

Putting Citizenship Back in Congress

The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

David Bornstein JULY 4, 2017



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On Jan. 24, four days after President Trump's inauguration, the House of Representatives passed the [READ Act](#), which establishes a framework for American leadership on access to basic education in some of the world's poorest countries. The bill was so broadly supported that it passed on a voice vote.

During the 2015-2016 Congressional session, another piece of legislation, the [Reach Act](#), intended to improve the effectiveness of U.S.A.I.D.'s work on maternal and child health in the developing world, received endorsements from more than [half of the House](#) and [a third of the Senate](#).

Neither of these initiatives has received much attention. Indeed, they are part of a story that is virtually absent from today's national narrative: how ordinary people can still influence the government through persuasive moral arguments and tenacity.

At a time when many Americans feel [powerless](#) to effect change — and some are deeply [concerned](#) about the health of their democracy — it's worth highlighting those instances when democracy actually works the way it's supposed to.

It's no coincidence that both of these pieces of legislation were prioritized by [Results](#), a grass roots network that works to build the political will to end poverty. Results is one of America's best-kept secrets. For decades, it has been transforming everyday Americans into skilled and powerful advocates. Through the efforts of Results' volunteers, [billions of dollars](#) in federal government funding has been channeled to meet the [basic needs of poor people](#) in the United States and around the world.

Results' volunteers operate without fanfare. During the first 100 days of the Trump Administration, they held [300 meetings with members of Congress or their aides](#), and their efforts led to the publication of 300 op-ed essays or letters to the editor. Much of their work was aimed at defending anti-poverty pillars like Medicaid and food stamps.

If you're looking to bolster participatory democracy in the United States today, you'd be hard pressed to find better guidance than the [experiences of Results' volunteers](#).

Consider Garrett Wilkinson, a rising senior at Kansas State University. “Results took me from not even knowing the name of our members of Congress to getting personal phone calls from them,” he said. “That sums it up in a sentence.”

During his freshman year, Wilkinson stumbled across Results at a booth at an [Impact Conference](#) being held in Los Angeles. The conference is an annual event to support civic engagement by college students. “They were making these bold claims about how everyday people can influence democracy, and I was skeptical,” he recalled. Still, he decided to sign up for Results’ [REAL Change Organizing and Advocacy Fellowship](#).

After Wilkinson received training in Washington, Results sent a staff member to Kansas to help him build an advocacy team during his sophomore year. Since then, the organization has provided the team with regular support: briefings from policy experts, help getting opinion articles published, guidance building rapport with congressional offices, training in the art of the “laser talk” — a brief and compelling presentation of an issue.

Wilkinson’s skepticism was fully overcome in late December 2015. On the same day that his first [opinion essay](#) — about the Reach Act — was published in a local newspaper, Wilkinson saw that Senator Jerry Moran, a Kansas Republican, was holding a town hall in Haven, a few hours’ drive from his university.

So Wilkinson and two of his friends raced over and sat in the front row. When the opportunity arose, Wilkinson stepped to the microphone; speaking from his heart, as Results encourages volunteers to do, he explained why he was so committed to preventing the needless deaths of mothers and children in the developing world. He described how American policy could save more lives, and concluded by asking Moran to co-sponsor the Reach Act.

“Results teaches you to create relationships with your member of congress,” Wilkinson recalled. “So when I was in the handshake line, I asked him again to sign the Reach Act and handed him a copy of the op-ed with my phone number on it.

“On New Year’s Eve, my phone rang. It was Senator Moran,” he said. “He told me he found it inspiring to see young people taking action on issues other than things that affected them directly.”

Less than a month later, Wilkinson’s advocacy team celebrated one of their big goals: Moran and Senator Pat Roberts, a fellow Republican, co-sponsored the Reach Act, making Kansas the first state to have both of its senators do so. (The act didn’t come to a vote in the last congressional session; Results’ volunteers are now lobbying to have it reintroduced.)

Over the past two years, Wilkinson and his fellow advocates have built working relationships with almost all of Kansas’ congressional representatives and staff. Through face-to-face meetings, they continue to build political backing across party lines for important legislation and increased appropriations in support of maternal and child health, education and anti-poverty policies.

The architect of Results’ “deep advocacy” approach is its founder, Sam Daley-Harris. Results grew out of Daley-Harris’s realization, almost 40 years ago, that Americans were failing to take advantage of their access to democratic institutions.

In the late 1970s, he became active in a movement to eradicate global hunger. For two years, working to build political support for that cause, he spoke with 7,000 American high school students and discovered, to his dismay, that only 3 percent of them even knew the name of their member of Congress, let alone had written to or met with him or her. That led him to establish Results.

Daley-Harris now teaches other organizations how to practice “deep advocacy” through a new initiative, the [Center for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation](#).

For Daley-Harris, the essence of deep advocacy is in unleashing and channeling the voices of everyday people to renew democracy. It requires a structure that allows people to connect to their sense of purpose so they can draw the courage to take bold and powerful civic action. It’s not soft. Deep advocacy, following Daley-Harris’s approach, involves rigorous goal setting and accountability, continuous training and practice, unwavering commitment to bipartisanship, and steadfast focus.

One might ask: How much real influence can ordinary people have in a political system dominated by insiders, hired lobbyists and deep-pocketed interests? The answer, as Daley-Harris’s work has demonstrated, is: *more than you think*.

The first organization that Daley-Harris trained in the deep advocacy approach, the [Citizens Climate Lobby](#), has, as we have [reported](#) in Fixes, grown into a national movement with more than 23,000 active supporters whose efforts led to the creation of the first bipartisan caucus in the House of Representatives focused on solutions to climate change.

Another organization Daley-Harris has coached, [American Promise](#), is working to win bipartisan support for a 28th Amendment to the Constitution that would empower Congress and the states to regulate the influence of big money on elections (effectively overturning the Supreme Court’s [Citizens United decision](#)); it has grown quickly since it was initiated in early 2016. “We’ve gone from zero to 150,000 members in 18 months,” said Jeff Clements, its president.

American Promise’s volunteers have taken thousands of actions to move the issue forward — meeting with legislators, publishing opinion articles, organizing public events — and are now leading campaigns in numerous states to advance ballot initiatives in support of the 28th Amendment. (This [map](#) shows their progress on this issue.)

Daley-Harris has also worked closely with the [Friends Committee on National Legislation](#), which lobbies Congress on [social justice and environmental issues](#). “We now have 60 [advocacy teams](#) involving 800 people around the country who are pursuing relationships with their members of Congress and senators,” said Jim Cason, who directs the organization’s strategic advocacy. “With the toxic debate today, there’s a hunger for this kind of work. We’re launching 10 new teams each month.

“I had doubts about whether people would be willing to step up and do this kind of work, which takes a significant time commitment and a certain amount of courage and grounding,” Cason added. “But people often find things in themselves they didn’t know existed. And with this structure of support, we’re finding that if we ask people to do more than we thought we could ask, many of them will do more than they think they can do.”

That was the experience of Sam Bruxvoort Colligan, 16, a high school sophomore who lives in Strawberry Point, Iowa. He began volunteering with the Friends Committee three years ago at the encouragement of his mother. "I'm a shy person. I was pretty skittish when it came to possibly talking to members of Congress," he said.

These days, in any given month, his team members participate in training calls, set up meetings with Congressional offices, attend town halls, and publish guest columns or letters to the editor. They've met with all of Iowa's members of Congress. This year, they've been working to rein in [military spending](#). Last year, they concentrated on [mass incarceration](#).

One day, Bruxvoort Colligan was surprised to receive a call from the district director for Senator Joni Ernst, an Iowa Republican. "We'd been in contact with her office and he wondered if we would like to meet with her. We said, 'Yes, of course.' He said, 'The senator wants to talk with you about whatever you want to talk about,' and I said we want to talk about sentencing reform. Two years ago I never would have imagined that." (Cason reports that 13 members of Congress signed on to sentencing reform and corrections bills in the [House](#) and [Senate](#) after being lobbied by Friends Committee advocacy teams.)

For Bruxvoort Colligan the main discovery has been that elected officials are "much more approachable than you would think." He added: "The key is just showing respect even if you don't agree with them. Just being polite, not yelling, not calling names. The best way to get anything done is to start a conversation." (He made an eloquent appeal for civility in a recent [opinion essay](#).)

"What's deep about 'deep advocacy,' " said Daley-Harris, "is the education and empowerment of people and the actions that they take." He added: "When people get out of their comfort zones, that's where the magic happens. But you need a month-in, month-out structure of support" to make it happen.

Advocacy organizations can do far more to unleash the potential of people around the country, said Daley-Harris, if they would stop underestimating their own members. "We need to dissolve the pervasive powerlessness and resignation in our culture," he said, and that means asking more of people, not less.

Happy Independence Day.

[David Bornstein](#) is the author of "[How to Change the World](#)," which has been published in 20 languages, and "[The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank](#)," and is co-author of "[Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know](#)." He is a co-founder of the [Solutions Journalism Network](#), which supports rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.

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