

Building Ties Between Movements and Parties: An Interview with Doran Schrantz

In the following interview with Columbia World Projects' Tom Asher, Doran Schrantz (Faith in Minnesota; The Organizing Lab) calls upon her experience as a longtime organizer and movement-builder to reflect on pathways for rebuilding civic culture and democratic capacities among elected officials and citizens. Discussing her recent work at Faith in Minnesota, Doran delves into the importance of and methodologies for injecting life into political parties by building points of tension and negotiation between communities and candidates.

This discussion was held in connection with Deliberation and Competition: Pathways for Renewing Democratic Participation, an April 2026 conference at the Harvard Kennedy School that explored distinct themes related to democratic renewal.

Tom Asher: Hi Doran. Let's get started. On the one hand, I am deeply interested in focusing on the institutions that connect communities to political parties. Here I mean unions, religious institutions, and civic organizations, many of which frankly play a greatly diminished role in civic life in the twenty-first century. Part of my concern is both their renewal but also the restoration of the functions they once played.

On the other hand, I am interested in how these organizations might connect to the party system in order to nurture a more vibrant politics, one that doesn't narrow participation to the act of voting but instead allows people to deliberate, to set agendas, and influence both ends of democratic institutions – that is, the goals they work toward – and also the means by which they pursue those goals. I'd love to think about how your work with ISAIAH and Faith in Minnesota suggests a path for realizing this ambition.

Doran Schrantz: Faith in Minnesota, our C4 entity in Minnesota, took a fairly significant journey through four electoral cycles: 2018, 2020, 2022, 2024.

Initially, we worked with vendors, knocked on a shit-ton of doors, and embraced a traditional model that if you door knock and use tools developed by political consultants, you'll be able to leverage the number of doors that you knocked on to gain power with elected officials.

We encountered two problems with this paradigm. One of them is that these metrics measure output of activities alone. I could pay a lot of people to knock on a lot of doors, and I could jack up the numbers hugely.

But A. Does that build impact? Do we have more power or influence at the end of that project? B. Is there more agency and ownership among the people we engage? C. Is there any governing power? Meaning, do I have more influence to be able to execute on the things that the constituency cares about because I attained those outputs?

And the answer, a lot of times, is “no.” So, after we did a couple of rounds with this approach, we realized we're further dislocated from the party, partly because the strategy was ineffective and partly because campaign finance laws basically make a wall between you and the party, where you and the candidates can't coordinate.

TA: Can you remind us of what you were doing? To what end were you organizing people? If this is 2018, you were probably active in the gubernatorial race?

DS: So, in 2018, we organized people predominantly through the precinct caucus process. This is an archaic still-in-place process that exists in the Democratic Farmer Labor Party. Even the words [DFL] imply a whole bunch of things about what the party is, and who is the party made of, and the coalition of constituencies presumed to influence the political system.

So, we still have the precinct caucus process for endorsing delegates. Rank-and-file members of the party must go to precinct caucuses [to show their support for candidates for major offices]. Delegates selected at the precinct level endorse candidates first at regional and district conventions and then at a state convention for the State Legislature. The system is a throwback to retail politics. And rank-and-file party members actually have to tussle with one another in real time to organize support.

If you don't win through this system, you can take your candidacy to a primary if you want in our system. If you don't get endorsed by the DFL party through this whole process I'm describing, and go through the primary instead, then you don't get the support and money from the party. That path becomes much more donor-dependent and marketing-dependent.

Our system is facilitative of organizing. So, in 2018, we sent 5,000 people into precinct caucuses, and then intentionally had them get elected to Senate district conventions. Our goal was to have an uncommitted block at the state convention.

So we have an agenda, even as we don't have a particular preferred candidate. Our primary loyalty is to ourselves and to what we want to see happen. Our second loyalty is to who we think would relate to us and engage us in a partnership. We care about how would they run their campaign. Would they relate to communities? And do they support aspects of our agenda? But very specifically, it was not a litmus test on policy agendas. We want candidates to run an

election that uses race-class narrative, and we want candidates to meet with communities, and we want candidates to organize their campaign relationally.

So, we negotiated with all the governor's candidates. We went to the state convention, we had an 11% uncommitted block at the state convention, and we swung the convention. It was a contested endorsement, and our bloc swung it.

But then we ended up not endorsing Tim Walz, so then he took it to a primary. And the person we ended up backing didn't win the primary, but we had all of this infrastructure in place, and we ended up building a very strong relationship with Tim Walz after the fact. He initially was mad at us. By now, we're BFF. It was a very powerful political relationship that we built with him.

After that, I was like, how do we translate that experience? Because the people who participated in this process went on an incredible journey. We had votes. We had process. We had decision making.

So we ended up cutting a deal with the party. We raise money into it, and then use that money to support our relational organizing. If a candidate commits to doing meetings in houses, town halls, and issue summits, then we orchestrate relational organizing strategies to try to persuade particular key constituencies to move into some negotiated alignment with the campaign.

TA: Can you get specific here and offer a concrete example of what you mean by relational organizing with key constituencies to achieve negotiated alignment?

DS: The most powerful example is drawn from the last cycle. There was this one legislative candidate who ran in a contested district. And he knew he was in trouble with Muslims and also with folks in manufactured home parks, who often voted MAGA. It's very working class: either apolitical or Republican, quickly drawn into populist right-wing issues and narratives.

So we had relationships with the mosques already, but we also hired an organizer who went into the manufactured home parks. We did door knocking. We pulled people into meetings. And we asked what do you guys actually care about? And what they care about is private equity buying the manufactured home parks because it's jacking up their rent. They are on fire about this issue.

Next, we staged negotiations between the teams and the people in these manufactured home parks and the candidate. We found a solution to this problem: a private equity rent cap. In turn, we asked the candidate would you support this in the state legislature? And would you fight for it? Then we also took him in rounds of small group meetings in the manufactured home parks and with the Muslim communities we also brought together 5,000 people in meetings in people's homes and in mosques. It wasn't just rah-rah pep rallies. It was tension-filled. Real

conversations. And he was willing to hold these conversations, and we were able to communicate that he engaged in this manner using teams in all these places who then did relational door knocking. It's not parachuting in consultants. It is people in the manufactured home park talking to their neighbors.

The upshot is that he outperformed Kamala Harris by 6 points, because a lot of those people did not vote at the top of the ticket for Kamala. So now, in this cycle, we're doing 7 legislative districts in alignment with the candidates who are like, "yes, I want to do that; I want to do it that way."

TA: What's the geographical distribution of those seven congressional districts?

DS: They tend to be in the suburbs. And they're more purple. The Democrats in safe districts have less need for this model. If you're an incumbent Democrat in a very blue district in Minneapolis, in some cases you might be barely campaigning. So what we're also mapping as an organization is what are the right legislative districts in which we need presence.

The result is that we are helping create conditions for what parties are supposed to be, which is alive. These are contested constituencies. You are negotiating. You're doing actual politics. Real politics is still happening, and by politics, I mean that in the small p sense: negotiation, persuasion, where you work out divergences of interests, and you build a governing agenda from that place.

And then you're taking mutual responsibility for advancing that agenda. That doesn't mean we agree about everything and it doesn't mean it's not sometimes messy, but that's what politics is. When people feel some agency in relationship to the party, and they feel like they've got a stake in it, and they're not just being door-knocked every four years, or sent 18,000 text messages to ask for \$5, you build a sense of ownership.

We don't have all the research to prove this, but that probably increases voter turnout. That probably increases people's participation. That probably increases their willingness to be identified with this thing called the Democratic Farmer Labor Party.

I think it's really important that Faith in Minnesota organized that, not the DFL. We're the bridge. We can create tension with the party. We can negotiate with it. People have an on-ramp that's not a partisan on-ramp into participation politically. We're building a bridge between constituents and political expression that produces an ongoing relationship with a policymaker who's supposedly representing them.

TA: And I suppose the outcome is a healthier, more responsive political party.

DS: Yes, and I'm very pro-party. I think parties are fundamental units. People sometimes get mad about partisanship, which is legit. But really, what I think people are mad about is their alienation from these entities.

The thing that's strong about the DFL in Minnesota, for all the complaints people have about it, is because it still has this semi-archaic system, which people are always trying to end, people critique it as inefficient. And complain that it's such a small group of people who participate in the caucus system. And observe that it is vulnerable to activists who can take it over. And that's true.

TA: It creates porosity and proximity. That's one way to think about it.

DS: Proximity! When our people were gonna determine the endorsement at the state convention, regular-ass people, some of whom had never voted, they were getting phone calls from Aaron Murphy, Tim Walz, Keith Ellison, and Amy Klobuchar. Everybody had to call them. Real conversations. So, that was mind-blowing to the people who participated in it, and it built a level of stakes, ownership, and urgency. People want to experience that they matter, and what they think matters, and so I think the party in Minnesota has an aliveness partially because of that system.

We see something similar in Wisconsin with [former party chair] Ben Wikler. They don't have the precinct caucus system, but he injected organizing structures into the party. He built pods and structures in which people have an on-ramp into a human-sized unit in the party that is about more than whether I vote or give money.

State parties are probably something we need to think about a lot more. What do strong state parties look like? Because that is a scale that people can participate in. How do you make sure that there are on-ramps for rank-and-file party people to participate, and then how are labor unions, churches, and civic institutions actually building on-ramps that use the party as our vehicle to negotiate our position and to negotiate with other critical constituencies in the state.

We need parties, but we need them to be alive.

TA: I love that formulation. I'm also interested in how you are navigating a moment of demographic change, in which you have these long-established coalitions of power, but also now new building blocks of power as evident with Minnesota's 5th Congressional District (where I grew up when I lived in Minnesota, now represented by Congresswoman Omar). It seems like this strategy is made for this moment of political transition.

DS: Yes. We built this in the context of Minnesota's significant and quick demographic change.

TA: Which is the Midwestern story right now.

DS: Yeah. So you got lots of Somalis, as the entire country knows now, as well as Hmong, and other immigrants of color, who have very, very different ethnic and cultural paradigms. And there's a bunch of challenges, on transgender issues, on public schools and charter schools, etc. And if there's no space to sort those things out, you get Dearborn.

So part of our path was to ask how do we create a legit, negotiated space for pluralistic orientation, a diversity of views? This is why you also can't have the litmus tests. When we did all the house meetings, what were the top issues and themes that we heard in our house meetings? The two top issues were Palestine and transgender rights.

And so, we were able to deflect that and reorganize those interests. To some extent, because we had this space, we had an agentic path forward, in which we could get partially to some of the things that we want and need, and we're negotiating about the rest, even as nothing's perfect in a pluralistic democracy.

TA: Just one other question. I'm thinking about the Dearborn case versus, say, the Hennepin County situation you're talking about. It seems like once you've nationalized a lot of these politics, as was the situation in Dearborn, all the strategies you've just identified are weakened. I don't know if that's true, but that would be my hypothesis.

DS: I think there's absolute truth to that. Because the Democratic Party is so nationalized, parties at the state level are hollowed out. So you've got a very nationalized marketplace that is about donors and whatever, and again, I'm not against people donating to parties, it's just there's no access point for a Muslim person in Blaine, MN, to have any entry point to that at all. So, all you get is Fox News versus this versus that, and the conversation you're having in your own community that is often very nationalized. The question becomes, can you counteract that dynamic at the local and state level? And I think the answer is "yes."

Why are people alienated from the Democratic Party? Maybe because parties are instead viewing everybody through the lens of modeling and data. They treat people like consumers of a marketing campaign. Why don't parties do politics with them instead?

TA: Politics has become an identity, and often a nationalized identity, rather than viewed as a process.

DS: I agree, which is also a problem in the progressive world. Politics happens in the divergence of interest. That is literally the reason for politics. Our interests diverge. What are we gonna do? We can't do an end-run around that process.

Doran Schrantz is the former executive director of ISALAH and Faith in Minnesota where she built what became the largest statewide multi-racial organizing institution in the country, recognized nationally as a model for how faith-rooted, broad-based organizing develops durable political power. Under her leadership, the organization grew to five distinct constituencies and became the backbone of Minnesota's 2023 legislative session delivering paid leave, childcare investment, housing, climate action, and a fairer tax code. She is currently a fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Civic Power Lab and the project director and founder of The Organizing Lab, a practice center that runs training programs and bootcamps for organizers and serves as the adoption engine for a practitioner-researcher consortium developing metrics and evaluation tools.

Tom Asher is the director of Research and Engagement at Columbia World Projects where he leads work to address democratic futures, responsive government, and civic infrastructure. Prior to joining CWP, Tom worked at the Social Science Research Council for a decade where he directed grant and fellowship programs to strengthen social science research capacity and networks across the world, including in Africa, Asia, and the United States. He currently serves on the NYC Civic Engagement Commission's Participatory Budgeting Advisory Board.