

# Nonprofits as “Schools of Democracy”: A Comparative Case Study of Two Environmental Organizations

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Jennifer Dodge<sup>1</sup> and Sonia M. Ospina<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This article presents a comparative case study of two nonprofit organizations that do community organizing in the environmental field and asks *how* do nonprofits school citizens in democracy? Although the literature suggests the importance of social capital, a practice approach surfaces important political dimensions that have not been sufficiently explored. We find that distinct organizational practices create contexts for participants to exercise specific ways of being and doing—called “subject positions”—vis-à-vis the state and their political community. These practices support member participation by serving to construct “citizens”—rather than customers or clients—who develop skills in critical thinking and who exercise agency in the organization and the policy field they seek to influence. These practices represent key mechanisms for schooling citizens in democracy in these nonprofit organizations and link participation in the organization with broader political participation. We discuss implications for theory and practice.

## Keywords

schools of democracy, practice theory, nonprofit organization, civic participation, civic engagement

## Introduction

We try to get the information out to our people and let them do their own work. It's a process of participating in a civil society, in democracy . . . One of the big things we do

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<sup>1</sup>University at Albany-SUNY, Albany, USA

<sup>2</sup>New York University, New York City, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Jennifer Dodge, Rockefeller College, State University of New York, Albany, Milne Hall, 3rd Floor, 135 Western Ave., Albany, NY 12222, USA.

Email: [jdodge@albany.edu](mailto:jdodge@albany.edu)

is say, “here’s the names and numbers of your representatives, folks, go . . . tell them in your own words what you think the problem is.” . . . And we’ll just try to arrange [it]. Basically what we’re doing is a process of education . . . I have . . . faith in the people knowing what the solutions to the problems are and what needs to be done. (Organizer, Powder River Basin Resource Council, November 2006)

This quote illustrates an essential point about *how* nonprofit organizations may serve as schools of democracy, particularly in contexts characterized by inequality and political cultures that inhibit speaking out against injustices. *Powder River Basin Resource Council* makes investments in developing capacity among members and strives to create conditions for members to become involved in its work with some autonomy. The approach focuses on educating members to participate in the democratic process, while actively supporting their efforts.

Powder River, located in Wyoming, is a particular type of association, a nonprofit that encourages citizen activism to change policies affecting citizens. The association’s literature offers excellent insights to explore how nonprofits may encourage political engagement. The above quote illustrates what the field has largely come to accept about associations and social change nonprofits as a particular type of association: They promote democracy and serve as “schools” that produce citizens able and ready to participate in society. As Macedo et al. (2005) state, “The importance of a vibrant associational life to the civic health of a country has attained the status of an unimpeachable axiom of democracy” (p. 152). Indeed, the dominant, neo-Tocquevilian approach suggests that associations—and by extension nonprofits, one may infer—provide contexts for citizens to generate trust and social bonds through face-to-face contact that induces civic-mindedness, greater tolerance for diverse perspectives, and other virtues (de Tocqueville, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, when citizens possess these virtues, they produce myriad societal benefits, such as cooperation and cohesion (Putnam, 2000). These, in turn, become prerequisites of a political culture that sustains democratic systems (Almond & Verba, 1989).

Yet the approach offers a limited conceptualization of the link between participation and civic action. It is as if citizens magically channel cooperation into political action. Although social capital might be necessary for collective action, it is insufficient. We also need to explain mechanisms by which political action is encouraged and enacted, thus unpacking nonprofits’ strategic choice to actually embrace civic activism and school citizens in democracy.

This is particularly true given the heterogeneity of nonprofits in terms of purpose, scope, funding sources, and structure, among other dimensions (Frumkin, 2002; Salamon, 2012). Salamon (2012) argues that the character of a nonprofit’s work in the United States today will depend on the priority it assigns to four impulses driving the sector: commercialism, civic activism, professionalism, and volunteerism. The impulse a nonprofit prioritizes in implementing its mission constructs participants differently—as “customers,” “citizens,” “clients,” and “members,” respectively—eliciting different meanings for what participants can contribute. Each thus produces consequences for participants and influences whether they exercise agency within the organization and political community.

The neo-Tocquevillian approach uncritically assumes that civic activism is inherent to nonprofit work. However, it may require a particular effort, especially because nonprofits can also generate behaviors damaging to democracy (Armony, 2004; Chambers & Kopstein, 2001; Macedo et al., 2005). More research is needed to clarify what happens for participants in nonprofits and how civic activism can be promoted. How do nonprofits school citizens in democracy? And what skills emerge from these processes? A practice approach is promising for examining these questions. We focus on practice as the mechanism that explains the enactment of Salamon's civic activism impulse, suggesting that practices matter for the kind of participant a nonprofit produces (Eliasoph, 1998), especially whether or not participants overcome inequality and inhibiting political cultures.

Our main argument is that to school citizens in democracy, nonprofits must enact organizational practices that construct active "citizens," not "customers" or "clients." Because assumptions underlying civic activism have the greatest potential for constructing active citizenship, we explore how this impulse is enacted in two nonprofits with experience educating citizens in democratic skills: the *Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice* and the *Powder River Basin Resource Council*. Both organizations—names not changed, with permission—do community organizing *with* people who struggle for a place at the environmental policy table.

We begin with a discussion of what we know about the role of nonprofit organizations in schooling citizens and then present our cases and methods. We then document our findings and offer implications for theory and practice. We find that constructing "citizens" in these organizations happens through two sets of mutually reinforcing organizational practices: framing and relational practices. These practices construct citizens by creating "spaces" (Brock, Cornwall, & Gaventa, 2001; Evans & Boyte, 1986; Polletta, 1999) for participants to exercise ways of being and doing vis-à-vis the state and their political community. Scholars refer to these ways of being and doing as "subject positions" (Fischer, 2006; Foucault, 1986; Katzenstein, 1998). Framing practices enable members' critical thinking, and relational practices shift power relations between participants and "experts" to produce member agency. These practices represent key mechanisms for schooling citizens in democracy. They link organizational participation to political participation and allow the development of democratic skills and capacities beyond social capital.

## How Do Nonprofits Serve as Schools of Democracy?

If the neo-Tocquevillian model is correct, "then associations that teach civic skills improve democracy by enhancing political participation" (Fung, 2003, p. 520). Yet the literature suggests this is not always the case. Nonprofits, as a particular type of association, have unique capacities for and constraints on encouraging political participation. Like other associations, they may exclude certain groups (Schwadel, 2002), fail to develop tolerance (Torpe, 2003), encourage apathy (Eliasoph, 1998), exacerbate rather than alleviate inequalities (Berry, 2005; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012; Strolovitch, 2007), or promote hatred and

bigotry (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001). Nonprofits also face structural conditions that suppress political activity such as restrictions on lobbying in the tax code (Berry, 2005), and imperatives to devote resources to service provision and grant-maintenance (Jenkins, 2006). Moreover, the concentration of government power may negatively affect participation as nonprofits become more professionalized and nationally focused (Skocpol, 2003). More generally, neighborhood poverty can weaken social ties and attachment to community institutions such as nonprofits and negatively shape perceptions of efficacy (Cohen & Dawson, 1993). Although nonprofits may overcome these constraints (Chaves, Stephens, & Galaskiewicz, 2004; Majic, 2011; Marwell, 2004), evidence suggests that neo-Tocquevillians are too uncritically optimistic about nonprofits' democratic benefits (Armony, 2004).

The literature on associations and political advocacy does clarify dynamics of civic engagement in nonprofits. Its tendency to focus on the structural conditions nonprofits face, while overlooking organizational factors influencing political participation, limits our capacity to account for organizations' differential ability to help members attain political voice given structural constraints (Han, Andrews, Ganz, Baggetta, & Chaeyoon, 2011). Thus, we must unpack the black box of civic participation and examine the influence of organizational practices. The neo-Tocquevillian approach explains how civic skills develop within associations of various types but leaves unanswered questions about *how* these skills translate into political action, and whether this yields more democratic participation, especially among marginalized groups.

Nonprofit scholars (Majic, 2011; Torpe, 2003; Van der Meer & Van Ingen, 2009) and other social scientists (Eliasoph, 1998; Fung, 2003) have begun to unpack this link, but with limited results, as two lines of research attest. First, research consistent with the neo-Tocquevillian approach suggests that nonprofits as a type of association must cultivate values motivating civic behavior and political activity to produce democratic outcomes (Clemens, 2006). But the link between civic behavior and actual political engagement is tenuous (Majic, 2011; Putnam, 1995). For example, nonprofit members might host potluck dinners and organize charitable giving events but not challenge policies or structures affecting excluded groups. In contrast, nonprofit members that do political work may write opinion editorials, develop organizational strategy, and testify in public hearings, resulting in the development of different skills.

This line of research documents a strong relationship between associational involvement and political action (Torpe, 2003), which is unsurprisingly stronger in interest and activist organizations than leisure organizations (Van der Meer & Van Ingen, 2009). An in-depth study finds that active union members apply civic skills developed and exercised in a union to other organizations (such as their children's schools) and move beyond "plug-in" forms of participation (like writing checks) to "critical forms of engagement" increasing their voice and leadership (Terriquez, 2011, p. 581). But even in this study, the link between participation in the organization and other arenas is not clear. In sum, the neo-Tocquevillian approach has a limited conceptualization of the relationship between participation and civic action, leaving unanswered whether social capital is sufficient for collective action.

A second line of research suggests that governance structures promoting participation (not just membership) may produce democratic outcomes (Barakso, 2005). This approach surpasses the neo-Tocquevillian argument in showing how involving participants in political work develops civic skills. For example, Barakso (2005) finds that democratic structures facilitate members' political engagement in the National Organization of Women, helping them "learn about the strategic use of parliamentary procedure, attain an understanding of the legislative process . . . , and gain exposure to the mechanics of local, state and national electoral campaigns" (p. 331). But participatory governance mechanisms may also fail. Forums intending to include marginalized groups in policy making often neglect to match this intention with inclusive practices and dialogical processes (Barnes, Newman, Knops, & Sullivan, 2003). Hence, while structures may create a container for engagement, practice determines whether the container fosters the actual expression of active citizenship.

A third line of research identifies specific practices—organizational routines or habits (Eliasoph, 1998)—that might support the translation of civic skills into political action by establishing spaces of engagement that enable active citizenship (Han et al., 2011; Majic, 2011). For example, research suggests that nonprofits providing health services to sex workers—while close to government through contracting—provide "habitats" that advance activist goals "from the inside" (Majic, 2011). Committed to prostitute rights, these organizations challenge "historical conceptions of prostitutes as criminals or 'vectors of disease'" (Majic, 2011, p. 827); provide compassionate, non-judgmental services; and offer sex workers opportunities to become managers and service providers, thereby gaining politically relevant skills. Through these practices of "oppositional implementation" these "social movement borne" nonprofits (Majic, 2011) explicitly foster empowered subjectivities (Kayal, 1993; Morgen, 2002). These practices are not common among all service providers, only those intentionally engaging in "oppositional implementation" (Majic, 2011).

Conversely, an organization's practices may hinder civic engagement. Eliasoph (1998) finds that diverse types of associations implement practices through which members convince themselves they can do nothing about social problems, thus immobilizing political engagement. As expected, several of Eliasoph's associations reflect Salamon's (2012) "volunteerism" impulse. But she also found this tendency among organizations representing "civic activism," which suggests that associations may mimic activism, but fail to deliver it. Moreover, their "impulse" does not determine the implied type of participant without intentional practice.

These cases illustrate key insights from a practice theory approach: organizational routines produce a quality of engagement within participatory structures (Barnes et al., 2003), as organizational staff and members construct participation through language and acts. This points to the importance of understanding meanings behind words like "member," "staff," and "affiliates," and how associated roles are practiced (Barnes et al., 2003). As Fischer (2006) argues, language is constitutive of social experience:

. . . the way "participation" is used and understood in a particular discourse determines what "subject positions" are available for participants to take up within particular spaces,

thus bounding the possibilities for both inclusion and agency. Whether they are constructed as “citizens,” “beneficiaries,” “clients,” or “users” influences what people are perceived to be entitled to know, to decide or contribute, as well as the perceived obligations of those who seek to involve them. (p. 16, see also Foucault, 1986)

“Subject positions” are identities into which members become acculturated and provide distinct possibilities for engagement. Treating participants as “customers” implies a market logic that limits agency to “purchasing” services or providing feedback through satisfaction surveys or leaving. In contrast, treating participants as “citizens” suggests the right to critically reflect on public issues, make decisions, and take action in the face of injustice. When people are thus empowered, different subject positions become available.

This approach has been fruitful in the “policy feedback” literature, which shows how different governmental policies construct citizens in ways that support or diminish their civic capacity. Mettler (2002) argues that educational benefits of the G.I. Bill increased recipients’ civic capacity, altering “beneficiaries’ sense of obligation to the polity . . . , by offering people a highly positive experience of government and public provision, one that . . . treated them with dignity and respect . . .” (p. 362). By incorporating recipients as full citizens, the G.I. Bill enhanced civic and political participation, especially for low- and moderate-income individuals (Mettler, 2002). In contrast, Soss (1999) describes welfare recipients as less politically active than demographically similar recipients of social security or disability insurance due partly to “the lessons they learn about government and demand-making” through interaction with welfare agencies (p. 365). The contrast can be attributed to widely different subject positions available to recipients, shaping their sense of self-efficacy and government responsiveness. These findings apply equally to nonprofits, and stress the impact of organizational practices on citizens’ experiences. Our contribution further unpacks the mechanisms by which political action is encouraged and enacted, that is, *how* nonprofit organizations provide spaces for excluded participants to transform into citizens and *how* they help produce this transformation. Beyond members’ activities, how they participate shapes what skills and orientations they develop.

Our practice approach has important research implications. It shifts the conceptualization of governance structures from formal reporting relationships and communication channels to the construction of governing in language and action, which are the means of opening and constraining fields of action (Forester, 1999). In the environmental field, it suggests the need to understand how nonprofits construct experiences of citizenship and of environmental hazards, and how participants adopt these practices. Participants may learn to interpret experiences with polluting facilities as the organization does: as a racial injustice, a threat to landowner rights, or something beyond one’s control. Thus, the premise of a practice approach is that a nonprofit’s practices produce different types of participants, more or less likely to engage in political work. Whether or not, and how, nonprofit practices allow participants to transform into active citizens is thus an empirical question worth pursuing.

## Method

Our data come from a project about nonprofits in deliberative democracy (Dodge, 2011) that integrated narrative inquiry (Dodge, Ospina & Foldy, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and interpretive case study methodologies (Stake, 1995). Both methodologies embed phenomena in context, report findings in narrative form, and aim to understand practitioners' perspectives.

In narrative inquiry, stories of practice reveal—through careful analysis—the practical knowledge of organizational members (White, 1999; Dodge, Ospina & Foldy, 2005). It offers an opportunity to unpack the black box of civic participation by focusing on how members of nonprofits make sense of their efforts to construct active citizens, in language and daily practices of community organizing. Case study methodology—from applied fields such as education and policy (Stake, 1995, 2006)—adds a comparative logic that facilitates case selection and theory elaboration (Dodge, 2011). Although one cannot generalize case studies of individual nonprofits to all nonprofits, they allow elaboration of mechanisms for theory building about nonprofit types (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Using theory-based sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994),<sup>1</sup> two nonprofit organizations were selected from 92 in a national program.<sup>2</sup> Both focus on environmental policy, represent the activist impulse in the nonprofit sector, and work in contexts defined by considerable inequalities. Selection began with 19 environmental nonprofits and narrowed to 12 doing community organizing because they were likely to engage members in political work. Allowing for theoretical elaboration across cases, the final two represented the greatest diversity in terms of definitions of environmental issues (environmental justice vs. conservation), theory of change (transformation vs. reformation), and organizational structures (network vs. membership). The Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice is located in New Mexico, and the Powder River Basin Resource Council is located in Wyoming. Their states have different environmental policy regimes, demographics (New Mexico is a majority–minority state with Native American, Latino, and White populations; Wyoming is largely White), and degrees of rural and urban populations. Finally, one is a nonprofit with 501(c)3 status. The other is a nonincorporated association with a nonprofit fiscal sponsor. Although the organization with a fiscal sponsor faces fewer constraints on lobbying, it functions similarly in practice: it does community organizing, is member-driven, and represents civic and political engagement functions in the sector (Frumkin, 2002).

Consistent with narrative inquiry and interpretive case studies, data gathering, analysis, and reporting focused on discrete stories about organizational practices as the unit of analysis (Dodge, Ospina & Foldy, 2005). Approved by a human subjects review, data collection included interviews, observations, and documents. The first author conducted 36 interviews, made 28 observations of organizational and public meetings and events, and gathered more than 400 documents (organizational and policy documents, and government reports; see Table 1). Semistructured interviews with organizational members, staff, and allies; government officials; and industry representatives were organized around key episodes in one campaign in each nonprofit.

**Table 1.** Data Gathering by Method.

Method	The Network	Powder River	Total
Interviews	18	18	36
Observations	16	12	28
Documents	69	359	428

Interviewees and key episodes were identified with informants. They covered topics related to how the organizations practiced deliberation and political action.<sup>3</sup>

Data analysis used a narrative approach called retranscription (Feldman & Sköldberg, 2002) that distills organizational practices.<sup>4</sup> A traditional coding strategy was not used to retain the cases' contextual character. The systematic analysis of transcripts and documents resulted in detailed Analytical Memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that presented storied accounts of organizational practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in each nonprofit's campaign. The accounts were shared with organizational members to verify interpretations. Analysis was sequential and comparative, from within-case analysis of the first case and then the second, the latter of which also incorporated cross-case analysis. This article presents the practices that emerged inductively from this analysis and that answer our research question: How do nonprofits school citizens in democracy?

## Two Environmental Nonprofits<sup>5</sup>

The *Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice* is a network of about 60 community-based organizations and individuals that represent communities of color or native origin. The Network, located in New Mexico, does environmental justice work in states on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border and with Native Nations in the region.<sup>6</sup> It emphasizes racial discrimination in environmental policy making, which results in poor people of color or native origin bearing a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards. To address this problem, it promotes “a people’s strategy” that emphasizes self-determination among affected people and direct action to hold governments accountable. In 2003, the Network started a campaign to bring environmental justice policy to New Mexico through its Environmental Justice Working Group.

The Network’s campaign took place in New Mexico, a “majority–minority” state with a population 45% Hispanic, 10% American Indian, 42% White, and 3% African American, Asian, and Pacific Islander (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The Network’s affiliated organizations are member-based and have at least 50% people of color or native origin on their boards and staff (Ledesma, n. d.); thus, Network members roughly represent the state’s demographics.

*Powder River Basin Resource Council* is a nonprofit in Wyoming with about 1,000 individual members interested in protecting public and private natural resources from energy development effects. It emphasizes conserving natural resources for future



generations and preserving the West's agricultural heritage. It promotes direct citizen engagement in policy making, seeks to build power, and holds governments accountable. Its members—mostly ranchers, agriculturalists, and other Wyoming residents—reflect the demographics of the state: primarily White with one leader who is a person of color. Members have a range of economic backgrounds: some are professionals with experience in government or industry; others are ranchers with modest incomes who described themselves as politically unsophisticated before joining Powder River.

In 2002, Powder River formalized a campaign begun years before to address environmental effects of coalbed methane development in northeastern Wyoming. Although its members have sought to protect private property, they have broader social goals: to share their experiences so other communities can protect private and public lands from gas development.

The Network has documented a history of exclusion of people of color in decision making in New Mexico, and although different, Powder River is concerned with overturning a culture where norms of politeness and modesty undermine speaking out against injustices. Therefore, although some members of both organizations have previous political experiences, they spend considerable resources developing members who learn skills through training and participation.

## Constructing Civic Engagement

I can remember . . . before we all got into Powder River, and we . . . had the meeting over at 4G Hall. And I got up, and . . . I said, "In my opinion, if it [coalbed methane development] is going to harm my neighbor downstream it's not worth any amount of money." And that's when a whole bunch of people mentally got up and left. They wanted nothing to do with trying to make sure that they didn't harm their neighbors . . . Of course, I had no idea how to engage with my neighbors at that point. I thought everybody was going to agree with me. I was so naïve . . . We joined Powder River . . . , because we didn't know how to organize ourselves. (Member, Powder River, September 2006)

She was our Board Chair and now she speaks to all these professional groups and all around . . . the rocky mountain region . . . [She's] very well respected for her work. (Executive Director, Powder River, September 2006)

These quotes describe a Powder River member who joined when coalbed methane development began to impact her property. They show her transformation from "naïve" to a well-respected leader serving on Powder River's board and speaking at regional conferences. How did she get there? We identified two sets of organizational practices—framing and relational—that explain her transformation, and others', and unpack the mechanisms that connect civic skill development and political action to construct active citizens.

### Framing Practices

Constructing participants as active citizens requires providing space to engage in political judgment. In these organizations, this is done through framing practices that

involve “higher-level reflection . . . on such ‘invisible essences’ as the beliefs, values, and perspectives implicit in policy struggles” (Schon & Rein, 1994, p. xiii). When actors engage in framing, they consciously and unconsciously assert what counts as fact and what arguments are relevant and compelling (Dryzek, 1997). Two framing practices—constructing injustices and constructing responsibility for injustices (Stone, 1989)—seem relevant to active citizenship.

One Network affiliate described how he learned to construct injustices in a particular way through interaction with other activists in the Network who framed problems in terms of Environmental Justice (EJ). While organizing to clean up a local chemical plant, he initially framed the chemical plant as an isolated problem. Then he began seeing polluting facilities differently, as he describes,

. . . you have people [EJ activists] come in to these meetings and . . . say, “You know your problem isn’t just the chemical plants it’s these dairies. They have high nitrate contamination.” And when you get the data, you see . . . these people aren’t lying. So those issues have now grown from this chemical plant to the environmental issues around what dairies produce. (September 2006)

This quote shows how he learned to adopt an environmental justice frame called “disproportionate burden,” which draws attention to the disproportionate number of polluting facilities in low-income communities and communities of color, thus revealing these as injustices. This affiliate learned to recognize disproportionate burden when the Network’s executive director pointed out other polluting facilities he had overlooked. By doing so, the director helped him focus on dairies, thus enlarging his perspective and facilitating action on a broader range of issues.

Members of Powder River similarly learned to frame problems with coalbed methane development as injustices, focusing on corporate greed, through their interaction with each other and community organizers. One founding member and rancher expressed common frustrations when he said, “You just can’t believe the dishonesty, and the crookedness and the immorality [of the gas companies]. It is so frustrating . . . that they can be that greedy . . .” Discussing government’s responsibility to address members’ concerns, the lead organizer describes that “it all boils down to the failure of the state to have the backbone” to enforce stricter regulations. Every member interviewed expressed similar sentiments: Government agencies permitted oil and gas companies to drain aquifers, block water flows, and unnecessarily damage private property, while shirking responsibility to prevent such problems. Powder River members took action by testifying at public hearings against companies’ requests for water discharge permits.

By learning the organizations’ framing practices, members acquire new capacities of political judgment, articulating environmental hazards as injustices, and identifying responsible parties (Stone, 1989). Nonprofits can thus provide “. . . the conceptual space in which dominated groups are able to penetrate the prevailing common sense that keeps most people passive in the face of injustice . . .” (Polletta, 1999, p. 3). In other words, they support critical thinking and action. Yet these practices are not

sufficient to construct active citizens. Nonprofits must also create conditions for citizens to exercise agency.

### *Relational Practices*

A second component of constructing active citizens are relational practices. In these nonprofits, four relational practices emerged: enacting member-driven accountability, opening a space for voice, building unity, and fostering inclusion and diversity. These practices are not just about what members do, but the meaning given to what they are doing and why. The activities are in the service of shifting power, by building member efficacy, voice, and equality.

*Enacting member-driven accountability.* Member-driven accountability illuminates how governing takes place daily in these organizations. The emphasis is on creating “just relationships” (Ledesma, n. d.) not only building a “structure.” While structure creates a container, practice determines whether this will establish a context for the expression of active citizenship. For this practice, active citizenship requires shifting roles so organizational staff and partners are accountable to members who guide the organizations. We examine member, staff, and expert role constructions associated with this practice, and present ample evidence of these roles in both organizations. These roles derive from community organizing and encourage active member participation and leadership, and support from staff and experts.

*Constructing members.* *Powder River* constructs participants as “members,” typically landowners with an interest in protecting private property from energy development. “Leaders” are members elected by the membership to “guide” the organization (Western Organization of Resource Councils [WORC], 2004). *The Network* constructs participants as “affiliates,” typically representatives of community-based organizations and individuals of color or native origin addressing environmental justice issues. Members and affiliates are not wealthy, nor are they always professionally trained, but are more commonly lay citizens or grassroots activists, so shifting authority to members is not an obvious choice.

Members learn these roles “by doing,” with staff support. They are positioned to assume formal and informal leadership positions. They serve on governing boards composed entirely of members. The Network’s “Coordinating Council” is “responsible for political, programmatic and personnel-related decision making” and “large-impact decisions” (Ledesma, n. d., p. 18), whereas Powder River’s Board of Directors sets priorities and gives direction on issues arising between annual membership meetings. Likewise, working groups and committees—made up of members in both organizations—implement the organizations’ work.

Establishing accountability this way requires special effort because members are often lay citizens without formal political, technical, or organizing skills. In addition to the practices described below, this entails training (e.g., on power analysis or campaign strategy) and frequent support from community organizers.

Less formally, members and affiliates implement the organizations' policy work. For example, a Network affiliate attended the National Latino Congress and used the Network's ideas to submit a resolution on environmental justice. A Network staff reflected,

A staff person doesn't even really need to be present or travel. To me that is an amazing thing . . . The members just kind of go out and travel [and do the work] and they check in with us. (September 2006)

These organizations place authority to direct, make decisions and do the organizations' work in members' hands. Members also testify in environmental policy hearings, write op-eds, do speaking engagements, and network with other communities.

*Constructing staff.* While members are constructed as leaders, staff is constructed as subordinate to members. One Powder River organizer explained, "We are not freelancers here. We work for these members" (September 2006). This assertion repositions the relationship between professional staff and members, privileging members' knowledge and experience.

Specifically, for Powder River, "organizers" "coordinate" daily with committees, the Board and the membership to help "set priorities," "develop strategies," and "implement" campaigns (WORC, 2004). Staff members "support" members by "facilitating" trainings and "troubleshooting," and "play administrative roles" by "producing" reports for the organization, doing "analysis and research," and "planning and evaluation" (WORC, 2004). Staff members also organize annual meetings where leaders (members) update the membership on committee activities and set priorities. Similarly, Network staff members are "accountable" to the membership and exist "to facilitate and coordinate meetings, training, research, gatherings, publications, and actions necessary to strengthen the grassroots efforts" (Ledesma, n. d., p. 21). Staff works closely with Campaign Chairs to support campaign activities and develops opportunities for affiliates to educate their communities.

Staff members take direction from members. As Powder River's executive director describes "we talk to these people [our members.] [They] are our guide, they tell us what they want to do . . ." (September 2006). Organizers often communicate through email to members on Powder River's task forces to make decisions. One member, a farmer on the board, explains,

[The lead organizer] will send her debate analysis or a copy of a lawsuit or something and ask us [members] whether there are any objections to us joining this or how she should respond. (September 2006)

This example reflects Powder River's member-driven practices. On another level, the Board, mostly ranchers, meets 6 times annually to provide strategic direction to staff.

*Constructing experts.* The nonprofits' language creates highly formalized roles for members and staff to shift typical power relationships. This shift is most apparent in

relation to professional and technical experts with whom the organizations partner. Both organizations articulate in documents and interviews that technical allies *support* the organizations' work but do not speak for the organization or make decisions. For example, Powder River's "technical experts" "work for members," and "provide advice and information," "legal representation," and "transfer skills" to members (WORC, 2004). They also "provide credibility" by "supporting" the group's positions (WORC, 2004). This language reverses the roles between experts and lay citizens, as it does between staff and members.

The Network offers a striking illustration of this view. It partnered with a mainstream (i.e., White) environmental law organization to provide testimony at public hearings on environmental justice in New Mexico. An affiliate ensured that "community people" had the opportunity to speak about their experiences in the hearing and also explicitly clarified that the director of the environmental law firm "works in the EJ communities but he doesn't speak for them . . ." She explained, "I said, 'well I want to be very clear that [the director] . . . is not the voice of environmental justice in New Mexico'" (September 2006). This story exemplifies how the Network's practices shift the relationship between experts and lay citizens to create a space for citizens to be experts.

The organizations' efforts to shift power is important within a society that handles public policy problems in increasingly bureaucratic and technocratic ways that undermine citizen participation (Fischer, 2000).<sup>7</sup> Our findings suggest that nonprofits can play a role resisting the dominance of technical expertise and rescuing the relevance of local knowledge in policy debates. By shifting power relationships internally, these nonprofits create a space for citizens to articulate local knowledge of environmental hazards and prepare to disseminate it in the policy domain they seek to influence (Dodge, 2011).

*Opening space for voice.* Opening space for voice is a practice that prioritizes opportunities for citizens to speak about their experiences and opinions. Voice in both organizations evolved in reaction to political contexts of exclusion and cultures of silence. A Network member explains that voice "surfaces out of the need for collaboration and cooperation and inclusivity and respect" that is often denied to people of color in the dominant, White society. These groups are alternately framed as "the silent group," "the people who speak too much," or "the people who are too angry" (September 2006). The Network thus prioritizes creating contexts for people of color to speak on their own terms (Ledesma, n. d.). Powder River does not emphasize a history of exclusion based on race. Yet, it is equally concerned with overturning a culture of silence where norms of politeness and modesty undermine speaking out against injustices (Dodge, 2011).

One Network affiliate explained that voice is accomplished when members meet by "honoring" voice, monitoring and "checking in." She explains,

Voice is incredibly important . . . we cannot move forward without [it] . . . It doesn't matter whether we are agreeing . . . or not. If someone is not voicing or if someone might be kept—and that would never happen—from voicing their position . . . somebody would

step in, anybody. But usually [the executive director] would monitor [that] . . . (September 2006)

Given that the organization works with Native American, African American, and Latino people, she also explains that voice is accomplished by understanding cultural ways of speaking:

Different cultures . . . are going to respond differently, people are going to be quieter and not necessarily share a voice right away. So there is always an opportunity . . . , and . . . people are invited to speak. There is cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity . . . around indigenous ways . . . , knowing that each tribe is going to be somewhat different. There are all these different levels of understanding of who we are working with . . . And everyone's voice is pretty strong because of that . . . (September 2006)

Opening spaces for voice empowers citizens and promotes political agency. It also prepares members to present in public, as they did during unprecedented hearings on environmental justice during the Network's campaign in New Mexico.

*Building unity and fostering inclusion and diversity.* While representing two distinct relational practices, building unity and fostering inclusion and diversity represent efforts to address two sides of a paradox typical of member-driven nonprofits (Ospina & Saz-Carranza, 2010). This means it is a strategic imperative for member-driven nonprofits to simultaneously respect divergence across constituencies and affiliated organizations *and* build their unity. Attending to both sides of this paradox creates a context for participants to enact subject positions responsible for holding divergent perspectives *and* finding common ground.

Powder River frames unity as "mutual support" among members and "collaboration" and "solidarity" with allies (WORC, 2004, p. 1). The Network emphasizes building "unity among people of color that we may determine or own needs and develop our own leaders, perspectives, and political agendas" (Ledesma, n. d., pp. 52-53). Unity means learning about and supporting others by incorporating their positions, experiences, interests, goals, and visions into campaigns, and sometimes agreeing to disagree.

A story from Powder River illustrates how building unity is accomplished by finding common cause with allies. In 2005, Powder River members in Wyoming faced a decision to intervene in a court case on behalf of the Northern Plains Resource Council in Montana. Three oil and gas companies sued the Environmental Protection Agency in response to its approval of strict water quality standards in Montana. Wyoming's Governor sided with the companies so the standards would not apply in his state (given that water flows between the two states). Powder River members were divided over whether to intervene. A board member describes,

. . . a couple of people . . . felt, "Well, I don't know. What are we going to gain by doing this?" . . . [And] "there's no need to piss off the Governor because he will probably be reelected." And then the others say, "well he couldn't be anymore negative about us than he already is . . ." (September 2006)

Facing a difficult decision, the board chair made the group vote several times before they decided unanimously to intervene. The process allowed them to develop a unified position to support their ally.

On another level, unity is accomplished by working through diverse opinions. For example, during Powder River's annual meeting, two members with opposing views hotly debated the effects of coalbed methane development on water. Field notes remark, "It was kind of electrifying to see the degree to which conflict was tolerated within the group. The tensions were palpable." This tolerance helps create a context for citizens to express opinions and negotiate them with others, and to situate their perspectives by highlighting the partiality of their own experiences.

Fostering inclusion is accomplished in multiple ways in these organizations. First, it involves democratic procedure. Powder River uses Robert's Rules of Order (WORC, 2004). The Network draws on EJ principles that reflect a "people of color perspective" of discussion that make "conscious effort for inclusiveness . . . a very key piece to environmental justice" (Network affiliate, September 2006). Second, inclusion involves understanding the nuances of a discussion so one may contribute. Although members' knowledge of environmental hazards is highly valued, they must also understand technical, legal, and policy issues. Therefore, organizers ensure members' access to specialized experts. Powder River organizers, for example, seek to "demystify" regulatory processes so people do not "feel like they have to hire lawyers to write their comments" (Powder River Organizer, September 2006). They do this by producing information about regulatory processes and connecting members with university professors to prepare testimony for environmental hearings.

Closely related to inclusion, diversity is accomplished directly by incorporating it into advocacy strategies or indirectly by engaging a diverse constituency. For example, the Network integrates diversity into its regional strategies on environmental degradation "and other social, racial, generational, economic, and gender injustices." Its *Principles of Working Together* stress

affirmation of the value in diversity and the rejection of any form of racism, discrimination and oppression . . . [and] . . . require respect, cultural sensitivity, patience, time and a willingness to understand each other and a mutual sharing of knowledge.

Although Powder River members are predominantly White, it also "encourages diversity and inclusivity . . . [and] . . . offers the opportunity for any person to participate regardless of her/his class, race, gender, sexual orientation, income level or formal education" (WORC, 2004, p. 53). Furthermore, its goals include "looking at and understanding different perspectives," "learning about and respecting . . . the rights of others," and "developing a tolerance and respect for other people who may be different" (WORC, 2004, p. 1).

In sum, our findings identified two practices—framing and relational—that construct members' active engagement in policy processes. Framing practices construct

injustices and responsibility for them. Relational practices enact member-driven accountability, open a space for voice, build unity, and foster inclusion and diversity.

## Discussion

Our findings advance insights of the neo-Tocquevillian approach to civic engagement by specifying the mechanism through which social capital translates into political participation: the daily enactment of relational and framing practices that bring citizens into the public sphere and define what it means to be citizens schooled in democracy.

*Framing practices* provide a lens on environmental hazards that enable critical evaluation of injustices and the responsibility to correct them. *Relational practices* offer means for participants to exercise political agency to overcome apathy and cultures of silence. Members develop leadership, negotiate divergent values, speak out against injustices, and learn tolerance for diverse views. These practices shift members' relations to those with power, creating a context to exercise agentic "subject positions" within the organization and policy field. In short, practices matter for schooling citizens in democracy.

Specifically, our practice approach makes three contributions. First, we find that what matters for civic engagement is not just promoting the civic activism "impulse" that Salamon (2012) describes, but whether or not a nonprofit intentionally advances active citizenship. Across the literature, we observe that nonprofit organizations exhibiting various "impulses" can support or inhibit active engagement. Collectively, this research suggests that *organizational practices*, not impulse, generate different experiences for citizens, with implications for how citizens take up democratic participation. Our findings support prior conclusions that constructing participants as "clients" or "customers" rather than citizens has a different impact on what they can be expected to contribute and their possibilities for active citizenship (Barnes et al., 2003; Schram, Fording, & Soss, 2011). We propose that the kinds of framing and relational practices we document can emerge in various types of nonprofits—from service providers to advocacy organizations and beyond environmental organizations, but only if they adopt what Majic (2011) calls "oppositional implementation" practices.

The theoretical implication of our findings is that developing agency and critical thinking—and associated capacities—is not guaranteed through association. Associating is not enough; nor is creating structures for participation. Rather, practices that foster certain ways of being and acting must accompany engagement. *Empowerment in these organizations is defined less as something that happens to individuals and more as the context created for the expression of active political identities.* In other words, practices not only create a container for participation but also lend it a character that allows members to overcome inhibitions to take action. For groups who have been marginalized, excluded, or politely silent, this is a considerable achievement. The practical implication is that nonprofits aiming to support political participation cannot rely on an effortless transference of democratic values into political participation but must support agentic subject positions.



Second, the practices that we elaborate represent the mechanism that links participation in these organizations with political action. We go beyond existing studies by opening the black box of civic participation and by elaborating on the framing and relational practices that facilitate member agency and link it to political engagement. *These practices facilitate political action specifically by shifting power relations.* Our study adds an understanding of how practice can shift power and authority from staff and experts toward members, enabling the latter to exercise these qualities.

The significance of this insight surfaces by examining contexts that de-emphasize power. For example, when professional experts' status and agency takes priority over clients' or customers', they work and make decisions on behalf of members, who need not become conversant in policy or capable of making decisions (Jenkins, 2006). This exemplifies, at its worst, the sector's trend to embrace professionalism, commercialism, and managerialism at the expense of expressive purposes (Frumkin, 2002). The risks are profound. Citizens miss opportunities to develop democratic skills and engage in political action. The sector risks losing its distinctiveness, which may erode its legitimacy and capacity to attract support (Salamon, 2012). Our findings suggest that the sector's distinctiveness can be maintained when nonprofits directly engage members in framing and relational practices—not as an add-on to an already burdened agenda but as a way of working—to ensure continual investment in citizen capacity.

Finally, our findings have the potential to solve certain nonprofit challenges. For example, managing diversity is increasingly important for competitive advantage (Offerman & Matos, 2007), and creating a space for voice develops tolerance for diverse views. Likewise, advocacy is an important strategic activity for mission-driven organizations, even regarding service delivery (Bass, 2009; Frumkin, 2002; Nelson, Brady, & Snibbe, 2007), but not all nonprofits know how to do it or believe that they have sufficient resources. To address these challenges, volunteers and staff may consider the practices we present.

## Conclusion

Despite the advantages of examining organizational practice to understand civic action (Han et al., 2011), limitations of our study point to further research. First, we did not explore the relationship between organizational practices and outcomes or the influence of external pressures on internal organizational dynamics. Clearly, not *only* practices matter. Nonprofits face environmental opportunities and constraints that also determine whether they “produce” active citizens (Morgen, 2002). Second, we do not explicitly compare activist organizations with those implementing different “impulses” such as commercialism or professionalism. Therefore, we cannot generalize our findings across the range of nonprofits. However, by linking our findings with the civic engagement literature, we have contributed to unpacking the connection between practices and civic action across organizational types.

These insights are important given evidence that traditional forms of participation are declining (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005; Macedo et al., 2005). Although some argue these forms are being replaced (van Deth, 2012), it is concerning that inequalities of

participation are increasing, especially among women and minorities (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005). These cases teach us about supporting political action. If participation is declining, we need to know how to enhance it, not just through social bonds but through the construction of active citizenship.

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### **Notes**

1. In theory-based sampling, selection choices are “driven by a conceptual question, not by a concern for ‘representativeness’ . . .” It highlights the *conditions* under which a construct or theory operates not “the generalization of the findings to other settings” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29).
2. Leadership for a Changing World was developed by the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Advocacy Institute and the Research Center for Leadership in Action (The Wagner School/NYU).
3. For protocols, please contact the first author.
4. This technique involves rewriting transcripts to uncover the structure and meaning of participants' stories.
5. Historical work about associations demonstrates how they created opportunities for women and people of color to engage in politics before granted the right to vote (Scott, 1993). The nonprofits in this study seem to follow this tradition given the underrepresentation of women and people of color in mainstream American politics (Skocpol, 2003).
6. See Bryant (2003) for a history of environmental justice.

7. For literature assessing the role of experts in policy making and its constraints on citizen participation see, from policy sciences, Fischer (2000); from science/technology studies, Jasonoff (2005).

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### Author Biographies

**Jennifer Dodge** is assistant professor of public administration and policy at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany–SUNY. She is also the book reviews editor of *Critical Policy Studies* and a fellow at the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at New York University. Her research interests include the role of nonprofit organizations in public deliberation and democratic governance, public and social change leadership, environmental politics, and qualitative methods.

**Sonia M. Ospina** is professor of public management and policy in the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. She is also cofounder and faculty codirector of the Wagner affiliated RCLA. She applies organization and management theories to public problem solving and governance in the United States and in Latin America in three areas of scholarship: leadership and social transformation, change in public management systems, and the craft of qualitative research.