



Organizer Roundtable: The Intersection Between Electoral and Issue Organizing

The Alliance for Metropolitan Stability held an Organizer Roundtable on February 11, 2009, that brought Twin Cities organizers together to discuss the Intersection of Electoral and Issue Organizing. This roundtable was an opportunity for organizers to share their recent successes in electoral organizing – and to discuss how to capture that energy in future issue-based campaigns.

Amalia Anderson, director of the Mainstreet Project, shared her expertise in rural civic engagement. Mainstreet Project is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works in partnership with League of Rural Voters. Amalia shared her strategies for focusing on civic engagement as an approach, not just an activity. Instead of short-term, linear election campaigns, Amalia emphasized having an end goal of building movements – rather than simply getting 51 percent of the vote.

Amalia shared insights about doing electoral and issue organizing in rural communities. Essential to movement-building within rural communities is supporting leadership development and increasing the knowledge of systems. Mainstreet Project tailors its messaging to a primarily rural Latino population by emphasizing civic engagement because not all community members are eligible to vote. It is also important to remember that many immigrants have never had a positive experience with democracy. Asking immigrants to engage in democracy may not have a positive connotation at first.

Amalia and the Mainstreet Project have created non-proprietary tools and trainings to strengthen year-round civic engagement within a network of organizations. For last year's election, Mainstreet Project created a bilingual political education tool especially for rural nonvoters, which allowed 45 partner organizations to build up their own reputations and educate their constituencies. Looking towards the future, the Mainstreet Project is working on a tool to de-mystify the census for rural communities.

Hashi Shafi, executive director of Somali Action Alliance, spoke of his work in multi-issue voter engagement and organizing. Building political power through organizing was a new idea for the Somali community, people who emigrated from a country where there was no functional democratic process.

September 11, 2001, was a major turning point for local Somali organizing, and ultimately led to the creation of Somali Action Alliance (SAA). This event had a huge impact on the community in terms of immigration (deportation of Somali immigrants became an issue) and education (nine Somali bilingual public school programs were shut down).

In response to these developments, leaders led the community in conducting a power analysis. The outcome of the analysis was that the community chose to build power through electoral organizing. After this incredibly powerful experience, the community created SAA as a vehicle for engaging more community members in organizing campaigns.

Today, SAA is broadening its work by partnering with new organizations and communities. They are working with ISALAH on an education equity campaign, partnering with Latino, Hmong and African-American communities. Additionally, they continue to focus on immigration issues and family reunification. SAA is committed to continuing leadership development in partnership with Wellstone Action. This year they engaged in 25,000 door knocks, and worked with the city of Minneapolis to train 11 Somali election judges.

SAA sees political elections as a tool to advance issues—not just to get out the vote and leave. Looking to the future, SAA will be developing candidates for political office and working on an international remittance campaign. More locally, SAA is a member of the Dania Partners, working to ensure transportation equity for the West Bank immigrant communities in the Central Corridor light rail transit planning.

Dai Thao, a community organizer with TakeAction Minnesota, spoke about the importance of getting people to engage beyond short-term priorities. When organizing around long-term priorities in a new community, it is important to gather information from the community, recognize the power players, and determine the goals of the community from the outset.

He also spoke about the role of identifying and working with existing power and authority structures in a community. The Hmong community is a culture where elders traditionally have held the authority, so organizers must learn how to work with elders and respect their wisdom and views while still bringing new leadership into organizing campaigns. As the Hmong have been oppressed for a long time by power and authority, it takes a perspective shift to view power as potentially good, or a way to reach community goals. As Dai said, “Power isn’t inherently bad or good – it’s just a way to achieve something.”

Dai was trained at the Gamaliel Foundation and modified their methods to fit the needs of his community. During the recent election, he organized an action center where people 13 to 70 years old from all different ethnic groups worked together to get out the vote. His community came to recognize that elections are one tactic to achieve their goals – not the end point. The Hmong Organizing Project at TakeAction Minnesota supported emerging community leaders by holding one-on-ones meetings about people’s ongoing political aspirations. Now he advocates to the Hmong community that this election was just one small piece of the puzzle. The big picture in the future is electing more progressive public officials, winning universal healthcare, gaining inclusive curriculum at the Saint Paul Public schools, educating about personal financial management and obtaining commitments for Hmong veterans’ health care. These are the next steps to build political power, and to join with the larger progressive movement.

The organizers present discussed how these presentations inspired them to strengthen their own work to include cultural sensitivity, the challenges of working against the risk-averse and re-election mindset, the importance of baby steps, the importance of analysis of power and selection of issues, the unique issues of rural organizing, the unique state of engagement in America as opposed to developing countries, the importance of engaging voters earlier, and the tension between educating the public and being educated by them.

Organizer Roundtables are one of the Alliance’s strategies to build a network of organizers that work on issues related to growth and development in the Twin Cities. Roundtables are led by and for organizers and are held monthly at the Alliance’s offices in Minneapolis. Please check our web site at www.metrostability.org for upcoming roundtables.