

**UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research
Policy Studies Department**

PS 238
Community Organizing and Democracy

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 2:30-4:00, or by appointment.

Description:

This course explores the kind of political action known as community organizing.

Though it is meant to be useful to those considering becoming organizers or working with community organizing groups, this course is *not* primarily a “how to” course on how organizers should act in order to be most effective. Rather, it focuses on larger theoretical issues involving what organizing is for, why it’s worth studying, what kinds of issues regularly arise for those practicing it, and what its limits as a form of political activity might be.

Central topics include:

(1) Organizing and democratic theory. What is democracy? What is citizenship? What kinds of politics can give political power and a sense of civic agency to ordinary citizens?

(2) Ethics. Is the whole idea of “organizing a community” offensive to those who already live in a place and have their own ways of doing things? How does an organizer get around this? Must a good organizer use modes of persuasion that shade over into manipulation or trickery?

(3) Culture. Should an organizer be culturally similar to those organized? If so, why? If not, how should he or she deal with cultural differences? Is cultural solidarity a long-term goal, or a short-term resource to be used with the idea of ultimately getting beyond race and ethnicity towards something more universal?

While the course itself will focus on readings and will be mostly theoretical—course grading will be based *exclusively* on oral and written work rather than on outside organizing activity—practical lessons will be presented by actual organizers invited as guest lecturers.

Requirements:

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| 1. Participation, inc. 1 short (5-10 minute) presentation | 10% |
| 2a. Option I: three short (4-6 pp.) papers. | 60%: 15%/20%/25% |
| 2b. Option II: short paper plus long (15pp.) paper: | 60%: 15%/45% |
| 3. Take-home Final Exam: | 30% |

This course is limited to graduate students.

The in-class presentation requirement will be waived if enrollment exceeds twenty (20) students. Participation will count 10 percent in any case.

Readings:

Books (available in LuValle bookstore):

Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Random House: 1989 [1946]).

Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage: 1971).

Robert Moses and Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1965).

Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995).

Peter Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1993).

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (Anchor Books/Doubleday).

Other readings are included in a coursepak available from:

Course Reader Material: 1141 Westwood Blvd, (310) 443-3303.

I. Introduction (1 class)

9/26

II. The Basics (4 classes, 2 weeks).

An introduction to the work of Saul Alinsky, the founding "saint" and key theoretician of community organizing.

Questions: what is the point of community organizing? To what problems does it respond? What are its goals? What assumptions does it make about human nature and society? What can community organizing *not* accomplish? Why might contemporary "activists" find it frustrating and is their frustrating justified?

A. Empowerment

10/1-10/3

Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, all.

B. Discipline and its Discontents

10/8-10/10

Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, all.

III. Associations and Pluralism (1 week)

10/15-10/17

The ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville, whom Alinsky often named as his favorite political theorist and whose work is central to all contemporary discussions of “civic engagement” and “civil society.”

Questions: what are civic associations for? Is the point of associational life to make people more responsible citizens of existing institutions, prone to challenge or defy existing institutions, or a little of both? Are some kinds of associations, or some ways of associating, better than others?

A. Association and Political Opposition. 10/15

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, selections from Vol. I:

Part I, Chaps. 4-5 (pp. 58-98—skim as necessary for main points);
Part II, Chap. 4 (189-195); small section of Chapter 5 (235-245).

B. Associations vs. Individualism 10/17

Tocqueville, selections from Vol. II:
Part II, Chaps. 1-8 (503-530), 14 (539-541);
Part IV, Chaps. 1-3 (667-674), and Appendix Z (p. 735).

IV. Catholic social thought (1 week).

10/22-10/24

An examination of the Catholic social thought tradition, which (somewhat surprisingly to some students) has been the most hospitable of all major ethical and religious traditions when it comes to accepting the ideas of community organizing.

Questions: how is the Catholic social thought tradition different from major ideologies or ways of thinking that most Americans are familiar with? Consider (1) the role of “the human person” and how this concept differs from “individualist” ideas of personhood; (2) the role of small-scale property (as opposed to large-scale capitalism *and* collectivism) in fulfilling human needs; (3) the role of explicitly spiritual considerations in grounding views of human dignity.

Readings: *Rerum Novarum* and *Centesimus Annus* (coursepak)
(1 session of discussion on these)

Guest speaker TBA (1 session)

FRIDAY, Fourth week of class: FIRST SHORT PAPER DUE, 5 p.m., 10/26
6355 Public Policy Bldg.

V. Class politics and populism (1 week).

10/29-10/31

If one wing of the organizing movement adopted a “Christian democratic,” Catholic-influenced perspective, others have turned Alinsky’s ideas in a more “radical,” socialist or Marxist direction.

Questions: to what extent are radicals like Delgado building on the Alinsky tradition as opposed to rejecting it? To the extent that they are rejecting it, are they right? Is there a tension between “majoritarian” political strategies and economic programs that stress the needs of the poorest members of society?

Gary Delgado, *Organizing the Movement: The Roots and Growth of ACORN* (Temple Univ. Press, 1986), 39-210.

Guest speaker: TBA (1 session).

VI. Organizing as Political Education (1 week).

11/5-11/7

An examination of civil rights organizing in the Jim Crow south, with a focus on organizer/educators (Septima Clark, Ella Baker).

Questions: what were/are the similarities and differences between the kinds of organizing Payne describes and the Alinsky model? Was the Mississippi organizing tradition less manipulative than Alinsky’s type? Less confrontational? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

Charles M. Payne, , *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*,

Chaps. 3, 8-9, 11-13, pp. 67-102, 236-283, 317-390.

Monday, November 12: Veterans’ Day (no class).

VII. Cultural Integration or the Politics of Identity? (1 week).

11/14

Democracy—and organizing—can be seen as having either the goal of integrating everyone into a common civic culture, or as challenging the dominant culture in the name of particular identities. The “cultural pluralist” tradition on which Alinsky drew was based on a middle ground of letting people keep their cultural particularities but putting them aside for the purpose of common, mostly economic goals.

Questions: why do both Skerry and Alinsky reject cultural pluralism? What role does culture and/or ethnicity play in each of their books? How does each portray the nature of Alinsky organizing and its role in future democratic politics? Who’s right?

Peter Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), Chapters 5 and 6 (pp. 131-215).

Gary Delgado, *Beyond the Politics of Place: New Directions in Community Organizing in the 1990s* (Berkeley: Chardon Press, 1997)—out of print; whole book (87 pp.) photocopied and included in sourcebook.

FRIDAY, Seventh week of class: SECOND SHORT PAPER DUE, 5 p.m., 6355 Public Policy Bldg.

11/16

VII. Quiet Progress in Dark Times (1 week).

11/19-21

Questions: How does Moses portray the goals of the Algebra Project and math literacy more generally? On what grounds can he argue that the Algebra Project represents the “spirit of Ella [Baker]”—even though the former lacks the political content of the latter’s work? Is the form of the teaching in some sense more important than the content? Is the content of the Algebra Project more radical than it seems?

Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, selections TBA.

Jeffrey Isaac, “The Algebra Project and Democratic Politics,” *Dissent* 46, No. 1 (Winter 1999): 72-79.

Guest speaker TBA

IX. Policy Applications and Student Topics.

11/26-11/28

Readings from Archon Fung and others.

VIII. Pathologies of Organization: A Counsel for Inaction? (1 week).

12/3-12/5

The “rational choice” tradition in political science and economics focuses on the costs of organizing rather than its benefits. In particular, it stresses that people tend to “free ride”—to want to benefit from the achievements of political organizations without participating in them—and that this means political representation will be systematically distorted.

Questions: What is Olson’s argument? What are the implications for organizing if he is right? Should his arguments make us question the whole idea of organizing? How do King and Walker’s findings challenge Olson’s argument, and how might organizers build on them?

Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, all.

David C. King and Jack L. Walker, Jr., “The Origins and Maintenance of Groups.” In Jack L. Walker, Jr., *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions, and Social Movements* (Michigan, 1991), 75-102 (handout).

FRIDAY, Last week of class:

12/7

THIRD SHORT PAPER DUE, 5 p.m., 6355 Public Policy Bldg.

(or)

LONG PAPER DUE, same time and place.