

BUILDING GRASSROOTS POWER:

An Introduction to Electoral Politics



**Developed by the
Western Progressive Leadership Network**

A Project of



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A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

For the past decade, Western States Center has emphasized the need for community organizations to develop electoral organizing skills in order to defend our communities from attack, achieve more representative governance, and build power for marginalized peoples. In doing this work, we have had the privilege to beg, borrow and steal – and particularly, to *learn* – from friends and allies who share our commitments:

- ◆ Several veteran political trainers and organizers have shaped the movement-building campaign training provided annually through Western States Center's **Community Strategic Training Initiative (CSTI)**; their materials and approach have been incorporated throughout this curriculum: Dave Fleischer, Liz Kaufman, and Thalia Zepatos.
- ◆ **Californians for Justice** advanced the development of participatory training and grassroots political organizing techniques in low income communities of color fighting racist ballot initiatives in California. Their training materials are featured in this curriculum, and have been incorporated into sessions of the Western States Center's year-long organizing and leadership development training program, the **Western Institute for Organizing and Leadership Development (WILD)**.
- ◆ The **Alliance for Justice** is a valuable source for information on "staying legal" through the complex web of governmental regulations for tax-exempt organizations participating in politics. The **NARAL** (the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League) **Foundation** provided feedback and lent their expertise on Internet-based advocacy.
- ◆ Members of the Center's **Western Progressive Leadership Network (WPLN)** and the **Money in Western Politics Project**, coordinated by Western States staffers Len Norwitz and (formerly) Deb Ross, including the permanent, multi-issue statewide coalitions in Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, and Nevada, have all contributed to the body of knowledge shared through the curriculum.
- ◆ Organizations associated with the Center's **Research and Action for Change and Equity (RACE) Program**, working with staffers Tarso Ramos, Moira Bowman, and David Rogers, are further defining the needs of people of color communities and organizations in the West as they seek to build political power through electoral organizing.
- ◆ The **Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO)** has been instrumental in developing and testing some of the curriculum among a newly emerging political constituency.

In addition to these sources of information and expertise, Western States Center wishes to thank Thalia Zepatos for initial design of the curriculum, Mimi Ho for review, and Western States Board and friends for helping to test new exercises.

Editor: Holly Pruet

Designer: RuthAlice Anderson

Publisher: Western States Center, 2002

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BUILDING GRASSROOTS POWER: An Introduction to Electoral Politics

About This Curriculum

- A. Who It's For & How to Use It

Module One: Why Get Involved In Electoral Politics, Anyway?

- A. Who Makes Decisions? (60 minute Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "One Example of the Power of the Vote"
 - ◆ Handout: "Roslyn, WA: A Case Study in Electoral Organizing"
- B. Smash or Takeover Elections? (40 minute Whole Group Debate)
 - ◆ Handout: "What is an Election & Why Should Community Groups Get Involved?"
- C. Movement Building Campaigns (40 minute Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "Traditional Vs. Movement-Building Electoral Campaigns"
- D. A Voting Rights Movement Framework (40 minute Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "Election Alternatives – The Voting Rights Movement"

Module Two: How The Political System Works

- A. Learning the Jargon (20 minute Interactive Activity)
 - ◆ Handout: "Political Jargon Exercise"
 - ◆ Handout: "Political Jargon Glossary"
- B. What's Your Political Address? (40 minute Interactive Activity & Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "What's My Political Address?"
- C. Mock Election (60 minute Interactive Activity)

Module Three: Basic Building Blocks of Electoral Organizing

- A. People Power: Volunteer and Leadership Development (2 hr small group exercise)
 - ◆ Handout: "Introduction to Recruitment & Member Involvement"
 - ◆ Handout: "How Many People Do You Need?"
- B. Message Development (60 – 120 minute skit and guided discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "Campaign Messages: The Good, The Bad & The Ugly"
 - ◆ Handout: "Campaign Messages and Audiences"
- C. Lists: Why You Need Them, How to Get & Build Them (30 min guided discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "Lists Needed for Electoral Organizing"

Module Four: Organizing Voters: The Basics of "Getting Out the Vote"

- A. Voter Registration Drive (2 hour Skit, Small Group Exercise, Role Play)
 - ◆ Script: "Voter Identification Training Script"
 - ◆ Handout: "Voter Registration Drive Checklist"
 - ◆ Handout: "Principles of Effective Recruitment"
 - ◆ Handout: "APANO Voter Registration/Education Plan"
 - ◆ Handout: "Latino Voter Registration: CAUSA '98"
- B. Voter Identification, Persuasion, and Get Out the Vote (GOTV)
 - ◆ Script: "No on 227 Field Campaign Training Script, excerpts"
 - ◆ Handout: "Characteristics of Electoral Field Organizing"
 - ◆ Handout: "Stages of Electoral Field Organizing"
 - ◆ Handout: "Fitting Your Field Work Into a Winning Plan"
 - ◆ Handout: "Training Agenda for Phones and/or Canvass"
 - ◆ Sample: MT Native Vote Poster

Module Five: Building Power & Influence During the Election Season

- A. Candidate Forums (30 minute Guided Discussion & Small Group Exercise)
 - ◆ Handout: "Candidate Forum Checklist"
 - ◆ Handout: "Asian & Pacific Islander Communities Candidate Forum" materials
- B. Voter Guides/Endorsements (60 minute Skit & Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Script: "Endorsement Training Script, Acts I & II"
 - ◆ Handout: "Endorsement Process Checklist"
 - ◆ Handout: "Voters Guide Checklist"
 - ◆ Samples: Voters Guides
- C. Initiative Campaigns (2 1/2 hour Mock Debate, Skit, Small Group Exercise)
 - ◆ Handout: "Victoryville Exercise"

- ◆ Handout: Decline to Sign
- ◆ Handout: "Setting the Pace on Issues of Race"
- D. Candidate Campaigns (30 minute Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "Sample Campaign Activities Handout"
- E. Long Term Development of Members/ Leaders to Run for Office (60 minute Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "What Makes a Good Candidate?"
 - ◆ Handout: "Preparing to Run – a Timeline"

Module Six: Building Power & Influence with the Legislature or Administration

- A. How A Bill Becomes A Law (30 minute Dramatization & Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Script: "How A Bill Becomes a Law Dramatization"
- B. Basics of Lobbying (30 minute Guided Discussion)
 - ◆ Handout: "Grassroots Lobbying Activities"
- C. E-Advocacy: Using the Internet as an Advocacy Tool
 - ◆ Handout: "Excerpts from The NARAL Guide to Technological Advocacy: Making the Most of Technology-Based Organizing Tools"

Module Seven: What Strategies Make Sense For My Group?

- A. 501(C)(3)s, 501(C)(4)s and PACs (30 minute Guided Discussion & Exercise)
 - ◆ Handout: "Comparison of 501(C)(3)s, 501(C)(4)s and PACs"
 - ◆ Handout: "Non-Profits and Political Activity"
 - ◆ Handout: "What Type of Exempt Organization Am I?"
- B. Making Strategic Choices (30 minute Guided Discussion)

Resource List

Feedback & Evaluation

About This Curriculum

For 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. "Movement-building" political campaigns can:

- ◆ Bring more people on board
- ◆ Mobilize and energize them
- ◆ Develop new leaders and greater organizing capacity
- ◆ Influence or control the terms of the debate
- ◆ Move a progressive agenda
- ◆ Win concrete improvements in people's lives

At the same time, the political system is part of the dominant structure that continues to disenfranchise whole classes of people. Its promise remains unfulfilled as long as the flow of money and other barriers limit participation 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 building grassroots power for disempowered constituencies and progressive issues through the political system. In the West, organizers are engaging first-time Native and Latino voters in school board and legislative races, and economic justice and civil rights ballot issues. A dozen years of organizing against anti-gay attacks has helped the gay rights movement in Oregon build a broad resource bank of skills, supportive voters and allies, donors and volunteers. Organized labor and community-based allies won a ballot measure indexing the minimum wage to cost of living in Washington, and multi-lingual worker safety training in Nevada.

These examples are only the beginning. This curriculum is meant to inspire and equip your organization and community to use electoral organizing as a tool. With training, people power, and effective planning, you can build your capacity to move your agenda and advance your mission through participating in – and thereby helping to change – the political process.

The concepts, skills, and exercises in this curriculum were developed by organizations like yours. By testing and adapting this material to meet the needs of your community, you will be advancing the tools available for others.

Who This Curriculum IS For & How to Use It

This Introduction to Electoral Politics training is for grassroots, community-based organizations. It is written primarily for groups with either 501(C)(3) or 501(C)(4) tax-exempt status. Organizations with the resources to form their own Political Action Committee (PAC) may find this a useful overview, but will likely want more detailed skill-building in campaign planning and implementation than is offered in this introductory curriculum.

The curriculum is designed as a self-guided tour for your organization to explore the world of electoral politics. It can be used as:

- ◆ Background information for your organization when considering whether and how to get involved in electoral politics
- ◆ A discussion and training guide for your organization to use in interactive sessions with leaders, members and staff – either before or after you make the decision to get involved in electoral politics
- ◆ A menu of training ideas to help shape the training or consultation you may choose to seek from outside sources once you've committed to getting involved in electoral politics.

Each section of the curriculum is divided into several components:

- ◆ Goals for the Training Module
- ◆ Time and Materials Needed
- ◆ What the Trainer Needs to Know
- ◆ What the Trainer Says
- ◆ What the Trainer Does
- ◆ Handouts

Before using these training materials with your group, read through the entire section so that you're completely familiar with the content and training design. If you have not led trainings on this subject matter before, practice with a small group first. Try to anticipate questions that may arise, and consult with others to develop your ability to respond to those questions. Whenever possible, adapt the material to your constituency or issues, using examples that are closest to your collective experiences.

Much of the curriculum essentially provides a discussion format for your group to explore its own experience and strategies in relationship to various aspects of political organizing. The qualifications needed to lead these modules is nothing greater than some experience with group dynamics and facilitation, and a willingness to prepare, as described above. Some modules cover more technical information. These are best led by a trainer who has experience actually implementing the organizing techniques that are being taught. The kinds of knowledge and experience needed for each module are listed in the "What the Trainer Needs to Know" section. Consult the Resources Section if your group would like assistance from more experienced electoral trainers and organizers.