

Measuring People Power In 2020+

KEY SURVEY AND RESEARCH FINDINGS



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Mobilisation Lab equips advocacy campaigners and their organisations to break through and win in the networked age with transformative, participatory and creative approaches to social change.



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The Climate Advocacy Lab's mission is to help the climate community build grassroots power and win through evidence-based advocacy.

In the 2010s, people-powered movements and advocates disrupted the status quo en masse around the globe. But large numbers are not enough to create systemic change. As we enter into a new decade, there is a need to more consistently and innovatively measure people power, and in doing so, transform our organizations' reach and impact.

In the most exhaustive study of its kind to date, MobLab and 13 other organisations heard from more than 500 social change practitioners and leaders across the global non-profit world. How can organisations measure the depth and value of people's engagement and participation? What indicators can you use to assess grassroots power building, organising, and volunteer initiatives? Through research, consultations, and a global survey, the resulting report offers a baseline for how organisations are measuring people power today, and reveals where more attention is needed to accurately reflect the power of people coming together for change.

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See the Appendix for a full list of the partners, allies, and advisors that made this project possible.

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Executive Summary

You are not alone: adequately measuring people power is a global problem

- More than 500 individuals and organisations participated in the Measuring People Power survey, offering many rich, long-form answers. Respondents represent over 170 organisations ranging from grassroots groups to global Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs).
- There remain a few important, regional blindspots as noted in the methodology section.
- Nevertheless, respondents represent a huge cohort trying to answer the questions of power building and measurement, and nobody has it exactly figured it out. But this study did surface clear ways to improve and intriguing paths forward.

The report is a serious wake-up call for social change practitioners

- In the 2010s, people-powered organising and campaigning disrupted the status quo and produced change across the world. Yet as we enter a new decade, thought leaders, emerging movements, community organisations, and established (NGOs) alike all struggle to accurately measure the power and impact of people-powered campaigning.
- Without these metrics, or even a shared understanding of what power is or what it looks like in the world, decision-makers are holding back from investing in people-powered strategies.
- In other cases, the lack of metrics is impeding our ability to assess what is working and build deeper and broader power.

Tracking online metrics is now the norm — but those metrics are imperfect

- In the early days of digital campaigning and organising, convincing practitioners to pay attention to key metrics was a significant hurdle. Decades later, this is no longer the case.
- 91% of respondents reported tracking list size and open rates of email sent to membership lists.
- More than half said they paid “enough or too much” attention to such metrics in their work.
- The problem is that “vanity metrics” like these measure overall numbers but fail to capture the value of relationships or the more complex value of people power. And there is a risk of the pendulum swinging too far in the other direction and organisations paying too much attention to imperfect metrics.

Most respondents measure the breadth of their efforts, but fewer adequately track depth or progress toward mission.

- We found a widespread adoption of metrics like list size and total petition signatures—and that’s a good thing! But these metrics primarily capture the breadth of efforts to engage more people.
- Fewer respondents reported measuring the depth of people’s relationship with an organisation, with one another, or with a cause.
- And almost all respondents struggled to measure how breadth and depth interplay to produce progress toward fulfilling an organisation’s goals.

Measuring supporter engagement and network strength is the most obvious opportunity for improvement

- A number of respondents are looking at ways to quantify the “depth” of relationships: how engaged and connected their supporters and allies actually are. These approaches try to measure people’s capacity, energy, network ties, and level of engagement with a cause. They take the focus off vanity metrics and put it on the relationships, network ties, and distributed leadership that are essential to people power.
- Most can be replicated without significant new research or technology. If more organisations and movements adopted these measurements, it would mark a significant leap toward effectively valuing people power.
- One word of caution: these measurements all rely on the theory that strong networks and deep engagement results in more power. That’s a sound assumption, but it means these approaches are still more of a proxy for people power than an actual measurement of people power.

A few approaches are worthy of more investigation

- There are potential new avenues to measuring people power, albeit ones that need more investigation. These approaches either tied people power directly to progress toward an organisation’s mission or captured the value of people power in a way that decision-makers can readily understand.
- Unfortunately, only a few respondents noted experimenting with such approaches, and there is more work to do before they can be easily adopted across the globe.

There are barriers—both practical and conceptual—to better measuring people power

- The challenge of measuring people power isn’t for lack of effort. Respondents identified common barriers to effective measurement. Some are practical, like simply capturing data in people-powered contexts. Others require more thought, such as deciding whether qualitative or quantitative approaches are the best way to measure people-powered strategies. The report includes our own set of research questions that could point the way forward.



Introduction



“New technologies are enabling activists to connect, communicate, raise money, and engage in collective action at previously unimaginable speeds and scales. The rise in social-movement moments around the world demonstrates the growing ability of ordinary people to challenge power — as seen in actions like the Women’s Marches and March for Our Lives in the United States and campaigns for action on climate change and democracy around the world.”

Michael Silberman
MobLab

What is people power, and why measure it?

From Occupy Wall Street to the Movement for Black Lives and the #MeToo movement, global climate strikes, uprisings in Hong Kong and more, the last decade was one of people power. It was also a decade where small grassroots groups, distributed movements, and major NGOs alike devoted more time and energy to adapting people-powered strategies to their particular contexts.

For decades, many social change practitioners operated on the assumption that well-funded, well-organised and tightly controlled change-making institutions were essential to building and exercising power. There has always been an alternative theory, however—one that gained currency in the last decades of growing access to the internet and social media: people power.

People, acting individually and collectively, have the power to create positive change in the world. A **“people powered” campaign or NGO organises, mobilises and supports people to create and lead change by providing the training, opportunities and tools needed to be successful change-makers.** When more people have the resources to take smart risks, work collectively, and act courageously, we build broader, more powerful movements together.

As people-powered campaigning took off over the last ten years, many stakeholders took notice of the benefits. People power allowed individuals and organisations to operate at a far greater scale and to achieve far greater impact. Just as importantly, it changed the way campaigners relate to supporters.

Counting up the number of donors or the number of viewers of a television broadcast would no longer suffice—nor would translating that logic into the digital era by counting email addresses or the number of likes on social media. In people-powered movements,



SURVEY PRE-RESEARCH:

Over the course of six months in 2019, we conducted 22+ hours of one-on-one sessions with thought leaders, experts, and researchers.

At the same time, we conducted a landscape review of existing research and practises in supporter engagement and impact assessment.

[See the full report and appendix for more details.](#)

supporters are more than just numbers to be counted; they're real people with unique talents and gifts ready to contribute to making change. Traditional ways of measuring support failed to capture the true strength of groups of diverse, connected people acting together.

Our survey pre-research confirmed this deep and abiding interest in people power. Unfortunately, it also revealed major challenges:

1) The whole notion of people power stumbles upon definitions of “power” and theories of how it works in practice.

Too often, we mistake power for resources: brand awareness, list size or total number of supporters, social media following and, above all, money. But research shows that small, critical masses of committed, organised, and vocal people are generally more powerful than larger, less engaged groups in creating social and policy change. A smaller number of more difficult actions — for instance, phone calls instead of petition signatures¹ — can convey more seriousness and thus exert greater influence on policymakers². Similarly, the strength of attitudes often matters more than the breadth of public opinion support.

To make matters more complicated, “impact” is not one-size-fits-all. Since every organisation or campaign will have different goals, power (and thus its measurement) will look different in every context. To help sort through these concepts, we completed an in-depth review of existing frameworks for understanding power, presented in detail in our [full Research Report](#).

We identified a number of frameworks that guide effective community organising and movement building as well as research that helps identify “likely activists” and what motivates people. We found research that analyses the interplay of movements and social tipping points, pointing out the dynamics of popular support and engagement that favour systemic change.

The biggest takeaway of our pre-survey research was a need to move toward understanding power as a dynamic force rooted in an organisation's theory of change and goals.

2) The underlying confusion over power makes it much harder to argue for investing in growing people power.

At the end of the day, many organisations still operate on the assumption that greater financial resources will produce more power and more real-world impact. Fundraising is fundamental—and the winning argument for investing in engaging supporters is often that it will benefit, or at least not hurt, fundraising efforts.

¹ Bergan, D. E., & Cole, R. T. (2015). Call Your Legislator: A Field Experimental Study of the Impact of a Constituency Mobilization Campaign on Legislative Voting. *Political Behavior*, 37(1), 27–42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-014-9277-1>

² Cluverius, J. (2017). How the Flattened Costs of Grassroots Lobbying Affect Legislator Responsiveness. *Political Research Quarterly*, 70(2), 279–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916688110>. This paper also finds that volume of contact actually doesn't matter: quality over quantity.

Decision-makers and budget holders recognise that people power is producing real change in the world at large, but they worry that shifting focus internally will hurt their own fundraising efforts. In fact, our survey reveals that senior decision-makers see themselves as more supportive of people-powered strategies than non-senior level practitioners consider them to be, which suggests that there may be an unstated divide within many organisations.

3) If anecdotal evidence isn't enough, stakeholders need more tangible measurements of the value of people power.

In the absence of such measurements, they will continue to struggle to make the case for investing time and energy in new strategies. Measuring effectiveness is a challenge for most organisations. Our pre-survey research found that organisations were most likely to track metrics for new programs or projects, rather than established ones. This points to the need to be intentional about finding ways to measure existing programs, and also the potential for a double standard where new, people-powered initiatives must meet a higher standard for clear, actionable metrics.

To make matters more difficult, our research revealed that most established tracking and measurement systems don't properly capture the dynamics and value of people-powered campaigning. While most organisations have developed sophisticated systems for tracking financial donations from supporters, there remains a marked lack of metrics that quantify and value other important contributions.

By “measuring people power,” we mean putting into helpful numbers the non-fundraising contributions made by those who support us:

- What can you accomplish thanks to the actions of “your people”: members, volunteers, activists, social media followers, email lists, or community members?
- How can we measure this beyond “vanity metrics” such as list size or number of “likes”, which may be easy to measure, but not actually meaningful?
- What measurements truly reflect power, the ability to create the social change called for by our missions?

These questions are at the heart of this report. Our full survey results make plain the scale of the challenge to putting people power at the heart of social change strategies. Yet it also reveals intriguing potential paths forward that provide hope these obstacles are not insurmountable.



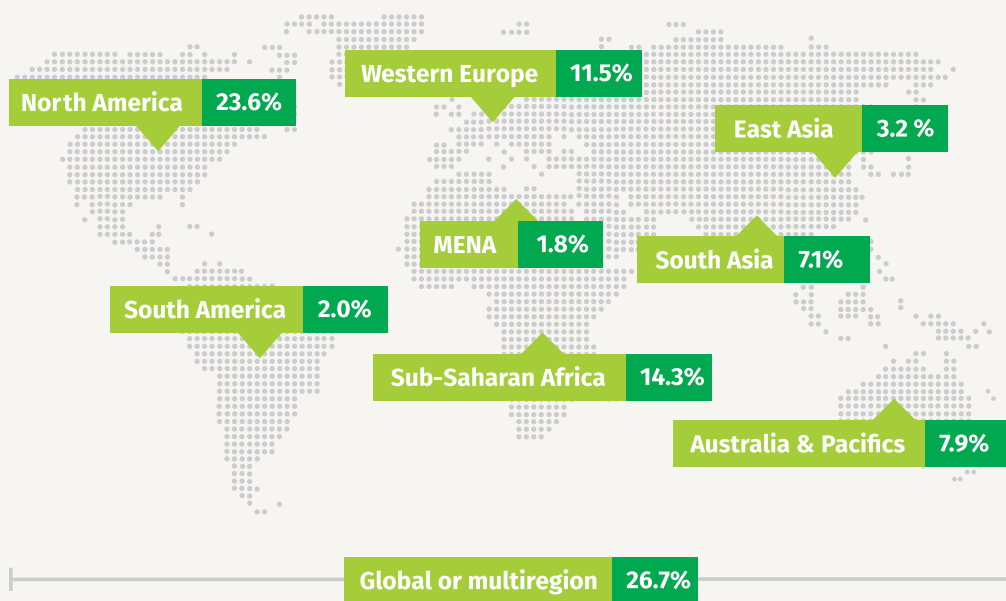
Methodology

From 14 August – 28 September 2019, MobLab and 13 other organisations launched a global survey to learn how practitioners and leaders across the non-profit world currently grapple with measuring people power. We sought participants in the survey via snowball sampling, first by tapping the networks of social change practitioners known to MobLab, the Climate Advocacy Lab, and our partners on this project.

Out of a concern that NGO communities in Europe and North America would be over-represented, we then conducted additional focused follow-ups to increase participation from often under-represented regions of the world. To make sure that we were getting a full portrait of people-powered approaches, we consciously attempted to contact groups that are quite diverse in issue area, size, and organising tactics as well as location. [See Research Report for complete notes on Survey Methodology.](#)

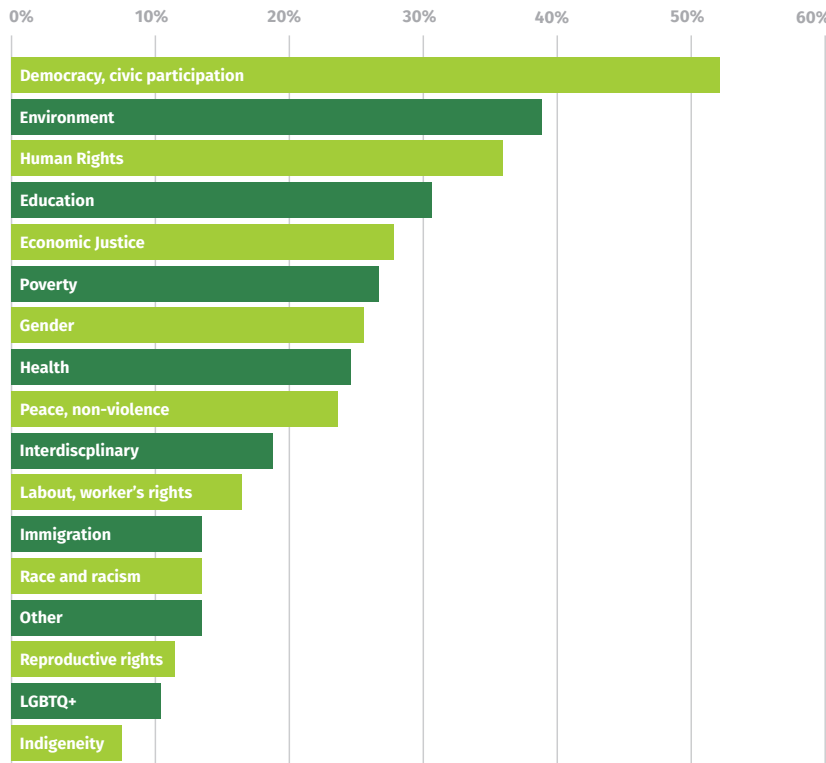
The final set of survey respondents included 500 people from at least 177 distinct organisations in 11 global regions. Groups working globally (132), in North America (117), Sub-Saharan Africa (71) and Western Europe (57) made up major concentrations of respondents. Notable global ‘blind spots’, from which we received no responses, included mainland China and Russia as well as certain conflict zones such as Syria, where reporting publicly on people-powered campaigning carries serious risks.

Regional distribution of organisations using people powered approaches

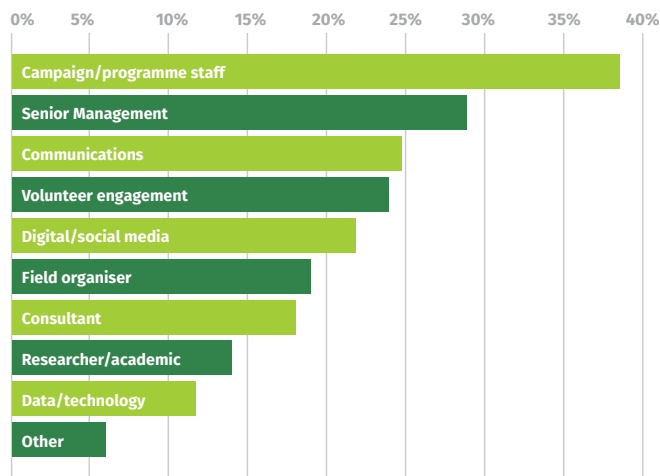


Respondents came from organisations of vastly different sizes. We received 75 responses from groups with over a million supporters, 150 responses from groups with 25 000 to a million and 275 responses from groups with under 25 000 supporters. We also drew respondents from multiple issue verticals and from a diversity of positions within NGOs and campaigning organisations:

Respondents' issue areas



Respondent roles in their organisations



We collected both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data painted a picture of which measurement approaches were most frequently used and to what extent. In the many detailed long-form qualitative answers, respondents described measurement approaches in greater detail while also revealing what they found was challenging or absent from current measurement practices.

Survey Results



Our pre-survey research confirmed just how important it is to measure people power—and just how hard it is to do so accurately. The full survey shows that the social change sector is actively exploring these questions but that no one has yet come up with great answers.

The survey revealed three notable clusters of measurement approaches. First are those approaches which primarily focus on metrics like list size, social media followers, or the number of likes or actions taken. Such “vanity metrics” (at best) show the breadth of an organisation’s reach with supporters or via various forms of media. The second cluster of “nuanced approaches” attempt to measure the depth of supporters’ engagement with the organisation, each other, and a social cause. The last cluster includes “points of light:” a handful of intriguing potential paths forward in measuring people power and progress toward mission.

1 Breadth: “Vanity Metrics”

What are these approaches?

The first set of approaches will be familiar to almost anyone who has worked in social change because they are the dominant set of practices that surfaced in our survey. These approaches all attempt to capture the breadth of support in gross numbers of people or actions taken:

- Many organisations track the gross numbers of supporters signed up to mailing lists or considered as members. Many others focus on response numbers, tracking low-barrier supporter actions such as petition signatures, email open rates and click throughs. Different social media platforms all have their equivalents, from the total number of followers and likes to the number of impressions, views, likes, retweets, comments or responses to various posts.
- The same general assumption—greater numbers equals greater power—is being applied in other ways. For instance, some respondents noted that they measure social media or cultural visibility and press mentions on the theory that volume will translate into policy wins ³. Organisations track media mentions, monitor conversations happening across society (including “social listening” analysis online, such as on Twitter), conduct automatic sentiment analysis of articles and posts, along with broad tracking of the frames and narratives in circulation to make sense of issues the organisations worked on.
- In a similar vein, some respondents are attempting to map “external impacts.” These approaches try to capture the value of people power by measuring an organisation or movement’s impact, instead. For instance, they might track external success criteria from public opinion to election results and policy change. In essence, these approaches measure the effect of people power, rather than people power as its own thing.

“The answer we are seeking is binary – yes or no. Did the target move? Was the change achieved? And then we tie ourselves up in knots worrying about the potential for attributability, rather than getting out there and seeking what change we can make.”

Respondent in senior management with a global animal welfare NGO

³ Greater volume of policymaker contact does not translate into greater success: Cluverius, J. (2017). How the Flattened Costs of Grassroots Lobbying Affect Legislator Responsiveness. *Political Research Quarterly*, 70(2), 279–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916688110>

How many respondents are using these approaches?

- Over 91% of respondents reported tracking “list size and open rates”
- More than 50% of this segment indicated that this was already being done “enough or too much” in their groups / organisations
- 16.8% of respondents referred to studying external impacts (including public opinion, vote share, campaign success, etc.) as the “most promising” measurement approach they had seen in their long-form answers
- 6% described approaches which tracked media coverage and digital mentions generated by campaigns

What are the benefits and challenges with these approaches?

- **Ease of use.** Size and impact measurement approaches are relatively easy to deploy and are built into most contact relations management (CRM) software or digital marketing tools. For traditional media and digital impact tracking, some investment in services or tools is also necessary.
- **Impressive, accessible numbers.** In general, these systems generate impressive numbers and, in theory, evidence of impact. These numbers are easy to understand, even for peers and decision makers who are not less familiar with people-powered strategies.
- **Lack of actionable insights.** The flip side of measurements that are easy to track and understand is that they can also fail to capture the complexity of people-powered campaigning. For instance, the total number of petition signatures does not tell you how committed people are to the organisation’s mission. Numbers like these lack information about what factors contributed to success or failure, and thus make it hard to learn or improve.
- **Attribution dilemmas.** Press coverage or social media mentions could be an indicator of the general news environment rather than the strength of a movement’s network of people. Even with concrete policy wins, it can be hard to disentangle the contributions of people-powered strategies from other factors that also had an impact. Was people power the main reason for victory, or simply one of many? What made those people so powerful in this instance? With vanity metrics, the true strengths and weaknesses of a strategy are obscured. In fact, it is possible to achieve many of these metrics without engaging people power at all!

For a full treatment of these approaches above and related use statistics, please download the complete Research Report [here](#).

For more on vanity metrics, what they are, their pitfalls, and how to avoid them, see our report, “Beyond Vanity Metrics: Toward Better Measurement of Member Engagement” [here](#).

Depth: Nuanced engagement and community-centred approaches

“Counting (growth in) active volunteers/supporters in each level of our engagement pyramid (leading, owning, contributing, supporting), and counting active and functioning groups working on our campaign issue ... is promising mainly because it focuses more on collective organisational capacity than on achieved policy change. This has helped shift our entire strategy towards building people power (organising) rather than lobby and mobilising efforts.”

- Joep Karskens, Digital organiser with Friends of the Earth Netherlands.

What are these approaches?

The second cluster of approaches skips “vanity metrics” that track breadth and outcomes. Instead, these approaches dig deeper into the supporter base. They look at the commitment and energy of supporters, the quality of relationships and network ties, and the capacity of people to lead campaign work. This set of approaches includes the following subsets:



- **Psychographic characteristics of supporters.** Psychographic research focuses on the attitudes and preferences of consumers or supporters, not just behaviors. In simpler terms, these approaches track the happiness or sense of empowerment (known in psychology as “efficacy” beliefs) of supporters. Surveys and other listening techniques are common tools for psychographic tracking.
- **Supporter behaviour over time, or supporter engagement levels.** There are many models of supporter engagement levels, often referred to as “ladders” or “pyramids” of engagement. All attempt to represent stages of actions that supporters could progress through—for instance, from an initial petition signature to leading a local chapter. A related but distinct method tracks the number and frequency of actions over time to gain a sense of whether support is fleeting or sustained.
- **Health of relationships.** Some of these approaches are relatively straightforward; for instance, tracking the number of one-to-one meetings or conversations supporters were having with organisers from the organisation. In other cases, organisations attempted to assess the social networks among supporters or evaluate the relationships and sense of community in places where they operate.

- **Network and community-building as a function and or benefit of people-powered organising.** These approaches try to measure the network ties and community-building benefits of people-powered organising. The core idea is that long-term relationships matter as much as short-term outcomes. Trusted relationships are essential to building long-term power that can then be activated in key moments, and to achieve more significant change. These approaches measure, for instance, whether events built deeper social ties or community—not just how many events there were or whether they received press attention.
- **Distributed leadership development and structural strength.** Almost all of the approaches above try to get a handle on how people respond to some kind of stimulus from an organisation or their peers. But this last subset of approaches tries to measure the strength of decentralised networks and autonomous groups acting in concert. For instance, respondents discussed tracking supporters reaching out to them unprompted and taking or leading actions without direction as indicators of these forms of people power.

How many respondents are citing these approaches?

- A majority of respondents indicated that they measured, or were aware of, some form of supporter engagement beyond list size and open rates.
- Many also indicated, however, that there was “some / not enough” deployment of these approaches in their groups or organisations. It appears that many are just beginning to implement these systems or only implementing pieces of them.

CASE STUDY



Refocusing on cultivating leaders

with Joep Karskens, Friends of the Earth Netherlands Digital Organiser

Friends of the Earth Netherlands traditionally focused on growing their supporter base by recruiting for one-off events—for instance, petitions or single actions—while neglecting longer-term leadership development and the creation of enduring local teams. But as they engaged more people than their staff could manage on their own, and with a desire to build long-term power across the ups and downs of individual campaigns, they began a process of refocusing their work—and what they measure.

Today, Friends of the Earth Netherlands is in the process of **refocusing the measurement of their organising work around long-term movement building** and away from a practice of mobilising people just for specific campaigns. This involves recruiting activists for longer periods of time through community organising and large-scale online recruitment efforts and investing in relational skills to build collective capacity. The organisation began focusing on those at the higher levels and supporting local leaders who can organise activities, such as door-to-door canvassing, around the country. This has led them to focus on measuring volunteer activities at the higher levels of their engagement pyramid and the number of durable local affiliate groups.

For example, in addition to goals centred on the total number of people in their pyramid, staff aim to grow a certain number of leaders—those with whom they are in touch on a regular basis—as well as local groups, each with a volunteer leader and volunteer canvassers.

Focusing on leaders dramatically changed campaign tactics. Staff needed to ensure that calls to action had meaningful opportunities to develop leadership attached to them. Instead of focusing exclusively on petition drives, they had to allocate time to train and grow leaders who could build groups and then lead their own canvassing, recruitment, and engagement work.

This strategic shift towards people power was initiated by Joep's former head of organising, inspired by scholar Marshall Ganz's "snowflake model" of organising. It was people in the middle tiers of their organisation, who started experimenting with different approaches. Their revised pyramid categories, based on the work of political scientist Hahrie Han, has been easily integrated into work across the organisation because it readily applies to the work of different departments, including fundraising, marketing, organising.

While it has been too early to integrate these metrics into comprehensive evaluation, the process has spurred reflection within the organisation and greater attention to their efforts to recruit and retain leaders over time.

What are the benefits and challenges with these approaches?

- **A window into relationships.** Human beings are social creatures, so any measurement of people power should factor in the existence and strength of relationships. In other words, measurement approaches that focus on engagement, distributed leadership, as well as network and community building are much more attuned to the dynamics and outputs of people-powered campaigns. Unlike vanity metrics, these approaches show what portion of supporters are engaged in a campaign and to what degree.

- **Inform better strategies.** Measures of engagement and network ties largely avoid the vanity metrics trap: they paint a picture about the health of a community or network ties, not just what that community accomplishes. That means these measurements can help organisations continuously improve how they are building relationships with and among supporters in pursuit of more power.
- **A place to start.** Most organisations could benefit from at least one of the above approaches—and most of the measurements described above can be implemented relatively easily. Little new research is needed, unlike some of the promising but incomplete suggestions outlined below, and few of these approaches require major expenditures on new tools or staff time. Organisations seeking to do better at measuring people power can start here.
- **Less helpful in winning over skeptics.** These approaches assume that stronger network ties and relationships equal more power. They assume that an organisation already values strong relationships with supporters, and/or self-directed action, as part of its theory of change. But what if decision-makers are, instead, laser-focused on vanity metrics—or a theory of change that leaves out supporters unless they are donors? In that case, these metrics, which feel more intangible, may not help practitioners make the case for people-powered campaigning.
- **Depth and impact are not the same.** Ultimately, none of these approaches draw a direct line between the depth of engagement and campaign impacts. These approaches measure the capacity of supporters and the health and sustainability of campaign networks. Practitioners need additional evidence to weigh whether those factors lead to greater political influence or mission impact, strategies from other factors that also had an impact. Was people power the main reason for victory, or simply one of many? What made those people so powerful in this instance?

For a full treatment of these approaches above and related use statistics, please download the complete Research Report [here](#).



Intriguing paths forward: Value-capture and bespoke measurement approaches

What are these approaches?

One of the central challenges of the “depth” approaches above is that they measure all the things—network ties and relationships—that skeptics of people power already undervalue, and they cannot draw a clear, unequivocal line between deeper engagement and campaign goals.

The approaches below are interesting because they represent possible paths out of that thorny dilemma. Their potential power lies in how they communicate the value of people power in ways that decision-makers can understand, and they enlist both decision-makers and grassroots supporters together in forming measurements directly tied to campaign goals.

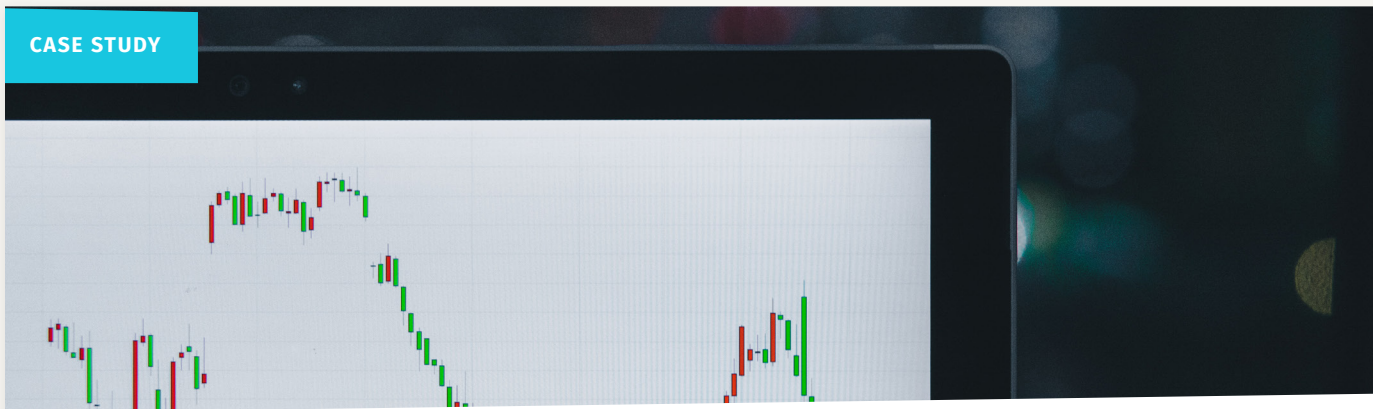
- **Capturing the numerical Return on Investment (ROI) of supporter time.** Measuring people power means measuring the value of all the time and energy that people pour into campaigns, not just the amount they donate. But what if you put a dollar value on that time and energy? That is what these approaches do, and the result shows the value of people power in a way that any decision-maker can instantly understand.

These approaches tracked how much time non-staff volunteers “donated” to campaigns and tabulated the equivalent value of this time, compared to paid staff time. In one case, an organisation found people power to be worth millions of dollars. In a separate study, the Corporation for National and Community service estimated the value of Americans’ 7.8 billion volunteer hours in 2015 to be worth USD 184 billion, for a total worth of USD 2.3 trillion over 14 years⁴.

- **Mission-driven bespoke measurement indicators.** One of the challenges to measuring people power is that power looks different in distinct contexts. Several respondents identified systems, such as the “Transformational Index Framework” and “Outcome Harvesting,” that meet this challenge head on.

These approaches help organisations and campaigners start with strategic goals and work backward to create bespoke measurement indicators. Often, the process includes dialogue with supporters so that they are helping formulate measurements of their own power. The result is a set of people-powered measurements—not just measurements of people power—that are tied to progress toward mission.

⁴ New Report: Service Unites Americans; Volunteers Give Service Worth \$184 Billion,” Corporation for National and Community Service: <https://www.nationalservice.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/new-report-service-unites-americans-volunteers-give-service-worth-184>



The value of “time donated” by supporters

with Geneviève Puskas, Équiterre

What happens when an organisation commits to logging all the time and effort that volunteer supporters pour into a campaign and adding up its equivalent in staff time? [Équiterre](#), a Canadian environmental NGO, did just that—and discovered a novel way to calculate the value of people power.

Geneviève Puskas and her colleague Marie-Eve Leclerc at Équiterre commissioned a new measurement system for their 2018 “Vire au vert” political mobilisation campaign. At the heart of this approach was a commitment to log the time and efforts invested in the campaign both in terms of staff hours throughout the campaign as well as detailed counts of every action performed by volunteers. This accounting covered everything from social media engagements to numbers of higher-barrier supporter actions such as writing letters to political candidates as well as attending or organising public events.

“One of our ‘a-ha moments’ was to score engagement levels based on the time it took to accomplish different actions.”

Geneviève Puskas
Climate Change and Energy Advisor
Équiterre

When all supporter actions were logged in these different categories, they were assigned scores according to the estimated amount of minutes it took to achieve each action. In this way, the system generated a total point/minute count for each type of activity performed, as well as a total count of minutes “donated” by supporters to move the campaign forward.

Using these scored action/minute counts, Équiterre was then able to divide all supporter-contributed minutes into hours and generate a ratio of volunteer time to staff time spent on campaign management that could be used as a benchmark against which to measure the efficiency of future campaigns.

Additionally, by taking the total number of donated volunteer hours, multiplied by a median staff hourly rate, Équiterre was able to arrive at an approximate dollar value equivalent for the donated supporter time and what it would have cost in paid staff hours.

Both of the outputs defined above clearly highlight the value of supporter efforts in people-powered campaigns in terms that most decision makers will easily understand. What's more, Geneviève Puskas reports that this measurement system helped the organisation understand what amounts of staff time will be required for people-powered campaigns in the future, an essential reference for strategic planning.

CASE STUDY



Linking measurements to goals

with Rachel Collinson with Unlock Democracy

The Transformational Index (TI) is a process for creating a bespoke measurement system that starts with the overall objectives an organisation is trying to achieve and uses them as reference points for creating performance indicators.

This approach was presented to us by Rachel Collinson, co-chair of Unlock Democracy, an organisation that works for a more accessible and representative political system for U.K. citizens.

In the TI process, usually led by a facilitator with experience leading this approach, an organisation works as a group looking at 56 different words or phrases that describe social or environmental impact. They cover both intended outcomes and also means of achieving them. The group then has to narrow down this list to around 5 key indicators. Using these, the organisation then defines measures that will concretely track progress towards each indicator. The goal is to find measures that are hard to manipulate, or achieve, simply through changing up short-term tactics that do not contribute to campaign objectives.

Key considerations for measuring indicators in the TI approach are that they track things that are precise steps towards outcomes, that the tracking process be feasible and also that the measurement draw upon gamification wherever possible to make tracking progress as stimulating for teams as possible.

"A measure is good if it is precise, practical and playful," - Rachel Collinson, co-chair of Unlock Democracy, citing a principle of the Transformational Index.

Because the Transformational Index is designed in such a way as to measure true progress towards organisational goals, it often reveals what is and what is not actually working. In Rachel's experience, the TI led Unlock Democracy to discover that one of their programs was not working and because of this, they were able to pivot away from it before they invested too much energy and resources.

What are the benefits and challenges with these approaches?

- **Demonstrate the value of people power.** Anyone trying to provide evidence for the wisdom of people-powered campaigning will be interested in calculating ROI in terms of time donated. Decision-makers may see an either/or choice between people power and the financial bottom line, but ROI measurements show how people power can radically expand capacity without blowing up the budget. This approach offers a clear, instantly understandable measurement of value. It also incorporates the fact that higher-impact tactics are often more time-consuming.
- **Tie measurements directly to people-powered impact.** The approaches in the first two clusters focus on measuring people power but struggle to capture how that power actually contributes to impact—that is, to progress toward a campaign's goals. Bespoke mission-driven systems stem directly from a group or organisation's core objectives and its theory of change, so indicators are undoubtedly relevant to ongoing work. Including supporters in the process also roots the measurements directly in people power.
- **ROI measurements aren't perfect.** ROI measurements keep the focus on money and the organisation's budget, instead of pushing people toward a different mentality that sees people power as inherently valuable on its own. In addition, any measurement that acknowledges that high-impact tactics take more time will better capture how people power contributes to achieving goals. But it is still possible to spend lots of time without accomplishing anything, so ROI may still not perfectly capture the interplay between people power and achieving campaign objectives.
- **Bespoke measurements are specific to each campaign.** The drawbacks of bespoke measurements are the flipside of their strengths. Because bespoke measurements are specific to any campaign or organisation, it is much harder to make cross-sector comparisons or identify benchmarks. Identifying and sharing what people-powered strategies are successful becomes a lot more difficult. In addition, if decision-makers are already skeptical of people power, their assumptions could lead to bespoke indicators that ignore people power altogether. Lastly, the major emphasis on finding clear, easily grasped metrics in these approaches could lead back into the dilemma that led to this report—people power is hard to measure!—and result in organisations settling on the same old metrics in the end, anyway.

For a full treatment of these approaches above and related use statistics, please download the complete Research Report [here](#).

More research is needed



This report is a waypoint along a long road of research and innovation that can improve the state of knowledge and practice in this area. It is certainly not the endpoint.

Below, we outline opportunities for research. But first, it is worth noting two obstacles to ongoing innovation:

1) Relevant data can be unavailable or challenging to assemble

Several respondents mentioned the difficulty of gathering and storing participation data. Supporter-led activities, by definition, are not always easy for campaigners to keep track of. Networks stemming from self-starting groups can become vast and complex, and supporter-led groups are voluntary and autonomous (to varying degrees). Actions that do not take place online—phone calls or in-person meet-ups—have always presented campaigners with a tracking challenge. Add the fact that it is neither wise nor easy make it mandatory to track all human activities in a centralised database, and it is no wonder that data capture is a measurement puzzle here.

“We can measure the number of organisers we train, and we may be able to keep in touch with some of them, but not all. And it’s hard to keep a record of the events or activities they do to mobilise others, the number of people they mobilise, and the layers of the onion beyond that. We are about to undertake our first deep dive into this, which we then plan to measure every 3-5 years.”

— Sarah Wiggins, Tearfund

2) Qualitative data offers as much, or more, than quantitative data

All of the approaches listed above try to quantify people power, at risk of losing sight of the holistic value that people-powered programs bring to social change work. Proponents of participatory and emergent measurement and reporting methods argue that only qualitative methods can capture that value. But qualitative data can be more time-intensive to collect, less precise, and more subtle in its interpretation—adding a new barrier to valuing people power, especially for larger organisations. And, like bespoke mission-driven measurements, qualitative data makes it harder to create benchmarks that allow groups to compare work and learn from one another.

“I don’t believe numbers/quantitative data are the best indicators of people power, although it’s a common approach (i.e. how many people have participated or are taking part in a movement). A more promising approach is to assess the ‘reactions’ or responses—including emotional, economic, and political—from different groups of people and organisations to a certain mobilisation.”

— Marina Martinez, Independent researcher and writer, and environmental-social justice activist

Recommendations for further research

Here are some of the unresolved questions that further investigation could help the field to address:

- Are there certain 'gateway' measurement practices that facilitate organisational adoption of yet more powerful measurement approaches?
- Are there certain measures that might serve as 'leading indicators' that a campaign or movement is succeeding in developing its people power? (For example, interest among activists to engage in one-to-one meetings with organisers may signal the breadth of leadership development potential among supporters.)
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) considerations were rarely discussed by respondents. What DEI principles and practices are relevant to measuring people power to ensure we build strong, representative, and just movements?
- Some respondents focused on measuring people, some on measuring tactics/events/ etc., and some on measuring outcomes and results. Under what circumstances are each of these levels of analysis appropriate, and how might measurement at each level be interrelated with the others to create comprehensive measurement systems?
- Diverse theories of change and engagement models likely call for appropriately designed measurement approaches. What needs to be different when measuring people power in the context of transformational organising versus transactional mobilising, and where might there universally applicable measurement considerations?
- Several respondents observed that quantitative approaches have limitations when it comes to measuring people power, and qualitative, consultatory, and narrative modes of data collection and interpretation are central. What may be optimal ways to combine the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methodologies for measuring people power?

Conclusion - The way forward

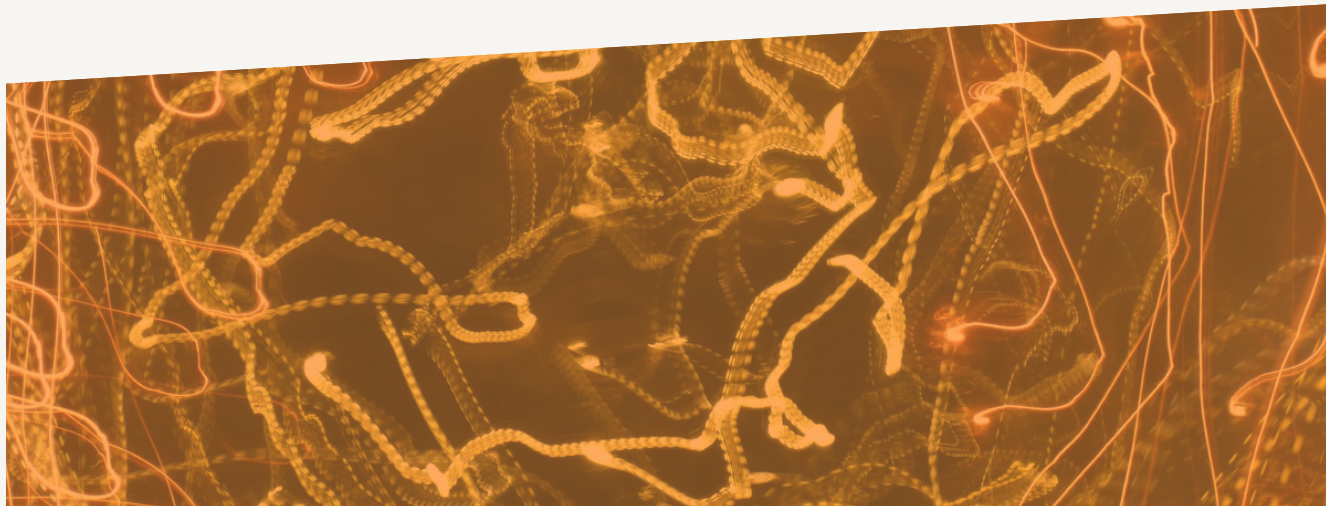


The holy grail of people power is a measurement that captures (a) the *breadth* of a campaign or organisation's reach, (b) the *depth* of sustained supporter engagement and leadership, and (c) the *impact* these factors have on achieving the mission. We suspected that there was not yet an approach quite that comprehensive, and the survey results back up this suspicion. In fact, few organisations are coming close to measuring the full value of people working together in concert.

That said, we learned a number of important lessons and identified clear bright spots showing potential progress. A few years ago, MobLab published a report calling for organisations to move “beyond vanity metrics,” and we outlined possible steps toward that goal. The Measuring People Power survey confirmed the continued relevance of that earlier study by reminding us how pervasive vanity metrics remain across our sector today. Yet it also showed a deep desire to move toward more accurate, relevant, and powerful metrics. Hundreds of passionate change-makers across the globe told us they’re pondering these questions and are ready to share wisdom and try new approaches.

Measuring people power is difficult, and not only for lack of investment, tools, or knowledge. We are trying to approximate the nuance, texture, and beauty of people working together collectively through numbers or equations. That is no easy task!

This survey shows that more investments, more decision-maker buy-in, and more innovation will be needed.



The survey results also remind us not to neglect other ways to show the value of people power. We can appeal to a rich history of people-powered victories, share case studies with peers, and simply listen to supporters, grassroots activists, and impacted communities and believe them when they say people power works. Stories of what works have influenced our species since the dawn of time, so they shouldn’t be overlooked in this context in the pursuit of a quantitative metric.

To get started measuring people power quantitatively, the **“depth” approaches are a meaningful place to begin.** There are a number of options to choose from above, and some might fit your context better than others. All share a common commitment to measuring power-as-relationship. People power relies on, well, people—so tracking how well you are engaging people and facilitating deeper relationships would be a big step forward for many organisations. We also learned that such metrics can still face resistance from decision-makers and investors who are laser-focused on vanity metrics or other theories of change.

We found a few enticing possibilities for meeting that challenge. Measuring the return-on-investment (ROI) of supporters' time can translate people power into a language many decision-makers understand. Going through a process of forming bespoke measurements tied to campaign goals can help engage decision-makers and grassroots supporters from the very beginning. These approaches are the ones we hope more organisations pick up and pilot—ideally in combination with other measurements, and with recognition of their shortfalls, as outlined above.

That brings us to a key finding: There might not be a one-size-fits-all measurement of people power. **What we might all be seeking is the right combination of measurements that approximate people power in our own specific work.** Power looks different in every context and in every campaign. What we surfaced above is a menu of potential options that could be combined in new and interesting ways to capture what people power looks like in different situations. Just like you need many ingredients to make a meal, we might need multiple measurements. And just like every human being has slightly different dietary requirements, the meal we each cook up may look different in different contexts.

So, we believe the path forward is threefold:

- **Build better cultures.** We need to build a consensus understanding of what different approaches actually measure, what they do not (or cannot) capture, and what assumptions underlie their use. We need to value measurements and accountability without becoming fixated on a handful of them to the detriment of long-term power-building. Practitioners need to push their teams and organisations to try out new approaches instead of relying on vanity metrics. Funders and decision-makers need to better grasp the nuance of various approaches and the perils of vanity metrics—and support staff and organisations who are experimenting with new measures and approaches.
- **Start somewhere.** We cannot let the pursuit of perfection prevent progress. For many organisations, depth approaches would be a marked improvement. Are they perfect? No. Are they better than vanity metrics? Absolutely. Other organisations might be positioned to experiment with some of the intriguing paths forward and share lessons learned with others. We should neither turn away from measurements, nor turn back to less-than-useful measurements, simply because no one has invented a magic elixir metric that captures the value of people power in every single context.
- **Combine approaches and keep innovating.** This report surfaced dozens of potential measurements you could use in combination to see what works for your organisation. And there are undoubtedly others that did not find their way into the survey—or have yet to be invented. Start with your vision of a better world, work

backward to your theory of change, and then look through the menu of options to find the set of measurements that best approximates people power in your mission. Keep innovating and keep testing new approaches—and share those with us so we can continue to help everyone learn from your amazing work.

- **This project offers a lay of the land.** It is a wake-up call that should show us how far the sector is from adequately valuing and measuring people power. It is also a resource guide for where to begin improving. Fundamentally, the questions that drove this report are still open. It is up to all of us to keep striving to understand how power is built and how we measure it. In the meantime, people power will continue changing the world around us.

Appendix

A)

Acknowledgements: Partners and Allies

This project was only made possible through collective effort, late night strategy sessions, and more cups of coffee than we can count. We are proud to be joined by over 170 organisations ranging from grassroots groups to global NGOs. Each contributed data, answered questions, and volunteered time to help make the Measuring People Power dataset rich and nuanced. More importantly, each of the changemakers and organisations brought unique perspectives to this work. We are deeply grateful to each and every one of them.

Collecting, coordinating, analysing and interpreting thousands of data points is no small feat. It requires keen eyes, open minds, humility, and collaboration. We are humbled and in awe of our Measuring People Power partners and allies.

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Each of these partners contributed a unique perspective. But of course, the most important way of looking is the one you bring. We hope you'll tell us about it: hello@mobilisationlab.org.

Any errors and shortcomings are our own, and the opinions expressed here represent those of the authors and not the consensus of our advisors.

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B) Three dimensions of measurement practice

Statistical modelling (via Principal Components Analysis and Exploratory Factor Analysis) of the survey responses related to change agents' current measurement practices identified two principal dimensions on which they tended to vary: a dimension that can be interpreted to represent the extent to which they engaged in "Core practices" of measurement, and a dimension of "Advanced practices"; several practices fit in both dimensions. This model served as an initial interpretive framework for the development of the typology described earlier in the report.

Core practices	Mixed practices	Advanced practices
Track basic/core metrics such as list size and open rate	Track retention rates or sustained or repeated activity over time by those engaged with you (such as rate of those on your lists taking action on a quarterly basis)	Track if people already involved with you have recruited others to be involved
Have a measure of the depth of people's involvement (that is, levels of observable activity or engagement beyond list size)	Track anything among those involved with you that predicts more involvement in the future	Measure the social networks among those involved with you (how many of your supporters/activists know each other, which supporters/activists know the most others, etc.)
	Track progression along a ladder of engagement, supporter journey, member lifecycle, or similar model of progress	Track the relationships you build through organising (such as their number, strength, diversity, or connection to each other)
		Track if people involved with you are spreading your messages (on social media, word of mouth, etc.)
		Predict, track, or account for burnout/overwork among volunteers or activists
		Look at how much money volunteers or activists save your organisation
		Survey or otherwise listen to those involved with you
		Rank or score those on your lists based on how involved they are or predicted to be
		Track the contacts your activists make with targeted decision makers