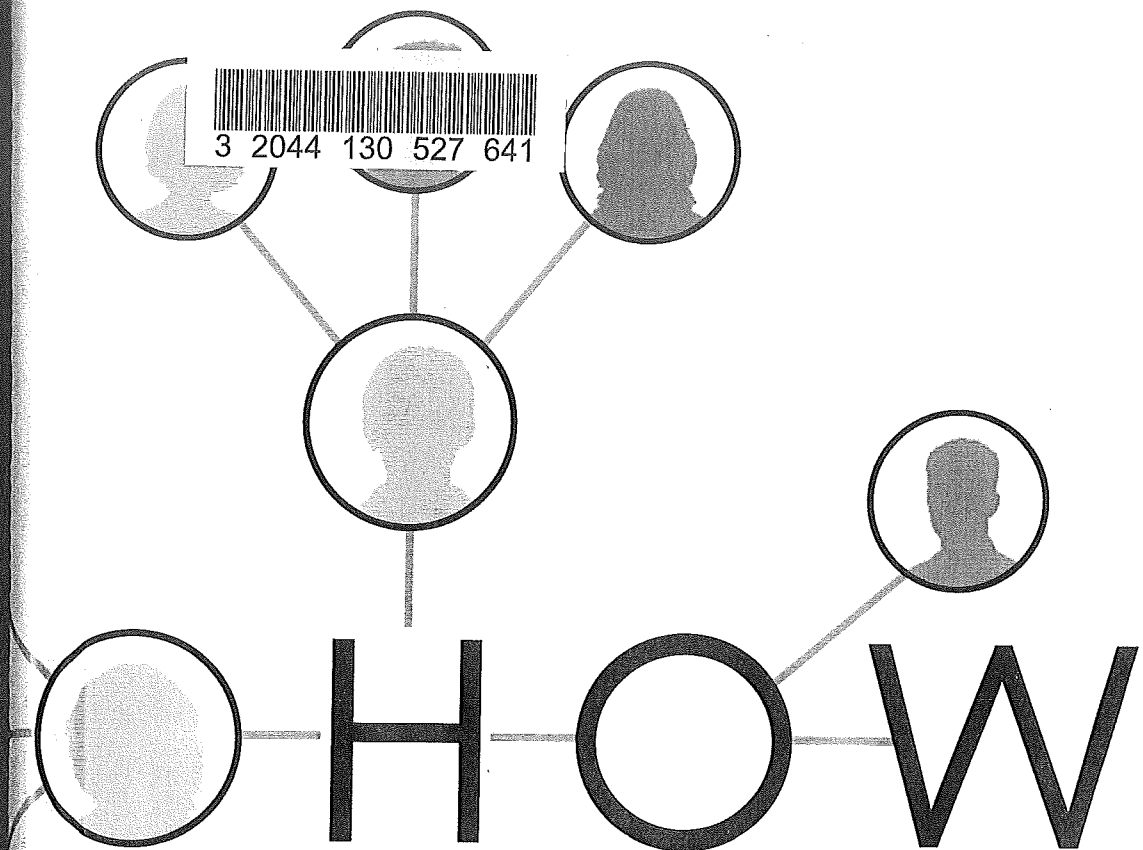
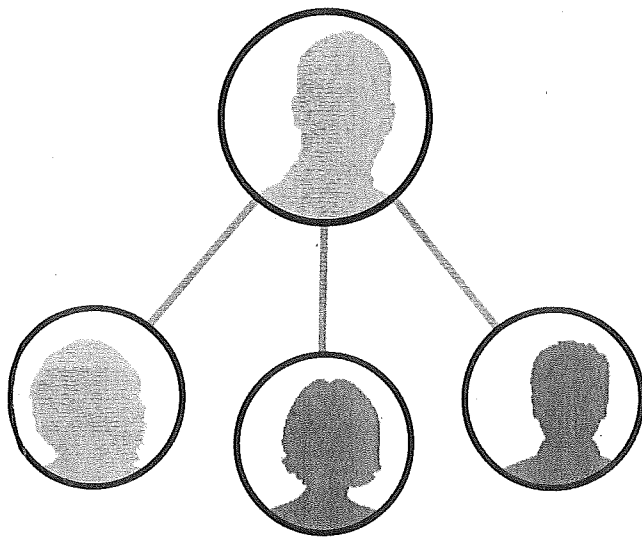


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ORGANIZATIONS DEVELOP ACTIVISTS



CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS & LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

HARRIE HAN

# Introduction

One chilly morning in November 2010, I met “Paul” in a crowded coffee shop to interview him about his work as an environmental activist.<sup>1</sup> As we were waiting in line for our drinks, Paul warned me that he may not have much to say. “I know you’re studying how to get people to do stuff,” Paul said. “I wish I knew,” he sighed. “We struggle with it every day.”

This book begins with a simple question: why are some civic associations better than others at “getting”—and keeping—people involved in activism? By signing petitions, donating money, attending meetings, making phone calls, and joining with others, activists power American democracy. Yet, the challenge of “get[ting] people to do stuff” (or, as some might say, cultivating people’s capacity for activism) is felt everywhere. From MoveOn.org to the National Rifle Association, Organizing for America to the Tea Party, from Health Care for America Now to the Sierra Club to local Parent-Teacher Organizations, membership-based civic associations constantly seek to engage people in civic and political action. What makes some more effective than others?

1. Throughout the book, the names of both individuals and organizations are disguised to maintain their anonymity. Interviewees from People for the Environment are given names that start with “P” while interviewees from the National Association of Doctors are given names that start with a “D.” I discuss this commitment to anonymity further in the appendix, which is dedicated to discussing the methodological approaches used in this study.

To answer this question, I spent two years comparing organizations with strong records of activism to those with weaker records. I observed their behavior and ran some field experiments with them. In doing so, I tried to get into the guts of the organizations, to understand what makes some better able to generate and sustain activism than others. Is it just about a charismatic leader, the communities where they work, or the people they recruit? Or maybe it is their messaging or their ability to target recruits. Or maybe it is none of these things at all and is just plain luck.

All of these factors matter. But I found, in the end, that what really differentiates the highly active associations is the way they transform their members' motivations and capacities for involvement. Just as Alexis de Tocqueville predicted 200 years ago, the associations with the most breadth and depth of activism act as "great free schools of democracy." By blending contemporary online and offline tools, these associations build breadth and depth of activism by developing citizens as democratic leaders and engaging people in collective action. In doing so, these associations help lay the foundation for a healthy democracy.<sup>2</sup>

What surprised me was how much these highly active associations struggled to maintain a focus on the transformational work of building democratic citizens. Cultivating, and transforming, people's motivations and capacities for activism—"get[ting] people to do stuff" more often and with more depth—is not easy. It takes precious time and resources to develop relationships with members, cultivate their motivations, and teach them the skills of democratic citizenship. Civic associations are most likely to do this work when it helps them build power. As Theda Skocpol writes, "Democratic [organizing] becomes the norm when would-be leaders can achieve power and influence only by drawing others into movements, associations, and political battles. Elites must have incentives to organize others."<sup>3</sup>

2. Many scholars have examined the importance of civic associations in laying the foundation for a healthy democracy. See Fung 2003 for a summary of that research, and, especially, Skocpol 2003; Putnam 2001.

Sometimes, contemporary political circumstances can create incentives for associations to abandon the long, patient work of leadership development. In the current environment, it can be tempting to short-circuit the process of developing activists by finding someone else who is already motivated and has the skills necessary for action. With the advent of new online technologies, big data, and analytics, finding these people—and getting to scale—is easier than ever before. Whereas getting a thousand signatures on a petition used to take weeks of pounding the pavement, now a well-crafted email to a targeted list can generate it in a matter of hours. Dramatic stories have been written about "viral engagements" such as Occupy Wall Street, the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt, the Susan G. Komen Foundation's decision to stop funding Planned Parenthood, and the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida.<sup>4</sup> It seems like it is easier than ever to get people engaged in the twenty-first century, and the political process seems more open to citizen input. People power, perhaps, is on the rise.

Yet, many of the activists and associations I talked with have a vague unease that all this activity is not adding up to something bigger. To these observers, American democracy seems broken. People "do stuff" but problems persist. Widening gaps along income, social class, political ideology, race, religion, and other dimensions fragment our society.<sup>5</sup> Approval ratings of government plummet as political institutions fail to address the everyday problems people face.<sup>6</sup> Associations can get more people to engage in certain kinds of activism more easily than before, but many feel like they still lack the power they need to address fundamental problems of today's society. These activists and associations persistently questioned themselves: what can we do to develop the quantity and quality of activism we need to win the victories we want?

4. Fung and Shkabatur 2012.

5. See, for instance, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012 for a discussion of rising inequalities and Brady and Nivola 2007 for a discussion of increasing polarization.

6. See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001 and Hetherington 2005 for a discussion of declining trust over time.

That is why I wrote this book. Getting people involved in collective action is just one part of what civic associations do to build power—but it is fundamental. Models for how to engage people in activism, however, are not necessarily transparent in today's complex political environment. Providing these models is fundamental to helping these associations build the power they want and also to supporting our democracy. This book, thus, shows how organizations that combined transformational organizing with transactional mobilizing were able to achieve higher levels of activism over time.

Sometimes called “engagement organizing,” “distributed organizing,” or, in certain contexts, “integrated voter engagement,” this blend of mobilizing and organizing helps civic associations build quality and quantity—or depth and breadth—of activism. To build power, civic associations need lots of people to take action and also a cadre of leaders to develop and execute that activity. They need individuals who take action but also a community that learns together how to translate that action into power. This is not a simple story about the power of offline versus online organizing. Instead, it is a story about how associations can blend both online and offline strategies to build their activist base. Associations face a constant tension between investing in membership and investing in members. Investing in membership helps build breadth, but investing in members helps build depth. I argue that associations do not have to choose between investing in members and investing in membership. They can do both. By investing in their members, they build the capacity they need to build their membership. This book describes how.

## STUDY DESIGN

Figuring out what distinguishes associations that are good at generating and sustaining activism is no easy task. So many factors affect an association's ability to get people involved. Luckily, many scholars have come before me—because civic associations have long played an important role in American public life. According to the Washington Representatives Study, individual-based associations constitute 11.9 percent of the 12,000

organizations listed in the *Washington Representatives* directory.<sup>7</sup> These associations differentiate themselves from other types of organizations because they (a) make claims in the public arena, (b) depend on the voluntary actions of individual members, and (c) govern themselves through elected members.<sup>8</sup> Commonly referred to as citizen groups, these associations are often disproportionately prominent actors in political debates.<sup>9</sup> Part of what all of these associations do to build power is engage activists. Given the importance of this activism in the political process, lots of people have studied it. From studies of political participation, interest groups, social movements, and civic engagement, we already know a lot about what factors influence activism.<sup>10</sup>

We know, for instance, that the kinds of people associations attract (individual characteristics) and where the associations work (community characteristics) matter. To participate, a person must have the resources to do so (free time, civic skills, knowledge, and such) and they must want to participate.<sup>11</sup> Location also matters.<sup>12</sup> Civic associations located in areas

7. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012.

8. See Knoke 1986; Andrews and Edwards 2004 for a discussion of the unique features of civic associations. Their reliance on voluntary action by members means that leaders must find ways to generate commitment instead of compliance, thus differentiating themselves from organizations that rely on paid employees and have more centralized bureaucracies (Kanter 1972).

9. According to the findings of Baumgartner et al. 2009, these civic associations are “the most frequently cited type of major participant in these policy debates” (9) and “may spend less on lobbying and lobby on fewer issues than business organizations, but when they do lobby, they are more likely to be considered an important actor in the policy dispute” (11, see also figure 1.1 on p. 13).

10. See, for instance, Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Teske 1997b; Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Wilson and Musick 1999; Gerber and Green 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Green and Gerber 2004, 2008; Schussman and Soule 2005; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Nickerson 2006; Arceneaux 2007; Klandermans 2007; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Musick and Wilson 2008; Munson 2009; Andrews et al. 2010; Dorius and McCarthy 2011; Eliasoph 2011; Garcia-Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl 2012; Corrigan-Brown 2012; Karpf 2012; Kreiss 2012; Rogers, Gerber, and Fox 2012; Baggetta, Han, and Andrews 2013; and others.

11. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schlozman 2003.

12. Wandersman et al. 1987; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Zeldin and Topitzes 2002.

like San Francisco with an active, ideologically charged community can be better off than associations working in other areas.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the issue context can make a difference. Political opportunities can open up, for example, when issues become the subject of national attention through a major focusing event like Hurricane Katrina or a school shooting.

My study focuses on organizational factors—what an association can do to cultivate activism. A growing body of research reconceptualizes the choice to get involved in politics not as an individualized choice, but as one embedded in the complex social interactions people have.<sup>14</sup> Thinking about the choice this way raises the question about organizational factors: how can associations create the conditions that make it more likely people will take action? Many scholars have studied the different ways associations can frame their message, create incentives for people to participate, build targeted lists, and use other tactics for generating activism.<sup>15</sup> But we still lack a textured sense of how all of these tactics, when put together into a broader strategy for engagement, succeeds (or fails) in cultivating activism.

To examine this, I set up a two-phase study that tried to isolate the effect of organizational factors by combining observational and experimental data. The first phase consists of two-year, comparative case studies. In these case studies, I identified matched pairs of civic associations that were working on similar issues in similar communities and recruiting similar kinds of people—but differed in the levels of activism they inspired. If two associations are working on the same issue in the same kind of community and drawing the same kind of people, why is one more effective than the other at engaging people in action? I drew on surveys, interviews, and ethnographic observations to investigate this

13. Putnam 1995, 2000.

14. Garcia-Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Rogers, Gerber, and Fox 2012.

15. On framing, see Snow and Benford 1988; Snow 2007. On incentives for participation, see Wilson 1973; Miller 2005. On targeting, see Issenberg 2012; Kreiss 2012. For more on the way organizational contexts can affect participation, see summaries in Polletta and Jasper 2001, Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2007, and Orum and Dale 2009.

question. Then, from this first phase, I identified key differences in what the high- and low-engagement local organizations did.<sup>16</sup>

I drew all of my matched pairs from two national associations that I am calling People for the Environment and the National Association of Doctors.<sup>17</sup> People for the Environment tries to get citizens engaged around environmental issues, and the National Association of Doctors seeks to get doctors and medical students involved in advocating for health reform. Both associations typify many of the characteristics common to modern civic associations. They have clear advocacy goals they are trying to achieve, they build power by engaging volunteers in activity, they govern themselves through elected leadership, and they operate at the national, state, and local levels. In addition, their local chapters operate relatively autonomously, such that we can examine variation in the local chapters to understand why some chapters are better than others at engaging people in activity, even though they operate within a common national framework. Each matched pair in my study consisted of local chapters working within the same national association. In total, I observed six pairs of local chapters in two national associations (twelve chapters total, six in each association).

The second phase of the project, the field experiments, built on hypotheses generated in the first phase to test their effectiveness in the context of online mobilization. Ultimately, to uncover causal relationships between actions an association takes and individual involvement, we need to test the effectiveness of different organizational interventions. These experiments examined how organizational actions affected the individual choice to take action.

Many more details on the research design are needed to fully understand the process I used to develop the arguments offered here. Together, chapter 2 and the appendix present those details—on everything from

16. As discussed in more detail in chapter 2, I define “high-engagement” organizations as those that historically have high rates of activism, while “low-engagement” organizations are those that historically have low rates of activism.

17. In undertaking the study with these associations, I agreed to preserve their anonymity. The choice to do so is discussed further in the appendix. In addition, I describe both associations more fully there.

the research design, to the two national associations that were the subject of study, to the implications of studying associations working on health and environmental issues, to the way I define activism, and the way I incorporate previous research. Here, let us get on to what I found.

### MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT: LONE WOLVES, MOBILIZERS, AND ORGANIZERS

So what distinguished the high-engagement chapters who had strong historical records of engaging activists? The key distinction is that the high-engagement chapters combine some form of transformational *organizing* with transactional *mobilizing*. Organizers invest in developing the capacities of people to engage with others in activism and become leaders. Mobilizers focus on maximizing the number of people involved without developing their capacity for civic action. The high-engagement chapters did both. Low-engagement chapters either acted as *lone wolves* or focused solely on mobilizing. People often confuse mobilizing with organizing, but as this book will argue, they are quite different. When mobilizing, civic associations do not try to cultivate the civic skills, motivations, or capacities of the people they are mobilizing. Instead, they focus on maximizing numbers by activating people who already have some latent interest. Organizers, in contrast, try to transform the capacity of their members to be activists and leaders. The chapters with the highest levels of engagement in the study did both.

Associations, just like people, act with implicit theories of change in mind. A theory of change is a set of assumptions about what kinds of actions will produce desired outcomes. Some associations believe, for instance, that the best way to get people involved is to make it as easy as possible. Others believe that it is more important to give volunteers real responsibility, however complicated it may be. These, and other beliefs, come together to form a theory of how the association will achieve its goals.

In my research, the association leaders I spoke with identified three different theories of change, which translated into three different models of engagement: lone wolves, mobilizers, and organizers (the terms are taken from our interviews). Each model of engagement, described in table 1-1,

Table 1-1 COMPARISON OF LONE WOLF, MOBILIZING, AND ORGANIZING MODELS

|                                                   | High-Engagement Sites<br>Combined These Strategies                                                | Low-Engagement Sites<br>Combined These Strategies                                                                                                  | LONE WOLVES                                                                                                                              | MOBILIZERS | ORGANIZERS |
|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Strategy for building power                       | Build power through information                                                                   | Build power by building membership; take people where they are                                                                                     | Build power by building leadership; transform motivations and capacities of members to take on more leadership                           |            |            |
| Strategy for building membership                  | N/A                                                                                               | Build membership by getting as many people as possible to take actions; build a bigger, more targeted prospect list                                | Build membership by developing leaders who can engage others; constantly develop leadership among new prospects                          |            |            |
| Implications for advocacy                         | Choose advocacy strategies that can be done without many people (i.e. writing comments, research) | Choose advocacy strategies that require quick engagement by lots of people (i.e. petitions); focus on reacting to timely events that engage people | Choose advocacy strategies that build people's engagement over time; focus on campaigns that sequence actions people can take            |            |            |
| Implications for structure                        | Centralize responsibility in the hands of staff or a few key volunteers                           | Centralize responsibility in the hands of staff or a few key volunteers                                                                            | Distribute responsibility out to a large network of volunteers                                                                           |            |            |
| Implications for types of asks made to volunteers | N/A                                                                                               | Focus on discrete requests that often allow people to act quickly and alone                                                                        | Focus on interdependent asks that are often more time-intensive, force people to work with others, and give them some strategic autonomy |            |            |
| Implications for communications with volunteers   | Provide information and updates to interested people                                              | Focus on reaching out to as many people as possible by developing attractive "pitches" that will draw in the most people and new networks          | Minimal resources needed for training and reflection                                                                                     |            |            |
| Implications for support                          | Minimal resources needed for training and reflection                                              | Minimal resources needed for training and reflection                                                                                               | Need extensive resources for training, coaching, and reflection                                                                          |            |            |

begins with a basic assumption about how to build power. This assumption drives subsequent choices listed in the table. Lone wolves choose to build power by leveraging information—through legal briefs, public comments, and other forms of research advocacy. Mobilizers and organizers, by contrast, choose to build power through people. Organizers distinguish themselves from mobilizers, however, because they try to transform the motivations and capacities of their members to cultivate greater activism. As Joy Cushman, the Campaign Director for PICO (a national network of faith-based community organizations) put it, “The organizer thus makes two [strategic] choices: 1) to engage others, and 2) to invest in their development. The mobilizer only makes the first choice. And the lone wolf makes neither.”<sup>18</sup>

### Lone Wolves

Peggy, for instance, is a long-time volunteer with People for the Environment and belongs to a chapter that is full of lone wolves. She initially got involved with People for the Environment because she was concerned about degradation of her local forest. When she first joined, she found that most of the other volunteers worked alone. So Peggy did the same thing. Over the years, she has developed an enormous body of knowledge about both the science of forest preservation and how the decision-making bodies relevant to protecting her local forest work—how and when they take public comment, what kinds of comments are most effective, how to participate effectively in the comment process, and so on. She devotes an enormous amount of time to this work, keeping abreast of policy developments, writing comments, attending hearings, and learning about the science and available policy alternatives. She is what other local leaders in People for the Environment call a “star volunteer,” so her local chapter has given her responsibility for all forest protection work in their area. When asked what she has done to recruit volunteers to People

for the Environment, however, she replied, “I’m so busy, I’m not doing anything and never have.”

Lone wolves like Peggy do not put effort into engaging others. They choose advocacy strategies that do not require them to engage others and focus instead on building power by becoming an accurate source of information and expertise for decision-makers.<sup>19</sup> As exemplified by Peggy, they often do this because they do not have the resources to engage large numbers of people in their work, or they do not think it is important. Because they are part of membership-based associations, they still have to keep others updated, but they do so by providing others with information and updates about their work.

### Mobilizers

Mobilizers build power by focusing on transactional outcomes like building the association’s membership. They try to get as many people involved as possible, but they do not try to transform or cultivate volunteers’ capacities for further activism. Instead, they take people where they are. Some people may act only once, and some may become involved over the long term. Some people may want to devote only a discrete amount of time to the association, while others may want to take responsibility for outcomes or become leaders. Mobilizers let people self-select the level of activism they want. To get enough people to accomplish their goals, mobilizers try to build the biggest, most targeted list possible, to maximize the chances they will find people poised for action.

David, for example, is a volunteer leader within the National Association of Doctors. He works with an informal group of about five doctors that initiates and carries out any strategic undertaking for the National Association of Doctors in its community. David and his team spent considerable time building their online presence through email, blogging, and social media. This online work has helped them amass

18. Personal communication, August 11, 2013.

19. Hansen 1991; Smith 1995.

a rather long list of doctors who may be interested in the events and activities of the National Association of Doctors. In addition, they have developed partnerships with other progressive organizations such as the local Democratic Party, MoveOn, some unions, and other organizations. Putting those lists together with their own, they can reach a relatively wide audience to publicize upcoming events and activities for the National Association of Doctors. Once people are on the list, they send them information and a menu of opportunities for participation, and people self-select into actions they want to take.

Depending on the activity, David may get very robust or very low rates of participation. The more attractive his asks can be—such as if they are responsive to timely or controversial events in the news—the more likely he is to engage more people. In one instance, he wanted people to sign a petition and was able to generate hundreds of signatures online. In another instance, he tried to get doctors to attend an event he had organized with a speaker, and only two people showed up. When asked what works to engage people in action, he said, “Well, I keep pestering them. I send many emails and keep pestering basically.” When asked how he followed up with the two people who showed up, David said, “Well, I didn’t really talk to them, so I’m not sure who they are.”

Because of the sheer number of events and activities they plan, David and his team engage a number of people in activity over time, but all of the responsibility for this work sits on their shoulders. When they cannot generate enough response to a request for action, they try to cast a bigger net. They try to search for and identify people who are poised for action. The bigger and more targeted their prospect pool, and the more responsive their asks can be to events in the news, the more likely they are to find larger numbers of people poised to respond to their requests for action.

## Organizers

Phil’s chapter in People for the Environment, by contrast, is full of organizers. When Phil first became a volunteer leader within People for the

Environment, he was given responsibility for organizing a certain geographic area in his state. Almost immediately, Phil realized that the area was too large for him to organize on his own. Other leaders within his state encouraged him to recruit other volunteers to help him organize his area and gave him some names of people to contact. Phil divided his area up into three sections and kept talking to people in those areas until he found three people who were willing to take responsibility for organizing each one. Then, he trained them in how to do their work, mimicking the training he had received when he first joined. Two of those leaders have recruited their own teams of people to help them, while one works alone. Now, Phil continues to meet with each of these three leaders on a weekly basis to check in about their work and to coach them in meeting their weekly goals. In describing this work, Phil says,

[The three leaders and I had] talked about running this regional conference together.... For about a month [after we had the idea], I would have weekly calls with these three individuals around putting together the structure of how volunteers would run this conference—because we didn’t have any funding.... It was their vision and their genius, and I was just kind of along for the ride with them, to help them create this structure and then recruit people. So they were the steering committee, and they recruited like eight of their friends, who they thought would each do a great job for their subcommittees. Those eight people joined the steering committee. And then the subcommittees, the chairs were responsible for recruiting for their committees. [There was a subcommittee on] conference content, fundraising, action, media, I can’t remember the others, you know. Pretty soon, we had an active group of about 100 people working on developing this conference.

Phil and his team distribute responsibility for getting people involved across a number of leaders. His distributed leadership strategy depends on developing a subset of people as civic leaders and engaging them in collective action. Those leaders are invested with real responsibility, and Phil supports them in that work. Because he expects them to achieve certain outcomes, he also provides training and coaching to help them develop the skills and capacities they need to reach their goals. Engaging others in activism, then, depends not only on Phil, but on the network of

leaders that he supports. Phil builds power by investing in the leadership skills of his activists and creating greater collective capacity by increasing the numbers of people responsible for engaging others in action. When Phil cultivates more leaders, Phil's chapter gains greater capacity to build power by engaging others in deeper ways.

### COMPARING MOBILIZING AND ORGANIZING

Many scholars and practitioners confuse mobilizing and organizing. Lone wolf strategies are the most distinct because they do not focus on building power through people. The confusion between mobilizing and organizing arises, in part, because mobilizing and organizing are not mutually exclusive strategies. The local chapters with the highest rates of activism in this study did both. Not only are these local chapters able to mobilize large groups of people to take quick action, they also cultivate a group of people to become leaders. Nonetheless, distinguishing between these models of engagement is important for understanding how high-engagement sites attain their levels of engagement.

A core distinction of organizing is that it has the potential to be transformational in a way that other strategies do not. As Tocqueville argued in his observations of civic life in America in the 1830s, organizers bring individuals together in a way that creates a collective capacity not present when individuals act alone. Organizers do not simply aggregate individuals but also create new relationships between them that generate new commitments and resources.<sup>20</sup> Mark Warren described this phenomenon in his analysis of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a nationwide interfaith network of community organizers. "Those leaders who become and remain primary leaders in the organization . . . speak of their participation in the IAF and its leadership development process as a transformative experience. They stay involved because they develop a 'self-interest' in personal growth and their newly won power."<sup>21</sup> Becoming a leader is a

transformative experience for activists within IAF, who reported developing a sense of personal agency that they previously lacked. Their work through IAF taught them that they could make a difference. By helping individuals discover and cultivate this sense of agency, the IAF organized them, pushing them in directions they might not have gone on their own.

Mobilizers, in contrast, do not seek to transform people's interests as they recruit them for action. They are focused instead on building their membership base—with more people on their list, they have a higher probability that more people can be activated for any given action. At any given time, some people are not ready to get involved while others are poised for action. People can be poised for action for a variety of reasons—perhaps they have a personal interest in health or environmental issues, or their interest was piqued by a news story they read, or they have a friend who is urging them to get involved, or they have some free time they are looking to fill.<sup>22</sup> Others may not be ready—because they are too busy, have other issues they care about more, or do not feel like their actions will make a difference. Mobilizers allow people to self-select the level of activism they desire.

Structurally, the work of mobilizing is usually centralized in the hands of a few leaders, while the work of organizing is distributed through a larger network of leaders. The primary goal of mobilizing is to generate transactional outcomes, such as large numbers of participants. Responsibility is often centralized in a group of people who seek to identify potential opportunities for participation and circulate it to an ever-widening group of potential activists. When there is a ready pool of people who can be easily activated because they have been primed by the media or by other events, mobilizing alone can sometimes achieve the transactional outcomes an association desires. Often, however, to reach its transactional goals at scale, an association needs a cadre of leaders who have the motivations, skills, and capacities to mobilize others. This cadre is developed through a distributed organizing structure. By focusing

20. Ganz 2009, 2010.

21. Warren 2001, 217.

22. See McAdam 1986 and Munson 2009 for a discussion about the importance of "biographical availability" in determining people's readiness for action.

instead on creating opportunities for participation that are as appealing as possible and then advertising (or marketing) those opportunities to as wide a list as possible.

Finally, because organizers want to develop people's ability to take responsibility, they focus on extensive training, coaching, and reflection, while mobilizers do not. Although both mobilizers and organizers may use outside strategies that depend on grassroots engagement for success, the ways in which they engage the grassroots are very different. Organizers make distinct choices about which activists they want to nurture as leaders, how to structure and develop relationships with activists and between them, how to cultivate the motivation and interests of potential activists and leaders, how to equip them with the skills they need to become leaders, and how to bring people together to engage in collective action.

Mobilizing and organizing are mutually reinforcing approaches. Mobilizing helps develop a prospect pool or "leads list" that can be used to identify potential leaders. Organizing can enable the work of mobilizing by developing high-quality leaders capable of recruiting future activists. To meet the challenges of building power, civic associations need to go broad in their mobilizing and deep in their organizing. The high-engagement chapters in this study, thus, did both.

## PUTTING ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ONLINE VERSUS OFFLINE ACTIVITY

It is tempting to differentiate mobilizing and organizing strategies based on whether they are online or offline techniques. Online techniques lend themselves easily to mobilizing because they make targeting and list-building much easier and more efficient than before. Associations can build much larger and more targeted prospect pools with online technology than with traditional organizing strategies. The work of building relationships, fostering community, and creating interdependent work, in contrast, seems to depend largely on offline interactions. Indeed, much of the previous research on the organizational

on the transformational work of building long-term capacity, organizers build up the people-based "assets" of the association. The leaders that organizers cultivate recruit future activists and leaders. The more responsibility is distributed to a wider network of organizers, the more capacity the association has for mobilizing.

Because organizers seek to cultivate and transform people's interests, they make different decisions from mobilizers about how to engage people in action (as outlined in table 1-1). First, organizers make requests for action that bring people into contact with each other and give them space to exercise their strategic autonomy. Research shows that it is through relationships and autonomous collective action that people's motivations for action are likely to change, grow, and develop.<sup>23</sup> Working with other people to strategize and take action is often challenging, however, because it requires more time and coordination than working alone. Mobilizers thus tend to focus on discrete, easy requests that allow people to act alone. Because mobilizers are not worried about cultivating people's motivations, they are less concerned with bringing people into contact with each other or giving them any strategic autonomy.

Second, and relatedly, organizers focus on building relationships and community through interdependent (as opposed to individual) action. The idea is that people's motivation for action and potential for learning becomes centered on the relationships they have with other people in the association.<sup>24</sup> James Q. Wilson argued that people have three different types of motivations for getting involved in political organizations: purposive, solidary, and material. Purposive motivations have to do with wanting to achieve particular policy goals. Solidary motivations are social and relational. Material motivations have to do with personal gain. Mobilizers appeal mostly to purposive motivations, while organizers try to appeal to all three, especially solidary ones. Mobilizers do not forge strong enough relationships with the people they are trying to engage to be able to use the relationships as a source of motivation. They focus

23. See Damasio 1994; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Nussbaum 2001 for more on the neurological basis of these findings.

24. Wilson 1973; Warren 2001.

roots of activism focused on the importance of face-to-face activity and the creation of strong collective identities.<sup>25</sup> In fact, a robust debate has emerged about whether or not online tools can be effective vehicles for collective action. Critics of the new forms of political activity have argued that their focus on quick and easy tasks amounts to nothing more than mere “clicktivism,” or worse yet, “slacktivism,” replacing meaningful political action with shallow tasks.<sup>26</sup> As Malcolm Gladwell famously wrote in his critique of online activism, “the revolution will not be Tweeted.”<sup>27</sup>

Simply equating mobilizing with online techniques and organizing with offline techniques would be a mistake, however. I argue that the important distinction between mobilizing and organizing is not whether the tools used are online or not. Both online and offline tools can be used effectively to mobilize and organize. Likewise, online and offline tools can be used ineffectively to mobilize and organize. As Bimber, Flanigan, and Stohl argue, debating whether specific technologies are able to do the kind of capacity building required for organizing is not useful because the technologies are changing so quickly.<sup>28</sup> While video-conferencing tools that were readily available to civic associations a few years ago were not able to foster the online collaboration needed in some forms of organizing, now they are much improved, much more accessible, and are only likely to get better. The question is not whether online or offline tools are better for organizing, but instead how changing technologies affect the landscape in which modern civic associations do their work.

Patterns of collective action have shifted throughout American history as the social, political, technological, and historical context has shifted. Democracy in America has never been a spectator sport. From the nation’s founding, people have been joining together to make their voices heard in the political process. As Theda Skocpol ably documents, from

25. For summaries, see Polletta and Jasper 2001; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2007; Snow and Soule 2010.

26. e.g. Morozov 2009.

27. Gladwell 2010.

28. Bimber, Flanigan, and Stohl 2012.

the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, much of this activity was organized through large, federated civic associations that spanned social classes. In these associations, “organizers [organized] organizers.”<sup>29</sup> These organizers were “civically ambitious” who built national associations anchored in vision and power aspirations” who built national associations anchored in vibrant local chapters that worked together to “support [expansive] public social programs.”<sup>30</sup>

This pattern of association activism changed, however, in the 1960s and 1970s with the advent of direct mail, the professionalization of movement organizations in the United States, and the fragmentation of associations based on social cleavages like race and gender. The advent of mass media—through television, direct mail, and such—in political communications allowed civic associations, for the first time, to communicate with members on a large scale. This change reduced incentives for organizing. As Skocpol writes, “[I]f mass adherents [can be] recruited through the mail, why hold meetings?”<sup>31</sup> More and more members of civic associations became “checkbook members,” contributing a modest amount each year to maintain their membership but otherwise not participating in the organization in any way.<sup>32</sup> Associations that focused exclusively on mobilizing began to emerge.

The online revolution in the early 2000s has led to even more changes. Information now flows instantaneously, allowing associations to activate participation much more quickly than in the past. Associations that once relied on phone calls and monthly newsletters mailed to their members can now communicate instantaneously and interactively with members and supporters through a number of different mediums. Some scholars argue that the very structure of participation has changed, because individuals with computers no longer have to rely on large associations to organize their collective action, which has altered the way people think

29. Skocpol 2003, 89.

30. Skocpol 2003, 73.

31. Skocpol 2003, 210.

32. Berry 1999; Schier 2000; Skocpol 2003.

about membership in civic associations.<sup>33</sup> Associations now structure work and action around constantly shifting events and activities instead of long-standing associational rituals and programs.<sup>34</sup> Copious amounts of new data have become available to associations, allowing them to get immediate feedback on their outreach strategies and target their work far more effectively than before.<sup>35</sup> With all of these changes, participation has taken new forms. Many civic associations, like MoveOn.org, for example, rely primarily on Internet technologies, which has forced older civic associations, like the League of Women Voters, to adapt.

Just as the advent of mass media in the 1960s changed the context for political activism, so did the evolution of mass online communication. As the landscape of collective action changes with new technologies, the incentives for civic associations to engage in organizing change also. Online tools make the work of mobilizing much cheaper than before and allow associations to create bigger and more targeted prospect pools. This may enable some associations to reach their transactional goals for the number of people they want to engage in action without ever doing any organizing. In other words, with the ability to reach a bigger prospect pool that is more likely to take action because it is better targeted, associations may be able to get the number of signatures they need on a petition or the number of people they want at an event without having to invest in pushing people up the activist ladder. Thus, many associations first taking advantage of mass online communication have focused on mobilizing.

Whether this is a durable long-term strategy for the association still remains to be seen. Some, like Zeynep Tufekci, argue that focusing solely on digital mobilizing might “paradoxically... [engender] hindrances to movement impacts... related to policy and electoral spheres.”<sup>36</sup> These hindrances emerge, Tufekci argues, because the ability of digital tools to reduce the costs of coordination and communication also means

33. Bennett 2012; Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl 2012; Karpf 2012; Mele 2013.

34. Karpf 2012.

35. Issenberg 2012; Kreiss 2012.

36. Tufekci 2014.

that associations relying on them are never forced to create leadership structures that later enable them to exercise power. They achieve their transactional goals, in other words, without ever engaging in the transformational work of organizing. Associations like MoveOn, which were at the vanguard of using online tools to mobilize people for action,<sup>37</sup> have begun to realize the limits of transaction without transformation. Mobilizing by itself can work if an association does not need to engage large numbers of people very consistently or does not need them to engage in very intensive activism, or if it has other sources of power other than people power. In that case, mobilizing may be a cheap and effective strategy to reach transactional engagement outcomes. For associations that do not have large prospect pools, that need people to engage in acts that require more time or risk, or that depend consistently on people to maintain power, mobilizing strategies alone may be of limited efficacy.

Given some of the limitations of mobilizing alone, a newer model of engagement, sometimes called “engagement organizing” or “distributed organizing,” that blends mobilizing and organizing began to emerge near the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2006–2007, MoveOn stopped relying exclusively on its online mobilizing model and shifted toward developing local offline “Leadership Councils” and other structures to enhance their organizing ability. Similarly, in 2007–2008, the campaign to elect Barack Obama president developed a model of blending online and offline organizing and mobilizing.<sup>38</sup> The shift in the strategies employed by MoveOn and the Obama campaign, as well as other developments, demonstrated the power that civic associations can create by blending online and offline mobilizing and organizing. Many of the most vibrant civic associations working online today, as a result, are exploring ways of organizing using online tools—they are working to create tools that can help enable the kinds of transformations that make organizing possible.

All of the models of engagement described in this book—transactional mobilizing, transformational organizing, and ways to blend the two approaches—emerged historically as associations responded to changing

37. Karpf 2012.

38. McKenna and Han 2014.

technologies, information economies, and political pressures. Each new information regime introduces uncertainty for associations about how to leverage new technologies and build power in the new terrain.<sup>39</sup> This whirlwind tour of changing historical patterns of mobilizing and organizing in American politics demonstrates the fundamental point that widespread organizing becomes more likely when civic associations need to organize to build power. Civic associations are most likely to engage in the hard work of organizing when they see it as a way for them to meet their goals. In the contemporary era, the affordances created by digital tools can sometimes enable associations to reach their transactional engagement goals with mobilizing alone—making it seem, in the contemporary environment, that the hard work of transformational organizing is not needed. For associations feeling the limits of transactional mobilizing, however, alternate models of engagement need to be clear. This book presents those alternate models.

This incentive structure linking models of engagement to association power, however, exists whether or not online tools for collective action are available. New technologies for communication and collaboration, new data, and new modes and structures of participation have not changed the core principles that differentiate transformational organizing from transactional mobilizing. Whether associations are using online or offline tools, if they want to develop the capacity of people to engage in further activism and become leaders, they have to create opportunities for transformation by developing interdependent, autonomous venues for participation, forging a sense of community, and training people in the online and offline skills they need to become leaders or deepen their activism. In both the online and offline context, in other words, the core lessons from this book remain true. While some debate whether the changes wrought by the new information age are “good” or “bad,” or “effective” or “ineffective,”<sup>40</sup> I argue that the more important question is about how associations use these new tools to engage activists. The important distinction is not whether the tools

39. Bimber 2003.

40. Morozov 2009; Gladwell 2010.

are online or offline, but instead how the associations use various tools to build power. This book thus describes how civic associations cultivate political activists and develop civic leaders in the modern era.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The following chapters explore the ways in which civic associations act as mobilizers and organizers to cultivate activism and leadership. Chapter 2 sets the stage for the study by diving into more of the theory and method behind the study. I consider alternative possibilities that could explain the differences between high-engagement and low-engagement sites. Perhaps high-engagement sites engage more people because they are in more politically active communities, or because they attract people who are more interested in activism. To address these possibilities, chapter 2 describes the similarities within the pairs of high- and low-engagement chapters selected for study in the People for the Environment and the National Association of Doctors. I draw on individual- and community-level data to ask whether and how the individual traits of members and community characteristics differ across the high- and low-engagement chapters. While minor differences do exist, they are not sufficient to explain the statistically significant gaps in rates of activism observed across these local chapters. Yet, I show that the high-engagement chapters were consistently able to engage more people than the low-engagement chapters during the period of the study. Why? Given the similarities in the communities they worked in and the individuals who joined, what explains these differences?

The appendix contains a further description of the methodology used in this study and supplements the information in chapter 2. Details are provided in the appendix so that they do not interrupt the narrative flow for readers less inclined to wade through the methodological weeds. For interested readers, the appendix describes (a) the process used to select the two national associations included in the study; (b) more detail on the two associations, their place in the broader landscape of civic associations, their relationships to the local chapters, and their overall functioning;

(c) details on how the high- and low-engagement locals included in the comparative case study were selected; (d) descriptions of the community and structural characteristics of the locals included in the comparative case study; (e) demographic and political profiles of the new members joining these local chapters; (f) a detailed discussion of the literature behind the alternative hypotheses explaining differences between high- and low-engagement chapters; and (g) a description of my relationship to the associations in the study.

Chapter 3 continues the argument by examining the myriad factors that come together to influence the way association leaders interpret their strategic environment, make choices about whether to organize or mobilize, and the divergent structures of responsibilities that ensue. It describes how many of the high-engagement chapters that chose to organize did so as the result of some kind of exogenous challenge that pushed them to adopt an organizing approach. Some of the chapters, like Phil's, faced a resource constraint. They had to organize a larger geographic area than they were able to cover with paid staff or existing leaders, or they needed to engage more people than they were able to with existing staff and volunteer leaders. As a result, they began to organize to turn more activists into leaders, so that a larger group of people could share the burden of the work. Many of the high-engagement chapters in the study had similar historical, episodic reasons that forced them to invest a larger number of volunteer leaders with responsibility. Depending on the way they interpreted the challenges they faced and the choices they had before them, many opted to organize and to invest in developing the capacity of volunteers to become leaders. In addition, this chapter describes the way the choice to organize or mobilize has important structural implications. I describe the structural differences between the way a lone wolf model, a mobilizing model, and an organizing model distributes leadership responsibilities. Once sites develop the practice of organizing or mobilizing, however, it has a strategic "stickiness" (or path dependence) to it that makes it more likely they will continue to organize in the future. This chapter argues that the choices local chapters make about what kind of strategy to pursue depend on a complex set of factors including the challenges the chapter faces, the way it interprets and makes sense of

those challenges, the individual biographies of the leaders involved, and the structures the chapter has in place.

This observed path dependence demonstrates the reciprocal relationship that exists between individuals and organizational contexts. Organizational cultures and narratives shape individuals within the chapter and the ways in which those individuals make meaning out of the world around them. At the same time, these individuals bring their own histories, experiences, and perceptions to the chapter, thus shaping the organizational context. When Phil first joined People for the Environment, he had not been trained as an organizer and did not know how it worked. Yet, he liked working with people, had worked with teams of people through student organizations in college, and was open to finding and learning different ways of doing things. When he took responsibility for an entire geographic area, he learned to organize from the example of other volunteer leaders within the chapter who had been organizing as a way of achieving their goals. His choice was influenced by the fact that other volunteer leaders he worked with had been organizing, that people who preceded him had worked as organizers, and that he was part of an informal social network of volunteer leaders in his state who all took an organizing approach. The way he learned to be a leader, in other words, was shaped by the organizational context, but he was the one who made choices about how to engage people in his geographic area.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe in greater depth the organizational practices that differentiate organizers and mobilizers. Chapter 4 delineates the distinctions between transactional mobilizing and transformational organizing more clearly, and the implications each approach has for how local chapters engage activists in advocacy work. Associations focused on transformational organizing are more likely to engage volunteers in work that brings them into contact with each other, gives them some strategic autonomy, and shows them how their work fits into a larger whole. Even in modern civic associations that use Internet technologies for mobilizing and organizing, time-tested techniques of relationship-building and investing in people's development form the core of successful organizing strategies. These relational commitments become an important source of motivation. The commitment to

activism, then, is borne not only of commitment to the issue but also of commitment to other people. In addition, local leaders provide extensive feedback to activists and reflect intentionally with members so that they begin to understand their own actions in light of their own agency. I describe the differences in the ways high- and low-engagement chapters make requests of their members and support their activism. As they ask individuals to engage in activism and then support them in their work, high-engagement chapters build strong interpersonal relationships with the activists and invest in their skills and motivations as leaders. This focus on long-term relational work differentiates them from the low-engagement chapters.

Chapter 5 focuses on the question of how associations achieve scale even as they do transformational organizing. I describe strategies chapters use to mobilize their members to achieve transactional outcomes at scale. I show how chapters blending mobilizing and organizing used mobilizing strategies that had beneficial downstream effects for the association by laying the foundation for future organizing. For instance, in the process of building lists of potential activists, low-engagement chapters are more likely to use relatively passive marketing strategies that allow them to post information and wait for people to consume it. High-engagement chapters are more likely to target people more directly and encourage more interactive activity, using strategies that helped the chapter build leadership skills and motivations among leaders. The high-engagement chapters thus bring far more intentionality to their mobilizing, building the capabilities of leaders even as they mobilize to continually expand their capacity to mobilize at scale. I draw on observational data to describe different kinds of strategies and also the findings of three experimental studies testing the effect of different online strategies in recruiting activists. These experiments test some of the strategies used by high-engagement chapters to generate transactional outcomes while still creating beneficial downstream effects. These studies show that the extent to which the association seeks to develop activist identities makes a difference in whether people respond to the request for action. The organizational activities, in other words, matter.

Chapter 6 concludes the book. I begin by reviewing the findings from previous chapters and discuss the ways in which they are distinct from previous research and conventional wisdom on activism. Because data in the book come from research with two major civic associations, I also discuss the external validity of these findings, examining publicly available data on mobilizing practices of other associations to show important commonalities across them. I then discuss existing research on the sources of political activism and recast the literature in light of the new findings from the book. The chapter also discusses the implications of this research not only for scholarship but also for practice. What are the policy and practical implications of this work? I argue that the book develops key insights into ways to mobilize traditionally hard-to-mobilize populations. Many people report believing that civic and political involvement is important, but many fewer people get involved. Identifying association strategies that can catalyze individual motivations to engage in activism brings us one step closer to understanding how to close the gap between intention and action.

## CONCLUSION

Democracy works when people exercise their right to have a voice in the political system—but democracy fails when people do not, or do not do it very thoroughly. By attending rallies; contacting elected officials and media; reaching out to neighbors, friends, and family; and otherwise expressing their views in the public arena, activists play an important role in American politics. They disproportionately see their views enacted in policy outcomes and are crucial for mobilizing others to participate. In a Tocquevillian sense, activists are the threads that hold the social and political fabric of America together. Many of these activists become involved through civic associations. Some 79 percent of activists report getting involved through a civic association.<sup>41</sup>

41. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 62.

By bringing people together for collective activity, associations teach people the basic skills of democratic citizenship while advocating for their members' interests in the public arena. Civic associations have the potential to cultivate and nurture democratic participation to create new models for collective action. Through the ways in which they reach and engage people, these associations can become engines of activism that propel people to higher levels of involvement. This book examines the way in which modern associations do that by examining their engagement strategies from the perspective of both the association and the volunteer.

A strong body of research on civic and political participation already informs our understanding of activism. While building on this previous research, this book also differs from it in three important ways. First, most prior work is based on research with civic associations that pre-date the Internet revolution. Second, prior research focuses more on the act of joining or affiliating with an association than on the choice to engage in ongoing activity. Third, there is little research on civic leadership in particular. By examining how modern civic associations blend mobilizing and organizing to develop activists and leaders, I uncover the core principles that make it possible for civic associations to engage people in civic and political action, develop their democratic capacities, and build the foundation on which our democracy rests. People power the associations; this book describes how associations power people.

## Setting up the Comparative Case Studies

At the core of this study is an important puzzle uncovered by the data I collected: even though the same kinds of people joined high- and low-engagement chapters, the high-engagement chapters were able to consistently engage more people in activism than the low-engagement chapters. In other words, the members were the same but the participatory outcomes were different. Figure 2-1 depicts these differences.

At the beginning of my study, I identified a group of individuals who had just joined the National Association of Doctors and People for the Environment. I surveyed them about a range of topics, including their personal backgrounds, their reasons for joining, and their previous activity in civic associations. Then, I compared the characteristics of people joining the chapters with historically low levels of engagement to those joining chapters with historically high levels of engagement. As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, and as shown in figure 2-1, the differences at the outset were minimal. When people first joined the National Association of Doctors and People for the Environment, those joining high-engagement organizations were no more likely to be active in civic associations than those joining low-engagement organizations (the differences between these groups were about 4 percentage points in both associations and were not statistically significant).