



Western States Center Debuts New Curriculum:

## Building Grassroots Power: An Introduction to Electoral Politics

**F**or the past thirty years, conservatives have methodically built their movement by mounting issue-oriented campaigns and running their own candidates for office. Political campaigns have enabled the right wing to expand its base of known supporters, to shape public debate on key issues, and to increase its clout within mainstream political organizations.

The progressive movement can use political campaigns to out-organize the right wing. By joining the techniques of electoral campaigns with the values base and goals of ongoing community organizing, we can build power to advance social and economic justice.

At the same time, we know that the political system continues to disenfranchise whole classes of people. Its promise remains unfulfilled as long as the flow of money and other barriers limit participa-

tion along lines of race, class, and gender.

Changing the way our political system works — fulfilling the true promise of democracy — requires work on two parallel tracks:

First, organizing to remove barriers to equal access and full participation. Strategies for working within the current electoral system should reflect an understanding of the limitations of that system, and seek to challenge those barriers whenever possible.

Second, building grassroots power by out-organizing the opposition. The governing forces in this country don't want poor and working class people, people of color, women, youth, religious and sexual minorities, and others who don't fit the dominant norm to have political power. Taking up space in the political process, organizing to swell our ranks, voicing a

message that challenges corporate domination — these are steps towards political power.

All across the country, community-based groups are using the political system to build grassroots power for disempowered constituencies and progressive issues. Western States Center's new curriculum — *Building Power: An Introduction to Electoral Politics* — is designed to support the efforts of groups with 501(C)(3) or 501(C)(4) tax-exempt status.

The following excerpt from the curriculum's introductory section develops our key distinction between traditional election campaigns — which can be alienating or disempowering for grassroots constituencies — and “movement building campaigns,” which leave groups energized and strengthened.



### TRADITIONAL VS. MOVEMENT-BUILDING ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

	TRADITIONAL CAMPAIGN	MOVEMENT-BUILDING CAMPAIGN
DEFINITION OF VICTORY	50% +1 on election day	win on election day + advance other movement goals
VALUES	do anything to win	values based
MESSAGE	“win at all costs”	at minimum, does no harm; at best, educates on the issues
MEDIUM FOR MESSAGE	paid media (advertising)	mass field mobilization (plus paid and/or earned media)
RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE	no accountability to constituency	politically empowers constituency
INCREASES CLOUT...	...of individuals	...of constituencies
TIMEFRAME	one-time focus	builds toward long-term strategy
LEADERSHIP	hired guns	builds grassroots leadership
RESOURCES	resources used are gone forever	resources used are an investment
OUTCOME	drains, alienates grassroots base	leaves community in better shape

**SUMMARY: Through the electoral process, progressive grassroots organizations can:**

- build their base (membership, donor, volunteer, supporter)
- advance their longer-term agendas
- develop and communicate winning, value-based messages
- recruit and train effective, grassroots leadership
- recruit and run grassroots, constituency-based candidates for office
- hold elected officials accountable



## INTRODUCTION TO MOVEMENT BUILDING CAMPAIGNS

WHAT TRAINER SAYS:	WHAT TRAINER DOES:	FLIP CHARTS:
<p><i>So, what is movement building, anyway?</i></p> <p><i>What are the elements of a strong movement?</i></p>	<p>Brainstorm with group and list answers on flip chart, add others as needed using examples on right.</p>	<p><b>STRONG MOVEMENTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize large #s of people to make change.</li> <li>• Mobilize large #s of people at critical moments.</li> <li>• Develop leaders and skills.</li> <li>• Have a structure and membership to sustain the work.</li> <li>• Have clear ideology and politics.</li> <li>• Select fights that advance long-term goals.</li> </ul>
<p><i>These are not the objectives of a traditional electoral campaign.</i></p> <p><i>What <u>is</u> the goal of a traditional campaign?</i></p>	<p>Lead group to answer on right; Write it on flip chart.</p>	<p><b>TRADITIONAL ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN GOAL</b></p> <p>Win 50% + 1 on Election Day.</p>
<p><i>What are the goals that WE would have in an electoral campaign, i.e. goals that would build OUR organization or movement?</i></p>	<p>Keep the “Strong Movement” chart visible.</p> <p>Brainstorm with group specific objectives within the electoral arena that reinforce the “Strong Movement” elements.</p> <p>Add others as needed using examples on right.</p>	<p><b>MOVEMENT-BUILDING ELECTORAL GOALS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop the analysis and skills of communities to advance a political agenda.</li> <li>• Gain power through demonstrating ability to educate and mobilize voters.</li> <li>• Gain experience in specific arenas, e.g. coalition work, message discipline, etc.</li> <li>• Identify and train new leaders.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Let’s take a look at how these different goals play out in movement-building campaigns vs. traditional campaigns</i></p>	<p>Distribute “Traditional vs. Movement-Building Electoral Campaign” Handout.</p> <p>Ask group to review and make any changes or additions to reflect the group’s perspective.</p>	<p><b>CHARACTERISTICS OF MOVEMENT-BUILDING CAMPAIGNS</b></p> <p><i>(write up key words from the handout that fit with your group’s experience)</i></p>
<p><i>Transforming traditional campaigns into movement-building campaigns takes a long-term commitment to building the capacity of both community-based organizations <u>and</u> progressive campaign workers.</i></p>	<p>Brainstorm the capacity that needs to be built in community-based organizations in order to participate in movement-building campaigns.</p> <p>Go back through and put a check mark by the pieces that are priorities for your group.</p>	<p><b>CAPACITY BUILDING FOR COMMUNITY GROUPS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to recruit and run own members for office.</li> <li>• Base of members, donors, volunteers committed to advancing the group’s agenda through electoral organizing.</li> <li>• Ability to hold elected officials accountable.</li> <li>• Ability to participate in and influence the way ballot issue campaigns are run.</li> </ul>
<p><i>If some of us were to go to work full time on a political campaign to boost its movement-building potential, what skills would we need to bring as progressive organizers that go beyond what a campaign dependent primarily on paid advertising would need?</i></p>	<p>Brainstorm the skills that need to be built in <u>progressive campaign workers</u> in order to participate in movement-building campaigns.</p>	<p><b>SKILL BUILDING FOR PROGRESSIVE CAMPAIGN WORKERS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Run winning campaigns that advance longer-term progressive goals.</li> <li>• Expand the base of people involved in electoral organizing.</li> <li>• Develop winning, values-based messages.</li> <li>• Recruit and train effective grassroots leaders and candidates.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Often there’s not a clear-cut choice between the two kinds of campaigns. Even when a big-money, mainstream campaign takes the lead, there is room for a complementary, movement-building effort. Balancing the goals of an immediate electoral win and long-term movement building is a challenge. Being clear about our goals and bottom lines is critical.</i></b></p>		

— developed by Holly Pruett, with contributions from Californians for Justice