

## Grassroots Organizing – Building a Green Party Local

The Green local chapter has been the mainstay of Green organizing in most parts of the country since before there were Green Parties. Combining day-in, day-out issue organizing of a local chapter and the occasional hyperactivity of an electoral campaign has been one of the great challenges for Greens, but also one of the great keys to our success.

While all towns are different and have differing political cultures, there are many things that overlap, and many common tools and strategies. Because of these differences, organizers must read any guide with caution. But we cannot all reinvent the organizing wheel and we have much knowledge to share.

While local members can take on various tasks, it usually works best to have people focus on one of the below areas, and have a coordinator see that the task is getting performed. It can help to save the more exciting tasks for newcomers.

I tell people that organizing is 80% hard work, 10% luck and 10% creativity. You do the hard work so that you are ready to take advantage of lucky breaks and maximize the advantage with some creativity.

### **Fundamental Elements of a Green Party Local**

The fundamental elements have a fair amount of overlap, but do represent key components of a healthy, growing local.

#### Foundation

These are the tasks that keep things going underneath: scheduling meetings, managing lists and any red tape with city or state bureaucracies. They aren't exciting, but there may not be anything to build on without it.

#### Party/Organization Building

Getting the word out about your organization using basic techniques like tabling and registration drives in states that have party-based registration are straightforward actions that build an organization and political party without the ongoing focus of issue organizing.

#### Issue Organizing

The bread and butter of most political organizing: choose an issue and change something. Convince your city to dedicate a community garden, oppose police brutality, work for affordable housing. Related to this is institution building: starting a food coop or a local currency. Issue organizing shows that Greens are really doing things and builds visibility and credibility.

#### Electoral Campaigns

Campaigns take hold of all the work done above in a relatively short-term effort when the less politicized public pays attention to politics. Then comes the Green Synergy – using general organizing to give you electoral opportunities, and using elections to build the Green Party.

## Building a Green Local – The Foundation

As with a building, there is nothing to build on without a foundation. It doesn't take many people to manage the foundation of a local, but it can be hard to recruit people to do so, both because they tend to be boring tasks, and also because they sometimes require technical skills, the most bothersome being the job of treasurer. Some of the key components of a foundation:

- Legal Requirements – You may need to register your organization with the city or state, or fill out financial reports
- Meetings – What is a group that never meets? Public meeting spaces are much better than homes because the public is sometimes intimidated walking up to someone's door. Make sure you get all the free newspaper calendar advertising you can get. Prepare an agenda and have effective meetings that don't waste peoples time. Having meetings that participants feel are ineffective are the quickest way to kill a local.
- Lists – You need to know who comes to meetings so you can continue to invite them. Managing lists and updating them from signup sheets after tabling events is critical to keeping the folks you already have
- Materials – You should have some kind of introductory material. This usually is a trifold brochure, but could be a one third tearsheet to save money. It needs to be updated regularly.

## Building a Green Local – Party Building

One step up from the Foundation is the party and organization building. This is where you strut your stuff and ask people to join and get involved. It is differentiated from issue activism in that doesn't require a long-term effort or a specific issue.

- Tabling – This dominates party building activities in most Green groups. Some organizers refer to building a “tabling culture.” Farmer's Markets, outdoor festivals, anywhere you can set up a table and display literature. Be sure to have a good sign-up sheet, a donation jar and talk to people in a friendly way as they walk by and have a good banner for visibility. You may want others walk in the crowd. And be sure to “seed” the donation jar with some money. Nobody wants to be the first to donate.
- Leafletting – Similar to tabling but at events where you cannot set up a table, such as outside of concerts or other public events. Keep it simple and only hand out one or two things. Wear a button or t-shirt or hold a sign so that people can easily identify what you are up to.

## **Building a Green Local – Issue Organizing**

This is what got many Greens into politics and it remains the core of the most successful Green Parties. Most voters need to trust third party candidates to vote for them, and you build credibility and visibility by the things you do in between campaigns. In most cases, coalition-building also flows from issue organizing.

Books have been written on this subject and I can only begin to mention some of the key tools and strategies you can use.

### **Choosing an Issue**

To build a political party, you need to choose an issue that affects people's quality of life in a clear way. Many Greens are passionate about issues that may be distant to most people in your community. Overwhelmingly, the failure to build a strong local is because issues are chosen that may be dear to an individual's heart, but not to the community. This doesn't mean that issue is not important, just that you can do more to affect it if you first work on locally-based issues. Issues like the drug war, plutonium in space and Central American human rights rarely build a local. Alternative transportation, affordable housing, police brutality, a stop light at a dangerous intersection, community gardens. These issues build a local. When people actually join for these issues, you can educate them about issues that may seem more distant or abstract to them. It's also good for a young group to start with something easy that they can succeed on. Take on the harder issues later.

### **A Plan**

You need to have an idea of how you will succeed. Who makes the decision that you need? Who informs the decision-maker? Do you need to investigate how your Planning Board works? What other groups are already working on this issue, or could be drawn into it? How do you get the public's attention? What other public events could be leveraged to get you victory? Should you plan your effort during a city council election and demand that candidates take a position? If you can't figure out a good plan, you probably need a different issue.

### **The Press**

No subject gets more complaints than the difficulty of getting mainstream press coverage. And independent or alternative media generally doesn't reach the people you need. A long-term press manipulation strategy is critical to a growing local. Call reporters after they do a story on an issue you know about. Ask them to call you before their next story. Don't demand that they quote you (though that is what you want), but let them use you as an info source and eventually you will get your quote. Write letters to the editor and call the editorial page editor. Above all, be polite and don't call them tools of corporate oppression, even if they are. And remember that the press loves to be manipulated.

### **Other Groups Issues**

It often makes sense for a new Green group to first offer to support an existing kindred group in their issue. If you offer help before you ask for it, you build credibility. Showing up at a city council meeting to speak in support of another group's issue will be remembered for a long time, win or lose.

## Building a Green Local – The Campaign

We are a political party after all, and we need to run candidates. But when? Should you build a local and not run until you have a real shot at winning, or announce the Green presence with a campaign? Should you run a few or a lot? High-level or local races? These issues have animated Greens for years, but the answer is often more local than many of the debaters admit.

In general, Greens try to only run in campaigns where they can have some kind of impact. We run less candidates than other third parties, but usually get more votes. We want campaigns that really get the message out, rather than filling the ballot with candidates voters only hear about when they vote.

### **When to run**

The traditional and dominant response has been to build the local first and run later on. Recently, more new groups have started with campaigns. Is this laziness? Most early locals were in towns with liberal cultures that permitted Green participation without a fight. Greens can build more easily in lefty college towns than in other places. As Green activity has spread to more conservative communities, a campaign may be the only way to get any visibility if the local power structure absolutely locks you out. Try to build a local first, but don't be shy about taking it to the powers-that-be at the ballot box if that is the only place you are allowed to get any visibility.

### **For what?**

The general sense is that local races build depth and higher-level races build breadth and spread the Green message, but require some depth to pull off. The exception is if you recruit a candidate who already has strong community presence and name recognition. But most candidates don't choose the office they seek based on the condition of the local, they base it on the issues they are passionate about and what offices affect those issues. The other aspect is that Greens win more at the local level. Having an officeholder at any level will get you more press coverage and more experience than a high-level race where you only get 1%.

### **Grooming candidates**

If you are building first, make sure that you groom your candidate while you build your local. The prospective candidate should try to get on a volunteer city commission, and should be one of the people working with the press. They should try to meet people and develop contacts, speak to kindred groups. If your candidate does this, they can get the payoff of endorsements, one of the most important tools for candidates that lack name recognition.

### **The team**

A campaign first needs to ensure that the candidate can spend his or her time being a candidate, not managing a database or picking up yard signs. How many team members you need depends on the office and the campaign. A campaign manager, volunteer coordinator and materials person may be the minimum, but you can quickly move up to needing a Press Secretary, Treasurer, etc.

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## Building a Green Local – The Campaign (continued)

### **The campaign**

Walking the district and leafletting are the core of low-level (local) Green campaigns. Make sure to get invited to candidate forums and study the issues. Nader may have been locked out of the Presidential debates, but most local candidate forums are more open. Letters to the editor are pure gold – make sure you get them at a regular clip.

### **Fundraising**

First, be realistic. If the candidate has little name recognition or endorsements, and isn't wealthy, there won't be much money. Use tear sheets instead of brochures. An experienced Green campaign manager once said that you should never insult anyone by not asking them for money. This is the truth. The greatest barrier to decent fundraising is not being willing to ask for money. You have to ask: at tabling events, forums, speaking events. Ask and you shall receive may be wishful thinking, but don't ask you shan't receive is the truth.

### **Getting Your Message Out**

The most difficult thing for committed activists is not reading the issue encyclopedia to prospective voters. To win an election or build your vote total, you need to appeal to swing voters. Keep it simple for them. Choose a few key issues and stick to them. Keep statements to the press brief so that you control what is used. If you speak for an hour and they use two sentences, they will use your worst. Any promotional materials, whether brochures or newspaper ads, shouldn't be too dense. Include nice pictures and bullet point issues. Let them ask you the details at a candidate forum.

### **Post-election – The Green Synergy**

I coined the term the Green Synergy for the post-election effort to try and keep as many of your new campaign volunteers in your local as possible. It is one of the most neglected aspects of Green campaigns and for a good reason – it requires the most tired and burned out people to do things when all they want is a vacation.

You need to do something soon after your election to hold your people in. If you have a Spring municipal election, you are lucky because Spring leading to summer is a good time for politics. November elections are torture because you are heading into the Holiday Season and it's damn hard to compete with Thanksgiving. In either case, the candidate and the core campaign team who are most burned out need to plan something soon after the election. A meeting to plan issue activism is best. But a party, or even a letter can do minimally. For November elections, you simply cannot wait until after New Years. Unless you won, and even if you did, your supporters will have moved on.

Ideally, if you have a healthy campaign team, one or two people should make plans for this before election day.

***But above all – be creative, don't be afraid to try new things, and have fun doing it!***