

Candidate Recruitment:

Running Our Own for Office

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War. Regressive tax policy. Disinvestment in the public sector. If you're upset by the way elected leaders are behaving now, one response is to look at putting different decision-makers in place for 2004. While it may feel like an insurmountable challenge in these times, grassroots groups across the region—just like the little engine that could—are working on changing the face of who's in power.

"The real question is how *wouldn't* our government be different if we focused on electing good leaders from the organizations we currently work with?" says Western States Center board member and former Oregon Representative Jo Ann Bowman. "We would have policy makers who share the vision of the organizations they came from, to move a

tions to build a strong coalition that created bipartisan support. It couldn't have happened without the work of the organizations that helped me pass the bill." Bowman acknowledges that candidate recruitment is a complex proposition for stretched organizations. But imagine how discussion on the bill in this example might have looked different if she had been able to work with other legislators who came from the organizations that formed the coalition of support.

In Wyoming, the Equality State Policy Center started its plan for candidate cultivation six years ago. The result is a more moderate state legislature that is interested in the issues important to the citizens of the state. ESPC Executive Director Tom Throop says, "Ultimately what ESPC wants to do is successfully change public policy to achieve economic, environmental and social justice. Those policy decisions are made principally by state elected officials. To maximize our success, we had to engage in this arena."

The IRS regulations regarding Political Action Committees (PACs) and non-profit 501(c)(3) and (c)(4) organizations can be complicated. ESPC embraced the IRS rule-



Jo Ann Bowman

progressive agenda forward." Much of Bowman's recent work has been helping grassroots groups to engage in candidate recruitment and electoral politics.

"As a legislator I relied on community organizations," Bowman explains. "For example, I was the lead on a bill that exempted grandparents from the work requirement of the state's welfare reform act. I worked with a number of organiza-



Thalia Zepatos

book and learned how to play. “We created a clear distinction between these organizations with separate names, board members and complementary visions. The (c)(3) is to educate voters on issues and get out the vote. The coalition of PACs recruits candidates and assists in specific elections,” explains Throop.

ESPC’s integrated approach resulted in significant movement in Wyoming’s 40 day session. “This year, in spite of the national trend toward conservatism, members of ESPC succeeded in advancing their own agendas. It has been encouraging to see the legislature now placing the interests of citizens ahead of the special interests,” says Throop. ESPC passed pre-election campaign finance reporting, improved the voter registration process on reservations, created a public service consumer advocacy commission, and made steps toward restoring ex-felon voter rights.

Leadership Development

In addition to policy gains, the approach of fielding candidates can also strengthen an organization. “We work with member groups to see running for office as an extension of leadership development,” says Throop. “Most of the candidates we work with are coming from membership or constituency-based organizations. This year our campaign school had over 50 participants: candidates, prospective candidates, and campaign organizers. Just think of the skills that they bring back to their organizations even if they aren’t successful in their campaigns.”

In Nevada, the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) has used Pro-PAC to offer a complementary approach to supporting candidates since 1994. Now the group is seeking to expand its role in cultivating candidates. Bob Fulkerson, member of Pro-PAC and Executive Director of PLAN explains, “We want to put together a ‘farm team’ so people can gain experience running for office and putting their issues up front. We want to put together a candidate recruitment plan that looks at race and gender and age to make sure that there is a mix of people with different life experiences who can take leadership.”

Fulkerson’s point about the identity of candidates is an important one. While the population of people of color has increased across the region, in some states there has been a decline in the number of elected officials of color. In spite of the high visibility of gay rights struggles across the region, comparatively few elected officials are openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered.

Bowman, who is African American, says, “In this region, the challenges for people of color to run for office are significant but not insurmountable. I was amazed that still, in 2003, almost everywhere in the country the composition of elected offices is so lacking in diversity. Unfortunately, the major political parties are failing to recruit and maintain people of color in their ranks. One party fails to incorporate people of color in their ranks, and the other only wants photo opportunities.” Independent PACs and candidate cultivation by community-based organizations is one way to address this concern.

So what should a nice non-profit organization do if it is fed up and can’t take it anymore? The resounding answer is: start early.

“If the goal is to have your own members become successful candidates, you need to make sure there is a good base of support. You can’t just put them on the ballot, leave them alone and expect them to win,” Bowman advises. “Are they ready to answer tough questions from outsiders and articulate their vision clearly? Are they ready to fundraise and tackle the challenges of being in the public spotlight? Start early because change doesn’t happen overnight.”

Fulkerson agrees: “Start now for 2004 and look at the districts to determine the myriad of offices to see where there are possible winnable seats. Once you’ve narrowed the list of offices then talk to your own members and leaders. All of us need to be in office at one point in our careers for justice. Think of it as compulsory service.”

As Fulkerson concludes, “If you’re about making progressive policy change at any level, you need to have decision makers who will go to bat for you. And there is no better decision-maker than one who comes from your own ranks.”



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

This year’s Community Strategic Training Initiative (CSTI) will offer workshops on candidate development and holding elected officials organizationally accountable. Experienced campaign strategist

Thalia Zepatos will join former legislator **Jo Ann Bowman** for three days of electoral training. While non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations must steer clear of any partisan support of candidates, there’s a lot of room for action.

For more information:

www.westernstatescenter.org/CSTI