

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

“All I have is my experience:” understanding  
non-participation in political organizing on  
Chicago’s Southeast Side

By

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*“If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”*  
– Frederick Douglass, August 3, 1857

## 1. INTRODUCTION

About halfway through the film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), protagonist Cassius Green accomplishes a feat that in most films would mark the end of the story: he exposes the villain’s plot to the world. He posts an unambiguously incriminating video of his billionaire employer’s cartoonish evildoings on Youtube, which racks up millions of views in minutes. He and his friend Squeeze, an organizer for the company’s labor union, wait for the forces of good to take care of the bad guy. They wait, but nothing happens. Outside of YouTube’s comment section, city streets and the halls of Congress remain silent. A despondent Cassius asks Squeeze how this could be:

CG: I tried to change it. I tried to stop it but it's just right in front of their faces ... and nobody gives a fuck.

S: Most people that saw you on that screen knew calling their congressman wasn't going to do shit. If you get shown a problem but have no idea how to control it, then you just decide to get used to the problem.

This exchange is a microcosm of one of the most confounding issues facing behavioral scientists: inaction. The film’s surreally hyperbolic case study spotlights key questions lying at the bottom of this phenomenon. Why, when equipped with knowledge and evidence of an objective injustice, do affected people sometimes choose not to act—particularly those for whom “calling their congressman wasn’t going to do shit?” Perhaps most notably, Squeeze asserts that the reason people didn’t take action in response to the incriminating video is not because they don’t care about the problem, but because they “don’t know how to control it.” This research argues that Squeeze is (at least partially) correct; uncertainty about how to engage in

non-traditional power-building action, namely political organizing, plays a significant role in depressing participation, specifically among marginalized people.

Of course, the problem of non-participation reaches far beyond the silver screen. Concerning trends in recent decades signal some pathology afflicting American civic life: sporadically abysmal turnout in local elections nationwide (Greenbaum and Harwood 2017), decreased participation in community organizations (Putnam 2000, Grimm and Dietz 2018), and rising distrust toward public institutions (Pew Research Center 2019, Doherty and Kiley 2023), to name a few. My research asks: what are the causes of non-participation according to Americans themselves? I explore this question using a suite of in-depth interviews with both participants *and* non-participants in a political organizing campaign combating environmental destruction in the Southeast side of Chicago.

The significance of this subject is difficult to overstate: can a system structured to function just fine with little to no engagement from its citizens truly be considered a democracy? There is also a strong moral imperative to conduct this research in order to better understand the disequilibrium of political enfranchisement across the United States and what can be done about it. I conclude that the decision to participate in politics is contingent not only on resource-based risk assessments, but on assessments of one's own capabilities relative to the perceived needs of political organizing campaigns. To describe the understandings that arise from these assessments, I introduce the term *personal efficacy*. Individuals who believe they have little to offer to a political campaign in terms of skills or knowledge are less likely to take the risk and make the sacrifices inherent in highly public forms of participation. I conclude with a brief discussion of the ramifications of these findings.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Political participation

#### *2.1.1 Defining political participation*

The meaning of *political participation* itself remains contested. Sairambay (2020) points to a “lack of consensus” among scholars regarding the definition of political participation, leading to “conflicting outcomes” in research (120). This dispute concerns the types of activity that can be considered “political:” where does the realm of politics begin and end? Actions commonly included in definitions of political participation include voting, corresponding with representatives, volunteering on an electoral campaign, donating to a political organization or candidate, or participating in a protest or boycott, to name just a few (van Deth 2014, Fox 2014, Brady et al. 1995, Sairambay 2020). To the extent that a canonical definition of political participation exists, it comes from Brady et al. (1995), who describe an “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (38).

Within political science, theories of participatory democracy must engage with the highly influential social capital model (Portes 1998). Robert Putnam, perhaps the most influential voice of social capital theory, defines *social capital* as the bonds of “trust” between individual members of a society (Putnam et al. 1993). A major strength of his framework is that it establishes a relationship between ostensibly “non-political” activities, such as membership in a bowling league, and engagement with electoral politics (Putnam 2000). These “non-political” activities facilitate formation of both relationships and skills, from coordinating a carpool to a

soccer game to organizing a bake sale for the team. While the model asks critical questions about the connections between public and ostensibly private activity, it is unable to identify where the bonds of trust that push people toward political or proto-political activity *come from*. In contemporary Italy, he gestures toward medieval history to try to locate their origins (Putnam 1993: ch. 5). This approach is also unable to explain why individuals select certain participation methods over others, or why some members of the same community choose to participate while others do not.

### 2.1.2 *Political organizing*

This work focuses specifically on participation in the form of *political organizing*. Han et al. (2024) define *political organizing* as “an approach to collective action that seeks to transform individuals and groups into actors (or, to use organizing terminology, to develop leaders) able to effectively pursue shared goals in the public domain” (2024: 14.3). Why study political organizing in particular, as opposed to the myriad other forms of participation outlined in the previous section? The reason is that political organizing is highly instrumental, particularly when compared to modes of participation such as social media activity or even large-scale campaign donation, which may serve primarily as a form of self-expression or identity enforcement rather than outcome-oriented political action.

Hersh (2020) coins the term *political hobbyism* to describe the phenomenon of engaging with politics as a form of entertainment, whether consciously or not. Such an orientation would naturally be more common among the privileged classes; he notes that “political hobbyism is and has always been a predominantly white phenomenon,” as well as a college-educated and

middle-class phenomenon (10). In his book *Politics is for Power*, Hersh presents political organizing as the antithesis of political hobbyism (2020).

His work performs a tremendous service by disaggregating the *motivations behind* and *effects of* different forms of political action. This is to say: just because a mode of action is well-intentioned does not mean it is effective at achieving political goals and vice versa. He distinguishes between actions that build power and those that merely provide stimulation. This is the big difference between recruiting someone for a direct action or having a deep conversation about their political orientation (a “one-on-one” in organizing parlance) and posting on social media or discussing the news with friends and family. If Hersh is to be believed, individuals choose different forms of political action in accordance with their motivations. He also contends that participation is not studied for its own sake. Hersh’s book, aptly titled *Politics is for Power*, argues that the reason participation fascinates political scientists is its capacity to change people’s lives for the better (or worse). By focusing on a form of action highly oriented around power-building, the present study deepens and expands its potential ramifications for organizers seeking to recruit others to similar work.

There is another dynamic at play in Hersh’s book: the capacity of political organizing to achieve outcomes other forms of participation cannot. At times, Hersh romanticizes compromise and equates ideological radicalism with hobbyism (2020: “Outrage and Compromise”). While this may hold truth in reference to hyper-partisan voters, his account excludes the key role of leftist organizers in major social movements throughout U.S. history (Nichter 2023, McAlevey 2016). More importantly, it obscures a distinguishing feature of political organizing, which is its capacity to alter power relations (McAlevey 2016: ch. 2). Voting and corresponding with electeds share the characteristic that they do not *build* power, but *wield* power granted by pre-established

channels to influence outcomes. Political organizing is fundamentally different: it has the capacity to challenge power relations through struggle (Jenkins 2002, McAlevey 2016, Han et al. 2024). This may also be why calls to organize are growing across scholars of inequality to address the intractable challenges of institutionalized racism and neoliberal capitalism (Francis 2018, Fergus 2018, McAlevey 2016, Han et al. 2024).

According to the late organizer and scholar Jane McAlevey, organizing “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don’t consider themselves activists at all—that’s the point of organizing” (2016: 10). She draws a critical distinction between *organizing* and *mobilizing*, which involves working to increase involvement among a static group of dedicated activists. Unlike organizing, mobilizing rests on an “elite theory of power” that

“assume[s] elites will always rule. At best, [mobilizers] debate how to replace a very naughty elite with a “better” elite, one they “can work with,” who wants workers to have enough money to shop the CEOs out of each crisis they create, who will give them a raise that they will spend on consuming goods they probably don’t need. The search for these more friendly elites frames the imagination of liberals and progressives” (2016: 4).

Organizers conceive of power differently, she writes. “People to the left of both liberals and progressives have a different theory of power: different because it assumes that the very idea of who holds power is itself contestable” (2016: 5). Most importantly, organizing is distinct from mobilizing in that “ordinary people” play a *central role* in formulating the strategies guiding the movement of which they form the backbone. Han et al. (2024) reaffirm the significance of this distinction while complicating the picture. “Mobilizers typically use tactics and tools for engagement in transactional ways to achieve the largest scale at the lowest cost to both the mobilizers and the participants,” they write, while organizers “build individual and collective capacity that has long-term consequences for people’s engagement with and analysis of their

own role in public life” (2024: 14.4). The longitudinal and relational focus of organizing distinguishes it from other forms of collective action.

Existing studies of political organizing tend to come from disciplines outside political science; only a small fraction of organizing research currently hails from this discipline (Han et al. 2024). There is another very important reason to focus on grassroots organizing: the limits of electoral avenues of democratic participation for members of vulnerable communities. Large swaths of race-class subjugated communities<sup>1</sup> are systemically excluded from the voting franchise, from non-naturalized immigrants to disenfranchised formerly incarcerated people (Soss and Weaver 2017, Kelley 2017, Hajnal et al. 2017, Burch 2013, López-Guerra 2014). Other barriers to voting, like identification requirements, disproportionately affect marginalized people and constitute informal modes of disenfranchisement (Hajnal et al. 2017). Political organizing, however, is accessible *de jure* to community members who have been stripped of their right to vote—and in fact holds potential to expand the franchise that other forms of political activity lack. It should thus come as little surprise that organizing, rather than large-scale voter mobilization, is recommended by many authors as a tool to fight political injustice (Francis 2018, K.Y. Taylor 2020, Imbroscio 2020, Han et al. 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> This term is drawn from Soss and Weaver 2017: “We use the term race–class subjugated (RCS) communities throughout this review to call attention to the interweaving of race and class relations, especially as they concern the state’s second face—the activities of governing institutions and officials that exercise social control by means of coercion, containment, repression, surveillance, regulation, predation, discipline, and violence. Race and class are intersecting social structures and productive social forces that defy efforts to classify people neatly on the basis of subjective identity, socioeconomic status, or possessions. . . . RCS communities are positioned at the intersection of race and class systems, and these two dimensions of power relations remain thoroughly entwined in experiences of civic ostracism, social and political oppression, economic marginalization, and state-led governance. Through use of the verb “subjugated,” we also intend to foreground an important assumption: Race and class are conceived in terms of power and political relations that are actively produced by human agents and organized, in part at least, by the state; they are not mere classifications of possessed (and therefore apolitical) traits. For more discussion of prevailing conceptions of race and class in the US politics subfield, see Soss & Weaver (2016)” (Soss and Weaver 2017: 567).



### 2.1.3 *Barriers to participation in organizing*

A tradition of political science research suggests that “wealthy, well-educated people are more likely to be politically interested, informed, and efficacious and thus more likely to participate” in politics (Han 2009: 31). Responding to this body of literature, Hahrie Han’s foundational book *Moved to Action* shows that motives driving low-resourced individuals to participate are different from their higher-resourced counterparts. Han makes the critical point that politics are fundamentally different for marginalized people. Her description of Hurricane Katrina refugees organizing to secure their own futures can be illustratively contrasted with Hersh’s political hobbyism. Marginalized people, whose lives stand to be radically disrupted by policy decisions regarding financial assistance programs, immigration policy, policing, criminal justice, housing, and more, experience politics differently. Seen from this perspective, politics is not a form of entertainment, but a looming threat to be avoided.

In the 15 years since the publication of *Moved to Action*, further research has illuminated the ways marginalized people experience state power in the United States and how that impacts their political orientations. Soss and Weaver (2017), for example, described the “state’s second face,” known as the carceral face, whose primary ends are “repression, subjugation, and social control” of race-class subjugated communities (584). Their work asserts that these state functions, including mass incarceration and policing, are underreported in traditional political science research, but that detailed knowledge of oppressive and violent state functions is critical to navigating life on the margins (*Ibid*). In light of this research, low voter turnout among race-class subjugated people reveals itself as a logical response to the lived experience of marginalization, rather than a product of mere apathy or ignorance (Hartig et al. 2023).

More recent work has cast further doubt on the traditional measurement criteria of “general political information” (Weaver et al. 2019, Cohen and Luttig 2020). Knowledge of the carceral state functions differently from knowledge of the liberal-democratic state. Weaver et al. (2019) find that knowledge of the carceral state is actually *demobilizing*; increased knowledge of the repressive arm the state serves to discourage people from participating in politics, rather than empower them. The authors thus subvert accepted wisdom in political science and conclude that race-class marginalized people have “too much knowledge, [and] too little power” (2019: 1153). While this subject is especially prominent in more recent literature, the demobilizing potential of carceral-state knowledge has been recorded in political science literature for decades. Joe Soss has written extensively about how experiences with social welfare programs impress upon their beneficiaries the idea that the state doesn’t exist to serve people like them (Soss 1999, Mettler and Soss 2004).

Soss (1999) argues that the distinction between beliefs about *internal* efficacy, or one’s own ability to participate effectively in political life, and *external* efficacy, or government responsiveness to citizen concerns, is critical to understanding political participation in marginalized communities (Niemi, Craig and Mattai 1991 via Soss 1999). He notes that “both forms of efficacy have been shown to be strong predictors of political participation” (Abramson 1983, chap. 8 via Soss 1999). In interviews with beneficiaries of two different U.S. social welfare programs, he finds that the perceptions of external efficacy vary by program: beneficiaries of a program that subjected members to intense and humiliating personal scrutiny tended to hold a lower opinion of the state’s willingness or ability to respond to their needs (Soss 1999). The most significant barriers to political participation may be psychological, not material.

The decision to organize is not a simple cost-benefit analysis. In choosing whether or not to participate, individuals evaluate *themselves* as much as the political campaign they might participate in. They are estimating their own skill level relative to the perceived demands of the method they choose. They are also evaluating the people around them. This is particularly salient to political organizing, which is uniquely relational relative to other common forms of participation. Voting, posting on social media, writing a letter to a representative, or even having a conversation with friends at the kitchen table do not ask you to take significant social risk. For this reason, organizing taps into social anxieties in a way that other forms of participation do not. This is important to recognize because it may elevate the risk people associate with participation in political organizing. Fear of social censure is a formidable deterrent to many actions, both within and without the realm of politics.

## 2.2 Environmental justice and sacrifice zones

The case study at hand in this research is a political organizing campaign around *environmental racism* in Southeast Chicago neighborhoods. Why should we look at environmental justice campaigns as sites worthy of studies in non-participation? Environmental destruction offers a highly visible and tangible example of a community issue. It affects all members of the community and does not require high levels of political knowledge or experience to be aware of. This way, interlocutors would not be restricted to those with high levels of political knowledge or prior involvement. As the words of this study's participants will demonstrate, environmental justice is also a deeply personal subject. It is difficult to imagine a concern closer to the heart than the air your children breathe.

Seamster & Purifoy (2021) make clear that environmental racism is a double-sided coin: it constitutes the destruction of marginalized peoples' land in order to serve the economic ends of white communities. Relocating toxic waste and other pollutants to race-class subjugated communities preserves the property values of white lands, making room for attractive high-dollar developments, while simultaneously warding off investment and concentrating chronic disease in black and brown neighborhoods (*Ibid*). As we will see later in the discussion of the case study, the project which gave rise to the protests studied here promised to reproduce both of these patterns in a single motion: the exportation of a polluting eyesore from a gentrifying neighborhood to a socially abandoned one was in fact a *key component* of the massive upscale infrastructure project slated for the gentrifying neighborhood.

Although existing research typically foregrounds the role of public policy in the emergence of sacrifice zones, select research on environmental racism has incorporated Cedric Robinson's (2000) concept of racial capitalism into their analysis, such as Seamster and Purifoy (2021) and Pulido (2016, 2017). Another theory of the role of markets in producing racist outcomes is known as the "racist theory of value" (RTV). This theory suggests that the profit-seeking motivation to meet (white) consumer demand for segregated communities incentivizes segregationist development (Imbroscio 2020, Tretter 2016). The racist theory of value offers a mechanism to explain the role of the state in the ostensibly pure-market phenomenon of neighborhood development—and the environmental destruction that often accompanies it. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor notes, "the market is us. The market is a reflection of our values" (2020). As socially constructed institutions, it follows that markets would respond to the racist preferences of market participants. Adolph Reed, Jr. explains that "parcels of land occupied by minorities are underutilized and ripe for redevelopment because the presence of

minority populations [itself] lowers market value” (Imbroscio 2020: 2). This research hopes to expand on existing work challenging the assumption that race-class subjugated people have low levels of political knowledge. Given this understanding, the racist theory of value serves to illuminate the scale of the obstacle facing protesters (or those considering protest) seeking to protect their community.

### 2.3 Argument

I argue that an individual’s estimation of their own skills relative to the skills they believe to be necessary for organizing work—a conception I term *personal efficacy*—is a key determinant of their decision to participate in politics or not. This concept builds on the formulations of internal and external efficacy employed by Soss (1999). Internal efficacy pertains to one’s understanding of their own role in the effective functioning of state services. Personal efficacy is different in that it captures one’s beliefs about their *ability* to be internally efficacious. As I will show later in the paper, a key difference between participants and non-participants in the Stop General Iron campaign is their estimation of the “value” they would bring to an organizing campaign. As I will show, individuals who believe they have little to offer an organizing campaign are less inclined to take the material and psychological risks inherent to participation in organizing spaces.

### **3. METHODS**

This project consists of a case study of the Stop General Iron campaign (2018-2022) and a suite of interviews. The case study serves to contextualize this campaign within a political economic landscape, recognizing the role of racialized market forces in the production of the

events organizers addressed and continue to address as environmental attacks on their community continue. In order to study grassroots organizing around an issue, it is important to understand the dynamics driving the incidence of the issue itself. Interviews with both participants and non-participants in the campaign will enrich the case study and provide insight into the decision to mobilize that cannot be gleaned by other methods.

### 3.1 Case study

The first component of this project is a case study using a variety of sources encompassing local and national newspaper coverage, blog posts, interviews, and press releases from local participating organizations, the City of Chicago, and General Iron. The analysis will also include legal documents, contracts, and agreements between the City of Chicago, General Iron and/or the federal government. These documents are available online. Documents will date from 2018, when the project was announced publicly, to 2023, when the City denied General Iron's South Side operating permit. Interviews with residents of the Southeast Side will also fill in blanks in the story of agents and machinations that fell under the radar of mainstream media coverage. In order to understand and properly contextualize their responses, it is critical that we as researchers understand the intertwined roles of state and market forces in producing racist environmental outcomes.

### 3.2 Interviews

I enrich my case study with interviews with 15 residents of Chicago's Calumet Industrial Corridor. I divide the interlocutors into "participants" and "non-participants" in the Stop General Iron campaign. "Participants" are defined as individuals who participated in *political organizing*

activities in favor of the Stop General Iron campaign. Individuals who attended a town meeting, or posted on social media regarding the campaign are not considered participants. This is because neither of these activities require engagement with the coordinated group activity that constituted the mass movement component of the campaign. Although this distinction may appear negligible, from an individual's perspective, the difference between participating in visible or labor-intensive group activity and engaging in private, individual action is significant. "Non-participants" are defined as individuals who did not participate in this sort of activity. All interviewees had prior knowledge of the Stop General Iron campaign while it was ongoing. This was an intentional sampling restriction that allows me to focus on the complex *decision-making process* residents undergo while standing at the boundary between participation and non-participation.<sup>2</sup>

Interlocutors were recruited in-person using a convenience sample. Recruitment took place outside of the Vodak-East Branch of the Chicago Public Library (CPL) during two consecutive weekends. The researcher verbally hailed all passersby and evaluated their eligibility for the study through conversation with them. All interviewees were offered a stipend in the form of a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com. In total, four campaign participants and 11 campaign non-participants were interviewed for this research study. Interviewees were mostly women (9 out of 15) and mostly people of color (10 out of 15). They ranged in age from 19 to mid-70s. Each interview lasted about one hour. Below is a chart overviewing the demographics of all interlocutors.

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<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that citizens always have a choice to foment their own organizing campaign in the face of a problem—many do—thereby negating the significance of prior knowledge of the organizing campaign as a sampling concern. The citizens who have the resources, social connections, information, and willpower to do this, however, represent a minority group with motivations and characteristics distinct from the masses of people whose engagement empowers the democratic process. This study endeavors a broader analysis of the "average" person. Such analysis is particularly important for organizing and mass politics, where the people make the power (McAlevy 2016).

**Figure 1: Demographics of Interlocutors**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Age*</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity**</b>	<b>Gender***</b>	<b>Participant (P) vs. Non-participant (NP)</b>
Angelica	33	Latina	Female	NP
Billy	early 70s	Latino	Male	NP
Caitlin	30s	White	Female	NP
Daniel	30s	Latino	Male	NP
Drew	late 20s	White	Male	NP
Dorothy	70s	White	Female	NP
Emiliano	41	Latino	Male	P
Jamylah	19	Black	Female	NP
Jim	69	White	Male	NP
Josefa	50s	Latina	Female	NP
Kristine	late 60s	Black	Female	NP
Luis	30s	Latino	Male	P
Marisol	mid 50s	Latina	Female	P
Olivia	early 30s	White	Female	P
Roberta	71	Latina	Female	NP

\* observed where not stated by participant

\*\* observed & confirmed with participant

\*\*\* observed

The population of interviewees represents a limitation of this research. All interlocutors in this research are English speakers and over the age of 18. This excludes a large group of Southeast Siders and organizers who formed the backbone of the campaign. A large number of organizers were George Washington High School students who petitioned Alderwoman Sue Garza to stop the relocation of the General Iron plant next door to their school (Evans, 2021).



While I was able to interview young people over the age of 18 who were minors during the campaign, the absence of school-aged participants may elide the unique concerns facing young people considering political action.

Interviews were conducted both in person and over Zoom using a verbal consent procedure. In-person interviews were conducted either in a private room at the Vodak-East Branch CPL or at the interlocutor's home. All interviews were conducted one-on-one between the interlocutor and the researcher, with the exception of three: Roberta, Billy and Josefa. At the interviewees' request, this interview was conducted in person at Roberta and Billy's home in South Deering. Josefa was recruited on the spot by Roberta for an interview. Roberta and Josefa were kind enough to provide me with a tour of their neighborhood, as well as a community garden which they are both instrumental in building and maintaining.

All interlocutors are referenced using pseudonyms throughout this work.

#### **4. CASE STUDY**

The "Stop General Iron" campaign was an organizing campaign created to stop the opening of the Southside Recycling (formerly General Iron) metal scrap-shredding plant in the East Side community of Southeast Chicago (Kaufmann and Eng, 2023). The movement garnered national media attention, eventually culminating in an investigation by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which ruled in favor of the protesters and resulted in the implementation of a "voluntary compliance agreement" between the City of Chicago and the U.S. government. In 2022, the City reversed its position and denied the plant a necessary permit to begin operations on the Southeast Side. The plant's parent company, RMG, is currently in the process of appealing a court decision that upheld the City's right to deny the operating permit.

What follows is an introduction to the region of Chicago known as the “Calumet Industrial Corridor,” where the plant was slated to relocate, and a chronology of the Stop General Iron organizing campaign which will serve as the central case study for this research.

## 4.1 Background

### *4.1.1 Southeast Side of Chicago*

The “Southeast Side” of Chicago is an informal designation referring to the eastern half of the city’s area located below the southern arm of the Chicago River. Since the 1920s, statisticians have subdivided Chicago’s neighborhoods into 77 “community areas” (Seligman, n.d.). The community areas of interest in this work are East Side, Hegewisch, South Chicago, and South Deering. The proposed location of the Southside Recycling project was 11600 S. Burley Avenue, located in the East Side community area. As of 2021, 87.7% of the population of the East Side neighborhood is Latino (CMAP 2023). 24.3% speak English less than “very well,” and 25.2% were born outside the United States. 87.7% of adults aged 25 and over do not have a bachelor's degree; 62.8% have a high school diploma or less. Median household income for this neighborhood is \$55,740, compared to \$65,781 for the City of Chicago. Per capita income is a stunning \$22,237 compared to \$41,821 for the whole city (*Ibid*).

### *4.1.2 Environmental justice issues*

The Southeast Side also has a history of environmental challenges due to the decades-long concentration of heavy industry in the area. According to the Chicago Tribune, the area continues to be “burdened by toxic waste dumped by industries that left the Southeast Side in the 1980s and ‘90s” (Hawthorne, 2019). Organizers and media outlets have connected the

pollution with poor health outcomes in the Southeast Side's population. For example, the prevalence of adult asthma in Southeast Side residents is twice the average for the rest of the city (Kruzman, 2022). Prevalence of COPD in the Calumet Industrial Corridor is also higher than the average for the City of Chicago (Calumet Connect Databook 2021).

The General Iron plant had attracted the attention of regulators in the past. As of September 2019, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had taken action against General Iron three times since the 1990s (Hawthorne, 2019). In 2015, a large explosion and fire at the plant led local leaders to call for its closure, and in 2016 the plant was forced to close after failing a building inspection (Nitkin and Hauser, 2015; Bloom, 2016). In 2017, a University of Illinois-Chicago study found "high levels of lung-damaging particulate matter downwind from the company's pair of massive scrap shredders" (Hawthorne, 2019; Hawthorne, 2021). The plant was fined for violating City emissions standards (Alani, 2021).

#### *4.1.3 General Iron*

The General Iron scrap-shredding facility was located in the Lincoln Park area on the North Side of Chicago for over a century (Hawthorne, 2021). The Labkon family was very politically active in Chicago; they donated to candidates up and down Chicago ballot, supported the Emanuel administration, and reportedly hired "a dozen City Hall lobbyists to protect their interests" (Hawthorne, 2019). In 2020, as property values near the General Iron plant rose, the Labkon family sold everything but the land to Ohio-based conglomerate Reserve Management Group ("RMG") (Hawthorne, 2019; Alani, 2021). RMG announced on July 13, 2018 that they would move the assets and most employees of the General Iron plant, which it had renamed Southside Recycling, to their existing property on the Southeast Side, where they currently

operate four other recycling facilities (Evans, 2022). The planned scrap shredder would be located a mere half-mile away from George Washington High School and the nearest residential area (Hawthorne 2018). It is worth noting that RMG’s property, located at 11600 S. Burley Avenue, comprises a portion of the site the former Republic Steel plant, once a fixture of Chicago’s industrial landscape (Ruppenthal, 2018). Republic Steel was the site of the infamous Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 in which ten protesters, all employees of Republic Steel, were shot and killed by Chicago police and 90 were injured (Alter, 2021). Critically, the union whose members were slaughtered in this encounter was comprised largely of Mexican and Mexican-American workers, who continue to comprise a large portion of the population of this community (Vargas 2005, CMAP 2023).

## 4.2 The Stop General Iron campaign

### *4.2.1 Campaign organizers and structure*

A coalition of local organizations (the “Stop General Iron coalition”) were responsible for the bulk of the organizing against General Iron’s move to the Southeast Side. According to news coverage of the campaign as well as on- and off-record conversations with some of the campaign’s lead organizers, chief among these groups was the Southeast Environmental Task Force, the Coalition to Ban Petcoke (now disbanded), Southeast Youth Alliance, Alliance for the Southeast, and People for Community Recovery. Other groups, including Neighbors for Environmental Justice (N4EJ), Blacks in Green (BIG), and Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO)—all members of the Chicago Environmental Justice Network (CEJN)—were allied in the struggle (CEJNa). Because the proposed location for the plant was a mere half-mile from George Washington Elementary and High Schools, students at the high

school as well as teachers also played a key role in the protests (Evans and Parrella-Aureli, 2020).

#### 4.2.2 Chronology of Stop General Iron campaign

Prior to his departure from office, Mayor Rahm Emanuel negotiated two major projects for development on the North Side: Lincoln Yards and The 78. The Chicago-Tribune describes the massive projects:

“The \$6 billion Lincoln Yards development is set to remake a huge chunk of the North Side, while The 78 will bring millions of square feet of development to 62 acres south of Roosevelt Road and west of Soldier Field ... In the Lincoln Yards project, developer Sterling Bay plans 14.5 million square feet of office, residential, hotel, restaurant, retail and entertainment space on 55 acres of formerly industrial land along the Chicago River near Lincoln Park. With The 78 project, Related Midwest is planning 13 million square feet of office, residential, hotel, retail, restaurant and entertainment space along a half-mile of the river’s South Branch at a cost of \$7 billion” (Byrne and Pratt, 2019).

These developments were labeled “signature projects of outgoing Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s last months in office” (*Ibid*). The proposed site of the Lincoln Yards project abutted the site of General Iron’s operation in Lincoln Park, located at 1909 N. Clifton Street. On July 13, 2018, General Iron issued a press release announcing RMG’s acquisition of the plant and the movement of operations to the Southeast Side, where RMG already operated four other recycling facilities (Evans, 2022). The General Iron plant had been embattled for years by public complaints, and at the time of the relocation announcement in 2018, was undergoing yet another EPA investigation for pollution violations (Hawthorne, 2018; Alani, 2020). An RMG executive would later testify that the firm received pressure from both Emanuel and Lightfoot administrations to move to the Southeast Side, stating that the company “never would have closed on the General Iron assets” without the City’s express support for the move (Evans, 2023a).

In a last-minute deal before leaving office, Rahm Emanuel offered the Labkon family, owners of the General Iron plant, the opportunity to continue operations on the North Side if the sale to RMG fell through. However, in September 2019, Mayor-elect Lori Lightfoot reversed this deal by signing an agreement requiring the plant to move out of the North Side and away from the site of the Lincoln Yards development (Hawthorne, 2019). The following months saw the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought renewed protests against the plant's destructive effect on air quality. Under particular scrutiny was the plant's production of "fluff," or particulate residue from processing non-recyclable glass, rubber, fibers, and dirt, which is known among residents for coating all exposed surfaces within a radius of the plant. In light of these emissions, North Side residents began requesting that the plant be closed for the duration of the pandemic. City Council ignored their requests, but in May 2020, a pair of explosions forced the plant to close temporarily (Alani, 2021).

On August 12, 2020, organizers filed a federal civil rights complaint against the City of Chicago. The complaint was filed jointly by three organizations: People for Community Recovery, Southeast Environmental Task Force, and Chicago South East Side Coalition to Ban Petcoke (Gauge, 2022). The complaint was filed with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, alleging that the City was engaged in "intentional discrimination against protected classes' by concentrating industry on the Southeast Side and in other low-income communities of color" (Evans, 2022). Through the fall of 2020, Southeast Side residents showed up at community meetings in droves to protest the final permit needed for the plant to open on the South Side. They also organized marches and protests near Mayor Lightfoot's home in Logan Square (Evans and Parrella-Aureli, 2020; Alani and Bauer, 2020).

On January 4, 2021, General Iron officially shuttered its operation on the North Side in anticipation of the move to 11600 S. Burley Avenue (Alani, 2021). Frustrated with the City's indifference to their pleas, one month later, three organizers—Chuck Stark, a biology teacher at George Washington High School, Breanna Bertacchi of United Neighbors of the 10th Ward, and Oscar Sanchez of Southeast Youth Alliance—vowed to begin a hunger strike, saying they would strike until the city denies General Iron its final operating permit (Chase, 2021a). In the following weeks, seven more people joined the hunger strike: Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25th), Yesenia Chavez, William “Kid” Guerrero, Jade Mazon, Melany Flores, Chuck Stark, and Audrey Harding (Evans, 2022; Ramirez, 2022; Chase, 2021a).

On May 7, 2021, under pressure from newly appointed EPA chair Michael Regan, the Lightfoot administration “indefinitely” paused the permitting process for Southside Recycling in order to complete an impact assessment before breaking ground on the project (Chase 2021b). Regan had stated that the proposed project raised “significant civil rights concerns” (Cherone 2023). Over the coming months, RMG sued the city twice in an attempt to compel it to resume the permitting process, to no avail (Cherone 2021a). On December 13, 2021, protesters staged another demonstration urging the city to deny Southside Recycling its operating permit. Marching through heavy rain, protesters targeted (what they believed to be)<sup>3</sup> the home of Dr. Allison Arwady, the head of the city's health department (Flores 2021). Four protesters were arrested and cited for staging a sit-in near the home.

On February 16, 2022, the City reported that its impact assessment, which had been performed at the behest of the EPA, found that the proposed plant's general air emissions & carcinogenic chemical emissions were in line with EPA limits of risk (Cherone, 2022c). The

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<sup>3</sup> Protesters claimed the address was Dr. Arwady's, but local news agencies were inconclusive as to whether this was accurate, possibly in an attempt to preserve the commissioner's privacy (Veljačić 2021, Goodman 2021).

study focused on the neighborhoods of Hegewisch, South Deering and East Side, which are closest to the proposed plant (*Ibid*). Despite these findings, two days later, the City of Chicago Health Department denied the final permit needed for Southside Recycling to open, on the grounds that the project posed an “unacceptable risk” to residents’ health (Evans, 2022, Cherone, 2022b).

On July 19, 2022, the Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a ruling on the matter of *Southeast Environmental Task Force, et al. v. City of Chicago*. HUD declared that the decision to allow the Southside Recycling plant to operate in East Side “continued a broader policy of shifting polluting activities from White neighborhoods to Black and Hispanic neighborhoods, despite the latter already experiencing a disproportionate burden of environmental harms” (Gaige, 2022). Local news reported that “if the city fails to negotiate an agreement with the federal government to resolve the violations, it could face the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as well as enforcement action by the Department of Justice” (Cherone, 2022b).

On April 4, 2023, Brandon Johnson was elected to replace Lori Lightfoot as Mayor of Chicago. On June 1, 2023, an administrative law judge ruled that the Lightfoot administration’s denial of RMG’s operating permit was unlawful. According to the judge, then-Mayor “Lightfoot should have asked the City Council to ratify her decision to conduct that health impact assessment.” That same day, Mayor Johnson issued a statement vowing to appeal the ruling (Cherone, 2023). On May 15, 2023, HUD announced that it had reached an agreement with the City of Chicago to resolve the violations identified during its investigation of the proposed scrap shredding plant. The “Voluntary Compliance Agreement” stipulates that, in order to maintain access to funding from HUD, “the City of Chicago will complete a comprehensive study of



environmental burdens, health conditions, and social stressors across Chicago and use that study to inform and advance reforms to land use, permitting, and environmental enforcement policies and procedures” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

## **5. INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

### 5.1 Material barriers to organizing

The first notable finding from this research is that material barriers—limited funds and available time—are significant but not decisive contributors to the decision to participate among interlocutors. Both participants and non-participants cited care work for one or more family members as the most significant barrier to participation in organizing. This is notable for multiple reasons. This highlights the depressive effect of neoliberal austerity on democratic participation. Resource limitations are exacerbated by a patchwork social safety net which forces families into increasingly precarious socioeconomic positions in order to access financial or other resources which may not be available through public channels (Michener et al., 2022). A focus on voting or other relatively low-effort forms of political action elides this phenomenon.

Education and work responsibilities also featured prominently. Among the participants, Olivia notes that “probably the reason that I was not more involved is because I had a very demanding full time job, which, so I did work with it through it, but I was working probably 50 hours a week at that point, and which was partially why what I was trying to do was like, do the things I could do through work.” Marisol (participant) also explained that she was (and continues to be) a “caregiver for a senior” when she decided to join the Stop General Iron campaign. Non-participants like Kristina and Angelica also reported caregiving responsibilities, but did not frame them specifically as reasons they chose not to engage with the Stop General Iron campaign (beyond posting on social media.) Instead, perceptions of self, particularly the value of one’s

own knowledge and skills, surfaced as the most prominent variable determining whether or not interlocutors chose to participate in the organizing campaign.

### 5.2 People know a lot about their communities

The first notable trend in responses is that interlocutors tended to be highly knowledgeable about their communities. A majority of interviewees were able to name not only their current alderman but the previous one as well. They reported having spoken with him directly or having visited his office, and a large number reported having attended town hall meetings around various community issues. In addition to this general knowledge, interlocutors reported specific knowledge of the General Iron project proposal and other proposed developments in the neighborhood, such as the alderman's recent proposal to lift a citywide ban on mining in order to pave the way for a controversial subterranean development in their neighborhood. Although they miss some of the details, like the name of the company, they know about the project, the general timeline, and have an informed opinion on it. They also know about specific local organizations, namely the Southeast Environmental Task Force, working to prevent polluting projects from setting up shop in their neighborhood. This finding echoes the work of scholars using a "bottom-up approach" to reveal knowledge that top-down approaches veil (Soss and Weaver, 2017; Weaver et al., 2019; Michener et al., 2022). Contrary to popular wisdom in political science, the issue at hand here is not an indifference to politics or the goings-on in one's neighborhood. Interlocutors are clearly invested in their neighborhoods, as evidenced by the high degree of frequently-updated information they hold about the place they call home.

The high level of knowledge among respondents may have been the product of self-selection bias. Recruitment materials mentioned the Stop General Iron campaign in

particular, and individuals with an awareness of the Stop General Iron campaign would be more likely to have a generalized awareness of other political goings-on in their neighborhood. That being said, there are many reasons to believe this finding is generalizable. The sample is diverse across axes of race, age and gender. Non-participants were recruited primarily through direct conversation with the researcher, who did not make specific mention of General Iron in recruitment discussions. Instead, potential interlocutors were asked to “discuss their feelings about pollution in their communities.” This more generalized solicitation opened the door to interlocutors without a high level of knowledge about organizing or developments in their neighborhoods.

Another notable form of knowledge interlocutors expressed was consciousness of the patterns, mechanisms and dynamics of environmental racism. I was surprised to find that non-participants and participants used similar language to articulate this problem. They described the nature of environmental destruction in their neighborhood as an *exchange* between their own neighborhood and wealthy white neighborhoods on the North Side. “I feel like this. We have been forgotten about,” explained Kristina (non-participant). “We’re just tired of stuff being dumped on our end [...] and then being dumped on and then nothing is being built up.” Marisol (participant) echoed her frustrations. “What, you know, I’m finding to be a problem is that, that’s how the city kind of operates is, well maybe we’re gonna, you know, gentrify this neighborhood, and we’re gonna dump toxins on this neighborhood, and then we’re gonna pour money into the business district in this neighborhood.” These interviewees had an intuitive understanding of the racist theory of value based on lived experience.

This understanding is backed up in many cases by historical and geographical knowledge of pollution and environmental disasters in their neighborhoods. Notably, there was no

significant or consistent difference in the extent of knowledge possessed by participants or non-participants. Differences manifested in the *explanations* they would attribute to phenomena like environmental racism; participants were more (although not completely) aligned in these explanations than non-participants. A few non-participants also demonstrated sympathy toward corporate rhetoric, and some susceptibility to conspiracy. Josefa (non-participant) told me eagerly about her discovery of Michael Cremo's *Forbidden Archaeology*, a text widely recognized by archaeologists as pseudoscientific (Brass 2002, Wodak and Oldroyd 1996). Intermingling of conspiratorial thinking with consciousness of state misconduct has been documented in marginalized communities around the world (Auyero and Swistun 2008). Once lived experience of marginalization diminishes trust in political, economic and journalistic authorities, it is difficult to know where your scrutiny of authority should end. My experience in the field suggests that individuals working alone are more susceptible to this; is it possible that conspiratorial thinking could be hemmed in by the skills and relationships formed in organizing spaces?

### 5.3 Nonparticipants don't trust that others will value their input

Despite the depth of knowledge interlocutors possessed about their communities, they bear complicated relationships with their own expertise. Interlocutors with extensive current and historical knowledge about their communities did not necessarily identify as "well-informed" members of their community. Similarly, interlocutors who reported attending town hall meetings, book clubs, and various other local events hesitated to call themselves "active" members of their community.

One such community member is non-participant Dorothy. “[I’m] not like, politically or socially active,” she said. “But I am trying to get, you know, the local library here on the East side, trying to get out, you know, to more of the programs they offer. I’m a member of the book club. I am planning to attend the alderman’s town meeting tomorrow evening. I am trying to sign up—the fourth district police have a Friday afternoon briefing, and I’ve been signing up for some of those. ... So I’m trying to become a little more aware of what’s going on.” Despite habitual involvement in community activities and high level of practical knowledge about community information and power holders, Dorothy did not consider herself an “active” member of her community.

The disparity between her words and actions suggests that she might believe that her knowledge is insufficient to act or make claims on. This suggests something about what this knowledge means to non-participants, the role it plays in their lives, and how it was acquired. An individual who acquired this knowledge intentionally as a form of entertainment or for social status (as described by Hersh) would be very conscious of its value. This indicates that non-participant interlocutors derived this knowledge from lived experience rather than intentional learning. Could it be that a more intimate understanding of politics—the fact that political knowledge is highly tangible for folks with lived experience of marginalization by the state—makes it riskier for folks with few resources to participate, in the same way that political hobbyism is facilitated by distance from the real risks and consequences of politics?

Upon further examination, this feeling of inadequacy was context-dependent. Despite downplaying the depth and significance of their own knowledge, non-participant interlocutors maintained confidence in their own opinions as legitimate. They balked at the proposition of *sharing* their perspectives, experiences and opinions with others. When asked to describe their

fears regarding entering political social spaces, many described fear of being “shut down” for not having their facts straight. Non-participant Angelica described fear of

"talking to like, government like, government officials or like you know, being the voice for a bunch of people and then getting something wrong. You know, and then, and then they come back with ‘oh, well, that's not true,’ or. In a way it's kind of already happened because, like, I would read like, I read like articles online and stuff and they're saying like, ‘Oh, well,’ like even – I think it was WKPW, they said that General Iron wouldn't pose a threat here. Like, huh? like, how do you figure that? ... Being challenged basically."

Here she describes how her lived experience is challenged in public spaces, including by media and official government sources. She refers to a report released on February 16, 2022 reporting that the Southside Recycling plant would not pose an environmental threat to residents of the Southeast Side (Cherone, 2022c). Patterns of rejection in social and public spaces depresses willingness to participate in these spaces, for fear of the humiliation and impotence of these repeated experiences.

Others struggled with concern that they would be *violating social norms* and incur resulting ire by “asking for too much” or “complaining” excessively. 19-year-old non-participant Janylah recalls her and her mother’s hesitation to speak out about the General Iron project:

“We didn't know like, how to like, stand up, because we were like, the only black people that lived on the block for I think, for about, maybe the whole, I think for about eight years, like in the immediate neighbor[hood] ... So we didn't know like, how to, I guess go about that and still feel like we can have a say or like, be heard. This was a very sensitive time for all people, but we just didn't know how to go out there and just like, say something without feeling like we're, like, asking for too much. Or like, just doing, like, a lot.”

This was far from the only reservation about participation that she listed. 33-year-old Angelica (non-participant) echoes the sentiment. “I don't think I'm alone in feeling like people should approach me versus me going to them and being like, hey, I have an opinion. You know, like when they actually want to hear from you versus like, just throwing yourself there and being

like, like Archie Bunker on TV.” Angelica feared that offering her unsolicited opinions in a public forum—an act she associates with organizing—would fit her in the unsavory archetype of an ignorant and domineering character. Such fears are also gender-racialized; as a Latina, Angelica’s concerns may be heightened by the looming stereotype of the “angry Latina” as a potential punishment for her involvement in a campaign.

Campaign participants also had comments to share about these anxieties. Luis describes a culture of disempowerment that targets black and brown communities that recalls Angelica’s concerns:

“It’s the, again, all the conditioning that we have in poor and in black and brown communities to be scared of power. Because we associate power with the negative examples, and the modeling of false leaders. And because of this, that’s what we hear, right? People are like, Who made you boss? They’re like, what makes you or gives you the right to do this? We’ve heard things as, you know, again, “this is the way it is. We are an industrial corridor, what do you expect to be built here?” Right, all the reinforcements to say, don’t do anything. It tells us we are not powerful enough to challenge this. And that we shouldn’t.”

Emiliano (participant) described something similar among immigrants with the “assimilationist culture” particular to this neighborhood: “it’s a predominantly Mexican neighborhood. But also, very much, there’s an assimilation culture that I grew up in in this neighborhood, so people are kind of taught to assimilate to the American dominant culture.”

The role of social pressure in discouraging participation becomes particularly apparent through an intersectional lens. Every one of the respondents who noted a difference between what she trusts and what she thinks other people will trust was a woman of color who had spent at least two decades of her life in Chicago’s Southeast Side. This finding recalls Patricia Hill Collins’ work on black feminist epistemology: marginalized people, particularly black women, form systems and standards of knowledge legitimation distinct from the entities that exclude them (Collins 1990).

Both participants and non-participants were aware of the social risks associated with organizing. Luis (participant) talked about how hard it is to be vulnerable in a social setting, and Marisol (participant) and Angelica (non-participant) both talked about the physical danger of retribution by the carceral state. Participants were more inclined, but were not the only ones, to connect these concerns to their systemic origins in racist or gendered social norms or carceral state violence.

#### 5.4 Nonparticipants don't know *how* to get involved

In addition to fears that they would be gaslighted in public spaces, interlocutors expressed concern that they lacked relevant knowledge necessary to contribute meaningfully to organizing spaces. When asked what held her back from expanding her involvement in the Stop General Iron campaign beyond social media posts, Angelica (non-participant) shared that

“I think it's probably like, you know, a feeling of lack of a—lack of like the correct knowledge or, you know, people usually depend on, you know, so called, like, experts in their field and whatnot. I would feel that I wouldn't be, like, that important. You know, I know I'm like a citizen here and whatever, but there's environmentalists, there's people who have done organizing work and things like that, and they have social work backgrounds and whatnot. But I always feel like well, I don't know enough. So I don't know if I should even go. **All I have is my experience living here and that's it.**”

Notably, participant Marisol (participant) framed her decision to participate in the Stop General Iron campaign—the first such political organizing campaign in which she had ever participated—in very similar terms of contribution: “I think, as far as like, you know, joining the campaign, I don't know. [pause] I just felt like I, you know, maybe had something to offer.” Marisol has a Master's Degree in Social Work. This is certainly an understatement of her skills as a highly educated expert in the interlocking social issues affecting her community. It is telling



that despite being highly educated in a relevant field, Marisol still understates her potential to contribute to a campaign.

Organizers themselves urge anyone who is interested in political organizing to reach out. They do not identify a knowledge barrier that must be surmounted in order for individuals to be suitable for political organizing. Individuals with organizing experience indicate that there is no knowledge barrier to organizing, while individuals without organizing experience fear the opposite. This suggests that, if individuals had organizing experience—if they possessed familiarity with organizing as a method and how it works—the concern that their participation is not valuable would be diminished. The belief that one must have special or “expert” knowledge in order to participate in political power-building is notable for multiple reasons. Many respondents noted that they vote and value their right to vote. Why does this belief surface around political organizing and not voting, which is also an individual exercise of political power?

Participants described their own experiences developing organizing skills through mentorship, but when asked about perceived lack of skill holding people back from organizing, they emphasized that organizing is for everyone. Luis (participant) in particular emphasized that among the most important resources a newcomer brings to the table is their personal experience: “People need to be involved because the cost is [your] perspective. And we need you.” This perspective conflicts starkly with Angelica’s (non-participant) fears that her personal experience would not be valued in organizing spaces. Luis’ (participant) point highlights the ways in which the decision *not* to participate shapes the formulation of organizing agendas and priorities.

### 5.5 Machine politics makes organizing less accessible

Of course, individuals' anxieties are not the only factor complicating the path to political organizing. The organizing space in Chicago also poses unique challenges. Organizations tend to have very limited resources, which limit the amount of resources they are able to dedicate to outreach, training and onboarding. Participants articulated the difficulty of structuring an organization to accommodate the diverse interests, availability and skill levels of the interested public. Organizer Emiliano explains that

“you'll find people who are very committed to the cause and will, like, drop everything to support you, but then there's others who will support you, but, like, it requires a lot of engagement. And you know, do you have the time and energy as an organizer to expend on making sure everybody's engaged and communicating. I think it's easier now with social media, but like having an engagement strategy that can connect people at whatever level of engagement they want to be at that specific moment, that requires a real, clear strategy that's, that's a challenge.”

Scholars like Hersh have described how social media, while a useful mobilizing tool, is unable to provide the relational connections that are key to deep organizing (2020).

Significantly complicating this effort is Chicago's formidable history with machine politics. Although both scholarly and anecdotal accounts attest that Chicago's political machine has slowly dismantled since its heyday during the Richard J. Daley mayoral administration, I was surprised to find in my interviews with participants in the Stop General Iron campaign that it still loomed relatively large in organizing spaces. All four participants interviewed described machine politics as a challenge facing organizers in Chicago. Additionally, in an off-record discussion with the executive director of one of Southeast Chicago's most prominent nonprofits, she advised me to “remember that Chicago is machine.” Concern about reprisal was palpable to varying degrees in interviews with campaign participants.

The ability of organizations to diversify their onboarding strategies to accommodate diverse newcomers is further complicated by the lasting inheritances of Chicago's notorious political machine. Emiliano (participant) explained how the political machine injects risk into recruitment and leadership development processes:

"Sometimes campaigns could get to a point where they're a little cliquish ... [but] I understand why **sometimes organizers have to be cautious of who they let in, and who do you let in at what level.** Because there are, yeah, going back to the, going back to the point that we're talking about machine politics, right, like there are political operators who are in the space to spy, to manipulate, to attack. And Sue Garza had a lot of people in that space that I'm sure were trying to help her navigate politically, this position that she took, which was to not support the [Stop] General Iron Campaign. ... So you kind of have to be cautious as to who you let into certain spaces. So that's real. I mean, I think that's a real challenge."<sup>4</sup>

Olivia (participant) compared her experiences working with the Stop General Iron campaign to her past experiences organizing in Champaign-Urbana:

"I've found that activism in Chicago in general is more difficult for me than it was in a small town. You know, I was-- I did a lot of work in Champaign Urbana over the many years that I lived there. And it's a much more concise environment. So it's much easier to get to things, to know what's happening, to plug into work, organizing work, to make decisions, and everything I tried to get involved with up here has always been a little bit like, oh, it's cliquish. Like, oh, these, this is this person's turf, or, it's way the fuck over in, wherever. Like, [a meeting] is an hour and a half away from me, and they cancel the meeting at the last minute all the time, so I'm already, like, 45 minutes there, and they cancel the meeting, you know. It's like, just been much more difficult to find a cadence. ... I wonder how much we would benefit in Chicago from a little bit more like, easy entry points for people and better coordinated, better coordinated and information disseminated about opportunities to be involved. Because I think people do want to be involved, but there's so many barriers to entry based on communication, location, expectation of, of time and all that, so."

Participants tended to be able to describe political mechanisms in systemic terms ("machine"), but both participants and non-participants possessed specific knowledge of the "machine" itself, naming particular representatives and policies across time that represented it.

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<sup>4</sup> He continues: "I think the new machine, though, has been nonprofits. If there were to be a machine, and a lot of nonprofits really think about their role as, of course, pushing their own organizational agenda. But a lot of these nonprofits, including the southeast side, have executive directors who have these political aspirations, right? You could go to a list of alders and, you know, pick out all those who are part of executive nonprofit executive directors before they became alders."

Both groups were aware of the same phenomena but used different conceptual vocabulary to describe it.

### 5.6 Perceptions of organizing as method

Another significant variable influencing the decision to participate is political orientation. Individuals may agree on the nature of a problem, and even agree that it is systemic. But they may be skeptical of systemic critiques, which makes them less likely to engage with organizing as a method, even if they possess the resources and care deeply about the relevant issue. This is a very important consideration that is too often sidelined in political participation literature. Political organizing is distinct from other modes of participation in that it is heavily stigmatized and sensationalized in media, which may further depress participation in this way.

The juxtaposition between support for a cause and limited support for organizing around said cause was striking. For example, Kristina (non-participant) declared of the Stop General Iron campaign that she “was 100% with [the protesters.] ... I was happy to see that somebody was doing something and I was rooting for them, you know.” However, when discussing nationwide protests following the murder of George Floyd around the same time, she expresses significantly more muted support. In those cases, she emphasizes the value of “respect for authority” even if they are in the wrong. “A lot of it is, people haven't been raised right,” she said. “Their parents weren't raised right. And their parents weren't raised, you know. They feel like, you know, I'm supposed to be able to do what I want to do and say what I want to say. They have no fear of authority. And no respect for authority.”

She continues: “Marching because somebody got shot is not a protest to me. I mean, it's a, it's an action. It's a—we got, somebody got killed by the police department. Okay? Yeah, it needs to be addressed. It needs to be a protest, needs to be a thing like that, but I think a lot of

people jump on board with that because they don't have the whole story. They're just looking at a race thing, you know.” Non-participant Dorothy described similar reservations which echoed participant Luis’ definition of a culture of disempowerment. Describing mill workers’ demands for 13 weeks of vacation, “I suppose you know, it was hard work in those mills, and it wasn't without danger. And I can only imagine before unions and before safety regulations went in. I mean, it was dangerous. But again, that even these working men could realize, at certain points, maybe we're asking too much,” she shared. The fear of “asking for too much” is significant.

Unsurprisingly, participants saw things differently. Luis emphasizes the importance of learning to ask for more. He defines the experience of marginalization as being constantly pressured to settle for less. “I think, many people can recognize that we are being exploited. Many people have, then, the perception of, we are all being oppressed, but pick yourself up by the bootstraps. You're either going to be oppressed or be the, or be, you know, the other side,” he explained.

### 5.7 Participant characteristics

For a moment we now turn our attention to the characteristics of interviewees who participated in the Stop General Iron campaign. These interlocutors were split by gender (2 women and 2 men) and were predominantly Latine (3 of 4). 3 of 4 participants held bachelors’ degrees at the time of the campaign, and half had completed advanced degrees. At the same time, three of four participants grew up in the Calumet Industrial Corridor and described themselves as “poor” growing up.

When participants describe how they got their start with organizing, a number of fascinating trends emerge. Firstly, each participant reported a story of a key companion or

mentor who joined them on their journey to begin organizing. This aligns with wisdom from Han (2009) that the strongest predictor of participation is being invited. Olivia (participant) explained that “my sister that I grew up with out on the farm, she is older than me and has always had a lot of really interesting thoughts about world issues, and, and definitely environmentalism. So she was definitely a beacon for me. We worked together on a lot of the things that-- even today, we work together on a lot of things that we do.” Emiliano (participant) explained that legendary Chicago organizer Rey Lopez-Calderón took him under his wing and taught him a syllabus of key organizing knowledge that equipped him for future work. “He was somebody who really kind of then filled in all the gaps in my historical knowledge. He ... really made me understand, kind of, how the political system operates in Chicago, and specifically in the 10th Ward.” Even before that, though, “I had an uncle who really kind of raised my political consciousness as a teenager, and then I kind of was more radicalized in college.”

Participants describe coming to organizing through a number of different causes. Each one could name the cause associated with their first organizing campaign. Emiliano (participant) got started “mobilizing for the immigrant rights movement in 2006, so between 2006 and 2008, that was kind of my entry into understanding what community organizing looks like.” Olivia (participant) describes very early awareness of environmental degradation in her rural neighborhood as a child, but says she “became more like, formalized as an independent, like, an independent organizer around the issues of the Iraq War. ... [T]hat was when I was like, No, this is like, core to my identity.” The Stop General Iron campaign was participant Marisol’s first; when asked what attracted her to the movement, she explains that “I think it was, it was just the right cause.” The diversity of interests offers an interesting perspective on Han (2009)’s issue public hypothesis. While these participants were drawn to organizing by a diverse range of

issues, it is true that the issue area itself appears to have played a key role in drawing them into organizing in the first place.

## 6. DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that participation in political organizing serves not only to express political preferences and to achieve a desired political end. Organizing also generates relationships and reshapes one's political orientation. Those who engaged in the Stop General Iron campaign had a sense of personal efficacy that carried them through the tumultuous initial stages of incorporation into a campaign. That sense of personal efficacy fermented and grew *through* participation in the campaign itself, generating a sense of civic responsibility, hopefulness, and recognition of their own skills.

Non-participant interlocutors demonstrated substantial knowledge of politics in their communities, and were highly involved and invested in the goings-on around them. They participate actively in social life from book clubs to regular attendance of town hall meetings. This did not translate to participation in organizing, even among those who expressed vocal support for the efforts. This suggests that social capital is an insufficient predictor of participation. Community members have the interest and the tools to participate in politics, but something else is holding them back.

That "something" appears to be a lack of personal efficacy: disbelief that they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively in political spaces. In this way, this research stands to complicate Joe Soss' work on encounters with the welfare state (1999). Respondents certainly expressed significant concerns about both internal and external efficacy, but the *decisive* factor in their decision to participate or not appeared to be personal efficacy. The

intimate understanding of how difficult it is to garner appropriate state response to their concerns likely elevated their perception of the skill and knowledge (“expertise”) required to be a worthy participant in political organizing.

These findings offer yet more evidence in favor of the “bottom-up approach” to political science research. Centering the expertise of affected people yields unique results not discernible by other means. This is particularly critical in the study of non-participation and other consequences of alienation from democratic systems. Just as the future of participation may be found in the wisdom of “ordinary people,” the people best situated to utilize any knowledge collected here are not academics, but organizers and community members themselves. With this in mind, the intended audience for this work is “ordinary people.” The hope of this research is that people might see themselves in the folks telling their stories here, and realize that they (along with their friends and neighbors) already possess invaluable political expertise.

De Tocqueville once wrote that the tendency to form organizations to solve problems and manage resources was a defining feature of American democracy, and a critical bulwark against “soft despotism.” These findings suggest that there is a feeling of *inadequacy* preventing individuals—particularly members of marginalized communities—from participating in the type of political action that once defined American democracy. What could be the reasons for this? One reason may lie in education. Civics education curricula discuss voting, media literacy, and how a bill becomes a law, but they do *not* discuss political organizing and movement building skills. Future research would do well to examine the causes and consequences of lack of education around the nature and methods of political organizing.

The great Jane McAlevey eloquently describes the key role participation plays in teaching people to be effective citizens: “People participate to the degree they understand—but



they also understand to the degree they participate. It's dialectical" (2016: 6). I would argue that participation produces not only understanding, but hope. Indeed, after years of organizing in the face of overwhelming odds, Luis still describes himself as "radically optimistic." Perhaps the best antidote for a fear of inadequacy is trying out the thing that scares you.

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