

# Strategies for Building Statewide Progressive Power

An Examination of Seven State Coalitions

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State Strategies Fund

A Project of the Proteus Fund

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# Foreword

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The State Strategies Fund (SSF), a project of the Proteus Fund, is a collaborative grantmaking program supporting innovative state-level strategies to increase citizen participation and advance political reform. SSF provides its funding partners with reliable information about the growing network of these multi-issue coalitions and their innovative strategies for promoting change. Participating foundations and individual donors of the State Strategies Fund contribute funds into a grantmaking pool. These funds are awarded to organizations through a competitive grantmaking process. The donors or their representatives participate on the Grants Committee and recommend funding to the board. Since 1999, its first year of grantmaking, the State Strategies Fund has awarded \$2,000,000 to 24 multi-issue, multi-constituency state coalitions.

This report is a summary of a lengthy study of seven of our grantees. The study was commissioned by the Fund to help us learn more about our grantees' strategies for engaging citizens and voters so that we might increase the impact of our grants. The research team included five talented leaders in the foundation community, and we are grateful to each of them for the time, attention, and care they brought to this report.

The research team included:

*Ryan Alexander*, formerly with the Rockefeller Family Fund and now an independent consultant.

*Michele Lord*, formerly the Director of the Norman Foundation and now the Director of the Ottinger Foundation and a principal at Lord, Ross, Ltd.

*Tom Novick*, a Senior Vice President with M & R Strategic Services, Executive Director of Conservation Strategies, based in Portland, Oregon, and former Oregon State Representative.

*Scott Nielsen*, formerly with the MacArthur Foundation and now an independent consultant.

*Donald Ross*, former Director of the Rockefeller Family Fund, principal of M & R Strategic Services, and of Lord, Ross, Ltd.

The report describes and critiques a wide range of programs undertaken through a variety of separate 501c(3), 501c(4), and political organizations. While the SSF funds only 501c(3) activities as defined by the Internal Revenue Code, the analysis and conclusions reached by the consultants of this entire range of organizations are noteworthy and helpful to observers of the state coalitions.

On behalf of the State Strategies Fund,

*Meg Gage*  
*Executive Director*

# Letter From The Co-Chair

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Before I stumbled into philanthropy a few years ago, I spent almost a decade in Washington, DC, most of it as a U.S. Senate staffer, working on education, welfare reform, campaign finance reform, health care, and other frustrating causes. I left the capital in 1997 convinced that, at least for the moment, Washington is not where solutions are likely to be found to the nations most pressing problems. National politics is too distant, too money-driven, too cautious, and too professionalized to take chances, make progress, and bring the public back into decision-making.

On the bright side, though, decision-making in Washington is at least relatively open to public and press scrutiny. And no issue lacks its cadre of well-informed and well-connected advocates for the public interest.

At the state level, the situation is virtually reversed. On the one hand, as conservative advocates of devolution correctly argue, there is far more opportunity for creative policy and real public engagement. Individuals and groups whose professional lobbyists in Washington barely speak to one another are able to find common cause and work together for change in the states. Citizens can find ways to involve themselves in the process, making their voice heard, working with others to reform the process, and eventually perhaps running for office themselves, even without big money connections.

On the other hand, state policy-makers often operate in obscurity, decisions (such as on public benefits) can be arbitrary or discriminatory, and conflicts of interest are rampant. (The Center for Public Integrity found last year that, in one large state, three of every five legislators serve on committees that directly affect their personal finances.) Money can often be directly traced to tax and regulatory decisions that benefit the powerful industries in a state. And in 24 states, the opportunity to put questions directly on the ballot puts human rights, the right to organize, and sound fiscal policy at risk year after year, while nonetheless creating a means for direct democracy.

To work in the states, then, is both an opportunity and an absolute obligation. As public responsibility shifts from the federal level to the states, there must be institutions at the state level that can ensure that responsibility is exercised fairly and democratically. There must be institutions that can bring progressive groups together, to join forces and magnify their voice. There must be institutions that bring citizens into the process, help them find a way to be heard, use their energy, and become full citizen-participants in governance, not just passive voters. The Open Society Institutes view has been that if and when these institutions of civil society are in place, devolution can be made to work for good.

Such institutions exist in a growing number of states, in the form of state-based progressive coalitions. The movement toward coalitions has been driven by several forces: the example of a few strong coalitions with magnificent accomplishments over a decade or more; the presence of regional support organizations, particularly Northeast Action and the Western States Center; a 1999 initiative by the Ford Foundation to build Collaborations that Count; and the development of the State Strategies Fund, a joint effort among donors to strengthen and multiply state coalitions.

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I first encountered state coalitions through their work on campaign finance reform, where groups like the Dirigo Alliance in Maine and Re-Visioning New Mexico have made full public financing of campaigns — an idea far beyond the incremental reforms stalled in Congress — a viable alternative. Reform of the political process is a perfect issue for state coalitions because the groups that make up a typical coalition — environmentalists, public health advocates, low-income and minority groups, womens organizations, youth groups, etc. — find shared ground in being on the losing side of the political money game.

But the coalitions are not just good government reform groups. Far from it. They take on as many issues as they have constituencies, from environmental protection to employment discrimination to regional economic planning to prescription drug coverage for seniors and tax thresholds for low-income workers. Above all, they provide an infrastructure that can provide a voice for citizens as new issues emerge and new solutions are crafted.

The state coalitions have received some foundation support for their lead role on campaign finance reform or for their work with environmental groups. But until the State Strategies Fund began making grants in 1999 (after a lengthy and cautious planning process), there was no funding source for the coalitions *as coalitions*. That is, there was no place where coalitions could seek support to do what they do best. The State Strategies Fund has filled that gap, helping the coalitions build capacity and providing a resource that they can draw on even when they dont happen to be working on an issue thats currently fashionable in the foundation world.

But the State Strategies Fund has not just been a funding source for coalitions. What is most impressive about the Fund, I think, has been its careful and ongoing scrutiny of the coalition strategy itself. After the several years of study that went into creating the Fund, it would be easy to sit back and assume that we know what there is to know about coalitions. But with the eagerness of the Funds staff to keep learning, we have supplemented the grantmaking with research projects, the first of which is summarized in the following pages. A team of experienced researchers, all with experience in state progressive action, challenged coalitions in several states on the most fundamental question: are they really engaging large numbers of citizens, especially those who would otherwise be shut out, in the political and decision-making process in their states? And what strategies work best for citizen engagement? As the report shows, most of the state groups are doing well, but some stand out and can offer particular lessons for other groups that aspire to a deeper engagement than they currently realize.

The more I see of the state coalition groups the more convinced I am of the need for the State Strategies Fund. The Funds contribution is not just in the money it distributes to state groups, but in the knowledge that we are accumulating and sharing with the coalitions, their allies, and other potential funders. We hope that this will be useful to colleagues in the philanthropic world as you think about the ways in which state coalitions might serve a foundations philanthropic mission, whether the mission is strengthening democracy, protecting human rights, reducing economic inequality, protecting the environment, or improving health.

*Mark Schmitt  
Director of the Program on Governance  
and Public Policy, Open Society Institute*

# The Importance of the State-Based Approach

Americans are seeing an unprecedented devolution of political power and legislative authority from the federal government to the states. State legislatures make increasingly significant decisions about major issues such as welfare reform, environmental protection, public school funding, tax structure, and health care reform. Concurrently, recent Supreme and federal court decisions are placing increased regulatory power in the hands of state-level administrative bodies, and have given the state judiciary system escalating authority. There is little doubt that powerful narrow interests have been exploiting these new responsibilities thrust on state and local governments. Moreover, as these state legislatures and administrative agencies struggle to divide diminishing funds among competing urgent needs, policy issues can become wedges that isolate progressive public interest groups who would otherwise be allies.

Yet devolution offers reasons for optimism too. Many of the most exciting political reforms — in health care, welfare, and campaign finance reform, for example — are occurring at the state level. Increasingly, states are the laboratories for policy experimentation, and successful models get adopted by other states, and even by the federal government. There are now more opportunities than ever before for state-based groups to participate powerfully in public policy discussions. To capitalize on these opportunities, state-level public interest organizations must build their political sophistication, strategic thinking, and organizational capacity. Much is at stake.

Progressive funders and national leaders have, research shows, neglected the importance of state-level organizing and advocacy work. While well-supported community organizations successfully represent the interests of low- and moderate-income citizens at the local level, and national single-issue advocacy groups channel resources and develop engaged constituencies throughout the states, neither community organizations nor national single-issue interest groups have developed sufficient power to be players in state capitals.

*“The future success of progressive advocacy, leadership, and policy formation could depend on the viability of the state-based coalition.”*

To seize the opportunity devolution presents, state-based groups must be supported. Multi-issue state-based coalitions are an efficient and flexible way to leverage limited resources, build ongoing collaborations among groups with consonant interests, and respond quickly

to crucial issues and events. In addition, the coalitions are the invaluable pipeline supplying information and skills from local to national levels, and back again. The future success of progressive advocacy, leadership, and policy formation could depend on the viability of the state-based coalitions.

This report describes the state-based coalition strategy using seven examples to illustrate the roles, successes, and challenges of coalitions across the country. These findings are neither definitive nor exhaustive, but rather present a snapshot of coalition activity regarding, largely, citizen participation activities.

# Development of State-level Strategies

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As the focus of political power moves increasingly from the federal to state governments, new public interest strategies are emerging at the state level to meet new challenges. Especially promising is the rise of multi-issue, statewide coalitions. Community, LGBT and womens organizations, unions, environmental groups, civil rights organizations, good-government groups, low-income advocates, and other groups that share common interests but do not have a history of working together now coordinate their efforts through statewide coalitions. Many coalitions focus and build leverage on cross-cutting issues that are too big for single-interest groups to win on their own.

## **Background**

The State Strategies Fund (SSF), a project of the Proteus Fund, is a collaborative grantmaking program supporting innovative state-level strategies to increase citizen participation and advance political reform. SSF provides its funding partners with reliable information about the growing network of these multi-issue coalitions and their innovative strategies for promoting change.<sup>1</sup> The coalitions are neither grassroots organizations nor issue-based groups, although they work with many grassroots groups and most coalitions do significant issue work. They focus largely on citizen engagement strategies that involve and empower low- and moderate-income citizens, particularly from disadvantaged constituencies.

The research initiative was initiated to help SSF and its partners better understand the practices and effectiveness of seven state-based coalitions:

- Georgia Rural-Urban Summit
- Dirigo Alliance and Maine Citizens Leadership Fund

- Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action (MAPA) and Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action Education Fund
- Missouri Citizen Education Fund and Missouri Pro Vote
- Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN)
- Progressive Alliance for Community Empowerment (PACE) and Re-Visioning New Mexico
- Wisconsin Citizen Action and Wisconsin Citizen Action Education Fund

The research consultants addressed the following questions:

- *What has been the organization's "citizen participation" accomplishments in motivating greater participation in the public policy process?*
- *What is the history and structure of the organization and the nature of its coalition partnerships?*
- *What are the typical and most successful examples of its programming?*
- *What has been the impact of the organization's work?*
- *What are the challenges, future needs, and opportunities for the organization and its partners?*

<sup>1</sup> Participating foundations and individual donors of the State Strategies Fund contribute funds into a grantmaking pool. These funds are awarded to organizations through a competitive grantmaking process. The donors and/or their representatives sit on the Grants Committee and recommend funding to the Board. Since 1999, its first year of grantmaking, the State Strategies Fund has awarded \$2,000,000 to 24 multi-issue, multi-constituency state coalitions and one national networking organization. The Fund is a project of the Proteus Fund in Amherst, Massachusetts.

# Characteristics of the Coalitions

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The seven coalitions profiled in this report reflect the unique political cultures of their home states, but they also share common characteristics. They are all permanent, statewide entities that define themselves chiefly by their progressive points of view, rather than by advocacy of any single issue, or by the support they receive from any one constituency. All pursue multi-issue agendas, and enjoy remarkable breadth of representation and constituencies.

The organizations supported by the SSF advocate legislation only to the extent permitted, and they do not engage in electoral or partisan advocacy. Because the Proteus Fund is a public charity and has made the 501(h) election, the Fund is able to make a limited number of grants for lobbying activity. We found that in many cases, the research, education, convening, and issue-development work of these c(3)s was strongest where there was also a c(4) or a political action committee that could conduct activities foreclosed to c(3)s.

The coalitions are part of a loosely connected national network of approximately 30 similar groups that advocate on issues affecting the economic well-being, womens, civil and democratic rights of their members. The strongest of these anchor their states progressive response to the recent national shift in resources and responsibility from the federal government to the states. These coalitions have emerged not only in states with

strong traditions of political engagement, such as Wisconsin and Maine, but also in states where the citizenry has historically been less involved, such as Nevada and New Mexico. Interestingly, these groups developed substantial impact in states dominated by conservatives, such as Wyoming and Georgia, as well as in more moderate or liberal states, such as Minnesota and Maine.

*“The coalitions change the way state policy is developed and implemented, and they have achieved new policy outcomes that were inconceivable even 15 years ago.”*

In sum, the seven coalitions examined in the research initiative bring together diverse constituencies who share a history of underrepresentation in the political process. By pooling resources and having member organizations work as a collective unit, the coalitions increase both the capacity and the influence of their individual members.

The coalitions change the way state policy is developed and implemented, and they have achieved new policy outcomes that were inconceivable even 15 years ago. In Nevada, for example, the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada helped enact the ground-breaking Employment Non-Discrimination Act over adversaries in the Christian Right. In Minnesota, the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action powered the successful campaign to curb corporate welfare by imposing public interest accountability on corporations receiving state tax credits.

# Origins Of The Coalitions

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Though national factors certainly contributed to their development and growth, the coalitions were formed in response to local conditions in individual states, many of which reflected national patterns. Among the most important key local factors were:

- ⟨ The cumulative political and legislative costs of on-going fragmentation and single-issue strategies among progressives.
- ⟨ The rise of the New Right, a dramatic and populist phenomenon threatening to usurp grassroots public opinion, values, and progressive political bases; and
- ⟨ The use of wedge issues designed to divide and weaken progressives by isolating constituencies and pitting them against each other — e.g. labor against gays, workers against environmentalists, rural dwellers against those living in the city, and working people against the poor.

In addition, the coalitions are a creative attempt to address fundamental challenges, questions, and goals faced by progressives. Among them are how to:

- ⟨ Build long-term growth in power and influence — permanent vehicles, for learning, retaining, developing power — an end to reinventing the wheel.
- ⟨ Take people and organizations from issues to agenda to vision — rooted in practical politics, but on the scale of governing our states.
- ⟨ Join and cross-fertilize key strategies, even wings of the movement — political groups and strategies,

and community organizing, non-electoral groups and strategies.

The coalitions reflect internal changes within the public interest movement itself. While the 1990s saw many of the powerful movements and victories of the 1970s and 80s stymied or rolled back by right-wing forces, these were also years when new leaders came to the fore of public interest organizations. The energy and organizing innovations they brought to new social and identity issue movements caught the attention of the rising leaders of unions and other traditional

*“Coalitions reach across wedge-issue divides, working to bridge and unify constituencies, thus combating the right wing efforts to divide them.”*

organizations. By the same token, the well-developed and hard-edged electoral and institution-building skills of more traditional constituencies, such as unions, were appealing to the new gay, environmental, womens, and citizens group leaders.

The astronomical rise of right-wing and corporate political action committees and campaign spending in the late 1970s and early 1980s forced activist groups that had previously disdained both electoral and coalition politics to rethink their strategies.

Following the examples of new coalitions in Connecticut and Montana, both of which were founded around 1980, progressive activists in several states joined to form 501c(4) organizations and PACs to work on elections. Founders of these early political alliances served as mentors to counterparts in other states, and helped launch new coalitions in Minnesota, New Mexico, Maine, Missouri and Nevada. Organizing by Northeast Action (at the time Northeast Citizen Action Resource Center) and the Western States Center in the late 1980s and the early 1990s played important roles in creating new coalitions.

# Key Coalition Activities

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Leaders and activists in the seven state coalitions carry out their coalitional activities through a variety of organizational and separate legal structures to accomplish their goals, including 501c(3), 501c(4), and PAC organizations. In states where it is allowed, coalitions often establish direct c(3)/c(4) relationships, relying primarily on the national talent bank of progressive non-profit tax lawyers, as well as skilled local legal assistance, to create the required firewalls and fiscal relationships. These structures allow a variety of activities within the parameters of applicable IRS regulation and electoral laws. As mentioned earlier, the grants made by the State Strategies Fund are all for 501c(3) activity, and SSF grantees advocate legislation only to the extent permitted by law.

A wide range of citizen engagement activities are carried out at the state level by the coalitions various structures. This report highlights nine of these activities. The resources of the State Strategies Fund support some or all of the 501c(3) activities described below, in 1-7. The Fund does not support any electoral activity.

## ***1. Bringing diverse constituencies together and fostering strong working relationships***

The coalition model works most effectively when groups representing diverse constituencies join resources on behalf of a common objective. Ideally, these collaborating groups work together toward shared policy and issue goals. This ethic of collaboration is a major change for many of the member groups, which traditionally specialized more narrowly on their own issues through the 1970s and 1980s. Over time, these active alliances promote trust, efficiency, and generosity among the partners.

Successful coalitions build nuanced relationships among constituencies and progressive leaders. Partners develop internal structures allowing groups of different philosophies, varying strengths and weaknesses, and unequal resources to coalesce around decision-making. Most coalitions use a decision-making process that gives each member organization equal voice (and votes), whether it is a 20,000-member union or a 500-member womens organization. The coalitions also consciously promote alliances between the old and new wings of the progressive movement. For example, traditional economic and community organizing constituencies whose roots date to the New Deal, such as labor and statewide citizens organizations, will join and learn from the new social issue and identity constituencies that came to prominence in the 1970s and since — gays, women, immigrants, and diverse communities of color.

Coalitions reach across wedge-issue divides, working to bridge and unify constituencies, thus combating the right-wing efforts to divide them. Indeed, in Nevada, Maine, and Connecticut, coalition outreach has led leaders from blue-collar industrial unions to organize labor-friendly legislators in support of gay rights ordinances, and to explain forcefully to rank-and-file union members the importance of standing up for gay and lesbian rights. In many cases, these new working relationships and strategic alliances between progressive groups did not exist before the creation of the coalitions.

Furthermore, once these new relationships are formed, they have already shown staying power and durability beyond the coalitions. They take root and flourish and are tapped without needing the coalitions to mediate. In other words, leaders now call each other directly, and work together on issues of their own choosing outside the coalition framework.

## Key Coalition Activities *continued*

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### **2. Initiating citizen engagement strategies**

Frequently, citizen engagement is the coalitions most innovative and important work. The coalitions believe that ongoing, year-round engagement with people—through trusted organizations, rather than political parties — will increase voting literacy and participation. Coalitions provide the structures, motivation, information, and organizing that can make voting an effective, satisfying, and ultimately habitual act. They are also committed to the rapid dissemination of new techniques and knowledge acquired by individual groups both in their states or by coalitions elsewhere.

For example, Wisconsin Citizen Action Funds (WCAF) Latino Vote 2000 Project, *Su Voto Es Su Voz*, was the first non-partisan Latino registration and Get Out the Vote program in central city Milwaukee wards. WCAF organized a multi-organization program of registration, with rallies in targeted wards, neighborhood organizing, intensive phone calling, and literature drops. Building on these efforts, WCAF orchestrated an outstanding non-partisan GOTV Election Day campaign. This initiative and several others to which WCAF gave assistance, increased voter turnout in Milwaukee by 10 percent citywide over 1996, and 30 percent over 1996 in the WCAF targeted Latino-concentrated wards.

Revisioning New Mexico and PACE in New Mexico conduct their citizen engagement work primarily through organizing initiatives. These include voter registration, leadership development, coalition building, popular education, and participatory research, aimed particularly at improving the well being and political power of rural and low-income citizens.

A good example of 501c(4) voter engagement work is modeled by the Wisconsin Citizen Action, which sent

189,000 pieces of mail in ten races in 2000. In addition, WCAF matched 229,549 of its own current and lapsed members with those of coalition partners to produce and send literature, voting guides, and other materials. They did a sampling of this member list and found that the effort yielded a 33 percent higher turnout rate than among non-members.

Since 1996, PLAN in Nevada has registered more than 7,000 new voters. PLAN analyzed turnout patterns of the voters it registered, and found more than 50 percent had voted, an impressive percentage for a state with low overall participation. To make registration and mobilization efforts effective, PLAN provides significant staffing, financial support, and technical assistance to its member groups who are actively targeting new immigrants, low-income people, and communities of color. As the state becomes increasingly Latino, drives to support citizenship engagement are a key priority. PLAN staff in Las Vegas routinely attend the swearing-in ceremonies of new citizens and register 75—100 new voters on the spot every week.

*Utilizing list enhancement and technology:* List enhancement is a highly efficient and successful citizen engagement tool that is increasingly supported by funders, and that takes advantage of new technology and friendly relationships between groups.<sup>1</sup> Of the seven groups profiled here,

<sup>1</sup> List enhancement uses computers to add information to an organization's list of members or contacts, to increase the amount of relevant information on the organization's members, both as individuals and in the aggregate, in order to be able to mobilize them efficiently and effectively. The list of members is matched against a statewide voter file to add the available data about each person on the list, such as legislative district, voting history, party registration, address and phone number, and gender and age coding. This information is then used for numerous purposes, including identifying and engaging volunteers, activists, donors, leaders, likely voters, and targets for voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives. When several organizations cooperate on a list enhancement project, organizational strength in specific geographical areas can be assessed and coordinated.

## Key Coalition Activities *continued*

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the Georgia Rural-Urban Summit (GRUS) leads the way in the use of these innovative practices. GRUSs enhanced list mobilizes activists for legislative policy battles and builds organizational capacity among its members. Thanks to the resources of a local funder, the 18 member organizations of the Summit participated in a list-enhancement project involving some 120,000 names. Half of the groups now use the lists for advocacy and fundraising. The lists were also used to build support during the coalitions campaign to pass hate crimes legislation. GRUS maintains a mailing list (enhanced) of almost 7,000 activists, which it regularly rents to progressive organizations.

GRUS has also used the internet to a far greater degree than any other state coalition. A weekly legislative and public policy alert identifying key issues and opportunities for grassroots lobbying and public education goes to nearly 2,000 activists throughout the state, primarily by e-mail. Thousands more see the alert through subscriber forwarding. GRUS maintains a Web site ([www.garus.org](http://www.garus.org)) that averages 17,000 hits a month. The site includes up-to-date legislative news, audio clips of legislators speeches and press conferences, the GRUS legislative scorecard, and links to other sites.

This year, PLAN, Missouri Pro-Vote, and Wisconsin Citizen Action are further enhancing their voter lists with the help of funds from the League of Conservation Voters. The League has designated PLAN and Missouri Pro-Vote as the official vehicles for the list enhancement work with the environmental community in those two states — a testament to the capacity of these groups. WCA Fund used its enhanced lists to identify neighborhood volunteers for its successful Latino voter program in 2000.

It is clear that without significant additional resources for increased staff support of list enhancement and other

technologies, progress will be slow. The most costly input is not the technology, but the required staff time. Supporting staff capacity to manage, train, and build the inter-organizational trust that a strong list enhancement project requires is clearly among these groups greatest needs.

### **3. Building diversity**

There is no doubt that communities of color have generally been underrepresented in what are intended to be multiracial progressive organizations. There is perhaps no greater challenge for these coalitions, and for the progressive organizations with which they work, than building multiracial organizations. Almost all of the coalitions invest time and resources in working to meet that challenge, albeit with mixed results.

Experience shows that building a multiracial coalition from the beginning is more successful than trying to diversify an existing monoracial coalition. From its outset GRUS was a biracial organization uniting black and white activists. The GRUS staff, its Steering Committee, and the recently created Executive Board reflect this commitment: half of each group are people of color and half are women. Anti-racism, civil liberties, and civil rights have thus been major focuses of GRUSs activities, and have both attracted and reflected the participation of strong African-American-led organizations in the coalition.

Strengthening the capacity of African-American member groups is a priority of the Missouri Citizen Education Fund (MCEF). Through solid organizing, aided by the relative strength of several member unions representing large numbers of African-Americans, the coalition has gained greater participation and power in communities of color than have many other coalitions. To aid that work, MCEF has a permanent organizer and a small office in the rural Bootheel region of southeastern Missouri.

## Key Coalition Activities *continued*

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Other coalitions, including some profiled here, have struggled with this crucial challenge. Building diversity, racial and otherwise, remains an ongoing goal for these organizations, and touches on all aspects of the coalitions work — its structure, board, staffing, programmatic priorities, and its ongoing work practices.

### **4. Fostering new organizations**

In many states, some disadvantaged and minority constituencies are not adequately organized to have formed an effective voice on particular issues of concern. One very exciting solution, tested by a number of coalitions, is to help start and incubate key constituency organizations. Once on their feet, many of these new organizations become invaluable coalition partners in their own right.

PLAN in Nevada has been a leader in this area. Since 1995, PLANs organizing effort has brought together constituencies traditionally shut out of state public policy making, including low-income women, latinos, and gays and lesbians.

The devolution of responsibility for welfare from the federal government to the states provided an impetus for this work in some states. A number of coalitions initiated projects and incubated new organizations that create forums for advocates to generate strong responses to welfare reform and related issues — e.g. PLANs incubation of the Nevada Empowered Womens Project and Latinos for Political Education. In Maine, the Dirigo Taxpayers for a Fair Budget campaign evolved into a freestanding organization, the Maine Center for

Economic Policy. And in New Mexico, Re-visioning seeded FUEGO, a low-income citizens advocacy organization.

PLAN linked powerful groups, such as labor and trial lawyers, with smaller organizations like Latinos for Political Education and the Alliance for Workers Rights, providing groups with varying strengths and unequal resources the opportunity to influence coalition decision-making as partners. PLAN leaders acknowledged that without these major players, the coalition would not have the strength and access it enjoys, and without the smaller groups it would miss the diversity and perspective these groups bring to the coalition. Seeding these organizations, says PLAN director Bob Fulkerson, brought new voices to the work, helped deliver an important base to the coalitions, and shifted political power in the state.

*“PLAN linked powerful groups such as labor and trial lawyers, with smaller organizations like Latinos for Political Education and the Alliance for Worker’s Rights, providing groups with varying strengths and unequal resources the opportunity to influence coalition decision-making as partners.”*

### **5. Carrying out public education issue campaigns**

Leading public policy campaigns forms the core of coalition work. Coalitions use organizing, public education initiatives, leadership development, legislator accountability, and other citizen engagement strategies to accomplish their objectives. Due to their efficiency, and success, the issues and tactics developed by progressive state coalitions flow to regional and national levels.

The seven coalitions in the research initiative work to improve the substance and dissemination of political discourse. They have moved debates into the

## Key Coalition Activities *continued*

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mainstream on health care, sprawl, corporate accountability, environmental protection, education, and affirmative action, among many others. The Maine and Nevada coalitions have worked to protect the civil rights of gays and lesbians. The Georgia coalition led the defense of affirmative action and the campaign to pass hate crimes legislation. The coalitions have a track record of focusing on issues that are fundamental to whole agendas and cut across diverse constituencies, such as tax reform and campaign finance reform.

A focus on state and federal campaign spending in the 1990s, coupled with an influx of money from several funders, enabled many coalitions to document and link campaign largesse to public actions and expenditures in their states.

The size and complexity of such major public policy goals make them unlikely issues for individual groups to take on. The coalition strategy offers the capacity for progressive organizations to focus on these broad, underlying problems and issues. Despite having limited resources, coalitions and their members have achieved remarkable victories over well-heeled and more influential adversaries. The Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action played an important role in Living Wage organizing efforts in the Twin Cities, and led the multi-year legislative effort to reduce public subsidies to corporations. Health care has re-emerged as an energizing issue for progressive activists in New Mexico, Wisconsin, Maine, and Nevada, where major victories have been won. Exciting environmental campaigns in Minnesota and Wisconsin have posted substantial victories.

*Ballot initiatives* in states employing direct democracy play an important role in the work and health of

coalitions. Coalitions almost inevitably become energized when they promote positive ballot initiatives or defend against negative ones. In Maine, Massachusetts, and Arizona, for example, coalitions have been able to pass sweeping campaign finance reform measures at the ballot box that would never have succeeded in the legislature.

Initiatives bring new players to the table, attract resources to support citizen engagement and training, recruit new supporters, and mobilize voters. They result in sharper education and debate within the coalitions, often with one targeted constituency taking on structured and extensive educational responsibilities for others. Finally, because coalitions seek to combine the power of traditional economic constituencies with that of

*“Despite having limited resources, coalitions and their members have achieved remarkable victories over well-heeled and more influential adversaries.”*

newer social and identity constituencies, ballot measures often are more effective terrain for political development than complicated and crowded candidate campaigns are. On the other hand, initiatives are high-stake propositions: they can drain resources and tax already overworked staff, and they can be highly demoralizing if the coalition loses.

### **6. Improving organizational capacity**

Ultimately, the coalition is only as strong as its member organizations. Many coalitions have made building the capacity of member organizations a top priority. Coalitions develop leaders and provide training in a wide variety of skill areas to strengthen member organizations performance in citizen engagement work. The coalitions also develop voter registration activities

## Key Coalition Activities *continued*

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and assist with list enhancement work.

Nevada provides an excellent example of a coalition tackling this strong need. In PLANs Ten-Year Strategic Plan, implemented in 1998, its leadership decided not to increase its own staff, but instead to expand the resources and capacity of its member groups. It has provided \$35,000 to member groups to strengthen their technological capacity, and provide training on resource development, media, campaign skills, and outreach.

### **7. Developing new leadership**

Coalitions provide a key pipeline for fresh civic leaders. Constituencies that do not have access to traditional business or community channels for leadership development and career advancement rely on this pipeline almost exclusively. Leaders of member organizations learn vital skills, develop networks, gain exposure to perspectives outside their own spheres of activity, and connect to resources. Though preparing potential candidates for public office is not the specific intention of coalitions leadership training activities, often leaders developed and trained by 501c(3) coalitions do become candidates.

Most coalition-affiliated PACs identify and train potential candidates for office from the ranks of progressive organizations, though the intensity of these efforts varies. Even states that devote few resources to candidate recruitment have successfully helped members of constituency groups gain office.

At least two structural impediments hamper the PACs efforts to recruit a critical mass of progressive candidates.

First, they lack the financial resources to run large recruitment and training programs. Second, the part-time and underpaid nature of most citizen legislatures deters many interested and capable candidates from running for office. A lawyer, real estate broker, or landlord can arrange his/her practice to accommodate a short legislative session; an assembly line worker, a small business owner, or a service worker cannot do so as readily. Campaign finance reforms, such as the Clean Money option in Maine, have the potential to alter the landscape for newcomers by eliminating the daunting task of raising campaign budgets from private sources. But they do nothing to address the \$9,000 annual salary in Maine.

*“Coalitions provide a key pipeline for fresh civic leaders. Constituencies that do not have access to traditional business or community channels for leadership development and career advancement rely on this pipeline almost exclusively.”*

### **8. Working with public officials**

In many states with progressive coalitions (including most states in this study, especially those with part-time citizen legislatures) lawmakers have little or no staff. Thus, they rely heavily on outside groups for information and assistance in developing programs and drafting legislation.

For conservative legislators, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) meets some of this need, and has demonstrated the ability to move a national agenda on a foundation of seemingly independent and unconnected state legislation. ALEC feeds an entire infrastructure that develops policy, mobilizes constituencies, and informs the public debate. In addition, conservatives can rely on a local infrastructure of lobbyists, associations, and think tanks, plus legislative staff, traditional parties, and other external forces. These two elements taken together make for a

## Key Coalition Activities *continued*

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very effective means to disseminate and achieve conservative policies, sometimes in waves that sweep the country.

Progressive legislators have no similar infrastructure, and they must rely on outside organizations for research, polling, constituency outreach, and drafting legislation. Many of the coalitions work to fill this important gap. The challenge for the 501(c)(4) organizations is to create an infrastructure able to move progressive agendas as effectively as the much larger, better financed, more established conservative groups move theirs.

In Nevada, New Mexico, Minnesota, Maine, Missouri, and Wisconsin, the 501(c)(4) organizations provide legislators with specific information about policies, government behavior, and voter attitudes. The coalitions act as conduits and clearinghouses for the press, and provide links to other elected and government officials within and outside the state. In many states, the coalitions organize and staff a caucus for progressive legislators and host meetings with issue experts for legislators and other government officials. Moreover, they link legislators to advocates and peers regionally and nationally.

The 501(c)(4) organizations also represent political resources. They mobilize constituencies and other legislative votes in ways that can embolden a progressive legislator, who is perhaps inexperienced and isolated. They also provide accountability mechanisms to help progressives hold the votes they need. The progressive PACs provide resources that enable legislators to capitalize on their stands when election time rolls around, and help enroll like-minded candidates in the future.

### **9. Moving an electoral program: PACs**

Four of the seven state coalitions profiled here have PACs that sponsor electoral programs to run candidates,

including grassroots leaders of progressive organizations, for elective office, primarily for state legislative seats. In many states, the desire to influence elections initially motivated members to come together — as it is often easier to agree on a set of good candidates than on a comprehensive policy agenda.

Significant resources in these states have been invested in building a progressive electoral apparatus. Some PAC activities, such as candidate recruitment and partisan get-out-the-vote efforts, have been noted above. In addition, PACs support other activities: walking precincts, staffing phone banks, identifying and training new leaders, and registering voters. Frequently, PACs participate in the entire campaign, from planning the campaign and recruiting staff, to developing the campaign message and materials, to coordinating the field operation. In some ways, these PACs are doing what a political party would do in a healthy political culture, and in some areas, progressive PACs are replacing political parties as the vehicle through which grassroots constituencies and others engage electoral politics.

Nationally, coalition PACs have worked to elect hundreds of candidates, many of whom were leaders or activists in grassroots organizations. Many of these officials have gone on to higher office, where they continue to draw on the support and expertise of their original groups.

Elections move organizations beyond immediate self-interest. Coalition organizations naturally seek to work on issues that most immediately affect their members. The PACs electoral program reminds organizations and their leaders of the broad public policy message a candidate must put across to win, and of the wider program she or he will champion if elected.

# Challenges Faced by the Coalitions

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Despite their individual differences and the varied states in which they operate, the coalitions face a common set of organizational challenges.

## 1. Financial resources

Coalitions expend too much valuable time and energy searching for basic resources to carry out existing and potential programs. It is astonishing to discover how much these groups accomplish on a budget of \$200,000-\$250,000. An additional \$75,000-\$100,000 would increase their capacity and accomplishments several fold. Even a casual examination of the way the political right nourishes its grassroots advocacy infrastructure demonstrates the connection between adequate organizational support and political success.

Increased and dependable support from national funders is especially crucial. In many states few, if any, local foundations support coalition work. Often coalitions must compete with member organizations for local donor and individual membership support. Structurally, the coalitions must insure the success of their constituent partners, and must place themselves at the end of the line when approaching funders. Too often, in a sparse funding climate, there is no support available from grantmakers to coalitions.

General support grants allow organizations to build their capacity as well as their programs, and hence are the life blood of coalitions. If general support is not possible, grants earmarked specifically for capacity building can fill this need. In addition, specific support in such areas as research development, list enhancement, and new technology and training, as well as multi-year grants,

serve to redress consistent gaps in the groups efficiency and effectiveness.

## 2. Building Multi-Racial Coalitions

As noted above, there is no greater principled or strategic challenge for these coalitions and the progressive organizations with which they work — than building multiracial organizations. While outside resources to assist with planning and implementing initiatives to accomplish this are important, the commitment to do the hard work involving coalitions structure, board, staffing, organizational culture, and programmatic priorities is paramount.

## 3. Maintaining high-quality staff leadership

Retaining key staff is as an ongoing problem for many groups. Often, including in most of the coalitions profiled here, a strong leader is critical to the organizations success. Dynamic leaders raise coalitions to positions of influence. Likewise, the absence or loss of a particularly charismatic leader weakens groups. None of the coalitions examined has a succession plan for staff leadership. New resources must be developed and programs initiated to train or recruit replacement directors, and/or extend the years of service of effective and successful directors.

## 4. Technology resources

Few of the coalitions employ new technologies that can significantly streamline and empower citizen engagement activities. As noted above, the Georgia coalition is the exception, and makes excellent use of

*“Coalitions expend too much valuable time and energy searching for basic resources to carry out existing and potential programs.”*

## **Challenges Faced by the Coalitions** *continued*

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list enhancement, e-mail alerts, and a well-used Web site. Many coalitions are ill-equipped to implement a broad list enhancement program. And even in Georgia, the leadership knows their capacity lags behind that of their adversaries. This technology gap must be closed if progressive coalitions are to succeed. Hardware and software must be made available, staff must be trained, and in-house expertise must be dedicated to coordinating this work, with back-up support.

Simply offering training programs, without having on-site coalition staff to coordinate a full set of programmatic activities to advance technology, means that little if anything will happen. Resources must be found to enable these organizations to have their own in-house staff person responsible for this work. This technology infrastructure is not expensive, and the cost/benefit ratio is extremely favorable.

### **5. Technical assistance for legal issues**

The state organizations profiled here are scrupulous in abiding by the requirements of tax and election law, yet there is no doubt that this is a complex area. As the roles of the coalitions expand, and as their public profiles grow, technical assistance from skilled legal experts in non-profit law will assure their maximum compliance and flexibility.

### **6. Unifying vision and agenda**

Progressive advocates and commentators stress the need for a genuinely coalescing vision among their states organizations. Many single-issue groups and ad hoc coalitions succeed in defensive or pressure campaigns, but to acquire and sustain genuine momentum and power, progressives must build around a holistic and coherent vision of the good life for all citizens. More intellectual and leadership capacity is needed to fuel this rich infrastructure, and move it beyond the sum of its parts.

# Conclusion

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Devolution and the expansion of state governmental power offer progressives significant challenges and opportunities. The challenges are clear: high political stakes at the state level mean increased money and other resources flowing to groups and individuals who would limit progressive change. Because it is unlikely that progressive forces can outspend their adversaries, public interest groups and thinkers must maximize their resources to capture their natural advantages in organizing disenfranchised citizens. On a level playing field, we believe, progressives can make the more effective case on behalf of fairness and genuine democracy.

The state-based coalitions can be the difference between realizing this opportunity or not. Properly funded and staffed, the coalitions are the engines of a broad-based progressive movement in the states. Though contending with ongoing resource and other challenges, the coalitions profiled here have proven to be powerful agents for promoting sustained dialogue and activity among widely diverse progressive groups.

In this way, coalitions are the circuits routing new energy, diverse populations, and innovative democratic practices into our civic life. Time after time, they have entered and changed public debate, against enormous odds, on difficult but vital issues. Coalitions use a wide range of citizen engagement strategies to achieve these results, including grassroots and direct lobbying, nonpartisan voter registration and education, community organizing, leadership training, public education, and non-partisan get out the vote activities. Coalitions have expanded the opportunities for under-represented constituencies to participate in our political economy, and elect truly representative leaders, and to hold these leaders

accountable. Far above political expediency, loyalty to entrenched incumbents, or any of the other common but disliked features of status-quo partisan politics, the coalitions emphasize loyalty to their issue agenda and constituency empowerment. This integrity produces the motivation and commitment required for sustained movement building.

Both community groups and national issue organizations will look increasingly to the coalitions to feed them ideas, leaders, new practices and technologies, and to test other innovative strategies. Without the coalitions, the energy of these two sectors rarely meet.

This report, however, makes absolutely clear that the coalitions will not approach their full potential without a significant increase in resources. As noted above, these groups accomplish remarkable feats with budgets in the range of \$200,000—\$300,000. With increased support, progressives can increasingly establish state institutions that will move the democratic promise of a vibrant civic life. The future of American politics belongs, it appears, to those who operate most effectively in the states. It would behoove progressives to move quickly to strengthen their organizational and leadership capacity.

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