Critical Dialogue

The Advantage of Disadvantage: Costly Protest and Political Representation for Marginalized Groups. By LaGina Gause. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 275p. $99.99 cloth, $34.99 paper.
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— Hahrie Han, *Johns Hopkins University*
hahrie@jhu.edu

The first and last chapters of LaGina Gause's new book, *The Advantage of Disadvantage*, open with historical anecdotes that hearken back to the American Revolution, reminding us that protest has always been core to the project that is American democracy. The first chapter opens with an account of the Boston Tea Party, while the last chapter describes a lesser-known skirmish in which angry American colonists confront British soldiers seeking to enforce British tax laws. Both incidents represent forms of protest, but while the first was carried out with the support of the wealthy, white Sons of Liberty, the second was, as John Adams described it, "a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes, and mulattoes, Irish teagues, and outlandish jack tars," including Crispus Attucks (quoted at p. 170). Adams, who resoundingly supported the Boston Tea Party, denounced Attucks and his compatriots and acted as legal defense for those who shot them.

These two historical stories capture the core question and insights in Gause's excellent book. Who, or which groups, she asks, benefit legislatively from engaging in collective efforts like protest? Unlike other research in this area, Gause's book takes seriously the differentials in the lived experience of people who engage in protest. The racial and economic backgrounds of the protestors made a difference in the historical incidents described here, a pattern that remains unchanged in contemporary America. How is it, then, that protest works when those who need to protest often need it precisely because they are structurally marginalized in the status quo? When people who are structurally disadvantaged in politics protest, does it correct those imbalances, and if so, why? Gause's book seeks to explain the ways in which the differential resources of protestors affect the ways their actions are perceived, heard, and addressed by legislators.

In an era of mostly dismal news about politics, *The Advantage of Disadvantage* offers a buoyant antidote—legislators are actually *more* responsive to less-resourced groups, she argues. How could that be? The book begins with a careful theoretical description of her counterintuitive argument, drawing on a formal model that explicates a theory of costly protest and legislator behavior. Gause's theory begins with the assumption that legislators want to be re-elected. In a complex world in which myriad groups and problems are seeking legislators' attention and support, they are constantly trying to separate signal from noise to adjudicate which bids for attention could have implications for re-election, and which ones would not. Protest by high-resource groups, she argues, send ambiguous signals because legislators know that protest is not as costly for these groups. Simply put, everyone knows that it is easier for wealthy white people with more free time, easier access to information, and more resources to participate in public life. When those people get involved, it is not clear to legislators how salient the problem actually is. Groups who engage in protest despite it being costly to them, Gause argues, send a much stronger signal about the importance of the issue to them. When Black and Latino communities, poor communities, or intersectionally marginalized communities put in the effort to get involved, they only do it because they are really upset. Gause's model describes the way the strength and clarity of that signal prompts legislators to respond when they recognize the costliness of the actions involved.

The Advantage of Disadvantage then walks through a series of careful empirical chapters that substantiate this argument. The first main empirical chapter shares the results of an original survey of elected officials and their staffs to verify some basic facts that have to be true for Gause's theory to hold: are elected officials actually aware of protest events? Does it matter to them—is it a source of information—as they make decisions about legislation? Do they think strategically about how their decisions in response to collective action will affect their reelection? Are elected officials aware of the differential resource burdens of different types of people? How do they perceive the costs of protest for poor people versus wealthy people, and Black and Latino communities relative to others? Although the survey does not have a large n (a limitation Gause freely acknowledges), it largely verifies that the strategic calculus of elected officials generally matches the patterns she is describing.

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The next three empirical chapters systemically examine the relationship between protest and roll call votes to test the theory. She draws on data from 1991–1995 in the *Dynamics of Collective Action* (DCA) dataset, which captures protest events reported in the *New York Times* and is a widely-regarded and widely-used dataset in the study of collective action. These chapters provide multivariate analyses of the effects of protest events in the DCA on roll-call voting behavior, showing that legislators do, in fact, pay attention to protest, and that they are particularly sensitive to protest amongst low-resource groups. Her analyses compare these effects to other factors that could shape the relationship between protest and legislative behavior, including both protest characteristics (such as the size, tactics, and media coverage of the protest) and legislator characteristics (such as the legislator's own demographic background, partisanship, and electoral security). Although there are some extenuating conditions that are important to understand, the basic thrust of the argument consistently holds.

The final empirical chapter then broadens the scope to look beyond the DCA dataset into digitally enabled protest in 2012. Gause uses the same methods as DCA to identify and code 2012 protest events and builds an original dataset that enables her to examine the differential effects of digital technology on costly protest. This chapter then queries whether the digital technologies of the twenty-first century mitigated the resource disparities that exist for protestors. She finds that while digital technologies make protest itself easier—by allowing for quicker and easier information dissemination and so on—they do not ameliorate the basic resource divide that separates racially and economically marginalized communities from others. It is still costly for poor Black and Latino communities to engage in collective action, and legislators still recognize costly protest as a stronger signal in the digital age.

Putting all the pieces together, *The Advantage of Disadvantage* provides a counterintuitive, compelling, and hopeful account of the way in which protest and collective action can ameliorate some of the basic inequities that plague American politics. Martin Luther King famously said that "a riot is the language of the unheard," but until *The Advantage of Disadvantage,* we have not yet had a systematic analysis of why those who have ignored the unheard suddenly hear them through protest. Gause's blend of sophisticated formal modeling and meticulous empirical analysis offers not only a cogent account of the relationship of costly protest and legislative behavior, it also provides an explanation for why the patterns she finds exist. She also illuminates questions that scholars of collective action and social movements would be smart to heed—for instance, she highlights the importance of risk, and the extent to which the risk that protestors undertake conditions the probability they will get a positive response from legislators. But what do those of us who study collective action know about risk, and the conditions under which poor communities of color are willing and able to take on the material, social, and emotional risks that protest and collective action often entail? As such, the book makes important contributions not only to the study of protest and collective action but also to the study of representation.

As with any good, thought-provoking book, however, some questions do remain at the end. For instance, in 2022, it is impossible not to wonder how conditional the findings are on the time periods that were studied. The 2017 women's march after the inauguration of Donald Trump and the outpouring of protest after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 were two high-profile instances of people of diverse backgrounds taking on costly protest actions without necessarily seeing the kind of results they might have hoped. Another way to ask the same question might be to ask how the value of any one signal might change as it becomes more widespread. Given increases in protest activity in recent years, should we expect an increase or decrease in responsiveness? Relatedly, by focusing on the signaling effect of protests Gause's book blackboxes the strategic agency of protest leaders themselves. In my own work, like the co-authored book under review here, I think about the relationship of collective action and representation from the perspective of those engaging in collective action—namely, what, if anything, can they be doing to make it more likely that the political system will heed their concerns? Gause's book tackles this question from the other side—how can we unpack the strategic calculus legislators use to make decisions about representation, and how can we understand why they might care? But what does her answer tell us about what protestors and leaders can do to navigate the political hurdles they face? Is their only role to try to maximize the costliness of protest to strengthen the signal they send, or is there a role for strategic leadership and negotiation in translating the resources of the protest (risk, costly action, etc.) into legislative action? These questions are, in the end, the sign of a bold book that invites its readers to think deeply. As such, it is sure to become a widely read and much discussed text for anyone who studies protest, collective action, or legislative representation.

Response to Hahrie Han's Review of *The Advantage of Disadvantage: Costly Protest and Political Representation for Marginalized Groups*

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— LaGina Gause

Hahrie Han's detailed and careful review of my book, *The Advantage of Disadvantage*, raises several thought-provoking questions about when substantial policy change might occur and how to generate costly protest. I continue

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to contemplate these questions, but I will offer some insights.

First, Han expresses some dismay about elected officials' (lack of) responsiveness to the 2017 Women's March and 2020 Floyd protests. She asks *how the value of any one [costly protest] signal might change as [protest] becomes more widespread* than in my book's empirical analyses, as it has done more recently. Indeed, more frequent protest suggests lower protest costs, perhaps due to shifts in the political environment or increases in issue salience. Nevertheless, even in an age of widespread protests, elected officials remain responsive to costly protest demands due to fears of potential electoral threats from constituents willing to participate until their salient grievances are met. On this point, my book's concluding chapter discusses how integral persistent participation is for substantive policy change.

The concluding chapter discusses how many Ferguson protesters were upset with Representative William Lacy Clay, Jr., who represented the congressional district in which Ferguson protests ignited. They felt that Clay delivered only symbolic and insubstantial responses to the costly protest in his district, so they decided to hold him accountable electorally for his (lack of) responsiveness. Their first attempt in 2016 failed. But they persisted. In 2020, voters elected Ferguson activist Cory Bush to replace Clay as their U.S. House Representative. Holding Clay accountable and receiving substantive representation took longer than anticipated, but their sustained organizing and mobilizing resulted in the election of someone who shared and championed Ferguson protesters' salient concerns.

Next, Han asks what the implications of *The Advantage of Disadvantage* are for protest leaders. Specifically, she asks: Is their only role to try to maximize the costliness of protest to strengthen the signal they send, or is there a role for strategic leadership and negotiation in translating the resources of the protest (risk, costly action, etc.) into legislative action? Certainly, a protest leader could read my book and infer that maximizing the costliness of protest is the best way to gain legislative responsiveness. However, this would miss a critical, though perhaps implicit, argument of the book.

Legislative responsiveness occurs following costly protest by low-resource groups because low-resource groups' costly protest demonstrates a group's ability to overcome collective action problems that inhibit protest mobilization and electoral threats when issue salience is low. Manufacturing costly protest to misrepresent issue salience may be productive in the short term. However, as Han's co-authored book, *Prisms of the People,* stresses, one of the most effective ways to hold an elected official accountable to a group is for that group to be organized such that it can re-mobilize when grievances are ignored. Manufacturing costly protest is less likely to communicate a credible electoral threat.

Given the scholarship of Han and others, which compellingly focus on the *how* of collective action, I was inspired to focus more on *when* collective action might yield at least marginal policy outcomes for groups consistently marginalized in U.S. politics. Costly protest is not always successful in producing substantive policy change. But *The Advantage of Disadvantage* contends that groups with salient interests who engage in costly protest and can hold legislators accountable electorally can receive support for their protest demands.

Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First Century America. By Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 216p. $95.00 cloth, $27.50 paper.
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— LaGina Gause, *University of California San Diego*
lgause@ucsd.edu

Many organizations engage in collective action to represent the interests of their constituents. Almost all face moments when the political environment shifts unexpectedly or drastically and they are left with the question, "What do we do now?" *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First Century America* contends that organizations faced with this question must develop a strategic logic to organizing that emphasizes building constituents within an organization who are independent, flexible, and committed to each other. This book is essential for scholars and activists interested in understanding how organizations achieve political power.

At the crux of *Prisms of the People* is the metaphor about how the design of the prism is integral for shaping the kind of light that is refracted outside of the prism (p. 3). Extending this metaphor, Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa argue that the ability of organizations to navigate complex, constantly changing political moments depends on leaders having developed constituents that they can strategically deploy again and again. While organizations cannot predict or control the political environment, they can intentionally cultivate and engage their members. *Prisms of the People* contends that organizations need constituents who are independent (not dependent on external resources), committed (aligned with the goals of the organization), and flexible (willing to follow the leadership's choices). Leaders who make deliberate choices that build such constituents can reflect light and power far greater than their membership numbers suggest.

Prisms of the People is necessarily ambiguous about how to execute the strategic logic for achieving political power. The time, space, and conflicts that organizations operate in are unique. So are the issues that need representation and the political environment in which organizations compete

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for representation. Nevertheless, the focus on building prisms of people power provides a greater understanding of how to successfully navigate political moments than traditional scholarship on social movement organization emphasizing resource aggregation.

Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa suggest that one of the most significant contributions of *Prisms of the People* is in moving beyond resource aggregation models that focus on amassing people's money, time, or efforts toward political campaigns. To illustrate this contribution, they describe a 2016 municipal ballot initiative for universal education in Cincinnati, Ohio. Despite gathering the 5,000 signatures necessary to support funding universal preschool, the city council decided not to move forward with the initiative. Faced with the question, "what now?" AMOS, a faith-based organization advocating for racial, social, and economic justice, turned to its strong constituency base. The movement's leaders were able to call on their independent, flexible, and committed constituency to pressure elected officials to adopt the measure. If AMOS had focused primarily on amassing signatures—traditionally a sign of successful resource mobilization – it would have had a much more difficult time re-engaging people in collective action efforts vital for securing the ballot initiative in 2016.

While AMOS contributed to a monumental policy win for universal preschool in Cincinnati, a policy win is not the primary measure of political power in *Prisms of the People.* The authors argue that political power is more than just passing policy. Political power is the "extent to which movement actors changed the cost calculations of their targets" (p. 74). It is having influence over how policies develop and a voice in the narratives surrounding those policies. Consequently, successfully achieving people power looks different depending on the specific context in which organizations are competing.

So, how do we measure an organization's success? The case selection for *Prisms of the People* is perhaps the first measure of successfully achieving political power. The authors interviewed dozens of national, statewide, local, digital, and labor organization leaders; academics; funders; and people who supported collective action organizations. They asked these leaders to identify successful state-level collective action campaigns. The fact that leaders with deep knowledge of organizing communities and collective action campaigns identified a set of actors as successful is, in itself, evidence of successful political power. Organizations perceived as successful have political power because people think they are successful and should therefore be at the table shaping policy changes.

Prisms of the People also looked elsewhere for evidence of successful political power. For some organizations, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa rely on network surveys that uncover shifts in power relationships. For another, they examine the quality and quantity of immigration legislation before and after a critical shift in organizing efforts in Arizona. And for a final organization, the authors compared the relationship between candidates' tweets and the platform of ISAIAH, a faith-based community organization in Minnesota. Each measure of success specifically and effectively captures the outcomes of each organization's collective action efforts. Indeed, as ambiguous as *Prisms of the People* is about how to execute the strategic logic at the center of achieving political power, it is equally and necessarily vague about what it means for an organization to be successful in a dynamic, context-specific political environment.

One might ask whether the strategic logic in *Prisms of the People* leads to policy influence. But there is no clear-cut formula to guarantee success. In their case study of six successful collective action organizations, the authors admit that they initially looked for patterns or a recipe for power that would guarantee success. They found none (p. 99). Instead, the findings revealed a strategic logic focusing less on amassing people for a collective effort and more on how to cultivate a constituency willing to show up again and again for collective action.

The inability to find a formula for success is not surprising and not a weakness of *Prisms of the People.* As the authors note, many collective action organizations operate amidst widespread structural disadvantages and for issues that would substantially challenge the status quo. Thus, policy wins, let alone political influence are rare and difficult to detect. Yet their goal is to identify plausible, not probable, pathways for change. *Prisms of the People* triumphs in this effort. With their methodological rigor, illustrative case studies, and commitment to letting the data speak for itself, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa demonstrate that cultivating an independent, flexible, and committed constituency is a productive strategic logic toward political influence. Nevertheless, two questions critical for understanding and adapting this strategic logic remain.

First, who are the leaders responsible for executing this strategic logic, and how do they develop? Leaders are central to the argument of *Prisms of the People.* They make decisions about how to engage constituents. And their actions determine how accountable constituents are to each other and the organization and how accountable the organization is to constituents. The authors contend that leaders must be reflective, flexible, and have the judgment to adapt their strategies when necessary (pp. 121-122). But where do those leaders come from? And how do they develop the skills needed to execute the strategic logic at the center of *Prisms of the People*?

Perhaps the organizing campaigns described in *Prisms of the People* provide some insight. For example, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa illustrate how the passage of Senate Bill 1070 in Arizona led to a 104-day leadership training vigil that produced wide networks of leaders and

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organizations committed to influencing immigration policy in Arizona.

However, this type of leadership building leads to a second question, which concerns the relationship between leaders and constituents. Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa challenge the perspective that successful movement outcomes are based on the strength of charismatic leaders with ideologues as followers (pp. 159-160). But if constituents are more than followers, then what is their role, if any, in contributing to this strategic logic? It is unclear whether and how much constituents contribute to developing and executing the strategic logic at the center of *Prisms of the People*.

Neither of these questions takes away from the accomplishments of the authors. In moving beyond policy wins as the dominant measure of political power, *Prisms of the People* exposes the true political power of groups that influence policies and narratives. Moreover, in challenging the dominant organizing perspectives that focus on aggregating resources (e.g., money, volunteers, petition signatures) as necessary conditions for successful collective action efforts, *Prisms of the People* helps scholars and advocates understand how organizations can answer the question "what do we do now?" when they observe a drastic shift in the political environment.

Response to LaGina Gause's Review of *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First Century America*

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— Hahrie Han

Let me begin by thanking LaGina Gause for her generous, insightful review and thoughtful queries about our book. It is a privilege to have our work be in conversation with hers. Gause rightfully asks two questions that our book does not address. First, we emphasize strategic leadership as being a necessary part of the "prism" that makes it possible for constituency-based organizations to translate the actions of their base into political power. Yet, as Gause fairly points out, we do not talk much about where those leaders come from, and how they learn to be strategic actors. Second, she asks what role constituents play in shaping the strategic choices that are made in these organizations.

The answer to those questions is intertwined. The constituents in our case studies were indeed acting as strategic agents, but strategizing on a smaller scale than the titular leaders of the organizations. Instead of developing strategy about whether or not to pursue a statewide ballot initiative in Arizona, for instance, the constituents might be strategizing about how to organize around one family's deportation in their community, or how to organize people in their own neighborhood to turn out for an action. By learning to develop strategy at a smaller scale, constituents not only developed their own motivations and capacities, they also entered (perhaps unwittingly) into a potential pipeline of leadership. Leaders, thus, often came from within these constituencies, having had the experience of learning to strategize in localized ways and progressively expanding the scope of the political landscape they were strategizing about.

These organizations were thus distinct from traditional non-profit organizations in key ways that prompted us to create the metaphor of the "prism." Unlike a non-profit organization in which leaders are to members as producers are to consumers, in the "prism" everyone was a producer, so to speak (hence the metaphor of a prism, which transforms white light into vectors of color, these organizations transformed constituents into agentic political actors). Leaders were not the only ones producing strategy or developing ideas, and constituents were doing more than merely consuming the menu of opportunities that leaders created. Relatedly, while a traditional non-profit organization might have a strategic plan with key performance indicators that was created by organizational leadership and executed by professional staff, these organizations had a more dynamic approach to strategy. They encouraged people at all levels of formal and informal affiliation with the organization to strategize, to constantly think about how they could harness the resources at their disposal to achieve their ends. Strategy—and the development of leaders—was thus multi-layered and constantly in formation.

Gause's book powerfully unpacks the strategic considerations legislators take into account when responding to protest and collective action. Our book highlights the strategic calculations constituency-based organizations need to make to generate such collective action. In that way, the books are two sides of one coin that put strategy and strategic choice at the center.

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