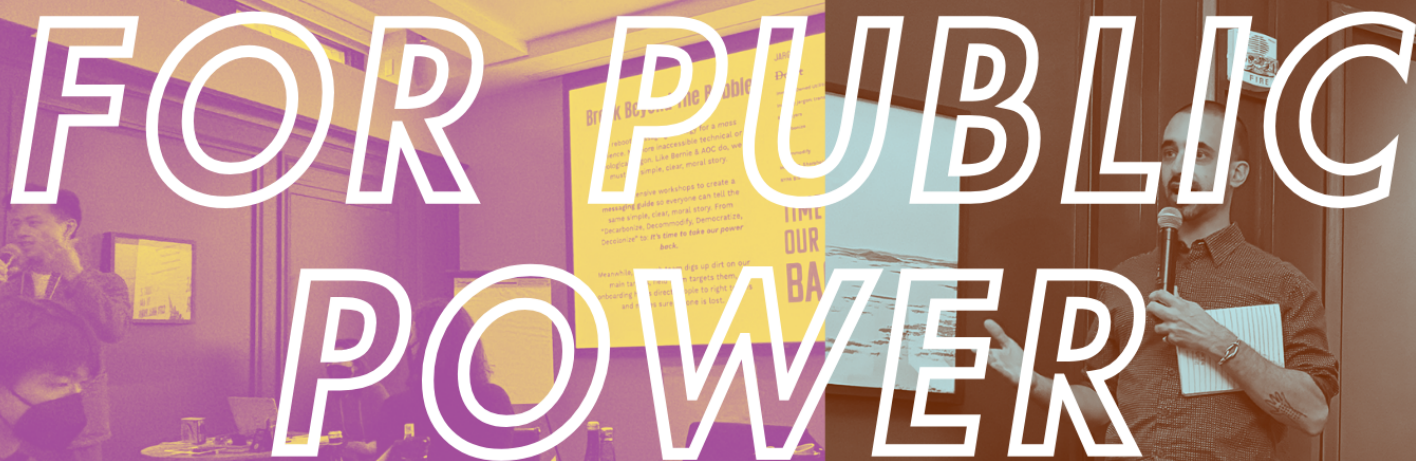




PEOPLE POWER



FOR PUBLIC POWER

The 2023 People Power for Public Power Summit: The State of the Movement

October, 2024

isaac sevier, Public Grids

Johanna Bozuwa, Climate and Community Institute

KC Caffray, Democratic Socialists of America

Matthew Haugen, Climate and Community Institute, DSA Green New Deal Campaign Commission

Lucy Hochschartner, Pine Tree Power Campaign, Our Power

Lake Liao, Princeton University

Lizzy Oh, Green New Deal Network

John Qua, Lead Locally

Climate and Community Institute (CCI) is a progressive climate and economy think tank.

Public Grids supports the movement of local to federal efforts to secure not-for-profit, community-owned electricity services for all with tools and training to win.

Lead Locally works to recruit, train, support, and elect the next generation of climate justice candidates to local and state offices across the country so we can pass the Green New Deal from the ground up.

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is the largest socialist organization in the United States.

Pine Tree Power Campaign, Our Power is a group of Maine ratepayers, business leaders, energy experts, conservationists, and others committed to putting the Pine Tree State's energy future in the hands of Mainers.

Public Power NY is a grassroots coalition advocating for democratically controlled and fully renewable energy in New York State. The coalition successfully passed the Build Public Renewables Act, the nation's first Green New Deal state legislation, in 2023.

Suggested citation:

sevier, isaac, Johanna Bozuwa, KC Caffray, Matthew Haugen, Lucy Hochschartner, Lake Liao, Lizzy Oh, and John Qua. 2024. "The State of People Power for Public Power." Climate and Community Institute. October 2024. <https://climateandcommunity.org/research/people-power-for-public-power-summit-2023/>.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to the participants of the People Power for Public Power convening in October 2023 for all of the insights that you provided and the organizing you are conducting. We also want to recognize the 128 Collective and 11th Hour Project for their funding support that made the event possible.



Contents

Introduction	1
National Momentum from Maine's Campaign	2
Designing Public Power Campaigns with Purpose	4
Place-Based Campaigns Make a Strong Movement	8
Private Corporations Spend Big to Defeat Public Power	10
Lessons From the Field	13
Conclusions	17



Introduction

The tradition of public ownership of the electricity system in the United States is as old as the technology itself. Prior to the opening of Edison's Pearl Street Station in 1882, the young farmer and engineer, Charles Brush, installed the first public power electric lighting system in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1879. Shortly after, in Wabash, Indiana, the city council created the nation's first municipal electric utility in 1880. According to the American Public Power Association, 1 in every 7 Americans is served electricity by a public power utility today.¹

At this pivotal moment—of climate crisis, utility failures, and climbing prices—people from all walks of life in the United States are once more looking toward public power and working hard to ensure more Americans can benefit from it.

The 2023 People Power for Public Power Summit, the first event of its kind, brought more than 60 organizers to Portland, Maine, this past October to strategize, collaborate, and learn from one another. Representing 45 different communities and organized groups from across the United States, the attendees were drawn to the fight for public power through their lived experiences, and each participant brought their unique perspective to bear on the proceedings. Whether it was outrage at unaffordable bills, anger about utility failures and shutoffs, frustration over for-profit corporations' distorting of democracy, or eagerness to effect a just transition to renewable energy that had drawn each organizer to the movement, the culprit remained the same: **an electricity system run for profits rather than people's health and well-being.**

Leveraging lessons from highly publicized state struggles—in New York, to pass the Build Public Renewables Act (BPRA), and in Maine, to approve a ballot initiative for public power—the summit constituted the initial step toward developing a sustainable network of organizers to share knowledge, skills, and resources.

Despite the varying facts on the ground in each organizer's community, the attendees shared a common goal: **the expansion of democratic control over energy service by winning state and local campaigns for public power.** The following report is designed to summarize the activities and lessons from the four-day summit and provide insights into the movement's status at the time of writing.

¹American Public Power Association, "Public Power," <https://www.publicpower.org/public-power>, (accessed June 27, 2024).

National Momentum from Maine's Campaign

We're here today because we know that the energy transition needs to put working families and their needs first, and we need elected officials who are committed to energy justice and public power.

-KC Caffray, summit organizer

The locale and timing of the inaugural People Power for Public Power Summit were not mere happenstance. With the Maine public power ballot initiative on the ballot in November, the time and place allowed the assembled organizers, policy experts, public servants, and academics to learn real-time lessons from an ongoing campaign. Additionally, summit attendees had the opportunity to participate in learning sessions from local organizers, exposing participants to tools and strategies unique to public power messaging and enabling them to take practical lessons back to their local fights.

Among the goals for this first national gathering of public power organizers was the cultivation of a vibrant, engaging, and joyful environment that would deepen the bonds among the participants. The summit organizers also wanted to ensure that the meeting was high value and informative and, to that end, facilitated collaborative sessions, group activities, and breakout sessions to cover a broad yet detailed set of learning objectives.

Collaborative sessions included:

- learning through popular education about the history of struggle for utility control
- reviewing the history of rural electrification and electricity cooperatives' democratic model
- presenting a diagnostic framework of existing utility governance models
- sharing cases from the active local campaigns of participants themselves
- learning from an analysis of environmental justice, green infrastructure, and decolonization
- forecasting the possible pathways

Group activities included:

- building new skills for accessing and understanding publicly available, local utility data from Department of Energy and Energy Information Administration sources
- training how to effectively educate new audiences about public power
- discussing how to build stronger relationships with labor unions, especially those directly involved in the electric utility system
- developing principles of unity across multiple social movements from participants' experiences and

Breakout sessions included:

- creating effective and focused campaigns around public power
- understanding electoral tools and tactics
- maximizing the benefits of the federal investments of the Inflation Reduction Act

The attendees also had the opportunity to share feedback about the summit's design and process. They noted that:

- the success of public power campaigns feels inevitable due to the abuses of private utilities and the fact that there is a history of public ownership in the United States
- every campaign faces similar learning curves and obstacles for which organizers can plan
- successful campaigns treat base building and labor partnerships as an essential feature, not an optional add-on
- strategies testing multiple tactics and encompassing different parts of the system at once within the same service territories could be powerful
- prior to coming to Maine, they had felt isolated in their local campaigns and, afterward, realized there is a large and growing ecosystem to coordinate and learn with
- answering utility management questions in such a way that builds support for winning requires more rigorous tools and analysis
- the messaging and framing of the advantages of public power are critical to success

Designing Public Power Campaigns with Purpose

Maximizing the chance of success for any campaign whose goal is to change the electricity system requires clear analysis and careful strategy. The electricity system has many different facets—from the type of equipment that generates the electricity and the amount of greenhouse gas emissions that equipment produces to the ratemaking design principles that affect people’s ability to pay—and public power campaigns can address more than one feature at a time. Which strategy options are available to a given campaign, however, will depend on local economic, political, and environmental conditions.

In what follows, we propose a basic framework that accounts for some of these conditions and provides a taxonomy of applicable campaign styles. We offer this framework in response to the defeat of the Maine ballot initiative and the subsequent questions concerning the long-term prospects of the fight for public power. It is important to note that the outcome of any one campaign cannot predict the fate of a national and global grassroots movement for public ownership. The movement to date has not been manufactured by special interests; rather, its objectives are appealing to people who are living through the failures of their local utility systems and are seeking change.

The framework below offers organizers a means to learn from past campaigns, whether won or lost, and to develop further analyses as new campaigns are launched and completed. The public power movement is fighting to win and expects to learn from each and every experiment along the way.

A Letter to Future Public Power Organizers: How to Assess Your Local Conditions

We want to win public power! Public power campaigns create immediate paths toward changing utility ownership. This change can feel like a powerful answer to solve problems you are experiencing with your utility. Before launching this campaign, you and your co-organizers should assess the “terrain” on which you operate to see which kind of campaign you should wage and whether you are resourced enough to wage a successful campaign for public power.

Questions you may want to think through are (but are not limited to) the following:

- What is the root problem that you are most motivated by?
- Is the problem you have identified widely and deeply felt by many other people in your community? Who are they? How do you know?
- Is there an existing base of people that care about this issue to organize with?

- Who will begin to work with you to address this problem? Who in your community is already in your corner? Who else needs to be in your corner before you begin?
- Where, with your co-organizers, do you have power to tackle the problem? Do you have political power? Institutional power?
- Who has the power to address the problem you and your co-organizers have identified? This is your target. Is the target moveable?

After mapping the terrain, you may decide that public power is the right answer and begin working to galvanize your organized base and wage an electoral campaign to take your utility back into public ownership and management. You may also realize that public power is a long-term goal, but that you need some stepping stones on the path to full public power. If the present conditions are not ideal for success right away, you can wage a legislative campaign or a referendum that incorporates one or more of the following demands, for example, while growing the organized power needed to succeed down the line.

There are two primary categories of campaign that organizers for utility justice and public power have employed to build power: **defensive campaigns** and **offensive campaigns**.

Defensive campaigns protect people from further encroachment on their health, wealth, and living conditions by actors in the energy utility sector. Especially important for frontline communities, defensive campaigns situate themselves in their local communities and instill a sense of protection and engagement. Defensive campaigns are valuable for galvanizing local stakeholders, building a volunteer base, and politicizing the fight, thereby creating opportunities for offensive campaigns in the future. Focus areas for defensive campaigns include (but are not limited to) the following:

Pollution. Campaigns focusing on pollution **fight to block the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure and/or shut down existing fossil fuel plants**. In North Brooklyn, for example, Black, Brown and Indigenous organizers waged the “Frack Outta Brooklyn” campaign to prevent fracked gas pipelines from being built through a predominantly Black and Brown neighborhood.

Price. Campaigns focused on price **aim to stop utility rate hikes**. In San Francisco, for

example, local activists have been organizing against egregious rate hikes by PG&E, which, in January 2024, raised utility rates by 13 percent, or around \$34 a month.²

Political influence. Campaigns prioritizing political influence fight to **prohibit utilities from using customer money to lobby politicians.** Utilities are known to donate to and lobby politicians in order to block climate legislation. In 2023, Colorado, Maine, and Connecticut passed legislation to prohibit utilities from charging ratepayers to fund their political activity.³ Since then, more states have introduced legislation to regulate utilities.⁴

Offensive campaigns, on the other hand, aim to expand public control by way of democratization, accountability measures, and universal access. They seek to chip away at the corporate model of many utilities and power authorities and can begin to expand governing structures so that everyday people are represented. **Through these campaigns, organizers can set the standard that energy is a public good that everyone should have access to and govern.** Goals of offensive campaigns may include (but are not limited to) the following:

Creating universal service by banning utility shutoffs. Human beings need electricity to live in today's society, but 27 percent of all US households experience energy insecurity (that is, the inability to afford the energy they need for basic essentials).⁵ In 2022, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power adopted a motion to ban shutoffs for low-income customers, seniors, and others who cannot pay as well as to prohibit shutoffs for all customers during extreme weather events.⁶

² Jaxon Van Derbeken, "New PG&E Rate Hike Approved by CPUC," NBC Bay Area, March 8, 2024, <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/pge-rate-hike-cpuc/3475233>. For more information on waging price-focused campaigns, see Little Sis, "Power Lines 102: A Guide to Challenging Utility Rate Hikes," 2023, <https://littlesis.org/reports/power-lines-102>.

³ Akielly Hu, "Connecticut Bans Utilities From Billing Customers for Lobbying Efforts," Grist, July 3, 2023, <https://grist.org/politics/connecticut-bans-utilities-from-billing-customers-for-lobbying-efforts>.

⁴ Akielly Hu, "8 States Move to Ban Utilities From Using Customer Money for Lobbying," Grist, February 21, 2024, <https://grist.org/politics/8-states-move-to-ban-utilities-from-using-customer-money-for-lobbying>.

⁵ US Energy Information Administration, "Residential Energy Consumption Survey (RECS)," <https://www.eia.gov/consumption/residential> (accessed May 28, 2024).

⁶ Hayley Smith, "L.A. to End Water and Power Shutoffs for Low-Income Customers," Los Angeles Times, November 17, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-11-16/l-a-to-end-water-and-power-shutoffs-for-low-income-customers-who-cant-pay>.

Expanding public ownership of electricity supply. Best suited to “deregulated” states where electricity is sold in a wholesale market, this goal can shift the balance of control over the electricity sector toward democratic ownership. A public developer of renewable energy, for example, can compete with private developers, green the electricity mix, displace fossil fuel generation, and reinvest the proceeds of electricity sales for greater public benefits. The public developer could either be an existing power authority or public institution (in New York, for example, the BPRA gave new authority to the existing New York Power Authority), or localities could create an entirely new public institution with this mandate.

Expanding public ownership of the electricity grid at the distribution-system level. Also best suited for “deregulated” states, this goal shifts the control and operation of the distribution grid to a local entity with democratic oversight. Campaigns in Maine and San Diego ran grid ownership campaigns to enhance reliability, keep rates low, and advance electrification.

Expanding public ownership of the electric utility (supply *and* distribution). This goal can be achieved at municipal, regional, and state levels and entails the full acquisition of a utility company’s existing assets, which often include both the generation equipment and the grid. This is the most comprehensive—and therefore hardest—type of campaign to run. It requires significant strategy and analysis and comes with huge potential to unlock greater public planning, coordination, and benefits.

Improving oversight with diversified democratic management of existing public power boards or commissions. Public power authorities and municipal utilities are the most common forms of existing public ownership of the utility system. These entities’ oversight boards or commissions, which are responsible for crucial decisions, are often filled with corporate financiers or former politicians. To make public power boards more representative and responsive to the public, organizers can campaign to expand the number of board seats or work to fill existing seats with key community stakeholders from progressive labor groups, utility workers’ groups, and community member experts.

Place-Based Campaigns Make a Strong Movement

Public power campaigns are being launched across the United States. These come along with a wide range of community demographics, utility-company service-territory sizes, political champions, and economic needs. All too often this diversity of attributes leads analysts to dismiss the possibility of applying lessons from one campaign to another (“We can’t compare apples to oranges”). Such assessments divide the public power movement and traffic in absolutes. To be sure, the nuances particular to each campaign are important, but they should be evaluated proportionally, taking into account the importance of other key ingredients for transforming the political terrain on which a campaign must operate.

The truth is that everyday people across the United States are angry about the failures of the utility system, from ever-increasing bills to faulty service, and public power campaigns can channel that energy into positive and constructive change. And public power is overwhelmingly popular: According to a Data for Progress poll conducted in Fall 2023, at least two thirds of respondents regardless of party affiliation (Democratic, Republican, or Independent) supported public ownership of the electric utility system.⁷

One reason for public ownership’s popularity is the effectiveness of place-based campaigns, which provide an array of advantages in the fight for public power.

Local Campaigns Respond During Disasters

When communities experience power outages and residents are in the dark, organizers in communities with active public power campaigns can engage with community members to create a vision of what a publicly owned system could look like.

Local Campaigns for Public Power Are Universal

Everyone is a ratepayer or relies on electricity to participate in society, and publicly owned utilities unite people across the political spectrum. Campaigns can cite the lower rates and reliable service that existing public power utilities offer—both major factors cited by public power supporters in the Data for Progress poll.

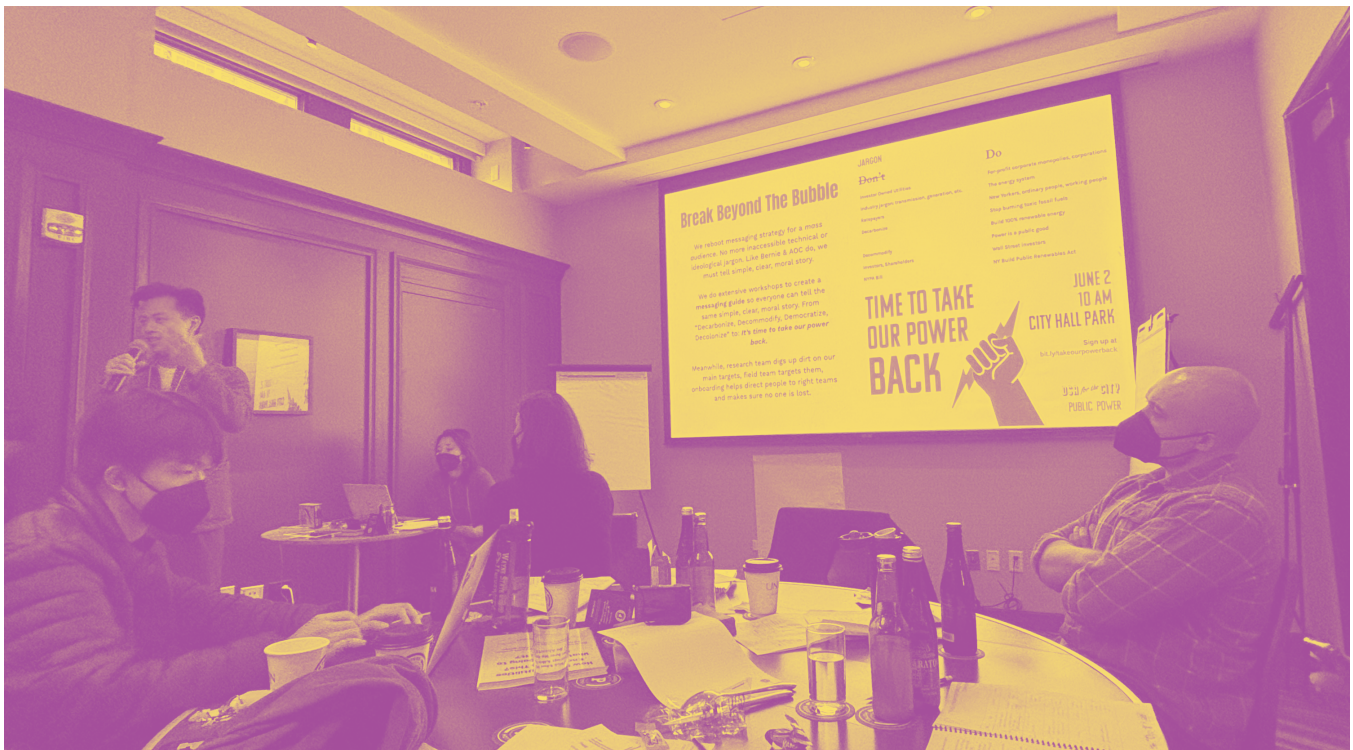
Local Campaigns Grow Regional Support

Public power has entered the public consciousness and dialogue, a direct result of organizers starting campaigns like Take Back the Grid in Boston, MA, Nationalize the Grid in Providence, RI, and Pine Tree Power in Maine. In the same way that rooftop solar installed on one home will inspire others in the neighborhood, public power campaigns tend to build regional interest. In New York, there are at least three simultaneous campaigns operating at city, regional, and state levels. In Michigan, campaigns are emerging in Detroit and Grand Rapids as well as statewide. In California, organizers in Oakland, San Francisco, San Jose, and Stockton have begun to build local campaigns.

⁷ Catherine Fraser and Grace Adcox, “Putting the ‘Public’ in Power: Voters Support Having a Publicly Owned Utility,” Data for Progress, October 31, 2023, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2023/10/27/putting-the-public-in-power-voters-support-having-a-publicly-owned-utility>.

Local Campaigns Address Local and Global Environmental Justice Conditions

Despite public power advocates' tendency toward wonky technical terminology and abstractions about "the grid," the US energy system extends beyond electrons and transmission lines. Though existing campaigns, whether established or just beginning, may differ on specific strategies and definitions of public power, there seems to be a consensus on the material requirements for an energy transition as well as how movements in the United States are connected to comparable movements globally. Organizers present at the summit quickly linked the struggle for energy sovereignty and production in the United States to international movements, producing a holistic analysis that included Puerto Rico and the unfolding genocide of Palestinians (the convening in Maine happened just weeks after Israel cut off electricity to Gaza).



Private Corporations Spend Big to Defeat Public Power

As encouraging as the growth of the public power movement is, it is essential that organizers recognize the significant power and money of the opposition, especially the investor-owned utility industry. Private utility owners and natural gas companies are willing to rally a wealthy coalition of political allies to fight efforts to municipalize private utilities or build publicly owned renewable energy. An analysis of where the power and wealth of the private energy industry has worked—and, more important, fallen flat—against a well-prepared grassroots movement reveals opportunities to focus on going forward.

In January 2019, the Maine Power for Maine People coalition sponsored legislation to transform the two statewide investor-owned utilities, Central Maine Power and Versant Power, into one public power utility, Pine Tree Power. While interrupted by the pandemic, the coalition persisted and by summer 2021, the legislature passed the bill, only to be vetoed by Governor Janet Mills. By collecting signatures for a year leading up to October 2022, the coalition qualified to place a measure making Pine Tree Power law on the November 2023 ballot. Once the ballot measure was approved by the state, the two investor-owned utilities spent \$40 million to defeat it. This sum outspent the coalition organizing for the measure 34 to 1.⁸ Pine Tree Power polled with slim majority support while under consideration in the legislature in 2021, but the barrage of attack ads led to the measure's defeat just two and a half years later, with 69 percent voting against it.

Maine

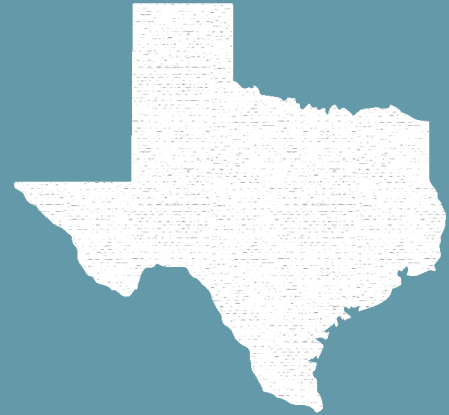


⁸Akielly Hu, "Maine Voters Reject Effort to Create the First Statewide Public Power Company," Grist, November 8, 2023, <https://grist.org/elections/maine-voters-reject-first-statewide-public-power-company>.

⁹Katelyn Weisbrod, "Climate Resolution Voted Down in El Paso after Fossil Fuel Interests and Other Opponents Pour More Than \$1 Million Into Opposition," Inside Climate News, May 9, 2023, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/09052023/el-paso-texas-climate-resolution-rejected>.

A similar scenario played out in Texas. This past spring, the El Paso Climate Charter aimed to institutionalize climate action into the city's charter (the proposed charter also included provisions to begin studying the feasibility of public power). The effort's organizers, Sunrise El Paso and Ground Game TX, were outspent by a coalition of private utilities, fossil fuel companies, and regional chambers of commerce that contributed over a million dollars to PACs organizing a media opposition campaign. The charter ended up losing, with 81 percent voting against it. The election results showed that older voters in particular were against the proposal.

Texas



In New York, however, the opposition failed in its efforts to sway candidate elections centered around public power with focused organized and active campaigning in support. Over three successive state legislative primaries, a coalition of organizations led by Public Power New York and New York City Democratic Socialists of America endorsed and turned out voters in support of leftist challengers to incumbent Democrats over their opposition to expanding the state public power authority. After winning almost a dozen elections, the coalition won the passage of the BPRA. The historic bill permits the New York Power Authority to build and maintain utility-scale renewable energy sources for the first time. It also hastens the state's energy transition by ensuring all properties it serves run on renewable energy by 2030.

New York



Takeaways

As these case studies indicate, investor-owned utilities are leveraging formidable coalitions of individual donors, PACs, independent expenditures, elected incumbent allies, and misinformation campaigns to overwhelm public power campaigns. In all of the campaigns listed above, the influx of money meant that voters were inundated by radio and television ads as well as mailers in the weeks and months leading up to the election. In Maine and Texas, these efforts cut significantly into the initial support of both states' measures.

The multimedia deluge mobilized by private interests is rife with disinformation. The opposition in Texas, for example, blanketed the airwaves with excerpts from a study commissioned by the El Paso Chamber of Commerce that stated—falsely—that the Charter would cost El Paso billions of dollars and kill nearly half the city's jobs. Although economists from the University of Texas Austin debunked those claims in a response paper, it had little effect, highlighting the necessity of early rebuttals to disinformation.¹⁰

In New York's case, notably, election contribution limits and regulations protecting individual candidates against industry spending prevented the kind of election spending seen in Maine and Texas. It also bears noting that, while the Maine ballot initiative to expand public ownership of the private utilities failed, another initiative limiting foreign dollar contributions to state elections and ballot initiatives passed. Getting money out of politics and winning public power may go hand in hand.



¹⁰ Diego Mendoza-Moyers, "Chamber Climate Charter Claims Based on Faulty Assumptions, Critics Say," El Paso Matters, April 25, 2023, <https://elpasomatters.org/2023/03/19/el-paso-climate-policy-impact-may-6-election/>.

Lessons From the Field

The summit in Maine was an extraordinary opportunity for public power organizers from across the country to meet one another, form new relationships face to face, and learn from one another's campaigns and experiences. Multiple sessions were led by local organizers, who devoted their information sessions to the inner workings of their campaigns. The case studies below, all derived from organizers' presentations, provide an array of useful lessons for ongoing campaigns. They also surface three key insights:

1. Climate disasters change the rules, and private corporations are ready to exploit the opportunity.
2. An organized, dedicated, and continuous grassroots ground game can build power to win.
3. Private utility campaigns of fear, uncertainty, and doubt can reverse a democratic outcome with enough time

Private Corporations and the Exploitation of Climate Disasters

In 2017, the Category 5 Hurricane Maria decimated Puerto Rico's electric grid: 100 percent of the island was without power and 80 percent of the transmission and distribution systems were damaged. Thousands of people died during the storm and in its aftermath due to a lack of clean water, food, and electricity. Given its Caribbean location and vulnerability to hurricanes, Puerto Rico is experiencing some

of the most dramatic effects of the climate crisis. Despite its environmental precarity, the island must rely on imported fossil fuels that are not only costly—Puerto Rico has the second-highest electricity rate in the nation—but also harmful to public health and the climate.

As a colony—or “territory”—of the United States, Puerto Rico has endured decades of disinvestment and tightened oversight by the federal government. The economic model imposed upon the island since the 1940s consists largely of tax exemptions for US corporations, which results in a chronically underfunded public sector unable to service the island's physical and social infrastructure.

In 2016, Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), legislation that purported to solve Puerto Rico's debt problem by privatizing the island. Up until then, Puerto Rico had had a publicly owned energy utility, Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), with a strong labor union. Although PREPA was imperfect, energy democracy advocates on the island had far more interest in further democratizing it rather than privatizing it. However, using the hurricane as an opportunity, the Republican-majority Congress used PROMESA to forward the privatization of PREPA's services.

Energy privatization has not gone well for Puerto Ricans. The companies put in charge of electricity provision have failed to rebuild a stronger, more resilient grid and continue to

invest in centralized fossil fuel infrastructure that ignores the particular topography of the island. (Puerto Rico is bisected by a massive mountain range that makes running transmission lines from a single purveyor difficult, costly, and damage-prone.) The federal government has encouraged this one-size-fits-all method of energy provision: The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—a core financier of new energy infrastructure on the island—has provided \$5 billion for a gas buildout.

Distributed renewables like solar-plus-storage would be the obvious solution, but only resorts and wealthy individuals can afford to implement it. This has created a two-tiered energy system on the island, one in which wealthy, largely non-native people have access to a more resilient energy system than those most vulnerable to extreme weather.

The rebuilt system funded with FEMA dollars was put to the test in 2022 when Hurricane Fiona, a Category 4 hurricane, made landfall. How did the new system fare? Not well: Most of the island experienced a major outage that lasted for weeks.

In response to the manifest failures of the privatized system, the Queremos Sol (We Want Sun) coalition—a group of grassroots activists, climate advocates, and union leaders—has formed to articulate an alternative vision for Puerto Rico that grounds the island in energy democracy. The coalition advocates the de-privatization of PREPA, greater investment in distributed renewable energy, increased equitable access to resilient electricity, the creation of good local jobs, and the establishment of stronger governance systems. Advocates have focused a substantial amount of their time on FEMA as

a moveable target with the power to shape the island's energy future via federal investments. Queremos Sol is also working with off-island energy groups like the Center for Biological Diversity and the Energy Democracy Project to push FEMA to end fossil fuel investments and direct it toward distributed renewables.

The Power of a Grassroots Ground Game ---

In 2019, the NYC DSA Ecosocialist Working Group voted to make public power their campaign priority. Members wrote the first drafts of the BPRA, which drew upon the Green New Deal's vision and adapted it for the state level. Early campaign actions included knocking on doors after outages and the organizing of town halls that drew hundreds of people.

In June 2020, NYC DSA-endorsed candidates swept their primary races, posting a five for five record. (This was during the heightened political moment of the Black Lives Matter protests.) In addition to Julia Salazar—who, in 2018, became the first NYC DSA member to be elected to the statehouse—the June 2020 primaries effectively put six socialists in Albany, significantly increasing their collective power as a political caucus.

That same year, the Ecosocialist Working Group built out individual teams—communications, onboarding, research, and field—in order to increase specialized capacity. They focused on refining and improving the text of the legislation. To further advocate for the bill, DSA NYC launched Public Power New York, a coalition

of grassroots and renewable energy advocacy organizations that focused on building political alignment with unions, other environmental non-profit groups, and elected officials.

In 2021, the campaign to raise BPRA's profile began. From March to June, Public Power NY organized to make BPRA the top priority bill in Albany. In 2022, DSA chapters statewide engaged in a direct action in front of legislative offices that brought multiple arrests and significant media coverage. Despite NYC DSA's concerted effort to push the legislation, Rep. Kevin Parker ultimately blocked the bill in the State Senate.

The following year, NYC DSA ran another electoral slate with six candidates, including a challenger for the seat held by Rep. Parker. In response, Rep. Parker changed his position and moved BPRA through the State Senate. The bill ultimately died in the State Assembly but not without a special hearing outside of the regular legislative session—a token of the bill's popular support.

In 2023, the left-labor coalition for BPRA welcomed AFL-CIO New York to its roster of proponents. On the heels of this expansion of support, Public Power New York carried out a comprehensive communications campaign that included billboards and social media activity (from June 3 to June 4, BPRA was the #1 trending topic on Twitter). Federal electeds like Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez urged Governor Kathy Hochul to pass the bill.

After Hochul included a watered-down version of the bill in the state budget—a move met with fierce pushback from Public Power New York, supporters, and engaged legislators—the governor conceded and passed the legislation through the state budget.

The Private-Utility Counterstrategy: Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt

In 2023, Maine became the first state to vote on whether to assume control of their investor-owned utilities and turn them into a single, essentially statewide consumer-owned entity. Although the effort ultimately failed, the multi-year campaign journey provides many lessons, and the vote itself was a landmark moment for America's growing public power movement. Taken as a whole, the Maine campaign is an excellent example of both the opportunities and risks inherent in the citizen initiative process.

Maine's journey with public power can be traced all the way back to 2008, when Central Maine Power (CMP), Maine's largest utility, was bought by the Spanish multinational Iberdrola. Seven years later, Iberdrola consolidated its American businesses under a single subsidiary called Avangrid and merged certain US departments, including customer service, which was hit by layoffs and experienced a notable decline in performance.¹¹

In 2017, disaster struck. A massive windstorm in October of that year caused widespread outages; right around the same time, the company botched the rollout of a new billing system. In the aftermath, the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) and local newspapers conducted investigations, and Mainers filed

¹¹ Josh Keefe, "How Central Maine Power Failed Its Customers and Still Increased Profits," Bangor Daily News, May 1, 2019, <https://www.bangordailynews.com/2019/05/01/business/how-central-maine-power-failed-its-customers-and-still-increased-profits-2>.

class action lawsuits over issues of misbilling, overcharging, storm response, and fraud.¹² Despite the outcry, CMP and Maine's other investor-owned utility, Versant, continued to earn some of the worst customer satisfaction ratings in the United States for years.¹³

By the 2019 legislative session, public power was on the agenda, an effort spearheaded by Rep. Seth Berry (D–Bowdoinham). The legislature succeeded in passing LD 1646, a bill that required the PUC to look into the economic effects of a consumer takeover. In 2020, London Economics International, a private consulting firm hired by the Maine Public Service Commission which oversees the investor-owned utilities, released its full report on the consumer-owned utility proposal. It didn't take a firm stance on public ownership either way.

Our Power, the nonprofit that led the public power campaign, was also founded in 2020. Its mission was to organize the existing groundswell of support for Pine Tree Power, the provisional name for the consumer-owned utility. In 2021, Our Power, Rep. Berry, and a broad coalition of supporting environmental groups succeeded in passing LD 1708, a bill that would have put the decision to create Pine Tree Power in the hands of voters. However, Governor Janet Mills (D) vetoed the bill, and there were not enough votes to override.

¹² "CMP Investigation," *Press Herald*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.pressherald.com/cmp-investigation>.

¹³ Evan Popp, "CMP Ranked Last Once Again in J.D. Power Business Customer Satisfaction Survey," *Maine Beacon*, December 9, 2022, <https://mainebeacon.com/cmp-ranked-last-once-again-in-j-d-power-business-customer-satisfaction-survey>.

In response to this defeat, Our Power spent 2022 gathering over 80,000 signatures from across the state to put Pine Tree Power on the ballot. Most of this work was done by volunteers. Maine DSA was a crucial member of the coalition and the only organization outside of Our Power to gather significant signatures.

By 2023, the campaign for Pine Tree Power and "Question 3" had officially started. A true grassroots effort, the statewide campaign never had more than five full-time staffers. By this time, many original supporters and volunteers were burnt out, and important coalition members from the legislative effort had stepped back. A new team organized house parties, deep canvassing efforts, debates, mailers, and digital ads in order to persuade voters. These initiatives highlighted the customer savings, reduction in outages, and increased local control that would flow from public ownership of electricity service. (With more progressive audiences, the campaign also touted Pine Tree Power's climate benefits).

Meanwhile, the private utilities were mounting their own campaign. To persuade Mainers to vote "no," the utilities branded the consumer takeover of the state's electricity provision as too risky, too expensive, and too political. These messages—aided by \$40 million in spending by the utilities, political allies like Governor Mills and the AFL-CIO, and paid politicians and consulting firms—won the day. However, it is worth noting that despite being outspent 34 to 1 and never having an ad on television, the "Yes on 3" campaign garnered over 30 percent of the vote statewide and 50 percent in Portland, Maine's largest city.

Conclusions

According to the more than five dozen organizers who attended the inaugural People Power for Public Power Summit, local support for public power campaigns stems from four key issues:

1. **Outrage at unaffordable bills**
2. **Anger in response to utility failures and shutoffs**
3. **Enthusiastic support for the renewable energy transition**
4. **Frustration with for-profit corporations' obstruction of democracy and influence over elections**

The Seven Key Ingredients to Winning Public Power

To address these grievances—and to face down an opposition that is motivated and well-funded—organizers for and supporters of public power need a comprehensive menu of tactics, strategies, and narratives to guide their campaigns. The seven key ingredients listed below are the product of a shared grassroots analysis yielded by the discussions, both formal and informal, held at the summit.

1. **Public power campaigns should clearly identify internal and external goals and strategy.** While public power organizers agree on the core issues—the need for public control of the energy system and a transition to 100 percent clean energy—there are often varying views on near-term goals and the pathway to winning. Visions of decentralized systems composed of microgrids and distributed generation can clash with the desire for centralized, utility-scale energy; and the best political level for ownership—cooperative, city, state, federal—is an open question, dependent on particular local conditions as well as the ideological orientations and strategic assessments of individual organizers. As indicated by the taxonomy framework above, organizers must analyze campaigns (past and present, winning and losing), assess political conditions, and be creative with regard to policy to surface the optimal strategy, tactics, and goals.

2. **Public power campaigns have a winning message with all voters and need sizable resources to share it successfully across multiple media channels.** Voters naturally believe in the core tenets of the public power movement. Data for Progress has found that over 68 percent of likely US voters support having a publicly owned utility as their local energy provider.¹⁴ Unlike other issues—abortion access, marijuana decriminalization—that have had success recently via ballot measures, voters’ inexperience with the utility industry means the narrative can be hijacked by deep-pocketed private interests. The messaging most common among the opposition—loss of jobs, reduced quality of service, the threat of a “socialist takeover”—isn’t persuasive with most voters, but these messages can nevertheless dissuade over time.
3. **Public power campaigns must develop relationships and strategy with labor unions. One of the biggest challenges public power campaigns face is building support with directly impacted labor unions.** Unions affected by a possible transition have legitimate concerns that can either be addressed early and collaboratively—or left to widen further the long-standing rift between “environmental” groups and labor groups. Important union demands—like high road compensation—and protections—like the rights to bargain and strike—can be transferred and even strengthened in a public ownership model. Labor unions must be seen as a critical ally in these fights. The workers most affected by public power transitions should have a say in how those transitions happen, and unions more broadly are strategically positioned to move the needle on campaigns for public power or other struggles for justice. Some campaigns have been able to garner the support of progressive unions like those for teachers and nurses—an exciting and promising development—but much more work needs to be done, especially in terms of persuading utility workers and building-trades unions to back public power.
4. **Electoral campaigns for public power should put in the early work to identify and target the key constituencies they need to win.** Understandably, many of the climate and progressive groups that currently organize for public power are most powerful in urban areas and most influential among youth voters. Campaigns should consider how to grow their supporter base among new constituencies. For example, what do labor, Black voters, or specific districts need to know to vote for

¹⁴ Fraser and Adcox, “Putting the ‘Public’ in Power: Voters Support Having a Publicly Owned Utility.”

public power? With support from polling or local political knowledge, campaigns should attempt to powermap these target demographics early and shape their electoral efforts around them. For instance, the initial state legislative campaign in Maine had support in more rural, conservative leaning districts, which led to the state bill receiving some Republican support. However, further research is needed in order to better understand the base supporters in public power campaigns and what messages are persuasive and motivating. Further areas of study could include more polling, the convening of focus groups, message testing, and exit polling.

5. **Electoral campaigns for public power should dedicate significant resources to organize and turn out the constituencies they need to win.** All public power campaigns should consider where the campaign has existing support and when and where a candidate's campaign or ballot initiative would do the most to turn out that base. In New York, for instance, NYC DSA focused their efforts initially on primaries in deeply Democratic New York City districts where they had strong membership that they could turn out to canvas. As another example, the Public Power NY coalition recognized that Governor Hochul, in her efforts to portray herself as representing New Yorkers outside the city, was heavily influenced by political actors from the Hudson Valley. By recruiting Sarahana Shrestha to run for a state house seat there—a seat Shrestha ultimately won—Public Power NY was better able to organize the area around the public power bill in a way that undoubtedly helped it pass.
6. **Public power campaigns need significantly more funding to reach their maximum potential.** As exemplified by Maine's Pine Tree Power effort, public power campaigns are at a disadvantage with regards to financing. Opponents of public power are generally investor-owned utilities and other energy companies with wide and diverse political allies and abundant financial resources, resources they put to use by (a) vastly outspending grassroots campaigns on TV and radio and (b) leveraging greater staff capacity for public relations and other direct and indirect campaign work. These advantages allow corporate opponents to spread misinformation and propagate false or misleading ideas without countervailing narratives. There are options, however, to counter private utilities' spending. Much as they have done for other decade-long missions, like winding down coal or advancing LGBTQ+ rights, philanthropic groups could help fund strategically viable

public power campaigns and invest in multi-year, general organizational capacity for base building (including electoral organizing), policy creation and advocacy, technical grid modeling, and polling and narrative strategies.

- 7. The progressive climate movement should anticipate outsized industry spending and follow electoral strategies that restrict it.** Opponents of public power campaigns are not only willing to outspend their adversaries to protect their bottom line, they are willing to do so by massive margins. Instead of trying to match the utility industry's millions, campaigns could consider expending resources on elections and ballot measures that would restrict opponents' ability to spend. For example, even as Maine voters rejected the Pine Tree Power initiative by a wide margin, they voted overwhelmingly in support of a measure that would restrict foreign donations on local referendums¹⁵—a measure that, if it had been in force prior to the Pine Tree Power campaign, would have banned much of the foreign-sourced funding that militated against it! In cases where restricting the opposition's spending is not possible, public power organizers should ensure that efforts like ballot measures are well-positioned—with strong grassroots support, the backing of labor, and very strong polling.

¹⁵ David Sharp and Patrick Whittle, "Maine Election: Mainers Vote Against New Utilities Proposal," AP News, November 8, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/maine-election-2023-0b90e819272b0896e96b9f32016c62bb>.

As climate disasters continue to force governments to reexamine the existing rules and practices of utility corporations, organizers view public power as a strategic intervention opportunity to advance climate solutions as well as protect public interests and secure climate justice. As noted above, one of public power campaigns' greatest strengths is local organizers' ability to respond quickly during disasters and offer solutions that are universal, grow regionally, and address local and global conditions simultaneously.

Even in its infancy—as measured by the reactions of the opponents to public power—the public power movement is a significant threat to the fossil fuel industry and the utility corporations responsible for grid failures, safety lapses, skyrocketing prices, and ever-increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Recent wins demonstrate that an organized, dedicated, and continuous grassroots ground game can build power to win in four years. All the movement needs to do is keep going.