, puts it, one goal of the organization is to serve as a “university of public life,” providing “a culture of learning in which leaders emerge and develop. That development is our chief product” (Metro IAF 2022, 2).

In the context of community organizing, “leader” has a specific meaning. While “organizers” are the paid staff of community organizations, leaders are volunteers who may come to the organization with little or no experience with political involvement. The shorthand definition of a leader is someone who has a following; someone who could persuade other people to turn out for a meeting or a public action. Leaders also are often someone who is directly affected by an issue on which the organization is working. A leader is willing and able to put in the time and effort to build relationships and be part of building organizational power to effect political change. Leaders are mentored by organizers and by other more experienced leaders; indeed, experienced leaders often serve as mentors for organizers. This article contributes to our understanding of the role of leaders in organizing. While research has focused on organizers (Sabl 2002a, 2002b; Coles 2012) there has been less attention to the role and perspectives of leaders.

In this paper, we draw on leaders’ reflections about what they have learned from the organizing work, as well as how they see that work in relation to democracy. In these qualitative interviews with leaders, our respondents reflect on how engaging with the work of local organizing has changed the way they think about themselves and their engagement in public life. They also speak about how their organization brought about some specific policy changes in their communities.

The focus of this article is on leaders from organizations that have been successful in accomplishing some of their goals.¹ The leaders that we interviewed are from organizations that are affiliates of the same national network of power organizations. This focus on leaders who have experienced success with their organizing work, and who thus may have something to teach us about organizing and democracy, draws on a similar strategy as that used by Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa in their recent study (2021). They were particularly interested in the practices of successful organizations. Specifically, they wanted to know *how* these organizations achieved their goals. Studying

¹ Success was defined by the organizations; specifically, whether the issue campaigns on which the leaders worked met their goal or target.

organizations that succeed in their goals is useful given the basic problem of collective action and of how difficult it is to accomplish policy change through organizing and mobilizing (Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021, 8). In this paper, we are interested in the experiences and ideas of leaders of organizations that have succeeded in some of their goals for changing local policy because we believe these leaders possess important insights into local political practice and into the practice of democracy.

Research Questions and Methods

The narratives included in this paper are drawn from qualitative interviews conducted for two different research projects. The two studies involve a total of thirty-three respondents who are involved with broad-based community organizations in the US. All interviewees were key leaders of broad-based community organizations at the time of the interview. Some leaders had been involved for less than two years with organizing; others had been involved for more than two decades. All names are pseudonyms, and we do not identify specific organizations in this paper or our chosen network to protect the privacy of both the leaders and their organizations.

In this article, we are interested in the following three questions: First, do leaders see their work as a form of local democratic practice? If so, *how* do leaders describe their organizing work in relation to their ideas of democracy? Finally, given the timing of these interviews, how do situations of political crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing worldwide protests, affect leaders' views of their work?

One of the two studies (the "Leaders" study) from which our interviews were drawn involves sixteen leaders from the same organization.² One of the authors is also a leader with this organization and knows the respondents personally. Key leaders were identified by the authors based on the respondents' membership on the organization's strategy team or on an important issue campaign they worked on. While race was not a key factor for us for shortlisting the interviewees, six of the leaders interviewed are African American, two are Asian American, one is Latinx, and seven are white. Most of these leaders had been involved in the organization for at least three years at the time of the interview. Some leaders had been involved in previous similar organizations, thus having several decades of experience with community organizing. The interviews were mainly focused on how the leaders viewed their organizing work and were conducted in 2020. The study of this organization has also involved participant observation, providing context for some of the organizing work referenced in the interviews. Participant observation included gathering and analyzing notes from many planning meetings, meetings with public officials, and trainings, as well as direct involvement in most of the issue campaigns mentioned by the leaders. The questions asked of leaders as well as the analysis, have been informed by this participation.

The second study (the "Pandemic" study) involves seventeen leaders from eleven different organizations from across the U.S.; this study focuses on organizing during the pandemic, and all interviews were conducted in 2021 (Fatima and Josephson 2024). The purpose of this study was to identify how community organizations were able to continue their work during the pandemic. For this second study, we initially collected data from publicly available information about all of the

² These leaders represent their member institutions; that is, the organization is made up of member institutions, in this case mostly religious institutions but also community non-profits. Leaders are usually also key leaders in their member institution.

organizations that were part of the same national network. We used this data to identify the organizations that had remained the most active during the pandemic. We then contacted the organizers of these organizations and asked them to identify key leaders and to help us contact those leaders.

The approach to analysis of the interviews draws on flexible coding, which focuses on using in-depth interviews, such as the ones conducted for this study, to ask multiple different research questions. The approach involves coding for broad themes first, then conducting more detailed coding for specific research questions (Deterding and Waters 2021). This contrasts with approaches drawn from grounded theory that work with very small snippets of data first. We used flexible coding because we wanted to identify leaders' ideas about very broad concepts such as democracy. We first coded for the questions asked in our protocols, and we have used this broad coding to identify some key themes, including the theme of democracy. Then, we coded for more specific research questions. For the current paper, we focused on leaders' mentions of power, of lessons learned from the organizing work, and their descriptions of democracy or of public life at any point in the interview. We also coded for leaders' descriptions of interactions with public officials, and of specific issue campaigns. We used qualitative data analysis software NVivo to aid the analysis.

These two studies each included a question that specifically asked about the leaders' views of democracy, though in slightly different ways. The interviews from 2020 included the question: "Has being involved in [this organization] changed in any way your views of public life and of democracy, and if so, how?" The interviews from 2021 included the question: "Has the pandemic changed how you think about organizing, and/or about democracy, and if so, how?" Most of the discussion below relates to leaders' responses to these questions. Leaders also discussed politics and power in response to other questions in both sets of interviews, and some of those responses are discussed below.

Findings

We organize our findings based on our coding for themes. Leaders responded to our questions about democracy by outlining both practical lessons and stories from their local engagement, as well as more normative or value-based responses about how their experiences with organizing had informed and been informed by their views of what democracy should be. To discuss our findings, we group their responses by first addressing the lessons about practical politics that leaders discussed. In this category, some leaders talked about their work around electoral politics and helping people to be able to vote in the 2020 election; other leaders talked about some of the lessons from local issue campaigns, and we discuss each in turn. We then turn to the more normative or value-based responses, addressing first the leaders' responses that spoke to their views of local participatory democracy, and then to ways that leaders spoke about the fragility of democracy and the meanings that they drew from their organizing work. We conclude each section of the findings with some observations that summarize these lessons.

Practical politics

1. Electoral politics

The focus of most of the work of these organizations is on matters of practical concern to their member institutions, seeking specific local policy changes to improve their communities. Mainly,

this work is not focused on elections and electoral politics. However, many of the organizations do use elections and electoral politics to bring pressure to bear on candidates for public office, for example, by asking for public commitments to the issue campaigns that are their primary focus. During the pandemic, many of the organizations that we studied had engaged in some nonpartisan election-related organizing, especially to make it easier for people to be able to register and vote. Leaders spoke of the changing rules about elections during the pandemic, such as permitting mail-in ballots, and of their work to make sure that people knew what to do to be able to vote, both in primaries and in the general election. In our interviews, some leaders reflected on what they had learned about elections and democracy from this work.

Well certainly the get out the vote campaign changed the way I think about democracy. Just seeing all the tactics that are used against people that on the surface seem innocuous. Like one of, I think one of the most powerful methods of voter suppression here was just confusion. Let's just overwhelm and confuse people and it's effective. So I mean, voter suppression is really real, to see some of the, some of the things that were tried and that were done...It was just so, such blatant racism. (Katherine, pandemic study)

Katharine was speaking about her organization's long-planned voter registration and get-out-the-vote effort for the 2020 election that had to be significantly adapted due to the way that methods of voting had been changed by the state, as well as by the pandemic. This campaign was originally planned to be in person and became a hybrid campaign. The organization managed to do both in-person and virtual voter outreach. Some of the in-person work was done through member organizations and through door-knocking in the neighborhoods surrounding member institutions. Some of the virtual work drew on the nationwide network of organizations of which Katharine's organization was a part, especially for a project that involved calling registered voters in the immediate neighborhoods of member institutions. Katherine saw the overall campaign as successful and effective, but also quite eye-opening in terms of the many ways that public officials in her state were trying to prevent people from being able to vote. And as she noted, the confusion that resulted from ongoing changes in voting rules and procedures operated as another method of voter suppression. Katherine saw the get-out-the-vote campaign as successful in part because, particularly with the in-person campaign, people expressed gratitude that an organization in which they had confidence was providing them with information about how to vote.

Other leaders also related their experience with get-out-the-vote or voter registration campaigns in response to our question about democracy, particularly leaders who lived in states that had added more restrictive procedures for both registration and voting. Tanya talked about her organization's work:

...so the last election changed a lot of stuff and scared a lot of us about democracy...and it all has, has made me very aware that democracy isn't a given and we need to be moving towards greater citizen participation and easier voting, easier registration, maybe automatic registration. I mean, the fact that we're trying to make it harder after a year like this, when it's been really important, is very troubling for me and makes the work that [the organization] does even more important to me. I think, um, it's also exhausted me. (Tanya, pandemic study)

Tanya spoke about the requirement in her state that voters who were voting by mail had to get their ballots notarized; this requirement was lifted during the state of emergency, but once the state of emergency was over, it was back in place. Thus, in 2020, there were different rules during the primary than during the general election. To help people get their ballots notarized, this leader and several other members of her congregation got notary licenses and then held “notary weekends” where people could bring their ballots to the church and have someone notarize them. But she also mentioned in the interview that they did not advertise this broadly outside of the organization, since they did not want there to be a crackdown on their organizing work or to risk the addition of further voting restrictions.

Thus, one response to our questions about democracy was about leaders’ work related to a basic procedural requirement of democracy, free and fair elections. These leaders talked about the necessity of their local work so that this procedural requirement of democracy could be realized, ensuring that their neighbors could vote. They observed the ways that voter suppression methods at the state level affected their members and communities. This led Katherine, Tanya, and other leaders to act, but also to conclude, as Tanya did, that voting should be easier than it was in 2020. These leaders saw both the importance of their local work to ensure access to voting and criticized state and national policies that made voting more difficult.

2. Local issue campaigns

Many leaders responded to our questions about democracy by discussing lessons that they had learned about how local politics operates in practice. Leaders reflected on how their views of the role of public officials and of their own roles as organization leaders had changed as they engaged in issue campaigns. Many of these observations were about how power operates, and about the role of the organizations’ work in ensuring that local public officials were held accountable.

One leader, Candace, spoke about how disappointing it is to support a particular official in their election campaign, only to see that their actions in public office are not what one expected, or what they had promised to do. For this leader this realization was a motivating factor to get involved with organizing.

So I used to think that if you, I was one of those people that if you get the right politician in power, right, then they will fix everything. It's so funny right now to think about it... And I remember thinking, like having the sinking feeling like, wait, that's not who I voted for...I just, I felt so betrayed...politics is not about virtue necessarily or altruism. It's about just getting stuff done within constraints. And what [this organization] has taught me is that we have to, as a people and a public, we have to be one of those constraints and we cannot be a constraint unless we are, unless we're organized. (Candace, leaders study)

Leaders mentioned what they learned, as, through meetings with public officials and the sustained work of specific issue campaigns and public actions, they came to have a different understanding of local public officials’ self-interest, capacity, and motivations. For example, in the quote below, Stuart talked about the lack of attention or even incompetence of public officials and how the organization’s issue campaign helped to push officials to work a little harder to do their jobs. Similarly, Karl talked about what he had learned about public life, including the incompetence or indifference of some public officials. Leaders spoke about learning what the real factors were that

motivated the actions of public officials, including pressures that are usually not very visible to the public.

So it has been fascinating to see how local government operates and to then evolve into seeing our quote unquote leaders are much more following the forces of power than they are leading. And that some of the... assumptions, like if we can just win over the mayor, then this will be solved. And then we realize, oh, the mayor is just treading water while all these other forces are closing in on him and making demands of him. And he realizes that his time in leadership is limited and that he can only do so much. And we realize that the longer-term powers need to be addressed, powers of commerce in particular. (Karl, leaders study)

I think I understand even more than I did before of how much goes on that almost nobody knows about, and that it really takes a lot of dedicated digging to find out what's really happening... I think that also, the incompetence among a lot of our elected officials...in terms of really knowing the details of what is supposed to be happening. With housing...this bureaucracy, this machine, the, corruption, all that was baked so deeply into all this...it wasn't important enough for them to really take the time to figure out...what's supposed to be happening. (Stuart, leaders study)

In different ways, Candace, Karl, and Stuart were all expressing the idea that public officials will not do what they ought to do or even what they promise to do unless there is sufficient pressure on them. They saw the organizing work as one way to apply this pressure, to create a "constraint," as Candace puts it, on the actions of public officials.

These are the leaders who have seen the operations of city government in detail while working on specific issue campaigns such as housing and education. To provide some context, Stuart was referring to an issue campaign on affordable housing, with two specific strategies. First, the organization was trying to get the city to enforce the housing code in apartment buildings that were owned by a landlord who had bought more than one hundred rent-controlled buildings in the city with the apparent goal to flip them to market-rate housing by forcing tenants out. Long time tenants' apartments were never repaired and were in appalling condition. Many of these apartment buildings happened to be near Stuart's church. Second, the organization was urging the city office to enforce the rent control law, as the landlord was clearly violating it. In other words, the strategy of this housing campaign was primarily to *get the city to enforce existing housing laws*. Stuart was part of meetings with city officials, where it became clear that they did not know what the law was or what they were required to do. These officials had been in their positions for many years at the time of this campaign. This is what Stuart meant by the "corruption" being "baked so deeply in".

Another leader, Tim, also noted what he had learned from the housing campaign:

I've learned a lot in that regard...when it comes to like, you know, power and politics, now, I have an understanding that you, you really have to put pressure and putting pressure is, is definitely building, building that base and building that power...power is, organized people, and organized money,...but the people is the big thing...if you have the numbers, you can kind of, you can push the politicians to do what needs to be done. And, and, you know, now I see things won't happen unless that pressure is there. If left to them, if, if there

had never been any pressure from [the organization] on those two housing things on rent control, nothing would've changed. (Tim, leaders study)

Echoing Tim's observation, several leaders specifically raised how while working on issue campaigns both before and during the pandemic, they had experienced the power of having enough organized people to put pressure on public officials. For example, Stuart spoke of the success achieved with the affordable housing campaign in educating public officials and holding them accountable. In the pandemic study, several leaders discussed how they were able to meet virtually with public officials who had previously refused to meet with them. The issues were urgent, and officials did not necessarily have alternative means of communicating with their constituents.

More generally, each of these leaders expressed that the work on the organizing and issue campaigns had helped them to understand how local politics works, including some disappointing lessons about public officials. These leaders also noted how this work helped them to develop their own self-understanding as individual leaders and highlighted the importance of the collective work of the organization.

Some leaders spoke in more positive terms about public officials. These leaders focused on what they learned from the success of issue campaigns that held public officials accountable, and on how public officials might become better at their jobs if they listened and responded to the issue campaigns of the organization. They emphasized the need for compromise and the importance of knowing what is motivating the actions of public officials, the importance of doing your research and even the potential to make them better officials and more responsive to the public.

...So we got them all passed. It's [the organization] who is helping me understand that when you see something that [seems] obvious, it's not always obvious. Sometimes it's really, really complicated as was the case. So this, by bringing people together to talk about what's right and, and pushing them a little, you can get a lot done. So, it's complemented my capacity to understand how power works. (Isaac, leaders study)

Through organizing I began to really appreciate in ways I never did before the value of understanding history and doing research. So I have [the organizations] that taught me the value of research in ways I never envisioned. And they clearly never taught us in grad school... I learned...the numbers support this story, you are telling...much as a three act drama, this is horrible here. Here's the numbers to prove it. Here's why it's horrible...And here's our solution. Here's how the numbers will improve. Oh, I could do that.... So I'm not gonna say you're racist...that's a dead end. I'm gonna say, I don't understand why in [this] county, your honor, for every one...white person that goes to jail, 22 people who look like me go to jail. Only 3% of the population. So you're not racist, but help me understand how was this so? (Vernon, leaders study)

I think that I have seen a growth in [a particular public official]...through [the organization] because now I feel that he talks and he listens. And so I think that we have helped him to grow into his own power. And that's what I would like to see more of that...that our connection with, for the people that represent [our] city and, and state...really to grow into their power and to treat it as a job for all people. And I, I think that's the place that we have

gained being a part of [the organization] is that they are recognizing that they are, they represent all people. (Kristine, leaders study)

These leaders saw their work as pushing and prodding public officials to be more responsive to the public. Isaac was discussing an instance where community organizations helped public officials reach a compromise to pass a measure that had broad public support. Vernon was addressing a case where the organization's action was more confrontational and involved doing enough background research to put together publicly available data that was very damning to a particular public official, and to make that data more visible to the public. Kristine was referencing how the public relationship with a local official operates with a community organization when there are ongoing reasons for the organization to be pushing, creating tension, and sometimes working alongside the public official. At the time of the interview, the public official she was describing had worked with the organization for more than four years, with varying degrees of tension depending on the issue.

Kristine's view is an optimistic one on how an organization's relationship with public officials might improve their accountability to constituents. Indeed, her point is similar to one made by Harry Boyte: "...there is a good deal of evidence that political leaders who develop respectful, productive if tension-filled relationships with citizen groups are better in their own roles" (Boyte 2003, 73). Boyte is citing points made by two long-time organizers and leaders of national coalitions of power organizations, Mike Gecan of Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), and Richard Wood of PICO (PICO is now Faith in Action). Kristine is also suggesting that the organizing work provides a more inclusive way of "represent[ing] all people".

Leader reflections show how they developed and deepened their political analysis of their communities. These findings suggest a shift in leaders' self-understandings and identities resulting from their organizing work. We think this relates to the way that organizing seeks to develop leaders in addition to bringing about policy change (Han, Baggetta and Oser 2024; Woodly 2022).

Leaders theorizing democracy

Some leaders responded to our questions about democracy by speaking about their values. In this section, we discuss leaders' normative reflections on what they learned about democracy from their organizing work. We first discuss responses that focus on leaders' ideas about participatory democracy. Other leaders spoke about the political moment when the interviews took place, discussing how organizing during the pandemic, as well as during what one of our leaders, Katherine, called the "real racial reckoning" that was taking place, had informed their thinking about how democracy should work.

1. Participatory democracy

Some leaders in both studies responded to the democracy question by discussing egalitarian, participatory democracy as a value they held and practiced through engagement with the organization. These leaders described the work they did with the organization as closely connected to how local democracy should function in their view. For example, Eric spoke about how he saw local organizing as more effective for democratic practice than joining in the work of a nationally-based organization:

But, to me, this local organizing is so much more effective...than maybe, sending 10 or 20 dollars to some sort of national campaign. I don't know. It just seems...I think the number one battle in terms of restoring our democracy is for people to have the bandwidth, to pay attention to what's going on in their own community and, you know, work together in their own communities. I think...that is the key starting point to start to rebuild our democracy. (Eric, pandemic study)

In a similar vein, Robert talked about the importance of engaging in local politics as part of the freedom that one has in a democracy:

I think we, everyone, if possible, should voice out their opinions, be active otherwise we cannot let others dictate what they want over us...If you see something, do something and then...you should exercise your freedom to talk, freedom to vote, freedom to get involved, freedom to let other people know what you think and the, the freedom to make sure that your voice is heard. So that's how it is. (Robert, leaders study)

I do think ideal democracy is a bunch of different people working together towards common goals that they have developed by working together. You know, that to me would be an ideal democracy, but oh, that's not what we have right now. It's not even close. (Edith, leaders study)

Frances and Erica also both spoke of local organizing as affirming the views and values that they already held about people being able to work together to achieve what they need from their local government, and the importance of individuals engaging in this kind of democratic practice:

I don't think it's affected my view on that. I think...it affirms my, I guess my idea, this is how it always should work. That you know, that regular citizens should be able to form a group and advocate, you know, through local government, what their needs and wants are. So I don't think it's changed it. I think it's just affirmed it. (Frances, leaders study)

...yes, it has definitely, it's empowered me and it's made me feel as if, wherever we are, we are the change that we want to see. So if we're not satisfied with the democracy that we are a part of, there is an opportunity to mobilize and sort of structure our voices to be heard, to change that for the better. (Erica, leaders study)

These viewpoints were typical of the views of participatory democracy expressed by leaders in both studies; eleven of the seventeen leaders in the pandemic study, and thirteen of the sixteen leaders in the leaders' study spoke of the value of local engagement in response to the question about democracy, even as some also expressed skepticism about achieving that value. For these leaders, it was deeply ingrained in their belief system that people have a responsibility to be active participants in democracy, even when that is difficult to do, and the organizing work was a way for them to act on this value.

2. Political crises and the fragility of democracy

It's hard to separate the pandemic from the real racial reckoning that ratcheted up in 2020, and I feel like that has forever changed me. (Katherine, pandemic study)

Because both the leaders' study and the pandemic study were conducted during the pandemic, and most of the interviews were conducted after the murder of George Floyd, several leaders spoke to how organizing during the pandemic, as well as their own and their fellow leaders' experiences of racism, racist violence, and racial injustice, had shaped their understanding of democracy. Organizing in a time of crisis, for these leaders, had shaped their views of democracy and of both the necessity and possibilities, as well as some of the limits of organizing.

Katherine, a white leader, in the quotation above, was responding to a question about whether she thought that the pandemic had changed organizing. She went on to discuss ways that she saw racism affecting other leaders, especially African American leaders, as well as the organizers in her organization, and how the combination of the inequalities of the pandemic and the "racial reckoning" of 2020 had changed how she thought about the organizing work. She talked about the way that racism had threatened the health and well-being of several leaders, both in an ongoing way and during the pandemic. For the leaders who talked about racism and inequality in their response about democracy, their skepticism about what might be possible politically in terms of fairness and justice was evident, even while they also expressed that the organizing work gave them hope:

I don't even think that the founding fathers had you know, had this level of democracy in mind when they created this nation, because they created it with the tenet that I wasn't, I wasn't completely human...I think in this experiment, as Cornel West calls it, this, this democracy, this experiment I think that we are seeing perhaps the best of it when we can see people across different barriers: race, you know, gender, socioeconomic, all of these different stratas that all come together and find common cause. So, it makes me hopeful... If this is democracy at its best, I, I can't say, but what I think about it, I, I think for where we are and where our nation is, I think that it, it's, it's probably the best expression of where we could be. (Bernard, leaders study)

Wow...the pandemic has made me, it has revealed all of the goodness of this country, but the worst as well...And it seems as if those who are on certain sides are just not concerned about ... fairness and equality, but more about power, about maintaining their power. It makes me very sad. I don't want to say that I am hopeless, but, uh, there are days that it makes it difficult to believe that this country can actually be a country that's fair and equitable for all. So, I would say that in many ways, I've been very encouraged, in other ways I've been increasingly, incredibly discouraged. (Darren, pandemic study)

Other leaders focused more on inequality generally, and the way that the dual political crises of the pandemic and of ongoing economic and racial inequalities contradicted their democratic values.

So, I think the experience of the pandemic has made me more aware of the fragility of, of people who live in our communities and their [struggle with] making it. It's made me more aware of the fragility of our democracy. And I really believe that community organizing is a key to the health of our democracy and the people who live in it. (Beverly, pandemic study)

Oh man, I'm at a point in my life now where I'm not sure democracy can work because capitalism is so ingrained that I don't think you can do democracy and capitalism together. I

don't know when I reached that place, but I'm really struggling now. I'm reading a lot of stuff about, you know, the disconnect between what can be done as economic justice and what capitalism just can't do. There's, there's just no way to reshare wealth... You know, we can talk all we want about it, but it's just not happening. (Howard, leaders study)

These leaders were expressing a clear vision that a democratic political system should be committed to fairness, justice, and equity, and their view that our current system is not living up to those values. Bernard, Darren, Beverly, and Howard all expressed the great distance between the present state of democracy and the world that they wanted to see.

Nevertheless, these leaders also emphasized the importance of organizing work, particularly during political crises, such as the pandemic.

I'm as convinced as I ever have been about the necessity of the work that we do...you know, that we're vital weavers of the, you know, of the social fabric, of the civic fabric in a time when everything wants to pull us apart. And so, I'm just enormously, proud of this work and it's probably been the most important work I've done in my, in my life (Esther, pandemic study)

And I think in a pandemic, so many of us have moments of feeling helpless or paralyzed or full of despair and feel quite powerless, honestly, in the midst of such a daunting pandemic and to remind people that the issues that they care about...the most are still important and that they can still take meaningful action in the world in the midst of a crisis is one of the most powerful things I've ever been part of. (Naomi, pandemic study)

Of the seventeen leaders in the pandemic study, ten answered the organizing/democracy question with some version of what the leaders quoted above said: that it reinforced for them the importance of organizing work for themselves and their communities.³

These leaders discussed how they had worked harder than ever on organizing during the pandemic and had found it more important and meaningful due to the situation. Charles perhaps put this point most strongly:

I can feel the emotion rising in my voice already. I survived it. I feel like I survived the pandemic, uh, because I'm a member of [the organization]. Uh, this was, this was, uh, a pandemic that made you feel like you were powerless. And, because I'm...a member of [the organization], I know that's not true. (Charles, pandemic study)

Most leaders in both studies spoke about the work of the organization as important to how they and their institutions managed to survive the pandemic. They talked about the importance of organizing work in helping people to survive, keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. And they spoke of the organizing work as central to their own ability to cope during an isolating time when it was easy to feel powerless. But the organizing work helped them to see that they were not powerless.

³ The other leaders answered with various comments about organizing methods such as use of virtual tools; the interview protocol had multiple questions about how organizations had continued their work during the pandemic.

How did the organizing work help Charles and other leaders to survive? Bernard noted what keeps him involved in organizing work: "it's the relationships" with "folk who I think are in this struggle with me". Leaders largely reported that they had met more frequently during the pandemic, especially early on, partly to stay in touch with each other and to stay informed about what was happening in the community, but also to provide support to one another. For many of these leaders, when they felt discouraged, isolated, or powerless, they could turn to the other leaders in the organization, engage in the work, and find that they could create change, even if it was on a small scale, and this helped them to "survive," as Charles said.

Analysis and Discussion

We began this paper with questions about how being engaged in the work of local organizing might develop leaders' identities and self-understandings as engaged members of a democracy. Specifically, we asked: Do leaders see their work as a form of local democratic practice? If so, *how* do leaders describe their organizing work in relation to their ideas of democracy? Finally, given the timing of these interviews, how do situations of political crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the ongoing effects of structural racism that were made more visible by the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing worldwide protests, affect leaders' views of their work?

In response to the first question, whether leaders view their work as a form of democratic practice, the strongest responses came from leaders such as Robert, Edith, Frances, and Erica, who clearly stated that local participation with others is central to their concept of what democracy should be. These leaders valued local participation even as they also saw some of its limits, learned through their organizing work. The overwhelming majority of leaders in both studies spoke of the value of local political engagement in response to our questions about democracy. Some also noted, as Eric did, that they saw this local work as more effective than what they could accomplish at the national level. Thus, we believe that the answer to our first question, based on these interviews, is that leaders do see their work as a form of local democratic practice.

In response to our second question, regarding how leaders perceive their work in relation to their ideas about democracy, leaders discussed the significant distance they saw between what democracy should be and what they observe happening in their communities and beyond. Yet, they also, for the most part, expressed a confidence that their organizing work was one way to bridge that gap between "the world as it is" and "the world as it should be" (Hazel, pandemic study). These leaders saw their work as a way to work together towards common goals with their neighbors, a way to practice democracy in their communities.

Regarding our third question, about the relationship between political crises and organizing, most leaders responded that they saw the work as even more crucial during the pandemic and in response to racial inequalities. Leaders experienced the difficulties and challenges of the pandemic and of racial injustice and described the feeling that "everything wants to pull us apart", as Esther put it. However, they responded by working even harder within their organizations, seeing their work as important, meaningful, and reflecting some of their deepest values, and certainly as crucial to their communities. The challenges of the pandemic led these organizational leaders to work harder and adjust their methods and practices effective in this new situation. It did not lead them to withdraw, despite the difficulties they faced as individuals, the challenges their own religious and nonprofit member institutions faced, and the difficulties the organizations encountered.

We also wanted to examine what can we learn about democracy from these leaders' ideas and experiences. How did the organizing work help to shape leaders' identities, skills, self-understandings, and capacities (Han, Baggetta, and Oser 2024)? We suggest that some of the primary lessons that leaders learned, as expressed in the responses discussed above, were about power and how power operates, as well as what is required for people to work together to exercise their power. The leaders we interviewed also had sufficient experience with successful issue campaigns, which gave them a great deal of confidence in their own abilities and in their organizations' ability to bring about political change.⁴

First, these leaders know that they are not powerless, as Charles noted with such emotion. That may seem like a simple point, but it was a point made by multiple leaders. And for these leaders, that has a specific meaning. These organizations teach leaders that power is the ability to act, and that to build power you need to build relationships among people in your community. But power is also built to accomplish leaders' goals, to run successful issue campaigns, and to bring needed change to communities. These organizations call this relational power: the power of people acting together. Given that most of these leaders had several years of experience in organizing, they knew how to move from listening to action, and they had exercised their power —i.e., their ability to act —to make a difference in their communities.

Second, these leaders also have a good sense of how power that is not accountable to ordinary people operates in their communities. They had developed this understanding by engaging in specific issue campaigns, such as around elections or on affordable housing. Leaders spoke of public officials who were not doing their jobs and were not being held accountable for carrying out their duties, even when they knew what they should be doing. As Karl put it, many local public officials "are much more following the forces of power than they are leading," and he was especially talking about the "powers of commerce," power that was operating in the background of local political decision-making and in issues that did not even garner public attention (Gaventa 1980).

This firsthand knowledge of the operations and harm of unaccountable power motivates leaders to act and to try to act effectively, open up spaces for political change (Gaventa 2006). As noted above, much of the work involves building enough power to pressure public officials to do *what they are already supposed to be doing*. That this requires extensive organizing and sometimes years of work demonstrates the inequalities of power in which these organizations and leaders operate. The leaders that we interviewed understood the problems that unaccountable power creates in their communities, and they were working to hold people with power accountable. Further, they were very confident in their analysis of the operations of power, and of their ability to use relational power through their organizations to bring about political change in their communities.

A third point about power and inequality follows from the second, and that is that leaders have a strong sense of how fragile their communities are and how fractured local as well as state and national democracy is. This fracture is not new but was certainly visible in new ways as many of the leaders discussed. Those who had worked on campaigns related to the elections were particularly pointed in their comments about the racism of voter suppression strategies. The leaders' discussion

⁴ We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this observation.

of what was discouraging, as well as what was encouraging, as Darren put it, in how their communities and the nation responded to the pandemic and to the murder of George Floyd, was particularly revealing about what leaders learned from organizing during a crisis. Some leaders, when discussing this fracturing, spoke about their work as responding to people's needs that stemmed from significant gaps in what was being provided by public policy and public officials. The idea of being vital weavers of the social fabric mentioned by Esther conveys this sentiment. It is a reference to an essay by Ernie Cortés (1997) that is frequently used in leader training, though the idea is perhaps more widespread than the essay. As noted in many of the quotations above, leaders saw their work as vitally important, even while they also saw it as difficult and challenging.

One limitation of our study is that it does not include reflection on organizing failures. We know that leaders and organizations learn a good deal from their failures as well as their successes, because these organizations teach leaders to reflect on all of their work, including when things do not go as planned (Gecan 2002, 136-140). Since we were focusing on successes with organizational goals and strategies, leaders did not speak extensively in our interviews about issue campaigns where they had not been able to accomplish their goals. Further study of the insights of leaders could certainly benefit from exploring this aspect of power organizing as well.

We have suggested in this study that a key aspect of organizing is the goal of developing leaders, including leaders who, through their relationships with other leaders, are accountable to one another (Han, Baggetta and Oser 2024; Woodly 2022; Gecan 2002). The goal of organizing is not just to change how local officials implement specific policies; it is also to develop leaders who can engage in the ongoing work of local democracy. We believe that these leaders, through their experience with organizing for change, have many insights into how democracy operates and how local organizations might be able to shift power dynamics in their communities, at least on some specific issues, to make power more accountable to ordinary people. Our findings indicate that the leaders we studied developed their skills in political analysis as they gained a deeper understanding of how power operates in their communities and learned how to utilize their relational power to create political change. We also observe the ways in which leaders were deeply committed to their work and to their relationships with other leaders in achieving their goals. These skills and identities are central to developing engaged leaders who can serve as "weavers...of the civic fabric," as Esther put it. This is why we think these leaders have something to teach all of us about democratic public life, and the ways that ordinary people can build power together to create change in their communities.

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