

Case Study

Shifting Power by Sharing Power: A Case Study of Relational Organizing in Saint Paul, MN

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Overview

In the fall of 2019, **ISAIAH**, a multi-faith, multi-racial organization in Minnesota, set out to raise turnout in a municipal election. They ended up in a proxy fight over trash collection and a bid to shift the configuration of political power in the city of Saint Paul. This case study draws on quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate how base-building organizations like ISAIAH can use relational organizing to politicize an electorate (even in low-salience elections and on hyperlocal issues like garbage hauling).

The P3 Lab, in research supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, conducted this analysis

as part of a Civic Engagement and Social Homes project that examines the ways in which organizations utilize transformational organizing in order to create deep systems of collective internal identity, accountability, and decision-making — and then leverage those social home structures to achieve power outcomes. In this case, we describe how ISAIAH developed and deployed tiers of deeply engaged volunteer leaders to reach voters at scale, and also utilized elections as strategic levers to enter into co-governance relationships with politicians and policymakers.

Keywords

Co-governance, relational organizing, mobilizing, elections, independent power organization



INTRODUCTION

At dawn on August 5, 2017, a firebomb crashed through the window of the Dar al-Farooq mosque in Bloomington, Minnesota. Worshippers had just gathered for their morning prayers, but miraculously nobody was injured in the blast. A subsequent FBI investigation found that an Illinois-based domestic terrorist group known as the White Rabbits had planned and executed the bombing. At his trial two years later, one of the perpetrators confessed that he wanted to “scare [Muslims] out of the country” by telling them “you’re not welcome here!”

The Dar al-Farooq bombing was one in a surge of similar hate crimes that followed Donald Trump’s election in 2016.² The mosque’s leadership faced a dilemma about how to respond to it. Imam Mohamed Omar remembered:

“*We were attacked, and we didn’t know what happened. That morning, I felt very strange. I felt like, ‘Who do you call when you have a problem?’ ... And then I sat down on my couch [in the bombed-out office] and I was very confused ... I was feeling powerless. I was feeling like, I am not connected with any political — I didn’t know politics is power. I didn’t know that. As a human, as an adult person, as an educated person, I could tell politics is power, but I felt it’s owned by someone, that power is entitled to someone, nobody can take it away from them. And as a white man, and he’s there, and he owns it, as long as he doesn’t kill me, I’m good. That’s where we’re coming from. He gives us what he has, thank you to him.*”³

Both Mohamed and the mosque’s director of programs and services, Abdulahi Farah, said that their closest confidants wanted them to “just be quiet” after the bombing. “My circle, [my] team, they told me, ‘Don’t talk to media. Don’t say anything. Just be quiet,’” Mohamed said. He remembered that people in his inner circle described the bombing in the passive voice: “[They said] ‘something exploded in this room.’ They didn’t even say ‘somebody threw something.’ When somebody says, ‘something exploded in this room,’ that means it was [already] inside,” he remembered.

Abdulahi similarly recalled that “we wanted to liberate ourselves from the Islamophobia that was happening” but that they lacked a vehicle through which to do so. “We didn’t have a power organization in our community,” Abdulahi said. He explained:

1 January 25, 2019, “Minnesota Mosque Attack: ‘White Rabbits’ Militiamen Plead Guilty,” *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46999849>

2 Griffin Edwards and Stephen Rushin, 2018, “The Effect of President Trump’s Election on Hate Crimes,” *SSRN*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3102652&download=yes

3 Interview with Imam Mohamed Omar on May 2, 2018, conducted by Michelle Oyakawa as part of research for Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa. 2020. *Prisms of the People: Power and Organizing in the 21st Century*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

“Most of our organizations [in the Somali Muslim community in Minnesota], whether they are nonprofit or advocate organizations, are just doing social service. They just did mobilizing [and advocacy] And we're like, if we wanted to change, I mean, have permanent change or really influence our politics in our state ... [we need] a power organization.”⁴

ISAIAH: A Social and Political Home

Twenty minutes by car from Dar al-Farooq is a nondescript brick building on one of the main thoroughfares in Saint Paul. It is the headquarters of ISAIAH, a statewide social movement organization founded in 1999 to promote racial and economic equity and the political empowerment of poor, working-class, and racial minority groups in Minnesota. Today ISAIAH employs 27 staff, 12 of whom are full-time organizers, has an eight-member governing board, and operates on an annual budget of approximately \$3 million.⁵ It is a longtime and active member of the national network Faith in Action (formerly PICO) and statewide alliances like Minnesotans for a Fair Economy (MFE), through which they partner with ally organizations Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha (CTUL), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), TakeAction Minnesota, and others to run campaigns that promote political and economic justice across the state.⁶

By sheer number of affiliates, ISAIAH is one of the largest faith-based community organizing coalitions in the United States.⁷ It also stands out for the diversity in types of institutions and constituencies it organizes, as well as its increasingly non-urban reach. As of 2019, ISAIAH's formal affiliates included 126 faith institutions (104 churches and 22 mosques and Islamic centers), a network of leaders and clergy from a broader pool of 280 faith institutions, 55 sanctuary and sanctuary-supporting institutions across the state, 14 barbershops and beauty salons, priests from 21 Catholic churches, and 51 childcare centers. The organization's internal database includes records for more than 12,000 volunteer members and supporters across Minnesota.

ISAIAH's past and present campaigns span a variety of issues. In addition to being at the forefront of the campaign to defeat a 2012 ballot initiative that would have restricted voting rights in the state, ISAIAH played a leading role in passing paid sick leave in Saint Paul and Minneapolis in 2016 and the Homeowners Bill of Rights in 2013. Some of ISAIAH's current organizing programs seek to end the school-to-prison pipeline for Black and brown children, secure paid family leave and paid sick leave, and affordable childcare for working families, and ensure that immigrant families are treated with dignity.

4 Interview with Abdulahi Farah on May 1, 2018, conducted by Michelle Oyakawa as part of research for Han et al. (2020).

5 ISAIAH [GuideStar](#) tax filing, 2017. Most annual revenue comes from grants and program income, but an increasing amount comes from individual membership dues and 52 dues-paying churches and mosques.

6 One of MFE's most significant wins to date was the defeat of a proposed Voter Restriction Amendment to the state constitution — a major victory after polls showed that 80 percent of Minnesotans initially supported the GOP-led initiative to require photo IDs at the polls. For more on this campaign, see the Movement Strategy Center and the Engage Network's [Case Study on Minnesotans for a Fair Economy](#) (2013).

7 Jack Delehanty and Michelle Oyakawa (2018), "Building a Collective Moral Imaginary: Personalist Culture and Social Performance in Faith-Based Community Organizing." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, Vol 6(2): 266–295, pp. 272.

An evolving organizational structure and strategy

ISALAH was not always so demographically, geographically, and programmatically diverse. In the first decade of its existence, staff and volunteer leaders organized primarily in white and Christian churches in and around the Twin Cities. Over time and with changing leadership, however, the organization's base-building strategy changed. ISALAH grew to include more multiracial (especially Latino) Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, and evangelical churches, and their Barbershops and Black Congregational Cooperative expanded. Executive director Doran Schrantz likens these and other changes to an old house undergoing constant renovation:

“*ISALAH really is increasingly centers of power. It's decentralized, not in the way that [some people] talk about decentralization or whatever that conversation is. When I say 'decentralized,' ... what I mean is there are hubs or rooms ... The way I use it with the leaders when I'm talking to them, I'm like, 'You know what this is like? This is like a house that was built in 1919, and there were some rooms, and our family gets bigger and bigger and bigger, but it's different parts of the family so they need their own rooms. And so we just build on to the house.'*

She went on:

“*It's a ramshackle, sprawling thing, but everybody's got their own room, and we share the plumbing, we share the electricity, we maybe share a kitchen, but you build your own room, you decorate it, you run it, and then we have common spaces where we come together and go like, 'What are we going to do? How are we going to move X, Y, or Z forward? Or learn together about something, you know?' So it really is increasingly like these hubs, and those hubs have their own power in the context of the organization, and then a lot of the organizational challenge becomes, how does that [all] get aligned into a common strategy that then meets everybody's interests?⁸*

The addition of a Muslim coalition to ISALAH's metaphorical “ramshackle, sprawling” house began in earnest after Trump's election in 2016 and under Mohamed and Abdulahi's leadership. After the Bloomington bombing, former ISALAH organizer and current SEIU leader Greg Nammacher invited Mohamed and Abdulahi to attend ISALAH's annual weeklong training in October 2017. Both described having transformative experiences. Abdulahi remembers:

“*When we came back from [ISALAH's] weeklong [training], we were just like, 'Oh my God, I'm awake.' So, we come back to friends and we're like, 'Oh my God, this training we've been to is nothing like any other training.' We don't even want to call it training ... When Weeklong happened and we came back, we started organizing at different mosques and just kind of doing all of the things we talked about at Weeklong.*

As ISALAH's volunteer leadership and base expanded, its political strategy grew more sophisticated. In 2017, ISALAH made another structural renovation to the house, building out a 501(c)(4) sister organization known as Faith in Minnesota (FiMN), which provides the legal and organizational infrastructure they need to engage in campaigns and programs that are explicitly partisan.

⁸ Interview on October 9, 2019.

Note: For the purposes of this case, we refer to the work of ISAI AH — a 501(c)(3) organization — throughout the report. However, much of the work described is 501(c)(4) work that was conducted through FiMN. The organizers and staff engaged in the work respected these boundaries very carefully, but we have decided to use one umbrella name here — ISAI AH — in order to minimize reader confusion.

The next year, ISAI AH launched a two-year campaign to elect 207 of its members — whom they called faith delegates — to the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) statewide convention, forming the largest delegate voting bloc in the contest to decide Minnesota’s 2018 Democratic gubernatorial candidate. “We became kingmaker” at the party nominating convention, remembered Imam Asad Zaman, one of the FiMN Muslim coalition faith delegates.⁹

ISAI AH’s 2018 faith delegate campaign was significant for several other reasons. First, it was ISAI AH’s first foray into wielding power within the formal structure of a political party. Second, it served as what Asad described as “a window of opportunity” to get “Muslims engaged in the political process” in ways they never had before. ISAI AH was the “power organization” that Abdulahi said the Muslim community lacked when they found themselves at a loss in terms of how to respond to the bombing of their mosque.¹⁰ Third, it helped ISAI AH’s staff and volunteer leaders gain further clarity that their longer-term goal was to help shape political agendas and narratives in Minnesota beyond one-off issue campaigns and political party conventions.¹¹ As ISAI AH mapped out its political strategy for 2019 and 2020, its leaders were convinced that they needed to continue to contest power in the electoral realm as a means to enter into what they describe as “co-creative” or “co-governance” relationships with politicians and other decision-makers.

Data and Methods

We conducted an in-depth, multi-method study of ISAI AH’s fall 2019 Saint Paul program. This case study was designed as ISAI AH was in the midst of a strategic planning process. As part of a research partnership between ISAI AH staff (lead program organizer Laura Johnson, Saint Paul East Metro organizer Vivian Ihekoronye, Muslim coalition organizer Abdulahi Farah, civic engagement and politics director Elliot Altbaum, data director Amity Foster, digital strategist Trevor Cochlin, and political strategist James Hagggar) and the P3 Lab at Johns Hopkins University, we sought to build on the lessons and successes of the organization’s faith delegate campaign by prospectively studying ISAI AH’s relational organizing, leadership development, and voter engagement programs in a different context: that of an odd-year municipal election.

Data consist of all back-end data that ISAI AH staff and volunteers accumulated throughout the campaign, including 16 internal spreadsheets (“trackers”) housed in a shared Google Drive

⁹ Interview with Imam Asad Zaman on May 2, 2018, conducted by Michelle Oyakawa as part of research for Han et al. (2020).

¹⁰ Nearly a third of ISAI AH’s faith delegates and alternates — 58 in total — came from the Muslim community that Mohamed and Abdulahi organized in the few short months between Weeklong and the first delegate caucuses in early 2018. Abdulahi now works on staff at ISAI AH as the Muslim coalition organizer.

¹¹ For more on the faith delegate campaign, see Chapter 4 in Han et al. (2020) and Doran Schrantz et al. (2020), “[Building Political Bases to Make Multiracial Democracy Work](#)” in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

folder, three months' worth of Empower data and digital media content (email, Facebook, Twitter, Hustle). Qualitative data consist of 163 pages of typed field notes based on observations of 24 internal strategy, training, and debrief meetings that took place between August 6, 2019, and January 24, 2020, 341 pages of primary source documents (ISAIAH's written strategy documents, meeting and training agendas, debriefs, news clippings, fliers, canvass and phone bank scripts, campaign finance reports), and nine hour-long interviews, which we transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the qualitative coding software NVivo. Network analysis of Empower data was performed in R using the igraph library and the Kamada-Kawai algorithm for undirected graphs.

Part I: Challenge(s)

ISAIAH's plan for the 2019 election was to run an integrated relational organizing program on three fronts: in the faith communities ISAIAH had organized for years in Saint Paul, among Muslim constituents in the city, and online. ISAIAH staff organizer Vivian Ihekoronye would spend the month of August recruiting faith leaders using outreach tactics like one-on-ones, Hustle (a peer-to-peer SMS messaging platform), and church bulletin inserts. By mid-September, ISAIAH expected these volunteers to have completed their first round of relational outreach with the list of voters they generated at the late August training. As laid out in the original campaign plan, those first conversations would revolve around two questions: "Did you know there is an election in Saint Paul coming up?" and "How excited are you [about it]?"¹²

In parallel, ISAIAH would run two additional relational programs, one with the Muslim coalition (led by staff organizer Abdulahi) and another using what they called "authentic messengers" online. Abdulahi's program would complement but differ from Vivian's predominantly Black and white Christian base program. "Instead of making a list of relational contacts and entering them into Empower [a software to help keep track of volunteer leaders and their friends and family]," said lead program organizer Laura, the Muslim coalition would "build lists of people connected to mosques who we got to fill out vote pledges" during the faith delegate campaign in 2018. Then "we'll do three Friday canvasses in a giant, 40-story apartment building that is about 99 percent Somali to reach four or five-thousand people with 25 canvassers."¹³

The digital strategy, which Trevor, James, and Elliot would help lead from headquarters in Saint Paul in consultation with communications director JaNaé Bates, was premised on ISAIAH staff's assessment that people are more likely to be persuaded to vote by something online if it represents organic content (e.g. a personal selfie video about the election) rather than paid content (e.g. a slickly produced digital ad). These three programs would run simultaneously, and ISAIAH staff would schedule weekly check-ins to update one another on their progress.

'You Mean I Have to Call People?'

On August 22, 2019, Vivian facilitated the first "training for trainers" test run in the basement of Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. The training was scheduled to last from 6 to 9 PM, and seven

¹² Minnesota Relational Messenger Research Memo, August 8, 2019.

¹³ Field notes from internal strategy meeting on August 19, 2019.

people — five white women, one older white man, and one young Hmong woman — showed up. When asked why they came, their answers ranged from a general interest in “increasing voter turnout” to “someone from my church told me to go” to “I care.” Vivian described ISALAH’s “path to power in Saint Paul” as rooted in shared values about multi-racial democracy, a just economy, and a reckoning about the current political movement. The faith leaders nodded along in silent agreement, but the room was warm and participants seemed distracted as they shifted uncomfortably in their colorful plastic chairs.

The second half of the training was designed to teach the volunteer leaders how to build and track their “list of 30” — a list of relational contacts (friends and family) whom they would contact four times in advance of the November election. In a coaching conversation three days prior, Laura, to whom Vivian reports, warned her about this part of the training: “It’s hard for people to come up with 30 names. They’ll need to be agitated.”¹⁴

When Vivian instructed participants to fill out the names, phone numbers, and addresses of their personal contacts on paper sheets, some of the volunteers balked. “I have a question about data security — where does this info go?” one asked. “I think I have to bow out because I don’t know anybody in Saint Paul,” said the older white man in attendance. Vivian engaged him in a conversation about who he knew at his church, which did lie within city limits, who he might include on his list. “Can you think of ten people at Christ Lutheran who do live in Saint Paul? Five people?” she asked. This volunteer left the training at 7:25, and five minutes later, another participant also ducked out with the vague commitment to “take ISALAH’s message back to [her] church and get them involved.”

The remaining volunteers filled in their list of 30 as best they could, after which Vivian made another ask: “Now choose three people on your list to call right now.” Participants grew even more antsy. “I don’t call people, I text them,” said one. Vivian responded by modeling a phone conversation, after which volunteers reluctantly retreated to different parts of the room to call three of the names they had put on their list. Most followed the guidelines in the sample script that Vivian provided but maintained a casual tone. ISALAH data director Amity Foster, who was observing and taking notes at the training, wrote: “This was the first training, so it was a little rough. But Vivian did an excellent job of getting the leaders who stayed engaged.” Amity described participants’ reluctance to make relational lists and start doing outreach as “standard organizing tension — [as in] ‘you mean I have to call people?’”¹⁵

So far, the program was proceeding according to plan. Vivian had recruited 54 other leaders for a second training to be held two days later. In her debrief of the trial run, some of the modifications she thought she would make for Saturday concerned the minutiae of how to better train volunteers to use the Empower app, confronting the data privacy question, and what strategies she and her trusted “super leaders” could use to reach the program goal of 225 volunteers who would each, in turn, build their list of 30 relational contacts.

¹⁴ Field note from August 19, 2019.

¹⁵ Field notes from August 22, 2019.

Unbeknownst to Vivian, however, on the night of this first training, the Minnesota Supreme Court handed down an expedited decision that would force ISALAH to make several unanticipated choices about how to proceed with their carefully crafted voter program.

A Fight Brews Over Private or Public Solutions

The state Supreme Court ruling concerned a hyperlocal fight about trash collection. The dispute had been brewing since 2016, when the city first began talks with haulers about switching from a private system to a municipal trash collection program. For decades, Saint Paulites individually negotiated their waste management contracts, meaning that residents selected from and bargained with a patchwork of about 15 vendors. In this private enterprise arrangement, neighbors could hire different haulers, which meant that garbage trucks from different companies would crowd the same streets on the same day, or that trucks would rumble through a neighborhood on multiple days in a given week. In some cases, Saint Paul residents would forego hiring a hauler altogether and instead barter with neighbors for use of their bins.

Then, on November 8, 2017 — one day after Melvin Carter was elected in a landslide victory as the first Black mayor of Saint Paul — the incumbent city council voted to end the city’s long-standing practice of private trash collection in favor of a publicly managed consortium. The coordinated program, which went into effect in October 2018 on a five-year contract, issued city-owned carts to 70,000 residents in Saint Paul and sought to streamline the service by allocating one hauler per block.

A noisy and well-organized opposition formed in response. “It’s the first time in the capital city’s 177-year history that residents are required to hire someone [a city-designated hauler] to cart away their trash,” wrote James Walsh, who became Saint Paul’s trash beat reporter for the *Star Tribune*, Minnesota’s largest newspaper. Under the old system, residents like Sheldon Moe were happy with the arrangements they made with their neighbors. Sheldon would mow a nearby business’ lawn in exchange for use of their dumpster. “It was a pretty good deal,” he said. “Now? This is the first time in years I have to pay for something. I don’t like it.”¹⁶

Two grassroots groups — whose most prominent instantiations were their public Facebook pages and extensive email lists — formed to mobilize disgruntled residents like Sheldon, as well as landlords upset by new rules that required them to provide bins for each of their rental units, and self-proclaimed “zero-wasters” who resented the city mandate that they be required to pay for trash bins at all. The latter banded together around the name Saint Paul CARTless (which stands for Community Action to Reduce Trash) and the former two groups joined other free enterprise proponents and small private haulers in a pop-up issue-based group that became known as St. Paul Trash. In one representative social media post from CARTLess, a user wrote:

“*For the last 20 years, I have taken care of my own trash. I accumulate one 35-gallon bag a month that I take to Twin City Refuse. The cost is \$8.00. I refuse to pay three times that amount to have my trash removed. A referendum is needed to stop this unfair, mandatory, and costly program. The more control by the city and state government infringes on our rights.*”¹⁷

¹⁶ James Walsh, “Zero Wasters, Bin Sharers, Self-Haulers Part of St. Paul Trash Uprising,” *Star Tribune*, October 21, 2018.

¹⁷ Saint Paul CARTLess [Facebook post](#), August 26, 2018.

St. Paul Trash activists invoked similar tropes about government infringement. They began by raising \$15,000 to pay for a lawsuit to sue the city council for violating the municipal charter and demanded that the city-coordinated system be put to a vote. Just two weeks after the new program went into effect, this strange bedfellow coalition of activists collected more than 6,400 signatures, exceeding the threshold needed to put a referendum on the ballot in the following year's election. Even though the trash negotiations preceded his tenure, Mayor Carter and the city council mounted a legal defense in response. After several back-and-forth decisions in the lower courts, the Supreme Court ruling held that the trash question had to be included in the November election. Mayor Carter and the city council were given 24 hours to finalize the ballot language.

The Supreme Court decision was “a victory for democracy,” said small business owner, attorney, and St. Paul Trash petition initiator Patricia Hartmann, who was herself in the midst of running for a city council seat. Hers was a single-issue campaign: She wanted to challenge an incumbent councilmember in the Third Ward who had voted in favor of the new hauling system.¹⁸ Buoyed by the court ruling, St. Paul Trash formed a PAC and began soliciting donations in the form of cash, donations from lawn signs, fundraisers, and monies from T-shirts to “help build our fall war chest,” they wrote on their website and social media platforms.¹⁹

The Strategic Pivot to Trash

When ISAIHA staff learned that the referendum would be added to the fall ballot, they had one day to decide how they would respond. Laura, one of ISAIHA's most seasoned senior organizers, saw the trash issue as an opportunity to make a strategic pivot. “Mayor Carter, when he ran two years ago, was the target of racist ads by the police force,” she said at an ISAIHA strategy meeting in her characteristically rapid-fire speech. “It backfired, and he won by bigger margins than expected. But if we lose this trash fight, then several terrible things happen,” she said, making the stakes explicit:

“*First, the city would be left with the \$27 million bill for the trash contract, and the only options will be to raise taxes or cut the services we care about. Second, if people vote ‘no’ [on the city program], it’s like Brexit, there’s no runway. So a very real scenario is that there is garbage in the streets, a \$27 million deficit, and Saint Paul solidifies its reputation for being a sleepy town not ready for change. Meanwhile, Minneapolis is the city that can do big, bold, progressive things. The story would be: the first time Saint Paul does something forward-looking, a collective solution, we get egg on our face. And third, it will be used to attack Carter, our first Black mayor.*”

She finished with a phrase that ISAIHA leaders and volunteers would repeat throughout the campaign: “Elections are vehicles for us to create the conditions to co-govern on our agenda.” Reflecting on this moment in the campaign months later, Vivian said, “To be totally transparent, I was not that excited about trash at first — [I was thinking], the house is burning and we’re trying

¹⁸ Kirsti Marohn, August 22, 2019. “MN Supreme Court: Saint Paul Voters Can Decide Trash Question.” MPR News. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2019/08/22/mn-supreme-court-rules-st-paul-voters-can-decide-trash-question>

¹⁹ St. Paul Trash [FAQ](#), Accessed September 5, 2019.

to put some spackle on the wall?”²⁰ But Laura and Vivian proceeded to quickly reformulate the training agenda for the next day.

All of the volunteer leaders who planned to come to Saturday training had been recruited to the meeting on a different premise: that of boosting participation in a historically low-turnout election cycle.

‘These Are Political Fights’

“The gang’s all here!” Laura exclaimed, opening the four-hour weekend training for the nearly 50 ISALAH leaders gathered in the same church basement where Vivian had led the first training two days prior. “This is an inside-the-cone [of silence] strategy conversation,” Laura said mysteriously. “It’s about how we are going to enter into a co-governing relationship with the city council and the mayor.”

“Woohoo!” cheered the ISALAH volunteers in attendance.

“... and the way we’re going to do that has to do with ... trash!”

Everyone laughed, not sure whether or not Laura was being serious. “We have to recognize that there is a terrain on which we fight for our politics,” she continued, holding the room’s attention. “Tell me about what you have been hearing about garbage hauling in Saint Paul,” she prompted the volunteers. One elderly white woman in attendance said that it was “a distraction from the big issues we care about” and an older white man noted that the referendum represented “an old-fashioned decision about collective versus individualism.” But others in the room were genuinely upset with the new public trash consortium and objected to the city council’s decision to make the transition without consulting the public. Another woman remarked,

“I think it’s going to be hard to convince people [on trash] because the city missed picking up my trash for three weeks in a row. If you follow NextDoor you can see the conversation there. People feel like the city is giving us the short end of the stick.”

“We’re not letting the council off the hook,” said Laura in response to these critiques from the volunteer leaders present. “But losing this battle sets the narrative that Saint Paul can only handle individual solutions to collective problems. If we decide to win this, we will be in a very different position with the council ... When we won Voter ID [in 2012], our power increased dramatically,” she said. Laura then asked participants what they wanted to see happen in Saint Paul next year. “Housing,” “funding for public schools,” “good transit,” “gun violence prevention,” “action on climate change,” volunteers offered. “Those are political fights. They require money,” she said. “If we lose this fight about collective trash collection, Mayor Carter will have less power to execute a shared agenda with us, which includes all of those things,” she said bluntly.

An elderly couple remained unconvinced and continued to admonish the city council for how poorly they handled the trash transition. “We’re leaving. See you at church,” they huffed as

²⁰ Field notes from March 23, 2020.

they walked out of the training.²¹ Reflecting on this moment five days later, Laura said that “of the roughly 50 people in the room, at least a quarter would not have voted with us [on the trash referendum]” at that moment. Observing the training, Elliot wrote, “there is definitely disagreement in the room about trash.”

Vivian stepped in to lead the next part of the training, inviting people into a leadership role in the campaign. “This is not about dumpsters; it’s about collective action,” she said. “And it has to be grounded in relationships.” She then led the volunteers through the practical part of the training on relational list building, explaining how the voter file works, and how volunteers would use the Empower app to track their conversations. When the pizza lunch arrived, only a few people trickled over to grab a slice; most were absorbed in filling out the list of personal contacts with whom they would talk about the trash referendum and ISAIAH’s bid to enter into a power relationship with city officials with this co-governing agenda. Some had brought their church directory with them to consult as they filled out their list of 30 people.

When a middle-aged white woman in attendance asked when “someone from ISAIAH would be contacting the people” on her list, Ann, a core ISAIAH leader (a category of volunteers the organization often references as a “super leaders”) said, “We won’t be calling them. We’ll be calling you to call them!” Toward the end of the training, Myrna and Stephanie, two more long-time ISAIAH super leaders, approached ISAIAH’s political director Elliot. “This trash thing was laid out so well and is so strategic,” Myrna said. “How did the plan get created?” asked Stephanie. “We co-created it.” Elliot responded. “This wasn’t in the training we had on Thursday. We just got clear about this yesterday,” he said.

Leveraging Existing (and Forging New) Power Relationships

While organizing staff held internal meetings focused on taking personal leadership risks—a regular practice for ISAIAH—a small group of political allies began planning their own response to the trash debacle as it moved from the courts and into the electoral arena. One of the first things this emerging coalition decided to do was put a poll into the field to assess public sentiment on the referendum and see what question frames might move people.²²

One of the first things this emerging coalition decided to do was conduct a poll to assess public sentiment on the referendum and see what question frames might move people. “We have no idea where the public is on this,” Laura said in early September. “We’re kinda flying blind.” Coalition pollsters consulted ISAIAH’s executive director Doran because, as Laura put it, “they know she’s smart about politics.” The questions ISAIAH suggested adding to the poll, however, came not from Doran’s political acumen but from conversations with the organization’s base. “The questions we drafted were based on what we learned worked in our trainings ... [basically], we’re in this together; and if there’s a blizzard we help each other out but we also need plows.” In other words, Laura said, “power organizations that are connected to real-ass people have a set of strategic advantages” — like knowing what might be persuasive to ordinary voters — “that supposedly smart political strategists who just make shit up in a back room don’t have.”²³

²¹ All quotes in this section are based on field notes from the training on August 24, 2019.

²² Email from September 11, 2019.

²³ Field note from August 29, 2019.

When the poll came back from the field, the results showed that respondents were 25 percent more supportive of the messaging that had emerged from ISAI AH's conversations with its base as compared to other frames about tax increases and the cost of scrapping the coordinated program.²⁴

SEIU Local 26 president Javier Morillo-Alicea, an experienced and strategic campaigner, was chosen to chair the committee in favor of the "yes" vote on the referendum. The committee, Yes for St. Paul, raised \$30,000 in campaign contributions, primarily from unions allied with Mayor Carter and those concerned that city contracts and essential services would be cut if the city was stuck with the five-year trash bill. By the end of the campaign, ISAI AH's filing showed nearly \$7,000 in in-kind services to Yes for St. Paul, an amount that covered the volunteer trainings, the entire ground game, and staff time they spent leading the online and offline grassroots dimensions of the campaign.²⁵ The opponents of the coordinated program, organized under the name St. Paul Trash Lawsuit, also spent roughly \$30,000 — but the majority of that sum paid the legal fees of the suburban law firm they hired to sue the city for its handling of the organized trash program.

Entering a 'Valley of Despair' as the Muslim Program Stalls

As these opposing campaign committees took shape, Abdulahi struggled to get the Muslim program off the ground. Although he didn't know it at the time, an informal political network of actors — whom ISAI AH staff came to refer to as "the operators" — were organizing in Saint Paul's Muslim community against the referendum. "When we started our canvass in the [predominantly Somali] apartments, voters would ask, 'Who are you and where is your white candidate?'" Abdulahi said, when he and the canvassers he recruited showed up to talk to voters about the ballot initiative. Abdulahi explained:

“*Because most of the campaigns would show up during an election and just try to get votes because they have a candidate, usually a white candidate, who hires them, 'I approve this message.' So [the residents] would ask, 'who are you and where is your white candidate?'*”

In addition to this skeptical response from voters, Abdulahi admitted that he too had some of the same early misgivings about the trash pivot as did Vivian. His low level of motivation about a garbage-hauling fight was reflected in his difficulty filling canvass shifts. In late September, he and Laura had this exchange:

“*Laura: Are [there] Muslim volunteers you could recruit to a full-time canvass job talking to voters in Saint Paul? How fast could we hire them if we had the money?*”

Abdulahi: Maybe one or two full-time, a few more part time.

Laura: Why so few?

Abdulahi: The time of year ... a lot are students.

²⁴ Field notes from ISAI AH internal strategy meeting where poll results were reported, September 13, 2019.

²⁵ Ramsey County Campaign Finance Reports 2019, available [here](#).

Laura: How many people could you get to do Friday night and weekend knocks? Same program as last year, 4 to 9:30 PM on Friday, Saturday and Sunday from noon to 8 PM.

Abdulahi: Um ... maybe, maximum five. I'm going to have to ask, I'm just guessing.²⁶

"It's usually not that hard," Laura said a few days later. "But the collective trash program is not the most intrinsically motivating issue to this constituency."²⁷ Mohamed later expanded on this point:

“*Here we were talking about trash and nobody wanted to talk about trash. They'd say, 'You told us to go organize ourselves against Islamophobia, or around affordable housing, why do we care about trash? We live in high-rise apartments, we don't even have a trash contract!'*”²⁸

Still, as October approached, Abdulahi made efforts to “do things by the book.” By which he meant: “We brought people together, talked about what was at stake, had your average ISIAAH meeting with some imams, built a core team, and propositioned these people to make commitments to knock doors ... we were excited! People committed!” Then, all of a sudden,

“*Some of our big people [super leaders] started to drop out. They would not answer our call, they were just 'busy.' A couple were like, 'Well, if you hire me I can do this,' and another was like, 'usually campaigns have money. I like the issue but it's hard to do it for free.' It's kinda like having a team and having your best player pull out. And not knowing why.*”²⁹

Abdulahi tried to set up a one-on-one with his “best player,” who dropped out, but the leader flaked on him twice. “I asked Ahmed [Anshur, executive director of Al-Ihsan Islamic Center, the largest mosque in Saint Paul] and he's like, ‘No, he's a great leader,’” Abdulahi said. “But then two to three other leaders pulled out too, or were ‘just busy.’ We went into, like, a valley of despair.”

According to Mohamed, the complexity of organizing in a Muslim community, made up of many concentric circles of close-knit familial and religious ties, became an excuse for why ISIAAH was having such a difficult time engaging the Saint Paul Somali constituency on the trash referendum. “The troll on the bridge,” he said, invoking a leadership metaphor, “is that this relational organizing stuff doesn't work in the mosque.” He explained: “I got tired of making the announcements every single Friday. And Abdulahi's troll was that he knew he had built a base in Saint Paul but the leaders were not moving. He didn't know what was going on. The base was not energized.... And Khalid [an ISIAAH Muslim coalition faith leader with whom Abdulahi worked closely]'s troll was — wait, 2018 [the faith delegate campaign] was so fun! This is not. What happened?” Editorializing on Abdulahi and Mohamed's discussion of each of their trolls, Doran observed,

“*This is the moment that a lot of organizations would say, 'This just doesn't work in X community,' or 'X community can't be organized, this is not an issue that they care about, it doesn't matter for their daily lives,' pulling out Maslow's hierarchy. That is an organizational troll that can easily appear at that moment.*”

²⁶ Field note from September 23, 2019.

²⁷ Field note from September 27, 2019.

²⁸ Interview on November 26, 2019.

²⁹ Interview on November 26, 2019.

Complicating the growing list of challenges ISAI AH now faced was Laura's long-planned organizing exchange in October. For the final month before the election, the most seasoned ISAI AH staffer on the campaign would be incommunicado abroad, entrusting the campaign to the organizer she had trained. She left Vivian in charge of coordinating the many moving pieces of this increasingly complex and acrimonious campaign.

Finally, in the last two weeks of the campaign, anonymous racists sent hate mail to Mayor Carter about the referendum that escalated to death threats. Police investigated a series of letters and phone calls that his office received throughout October, including news clippings about the trash referendum "annotated with racial epithets in black marker," the police reported. "This is what we get for voting a [racial epithet] boy," said one. Another read, "This is B.S. you [expletive] [racial slur]." At one point, Mayor Carter received a voicemail suggesting that if taxes increase because of the trash vote, Carter would have to "pay for it" and should put "bulletproof windows" in his house.³⁰ These threats were particularly chilling for staff and volunteers in ISAI AH's Muslim coalition, for whom they were reminiscent of the Dar al-Farooq bombing.

Part II: Developing (and Deploying Political Power) as a Social Home

Engaging Leader-Organizers in the 'Co-Conspiracy'

Vivian remembers the early period of the campaign as a "grind" and significant personal leadership challenge for her:

“ Part of it was that I didn't have a clear sense of what my power path was [in the trash fight], and I didn't have enough courage to say, 'I need to help inspire. To figure out what the path is.' And so then I got lost in, 'Oh, because there is something I don't know, then I must be a failure. I don't have it together ... there were moments when I was like, 'I don't know if I can do this.' I was just treading water.

As she wrote in her weekly reflections during the campaign, Vivian realized that if she was feeling blocked because she "didn't have a clear sense of what [her] power path was," then the same thing must be true for the volunteers she was trying to recruit and inspire.

“ The thing that actually re-grounded me back in my organizing, and made me even more self-interested, was the fact that if Saint Paul votes no [on the referendum], then each year, for the next four years, the conversation about the city budget wouldn't be about our agenda or the vision — it would be about trash. And that made me so angry! Because it would further cement the status quo in Saint Paul and would derail our work for the next four years.³¹

Vivian reinvested in the trash campaign because she desperately wanted to never have to hear about garbage policy again. "It would have been kryptonite for any future organizing I wanted to

30 Quotes in this paragraph are from Liz Sander and Randy Furst, October 24, 2019. "[St. Paul Mayor Gets Racist Threats Over Trash Collection Vote](#)," Star Tribune.

31 Interview on December 4, 2019.

do in the next few years,” she said.³² Additionally, she said, “I didn’t want to let the organization down as well. I knew there was a lot at stake if we lost. So I was just like, ‘Let me just keep pushing because I can’t afford for my power organization to have a loss.’”

Vivian shared this power analysis with her core team of faith leaders, whom ISIAIAH named Leader Organizers, and who constituted the first layer of volunteer leadership on the campaign outside of paid staff (**Figure 1**). Vivian opened her first training with this core team — Arline, Ed, Eily, Gaye, Ginny, Stephanie, and Kathy — by saying that the “most important part of this meeting is getting grounded in our power compass and getting clear about our particular mission” in this trash fight, as she just had.³³

Once Vivian was clear about her own “power compass,” she was able to invite others into what ISIAIAH staff came to call the co-conspiracy they were engaging in with supporters. “The details [of the referendum, hauling contracts, and tax implications] are really complicated,” she said at the superleader team meeting. “A bunch of this will get settled in court again afterwards after it all goes down. But we can’t be the experts, we have to be grounded in power.”

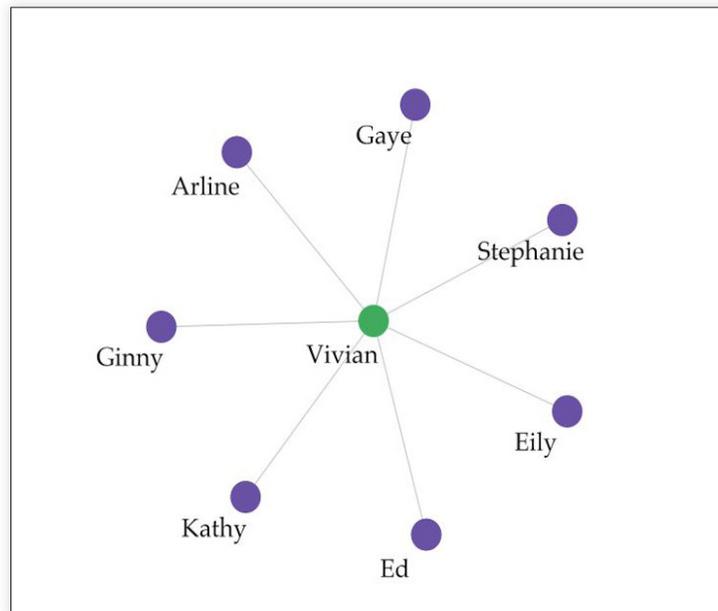


FIGURE 1:
ISIAIAH's
First Tier of
Volunteer
Leadership
(Leader-
Organizers),
September 2019

Data source: Export of
 ISIAIAH Empower Fall 2019
 Data

In every meeting and training Vivian facilitated about the campaign from mid-September onward, she would open with a reminder about ISIAIAH’s power path, finishing with the question: “Are there any questions in terms of our power moves before we get into strategy and the agenda?”³⁴

The Leader Organizers were responsive to Vivian’s agitations. “Vivian was just on fire,” Eily remembered, “which I really appreciated in terms of her getting us. That’s always an important part for me — getting fired up.” Eily remembered facing similar struggles as had Vivian and Abdulahi in recruiting other people to volunteer on the trash referendum, a singularly demotivating issue particularly for the college students she worked with. Eily said,

“ Our student leaders were really resistant to bringing the 15 other students into this cohort to work on garbage. They’re like, ‘Uh. Why would a college student want to work with garbage?’ ”

³² Field note from March 23, 2020.

³³ Field notes from September 10, 2019.

³⁴ ISIAIAH staff strategy meeting, October 7, 2019.

And then they went to a meeting with Vivian talking about garbage, and they're like, 'I want to work on garbage!'³⁵

Another Leader Organizer, Stephanie, remarked, "The thing I see at stake is the culture of politics in Saint Paul going forward." Ed, however, was still frustrated in September. "I've got 15 people on my list and I think they're going to say no" to working on the referendum, he said. "What do we say to people who say, 'Who are you to say this trash fight is more important?'" Stephanie offered one response: "This is not about what's more important. It's about what's going to have more lasting change."³⁶ Earlier that day, Laura had prepped Vivian for a question like Ed's:

"If anybody is like, 'Why this issue?' We say, 'Look, I wanted to talk about 100 percent clean energy, schools, and policing. But in every election there is a political context, and this is the political issue in Saint Paul right now. If we came with other issues we would look like we're from Planet Zoltron.

This is about building Black and brown political power in Saint Paul; we have a reputation for always being up in the city council's face. This is the first opportunity in ten years to demonstrate the breadth and scale of our power in Saint Paul and to do it in a way that is in the city council's interest, because we'll be saving their ass and we'll have a new relationship with them — it'll be begrudging respect.³⁷

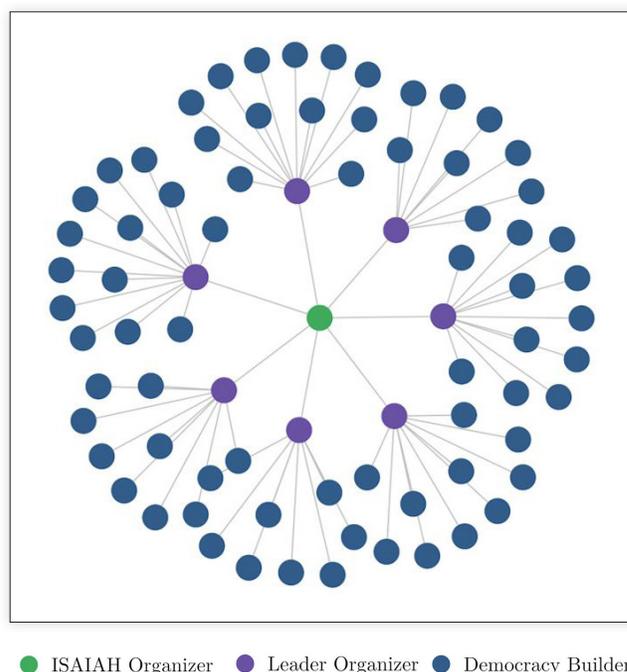
The main ask that Vivian made of the seven Leader Organizers (LOs) was to work with her to recruit a third tier of leadership, which ISAI AH named "Democracy Builders" (DBs). LOs used the Empower app to enter contact information for this outer ring of volunteer leaders in the database, plotted in **Figure 2**.

The 89 DBs that Vivian and the LOs recruited throughout September were then asked to make a list of 30 friends and family whom they would call three different times in advance of the election. "Their role was to make that list of 30 people, relate to them, and connect them to our database," Vivian explained. "The icing on the cake was the mailing address so we could confirm that they live in Saint Paul."³⁸

Two major challenges that Vivian and the Leader Organizers still faced were 1) the difficulty DBs encountered when building lists of 30 contacts and 2) concerns about breaches of privacy. To address the

FIGURE 2:
ISAI AH's First and Second Tiers of Volunteer Leadership (Leader Organizers and Democracy Builders), October 2019

Data source: Export of ISAI AH Empower Fall 2019 Data



³⁵ Interview on September 26, 2019.

³⁶ Field note from September 10, 2019.

³⁷ Field note from Vivian and Laura one-on-one, September 10, 2019.

³⁸ Field note from March 23, 2020.

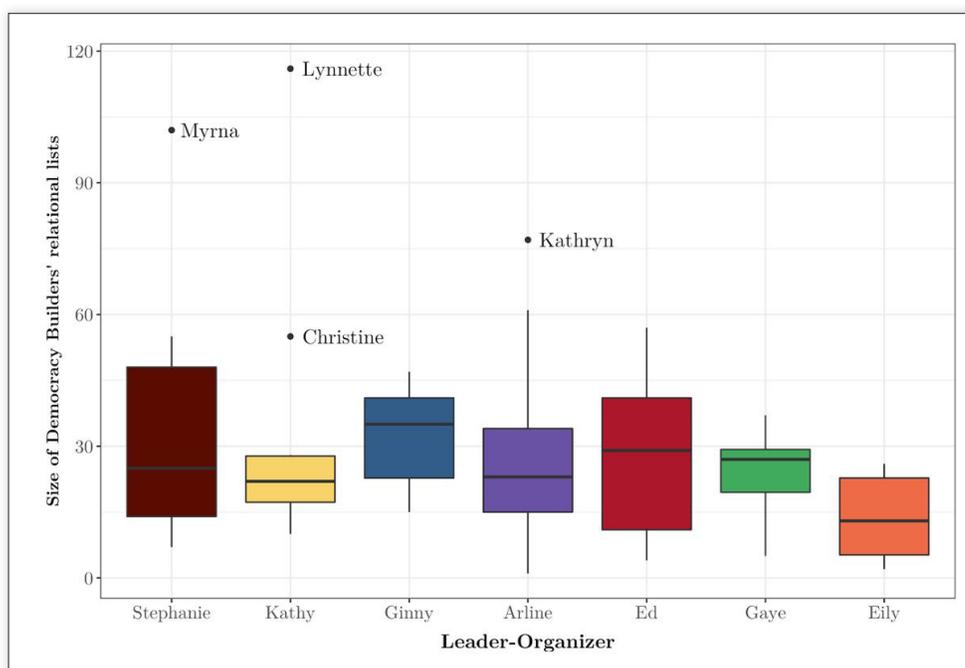
first issue, Vivian implemented a rigorous coaching and accountability structure. “There were some leaders who got caught up in the fear of having tension-filled conversations or in the amount of work it would take, so they didn’t feel as committed to building a complete list of 30 or to continuing to make calls.” She learned that the most effective intervention she and the LOs could make in response to this fear and lack of commitment was to have a 20-minute check-in conversation with each DB no more than three days after they attended the initial ISIAAH training in which they learned about the program and how to build their list. “These conversations can clarify any questions or concerns” they have about the program and “help them walk across the bridge of this leadership opportunity,” she wrote in her weekly reflection.³⁹

To the second challenge, DBs told ISIAAH leaders, “I feel like I’m going to break [my friends and family’s] trust if I share this information” in the software. One frame Vivian used in response was to remind the DBs that the opposition has been collecting phone numbers, addresses, and emails as part of their extensive petition campaign. “This is how people are contesting for power,” Vivian coached DBs. “I was able to share that nugget — that if we’re not just as serious as the opposition — then we’ll not only lose but they’ll be able to win this ballot referendum and stage their next power contest, and we’ll be further behind. We’re not going to sell [your contacts] data.” It was always, Vivian said, “about bringing it back to the power stakes. Some people never got on the bandwagon, but others thanked me for the honesty and for letting them know what the deal was.”⁴⁰

Using these approaches, Vivian’s core team of seven LOs met — and in many cases exceeded — the original goal of 30 relational contacts per DB. As Figure 3 shows, the DBs’ average relational list size across all LOs was 28.⁴¹ Some ISIAAH volunteer leaders (plotted in Figure 3 as the outliers: Myrna, Lynette, Christine, and Kathryn), generated relational lists of more than 80 personal contacts, whom they contacted three times throughout the campaign.

FIGURE 3:
Size of ISIAAH Democracy Builders’ Relational Lists by Leader-Organizer

Data source: Export of ISIAAH Empower Fall 2019 Data



³⁹ Vivian’s Weekly Reflection from October 20, 2019.

⁴⁰ Field note from March 23, 2020.

⁴¹ For comparison to other similar relational voter turnout programs, Faith in Action’s 2018 AI study with network affiliates in Indiana, Nevada, Vermont and New Hampshire recruited 171 volunteers, each of whom listed an average of 18 personal contacts.

Playing ‘Six-Dimensional Chess’ to ‘Unlock’ the Muslim Base⁴²

As Vivian built out this leadership scaffolding with the LOs’ help, the Muslim relational program was still blocked. With Laura on vacation, Doran and Mohamed were called in to help strategize and troubleshoot. Doran remembers, “Mohamed got involved because Abdulahi and Khalid could not move the Saint Paul Somali leaders whom they had moved in other scenarios. *The very same people*,” she said for emphasis. “There was clearly something stuck at Al-Ihsan and in the Somali apartment buildings. Something was up.”

Vivian started making accountability calls to Abdulahi. “You’re down on your numbers! Why aren’t your [canvass] shifts getting filled?” he remembered her asking him in October. “We had canvassed at [the Somali apartment complex] McKnight before [during the faith delegate campaign the year before], but compared to the trash fight it was like night and day.” Abdulahi continued:

“*I remember one lady vividly, she opened the door a little bit, we gave her the Mayor Carter leaflet, and as we were walking away she opened the door and threw it out! I later find out that those ladies, well, the operators went to her — people not from our community — that came around and labeled us as the operators. They said, ‘ISALAH has brainwashed them and they don’t have the community’s best interest in mind.’*”

Abdulahi explained that what he didn’t know at the beginning of the campaign “was there were [Somali Muslim] operators on the back-end, hidden from us.” He, Doran, Khalid, and Mohamed, only gained this clarity about these actors — community members with Democratic party ties — toward the end of the campaign. “This is part of my own learning trajectory,” said Doran, “but organizing in the Somali community is like playing six-dimensional chess. And Abdulahi and Mohamed are the best six-dimensional chess players in Minnesota — Mohamed is like a ninja.”

Doran was referring to the ways in which the Somali Muslim community in Minnesota is “incredibly interconnected,” in ways that have little to do with the geographic boundaries that define American elections. “There’s also a religious vector,” she said, “and the different ways to think about what it means to be Muslim.” These vectors are overlain by “mosque, familial, and tribal politics,” as well as how conflicts unfolding in Somalia are refracted domestically.

“There’s also a knowledge level,” Abdulahi said, building on Doran’s observations, in an interview. “A lot of Somalis came as refugees whereas in the Desi and Arab communities many came as engineers and students. The same message can be taken and interpreted in a different way by a Somali [immigrant] ... [so] when we’re doing relational organizing we have to understand what environment we’re walking into and understand and tailor the information based on that.” And finally, Doran said, there are “the operators,” or the community members who were embedded in traditional Democratic party politics and often paid to build “Somali machine politics” in Saint Paul and across the state.

⁴² All quotes in this section come from a joint interview with Abdulahi, Doran, and Mohamed on November 27, 2019.

At first, Abdulahi and Mohamed thought they would leverage ISAIAH's legitimacy and connections with city hall to broker a conversation between Mayor Carter and the operators, whom they had heard held a grudge against the mayor because they had worked for his opponent in the 2017 campaign. Abdulahi called Vivian to see what she thought about the idea. "Is this just going to be a tokenizing thing?" she asked. "Is it really a power move?" Abdulahi and Mohamed agreed with Vivian that the risk of playing an access card to curry favor with the operators could backfire and leave them in the same stalemate with the Saint Paul Muslim community. "There were only two weeks left until the election, it's really getting to the end," Abdulahi worried.

Running out of options and feeling like they were missing information about who was organizing against them in their own community, Abdulahi and Mohamed decided to go on a reconnaissance mission. "We said, let's go to the coffee shops — what is that coffee shop, Caribou, it's a Somali Caribou — where the community meets and sit and see, 'What's the movement? What's going on?' Talk to people," said Mohamed. Describing their arrival at Caribou, Abdulahi said, "It was like walking into a wild, wild West town, where everybody's looking from the window, watching you go to the little shop. You know the town is full and wants to see, 'Is there someone behind them?' They want to see, 'Who is that person?'"

What they learned in talking to Somali coffee shop patrons is that Mayor Carter was considered a "Bogeyman" to much of the community because, they were told, he was responsible for blocking the construction of a new mosque in the city. Abdulahi and Mohamed also learned that Kassim Busuri, Saint Paul's first Somali-American city councilmember, who had been appointed to fill a vacant seat in early 2019 and was up for election, had "connected the Somaliness of his candidacy to voting 'no' on the trash referendum," Abdulahi said. "The Somali community felt like, 'Why would I be against this young guy — we finally have one guy who looks like us [on city council], why trade that for something we don't even know?'" And finally, Abdulahi and Mohamed learned after talking to a Somali police liaison that the mayor was seen as "anti-law enforcement," pointing to Carter's decision to cut the city police force by five cops. "So then we understood that the opposition's fear-mongering messaging was working — to make them scared of us, even though they like our message," Abdulahi reflected. "That's when we brought in Doran — I said to her, 'If you can get us to the mayor then we can expose the strategy of the operators, then we can bring in these community leaders who have healthy fears, bring them in to ask the hard questions ... to see that we are holding the mayor accountable!'"

At first, Doran shared the same misgivings as Vivian about meeting with the mayor for "tokenistic" or access reasons. "But when they laid out this whole thing," she said, "it was really clear from my vantage that we needed to replace the operators as the brokers in this community. That [was] the dynamic: they're acting as brokers." She continued:

“*We need to get the real community leaders, who are actually feeling confused, unsure, imams like Ahmed, people who worship at Al-Ihsan, who think they have to go through these players, but we know they don't. The people who really move Skyline [a Somali-Muslim apartment complex], the heads of small businesses.*”

Doran was underscoring the point that the residents that Abdulahi was trying to organize need to see that they can have their own, direct power relationship with the mayor. “It’s not an access thing,” she said, “it’s an experience of — you, yourself, are the leaders. You can have your own set of power relationships with the mayor. Until we demonstrated that, we couldn’t unlock what needed to be unlocked,” she said. “The agency! The agency!” Abdulahi added when Doran described the “unlocking” experience in these terms.

A lingering concern, however, was: what would happen if any of the operators came to the meeting with the mayor as interlopers? “They could have sabotaged it, yelling, venting, basically saying the mayor was dividing the community,” Abdulahi said. To preempt this, Doran said, “there were now two simultaneous timelines. Abdulahi and Mohamed were going to have this family feud meeting with the operators on Thursday night [five days before the election] while I was trying to land a meeting with Mayor Carter at 8:30 a.m. the next morning. It was like mission impossible — it had to work on that timeline otherwise we would be hosed!”

The ‘Family Feud’ Meeting with the Operators

“In ISAIAH,” said Mohamed, “what we do before we go into any meeting is we have to prepare — we have to have some sort of meeting before the meeting.” With this in mind, Abdulahi said, “we all had roles for the meeting. Mohamed’s role was to explain who we are as ISAIAH, the organizing philosophy, what is it and where does it come from.” (“We call that the faith grounding in ISAIAH,” Mohamed said.) “My role,” said Abdulahi, “was when the debate gets heated to explain why [the yes vote] is good. I was like the bad cop. And then Ahmed [the Al-Ihsan leader and ISAIAH ally] was the good cop, the mediator.” Preparing for the meeting also involved mapping where each person in attendance stood. “You have the neutral wild cards but the rest were operators or aligned with the operators,” said Abdulahi. “There were two guys who were persuadables. But the operators didn’t know that we knew that they were operators.” Kassim Busuri, the city councilmember up for election, would also be in attendance.

After Mohamed opened the meeting, one of the operators interjected, “Why are you talking about unity but then you’re against Kassim?” Abdulahi responded, “Hold on, we don’t want to make it about the Busuri candidacy. We are not against the Somali candidate. Can I ask you a question? Can I vote for you and then vote for ‘yes’ [on the trash referendum]?” To which Busuri answered yes.

As the meeting wore on, one of the operators jumped up and said, “Let’s call the elephant in the room! Who are you guys? What is your agenda?” The discussion quickly turned into a fight about the mayor. When it was his turn to speak, Abdulahi tried to adopt a calm demeanor to persuade people that the referendum was about paving the way for working on the issues that the Saint Paul Muslim community cares about — not a feud with the mayor. “And then it went wild!” Abdulahi said. “They started making personal attacks! These are grown people’s beef being translated into a community issue, they just want the mayor to go away. That’s when everything got exposed.”

At that point, Abdulahi remembered, “Kassim and the operators most closely aligned with him just got up and walked out. We were very disciplined not to react. It was one of the undecided people there who said, ‘don’t walk out.’ Because in Somali culture, if you walk out from a meeting while you have a guest from somewhere, it is a deal-breaker, you have no respect at all.” Mohamed described this moment with reference to a Somali proverb: “When the elephants fight, the grass suffers.”

After Busuri and his allies walked out of the meeting, Abdulahi, Ahmed, and Mohamed took stock of who was still there. “There was this elder operator, the most experienced, who was leaning toward them” who was still there, Mohamed remembered. “It’s like they brought him to war and left him on the battlefield! They became the bad guys and the meeting shifted to — Abdulahi will lead us!” One person in the room said he had already voted early but would go back and change his vote from “no” to “yes” on the trash referendum. Another Somali leader present, who was running for school board, shared that the operators who had just walked out had told him that if he supported the trash referendum “his political life would be over.” Seizing the momentum, Abdulahi and his team “laid out our power agenda. We said, ‘we hear you, there is an issue with the mayor, we will help solve it — will you guys allow us to be in this position to help you hold the mayor to account?’” Ahmed closed the meeting with what Mohamed described as “a beautiful lecture about togetherness” to “make sure our community gets the best out of this.”

A Power Move Meeting with the Mayor

Securing the meeting between the Muslim community leaders and Mayor Carter for the very next morning was not easy. “I had to convince the Chief of Staff that this was in the Mayor’s interest and that ISAI AH had enough support lined up—with the small business leaders, Imams, womens with large networks in the apartments and so forth—to ensure its success,” Doran remembered. The organization, in other words, was trying to land a meeting with the Mayor who had reason to distrust because there was a history of Somali operatives who had been hired by his opponent organizing against him during his election. “We didn’t tell them they were going to meet with the mayor until that night because we were waiting to see what happened with the operator meeting,” Doran said. The meeting with the mayor was “awesome,” Mohamed said. “It gave our base back their energy.” (See Figure 4 below.) “Some of the ladies [in attendance] left the meeting saying, ‘don’t even worry about that apartment complex, we got it,’” Abdulahi remembered. These women were the Muslim coalition’s equivalent of the Leader Organizers Vivian had recruited, represented as purple nodes in the Empower network maps in **Figures 1 and 2**.

The reenergized Muslim base had just four days to politicize and then mobilize their community to vote yes on the referendum. Abdulahi had a goal of recruiting ten volunteer canvassers. With help from his Leader Organizers, however, he well exceeded that goal, securing 25 Muslim volunteers from Saint Paul who signed

FIGURE 4:
Muslim Coalition Meeting with St. Paul Mayor’s Office



up for get-out-the-vote shifts on Tuesday. “The tables have turned!” he remembered thinking. The Monday door knock was so successful that the canvassers ran out of literature because more volunteers showed up than they had expected. On election eve, Abdulahi sent volunteers around to seven childcare centers in the community (and with which ISAI AH had preexisting relationships), asking to use their vans to help bring voters from the apartment complexes to the polling stations the next day.

Part III: Outcomes

On November 5, 2019, nearly two thirds (63 percent) of Saint Paul voters decided to keep the organized trash collection system, with the ‘yes’ vote prevailing in six of Saint Paul’s seven wards. As shown in **Figure 4**, turnout in the city reached its highest level in recent memory for a non-mayoral municipal election.

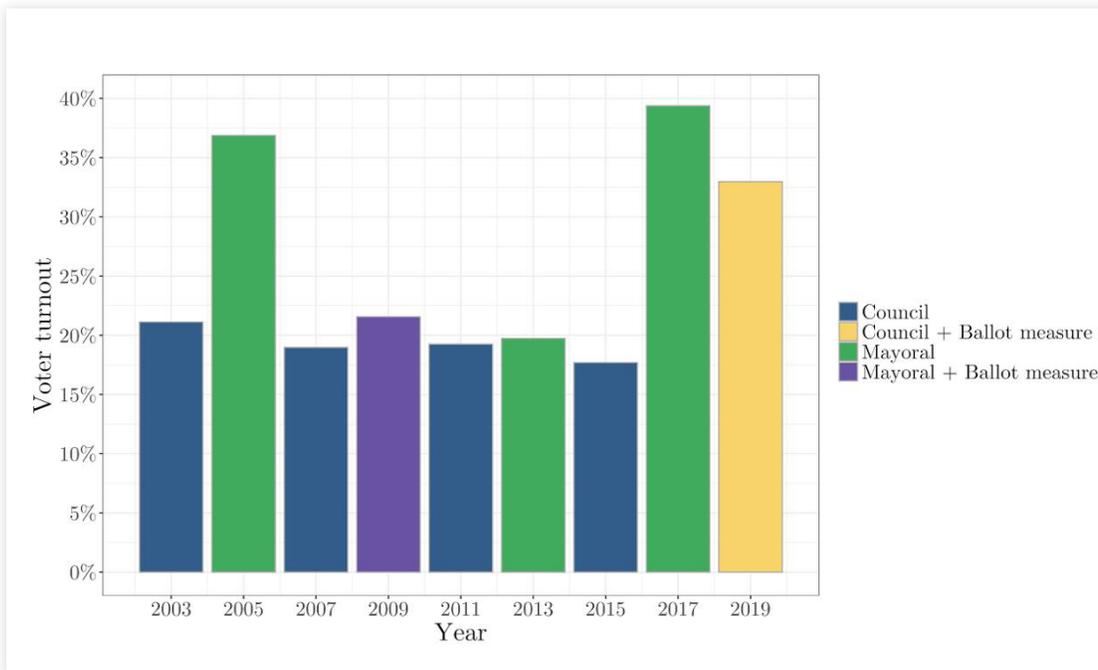


FIGURE 5:
Voter Turnout in Saint Paul Municipal by Election Type, 2003-2019

Turnout Analysis

Most striking were the increases in turnout at three Saint Paul apartment complexes with significant Somali populations where ISAI AH leaders organized:

- At Skyline, turnout increased by 163% (from 290 residents voting in 2015 to 764 in 2019), with 73% of them voting yes on the ballot measure, the third-highest rate in the ward.
- At Mt. Airy, turnout increased by 40% (from 153 voters in 2015 to 214 in 2019, with 75% voting yes on the referendum, the highest rate in that ward.
- At McKnight, although located in the only ward to vote no on the referendum, voter turnout doubled and a slim majority of residents in the apartment complex voted yes.

Relational organizing (and mobilizing) at scale

In addition to the win at the ballot box, ISAIAH's relational organizing programs with the Christian base, the Muslim base, and online mobilized thousands of Saint Paul voters—significant in an election in which just over 50,000 voters turned out. Figure 5 depicts the 2,400 voters on the friends and family lists entered into Empower, whom the Democracy Builders contacted (at least) three times over the course of six weeks. The scale of ISAIAH's full field (non-Empower) program was even larger. **Figure 6** underscores the fact that reaching this scale did not happen overnight; rather it was a function of the volunteer scaffolding that Vivian and her Leader Organizers (longtime ISAIAH superleaders) built in stages. Deep relationships, politicization around the trash issue as a power fight, and leadership development — in other words, organizing — preceded GOTV mobilization.

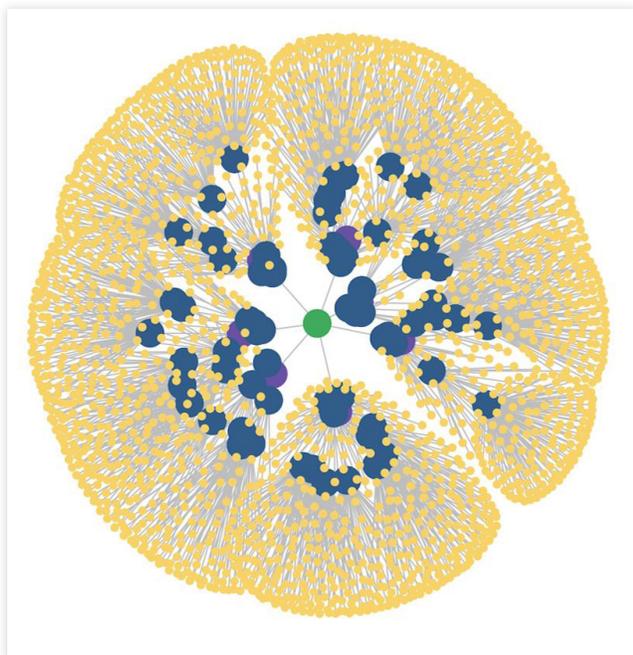


FIGURE 6:
**ISAIAH Relational
Organizing at
Scale, 2019**

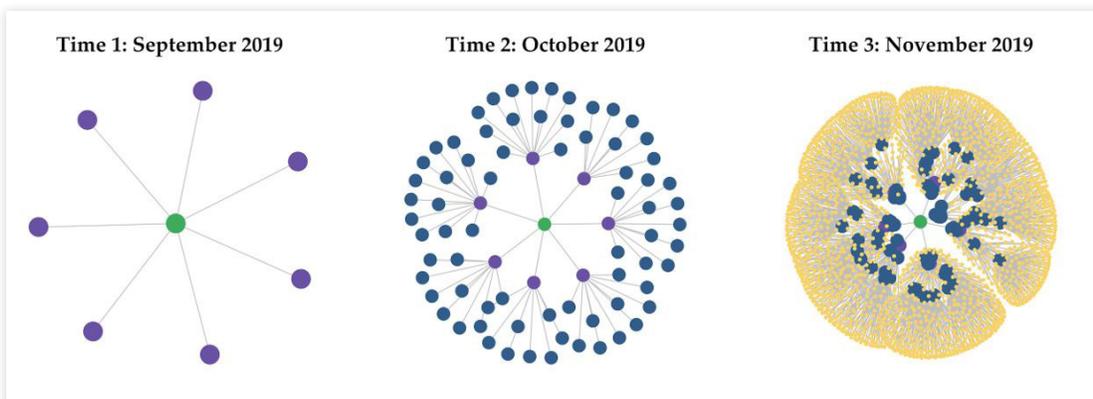


FIGURE 7:
**ISAIAH
Leadership
Development
and Relational
Organizing Over
Time, 2019**

● ISAIAH Organizer ● Leader Organizer ● Democracy Builder ● Voter

Elliot, ISAIAH's political director, led the effort to match the voters on the Empower relational lists (represented by the yellow nodes in the figures above) to the voter file. He was able to match 89 percent of them in the Voter Activation Network (VAN), making it possible to compare ISAIAH's contact history and the official voting record with the vast majority of the relational program universe. Elliot and Vivian were also pleasantly surprised to see that the Christian base had considerably expanded their reach in Saint Paul, well beyond ISAIAH's long-standing base of supporters in the city. Elliot found that only 470 of the voters on the Democracy Builders' lists — or 19.5 percent — were currently in ISAIAH's membership database.

This insight about who was on Democracy Builders' relational lists had strategic implications for the campaign. Because most of the people being contacted through the relational program led by Vivian were new to ISAIAH, many veteran supporters of the organization had not yet received any outreach about the trash referendum. Organizers describe these kinds of constituents as "low-hanging fruit," that is, likely supporters who could be activated with relatively little effort and who, because of their previous interactions with ISAIAH, could be asked to do more than just turn out to vote. With this in mind, Elliot and Amity quickly rolled out a text campaign program, bringing in two of ISAIAH's more prominent church leaders, Javen and Oby, to spearhead the SMS outreach about trash. Elliot described the three waves of the text campaign:

“ *The first texts were sent on October 5th, letting people know about the election and checking in on their thoughts about the referendum. We got 151 IDs, which is 8 percent of the list, and high for texting. More than 80 percent of our [ISAIAH] list were supporters by the end of the conversation.*

The second wave asked people who were already 'yes' voters to talk to five people they know about the election voting yes. Seventy-five people committed to talk to five people they knew. For folks who hadn't responded the first time, we tried to start the conversation again.

The third wave was an accountability text for people who had committed to talk to five people. It was clear from these conversations that people had in fact made a list of five and reached out.

For comparison, ISAIAH also led a public texting campaign in parallel, recruiting 25 volunteer shifts to text 28,000 people culled from AFSCME's database. Although this program scaled quickly, with everyone on the list being contacted at least once, they were only able to get 1,251 IDs for a contact rate of 4.5 percent, or just over half of the response rate compared to the SMS outreach that relies on the higher-quality ISAIAH base list.

Reflecting on the SMS program's successes, Elliot pointed to the fact that the list they built from ISAIAH's database was effectively a "latent base" — that is, people who had already engaged with ISAIAH but not the referendum fight. Second, he said, "we centralized the program to just Javen and Oby. This meant that the texts were high-quality and got fast responses. They are respected community leaders in ISAIAH and it was clear that they got a higher response because people knew who they were and felt accountable to their asks." Javen and Oby operated as a team to work through the list on Hustle, and both remarked that they felt comfortable sending the texts and replying for each other (as the other), knowing that they could

trust what the other was going to say in their name — especially when some of the people on the texting list were their congregants.

In addition to relationally contacting thousands of voters through the Democracy Builder program and via text, ISIAAH's Christian base also knocked on 3,000 doors and had 703 conversations for a contact rate of 23 percent in the final days of the campaign. This represented a more traditional electoral canvass of voters in wards that ISIAAH strategically decided to target.

Finally, the relational program that Mohamed and Abdulahi led aligned the politics of Saint Paul's Muslim community with a door-knocking and text-banking campaign. The program filled 107 door-knocking shifts in the final days of the campaign and recorded conversations with 861 people in the community. In addition, Abdulahi recruited volunteers to contact the roughly 1,000 Muslim voters on ISIAAH's internal list, a product of the previous year's faith delegate campaign. The response rate from this effort, however, was relatively low, totaling just 44 SMS conversations.

'New city, who dis?'

The meeting with Mayor Carter on the eve of the election, Doran said, "was the most strategic power move that needed to happen in order for the Muslim coalition to have an experience of agency. We had to clarify the channels of communication, who was representing whom, and who could be trusted," she said about this crucial moment in the campaign. Once ISIAAH leaders had facilitated that "experience of agency" between the Somali community leaders and the city's leadership, information about the trash referendum spread through the community "like a brushfire," Doran said. "It was so smart to bring Somali TV into the room with the mayor," Mohamed said. "Some people don't speak English very well but then they saw Somali TV. The Somali women especially went crazy [in helping out the campaign]."

Whereas at the beginning of GOTV the mayor was uneasy about his relationship with the Saint Paul Muslim community, after the meeting he had a deeper and more accountable relationship with many of the community's core leaders, including Abdulahi and Mohamed. Reflecting this shift, on election day, Mayor Carter spent his day door-knocking with ISIAAH volunteers in the Somali high-rises and celebrated the referendum victory at the ISIAAH election night party held at the Masjid At-Taqwa Islamic Center. Late that night, he tweeted, "New city... who dis?" showing his eagerness to move beyond trash. He found himself in a new co-governing relationship with key leaders in the ISIAAH base. "After the election," Vivian said,

“ *It didn't take a long time to get on the mayor's calendar. We've never had that — in the past it was just petitions and protests, leading to a transactional relationship. Now we're in a strategizing partnership with city leadership, which is a huge shift; we've never had this much power before in Saint Paul.* ”

One of the points Mayor Carter made in his interactions with ISIAAH was about how "disciplined" the organization's staff and volunteer leadership are. "He mentioned that multiple



times," Vivian said. "And because the organizers who led this campaign — Abdulahi and myself — are both people of color and the mayor is a person of color — this is now an exciting opportunity to contest who gets to belong, and who gets to sit at the table."⁴³ Reflecting on the new power ISAIAH built, Vivian wondered: "Can we have a multiracial democracy in this city? And how is organizing at the center of that, instead of the same old, same old, old guard who get to decide?"

⁴³ Interview on December 4, 2019.

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