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# THE POWER OF THE VOTE:

Expanding Your Influence, Effectiveness,  
and Power in the Advocacy Arena  
Through Electoral Organizing

BY PAUL GETSOS

**W**ith energy and interest in the 2008 election running high, many community organizations are thinking of whether and how to get involved. A successful voter project could increase your organization's capacity and political influence, engage your members, clients, board, and staff in an important part of civic life, and bring in additional dollars. Clarity on goals, good planning, and a strong fundraising plan are key.

This article explains what electoral organizing is, why an organization that does community organizing, advocacy, or direct service might want to consider engaging in electoral work, and what's different in raising money for this kind of work.

## TYPES OF ELECTORAL ORGANIZING

One or more of the following electoral programs might be appropriate for your organization:

- Registering members and then reminding them to vote
- Educating members about candidates' positions
- Increasing voter turnout by geographic area or issue area

All of these programs can be nonpartisan — that is, the organization takes no position on a candidate or issue, which keeps them within their 501(c)(3) restrictions. Groups also have the opportunity to engage in partisan work through developing a 501(c)(4) Political Action Committee (PAC). (For more information about acceptable activities within nonprofit law, see [AllianceforJustice.com](http://AllianceforJustice.com), or consult a lawyer who has expertise in not-for-profit law and regulations.)

Although many groups begin to think about developing voting and electoral programs during the big races for President or governor, local races for state legislature, city council, and various community boards give groups engaged in electoral programs the chance to have a major

impact. Not only can mobilizing manageable numbers of voters (500–1,000) have an effect on these races, but many of these elected offices have power over the issues that many organizations work on. Local officials are making critical decisions about public benefits, local zoning ordinances, economic development projects, and program budgets. A group that has implemented an electoral program that these officials are aware of can bring their influence to bear in holding the politicians accountable to community needs.

## WHAT IS ELECTORAL ORGANIZING?

Electoral Organizing is work that engages registered and eligible voters in an activity that results in increased participation in an election. The goals of this kind of work can be to increase the numbers of people who vote, to change the outcomes of the election, to increase the power and influence of a particular community or issue group, or to add an additional strategy to your organization's power to win on its issues.

Although it can be an end in itself, electoral organizing is most powerful when it complements and builds on your core policy, program, and community organizing work.

## Engaging in Voter Work versus Developing an Electoral Strategy

Electoral organizing can range from a one-time voter registration drive connected to an issue campaign to a multi-year program that helps to build an organization's political power.

Examples of short-term opportunities include an open seat for an elected office that could affect local or regional politics or a ballot initiative that could have either a negative or positive effect on an organization and its constituencies.

Organizations that choose to build a long-term electoral program generally do so after a strategic planning process and evaluation of what is necessary to shift power in a community, including what opportunities exist for collaboration and resources for the work.

### Electoral Organizing Activities

Voter work is simply engaging voters or potential voters in some kind of activity with your organization. These are the most common activities:

- **Voter registration:** Getting people to fill out the paperwork to be able to vote in an election. A voter registration campaign can either focus only on increasing the number of people registered to vote or include components that educate and mobilize these new potential voters. Voter registration projects are generally aimed at new voters (newly naturalized citizens, youth, and students) and communities with historically low voter turnout rates (such as low-income people, workers, homeless people).

- **Voter education:** Educating a group of voters about one or more of the following: an upcoming election, major campaign or ballot issues, the positions of candidates, and the voting and political system. Activities can include town hall meetings, voter guides, candidate forums, and one-on-one contact.

- **Voter identification:** Identifying a certain group of voters that an organization would like to turn out during an election. Whether you are doing a nonpartisan project or endorsing a candidate or a position on a ballot initiative will determine how you can engage in voter ID. By turning voters out for an election, an organization can show potential policy makers that they have a base of people in the community they can move, particularly around specific issues.

- **Voter mobilization:** Getting people to the polls. Get-out-the-vote activities range from sending a reminder mailing or email to the people you have in your database to carrying out an intensive, multi-contact voter mobilization program. Nonpartisan voter mobilization messages focus on the importance of civic engagement, participation, and involvement, not on a specific candidate or ballot proposition.

Any of these activities can be done alone; however, they make the biggest impact if you combine a number of them in an integrated program connected to your ongoing work and program.

### Other Types of Electoral Work

In addition to activities that engage voters, the broader scope of electoral work can include candidate education and candidate development. Educating candidates about

an issue and how your group thinks it should be addressed can be done through media, policy advocacy, public education, and direct action such as accountability sessions or target meetings with the candidate.

Candidate development is the process of identifying people in your organization, community, or networks who would make good elected officials, training them to be strong candidates, and helping them to run effective campaigns.

### GETTING STARTED: PLANNING YOUR PROJECT

When you begin to explore the idea of doing electoral work, your organization should engage in some evaluation, assessment, political analysis, and planning to develop the best program possible. Particularly important is evaluating what issues are on the table and

whether other groups are also working on the election around those issues. Make sure you check in with other groups and stakeholders to coordinate your activities.

Talk to a variety of people in the political world — such as the political director at unions, friendly elected officials, political donors, and independent consultants — to find out what could have the largest impact and raise the profile of your organization, particularly with elected officials. This process can help you understand the opportunity available to create a program that has some value, while starting to build relationships and get buy-in from people you may want to return to as you engage in your fundraising.

When the assessment and planning process is complete, having a strong plan will help you communicate what you want to do effectively to people inside and outside of your organization from whom you want support for the program. It will also help you with raising funds for the work.

#### *There are seven key steps to planning your electoral project:*

1. Clarify your goals.
2. Determine whether your program will be nonpartisan — within your (c)(3) — or partisan — as part of a (c)(4) PAC.
3. Assess your organization's current resources and what you need.
4. Articulate how engaging in this work builds your organization and helps to fulfill your mission.
5. Develop a written plan.
6. Develop a budget.
7. Develop a fundraising plan.

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More detail about the first five steps can be found on the website, [www.grassrootsfundraising.org](http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org). Here we look more closely at the two steps that pertain most directly to fundraising: developing a budget and a fundraising plan.

## DEVELOPING A BUDGET

A realistic budget that reflects the needs of an electoral project is critical for fundraising. Donors who either fund voter programs or do their own electoral programs will be less likely to fund a project whose budget is unrealistic or does not accurately reflect the needs of a strong voter project.

Specifically, the budget should reflect the plan and its activities. If you plan to target voters using an analysis, specific databases, and technical expertise to manage these databases, the budget should reflect these costs. If you want to evaluate voter participation rates in a district, make sure you budget for that. Technology and the acquisition of voter lists are always critical budget items as well.

Even if you believe some items will be donated or you will receive in-kind services, estimate a cost for them and put them in your budget. People sometimes promise things that at the last minute they cannot deliver. If volunteer time or in-kind services and donations fail to materialize at the right time, you may need to pay for these in order to go on with your work. For example, the failure to create a targeted list of voters at the appropriate time can end a project before it starts or at best severely affect its outcomes.

Once you have created a budget for these core expenses, including the cost of a Project Manager or Director, then the rest of the budget will be based on how many voters you want to contact, how many times you will contact them, how you contact them, and what you ask them to do. Cost items will be based on estimating how many contacts each organizer will make a week so you can estimate how many organizers you will need to make your goals. Other costs include literature you will produce and mailing costs associated with sending it to voters.

## FUNDRAISING FOR AN ELECTORAL PROGRAM

All the work that you do in the first five steps on goals and plans should significantly improve your ability to raise money because you will be able to articulate to your current supporters how this new work, while separate from your core work, also builds your organization. New donors, particularly donors interested in the electoral arena, will see that you have thought about how to do this work effectively and that you want to have an impact.

Following is a brief overview of how to raise money for your electoral program.

## Develop a Message and Materials

Working off the plan you created, develop the basics of a pitch to use when communicating to donors. The core elements of the pitch will be the same for all of your donor appeals, but you modify them depending on whether you are talking to current donors or potential donors. The pitch — which can take the form of a fundraising letter, a phone rap for a phone bank, the content of an in-person conversation with a prospective donor, or a more formal proposal to a foundation — should include the following elements:

- The name of the new project and what it is going to do
- Why it is important to do now and the opportunity that your organization wants to take advantage of
- Why you think you can do it and how your track record supports this belief
- How it will build your organization and how it will help you achieve your overall organizational goals
- What you think or hope it will achieve
- How much money you need to raise and for what
- An ask with a specific dollar amount

## Different Audiences

It is important to tailor the pitch to the person you are talking to. Smaller contributors do not need an entire political analysis, but they might need to just know why a state senate race is important. Your core

donors may need to understand how a gift to this project is different from their regular contribution. People who have given to your issue area before but not to your organization or to a voting project will need background on both as well as on how this project connects to the issue they care about.

An individual donor with a history of giving large gifts to campaigns and organizations engaged in voter work will need to know that you have done your research and that you understand how information about past elections, turnout rates, and polling could be helpful in moving people to support your work. These donors are more likely to be motivated by hard facts. However, do not forget to include stories that make the work real for people. Having a community person tell how they voted for the first time as a result of the work of your organization is a good way to get donors to understand the work and to potentially move them to give.

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## Asking Current Donors

The first people to consider asking are those who support you already. These supporters know your organization and believe in your work. If they are consistent donors, they trust your organization and believe in your capacity and ability to make an impact. With these core supporters, the two challenges you will face are convincing them that the project requires new funds and persuading them to give you additional money for this work.

If your electoral work is going to be a one-time-only project, for example developing a voter program to participate in an open mayoral election or to oppose a conservative ballot initiative, you can make a “special appeal.” In this appeal — written, phone, or in-person — the pitch would focus on the uniqueness of the situation and the impact that your organization could have on the issue by getting involved in this work for a limited time. It should also include a good amount of urgency and clearly lay out the impact that the outcome could have — both good and bad.

For your smaller donors, a letter or email appeal is your best approach. Your message should also include a concrete amount, perhaps with a description of what activity is supported through the donation. For example, “A contribution of \$100 will provide 400 voters with the information they need about the important issues that the next Mayor needs to address so that they can make an informed choice on election day.”

For your major donors, or those donors who you think have the potential to give larger gifts, consider holding a breakfast briefing or morning roundtable. These meetings can appeal to the desire of a medium-to-large donor to be seen as an organizational partner. They also provide an opportunity to do more education.

A briefing should include a presentation about the political landscape, how an electoral program could make a difference, and a description of the programs the organization will run. Be prepared to talk about the resources available and needed and to present the budget. Following a question and answer period, ask attendees to consider making a gift to the project. It’s ideal if a donor who has agreed to make a contribution prior to the meeting can make the ask.

This type of gathering can generate an atmosphere of excitement that provides people with an incentive to give, and it can move some people to give because they see the public commitments of others. These meetings also allow you to reach a larger number of donors at one time, cutting down on the time one-on-one appointments take.

However, these meetings can also have challenges. For people who do not like to commit money in public,

you will need to schedule individual follow-up meetings soon after. If you can’t hold a meeting at a time when most people can attend, you may want to have more than one meeting — a morning and an evening meeting, for example. For those who still cannot make either, you could mail a copy of the materials, a summary of the presentation, and a list of people who did come (or who were invited), along with a handwritten note asking for an individual meeting.

The biggest challenge that can happen at these meetings is that donors (or one donor in particular) disagrees with the strategy or the presentation and says so. Their reaction has the potential to raise questions in other donors’ minds about the validity and the strategic nature of the project, which could engender a series of comments and questions that could derail the meeting. This can be particularly problematic if the person is disruptive or tries to take over the meeting. If you know your donors, you may have an inkling of people who could pose this challenge. These folks might still give money, but they should be prioritized for an individual meeting.

Another way to head off such a scene is to check in with people over the phone when inviting them, assessing their interest in and alignment with the proposed project. Although you cannot dis-invite them, you can do some prep work with them on the phone before the

meeting to respond to concerns that might make other donors anxious.

Finally, good facilitation, combined with one or two key respected donors who are prepared to be supportive of the project and make a financial

commitment then and there, should help to temper any negative impact if this situation arises.

## Raising Funds from New Sources and New Donors

There are three other groups of people who should be included when building a prospecting list. These are people who are already donors to other organizations or issues: donors interested in your issue area, constituency, or type of work; donors interested in general civic engagement and participation activities; and political and partisan donors.

You can approach donors interested in your issue area or constituency with a targeted message about why supporting electoral work is important to the issue they care about. For example, people who contribute to service organizations that are concerned about poverty, job

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training, unemployment, and housing issues may be interested in supporting work to educate voters and candidates about these issues.

The message that could resonate with these potential donors is that elected officials have the opportunity and power to address these issues through the policies they pursue. Although many people give to service organizations because they want to fund direct services, some of them may be interested in root causes and issues and want to see them raised in an election.

For donors and institutions that are interested in the general area of civic engagement, your message will focus less on the issue and even on change and more on “participation.”

To reach these potential donors you can trade lists with other nonprofits whose donors may be interested in your work in this area or rent lists from direct mail list brokers who specialize in nonprofit lists. Look for lists of people who support good-government groups and institutions such as the League of Women Voters. Because the response rate for direct mail is so low when you’re writing to people who have never made a contribution to your organization before (1 percent would be a successful result), this is an expensive approach, but may be worth it if you don’t have enough current donors to ask.

You can also use your prospecting research to identify donors who give large gifts to your issue area and try to interest them in funding electoral work. A good way to target these folks would be to try to cross-reference the people who give to your issue and also donate to candidates or political organizations. You can learn which donors these may be by asking related issue groups to identify these donors if they know which of their donors give to campaigns or candidates, or by checking to see if these donors’ names are on lists of campaign contributors. Those lists can be acquired either by asking candidates themselves or by requesting such lists from campaign finance boards and election offices. Each candidate is required to file a report of how much money they have raised, from what sources, and the amount of each contribution.

As with all fundraising from individual donors, the most effective way to reach these folks would be through a referral or personal connection. Although it can be hard to get people to share donor information, some organizations that provide services but do not do advocacy or

political work may be willing to make an introduction to a donor who may also be interested in electoral work.

### Asking Foundations, Unions, and Religious Groups

Some foundations provide additional resources during election years to support voter work. Unions as well as some intermediary organizations (including national organizations) also have funding available for voter work, particularly voter registration activities. You can approach these institutions by calling or by sending a letter to ask if any funds or special pools of money will be available for the upcoming election. You can also set up meetings with the appropriate people at the institutions to talk about your project. Another approach is to set up a briefing similar to the one for donors and invite representatives.

### Raising Funds for Larger Electoral Programs

For groups that are building larger or ongoing electoral programs, the donors who already give to political campaigns will be the base of donors you want to reach out to.

One of the biggest attractions for these political donors, particularly if you are doing nonpartisan work within your (c)(3) status, is the opportunity to make a tax-deductible donation.

The major challenge associated with trying to raise money from political donors is that they are used to using their donations to help a candidate win rather than to build an infrastructure that supports ongoing social and political change. These donors may want proof that your work will make a difference in the outcome of the election. When doing nonpartisan work you cannot make this case — only that you plan to increase participation rates. In a close race where convincing voters of the differences between candidates is critical, this outcome may not be enough for these donors.

Another challenge that may arise with political donors is that their interests can change from year to year, election to election. They have a tendency to invest in races that they perceive to be critical each election year. They sometimes do not understand and thus do not commit to building the ongoing capacity that long-term electoral programs require.

It is best to approach these donors with the mindset that it may take time to move them to understand the importance of your work. You will have to educate them about your work and how it ultimately will help to contribute to the ends they want. If you are successful, these

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donors could end up being supporters of all aspects of your organization.

To find these donors you will need to do research. Checking out campaign finance reports and doing online research of specialized contributor search engines can produce lists of people, addresses, and potentially other contact information.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

Once the decisions are made, the plan is set, and the resources are raised, the real work begins. Whatever type of project you decide to develop and run, electoral and voter work can be energizing and fun. It can also mean long hours, including weekends, and a lot of hard work. No matter what kind of organization or what kind of work you do, voter work is an excellent way to feel connected to your constituents, members, and your community — and to work for change. **GFJ**

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PAUL GETSOS HAS MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, ELECTORAL WORK, AND STRATEGY AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. HE WAS THE FOUNDING ORGANIZER OF COMMUNITY VOICES HEARD, AN ECONOMIC JUSTICE ORGANIZATION IN NYC. HE IS THE CO-AUTHOR OF *TOOLS FOR RADICAL DEMOCRACY*.