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Richard L. Wood

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## **Raising the Bar: Organizing Capacity in 2009 and Beyond**

### **A Report for the Neighborhood Funders Group**

**Richard L. Wood  
University of New Mexico**

Efforts to reshape the life opportunities for working families in America face a critical juncture in 2009 and beyond, involving both new opportunities *and* new challenges. This critical juncture arises due to two recent changes. First, 2008 brought important changes in national political dynamics as a result of the economic meltdown and the election of President Barack Obama and a new Congress. Second, internal dynamics within community organizing efforts in poor, working-class and middle-class communities have changed, with significant progress made over the last decade in re-engaging working families in the political process. This report uses the recent experience of two projects – different models for mobilizing working families for civic engagement on policy reform – as a lens to explore the broader dynamics of community organizing today. Ultimately, it argues that these dynamics present a strategic window of opportunity for those dedicated to advancing the interests of working families in the United States.

#### ***Political context: Instability of national political dynamics***

Local community organizers increasingly recognize the need to project power into state- and national-level political arenas. Though significant decisions about the quality-of-life issues that are the bread and butter of local organizing – public education, working-class wages, law enforcement, affordable housing – are still often made by local authorities, those decisions are often deeply constrained by policy and funding decisions made by state and national authorities (the No Child Left Behind law being one dramatic example). And on particular issues crucial to working families – healthcare and immigration among them – meaningful policy change virtually *has* to come from national or state political arenas. As I've noted elsewhere:

Changes in the national culture and political economy have reshaped the ecology of civic engagement in ways that present new challenges. Deindustrialization of the American economy, and the de-localization of many of the corporations that remain in cities, virtually require community organizing to project power into higher-level political arenas if they wish to have real impact. But meanwhile the political and cultural bases from which to build such civic power have themselves been eroded: on one hand by a new hyper-partisanship in Congress and national

politics; and on the other hand by the decline of a culture of civic engagement in American life.<sup>1</sup>

Part of that 2007 analysis has become even more relevant since the financial implosion and economic downturn of late 2008. America in 2009 and beyond will face extreme economic challenges. The question is whether the spike in civic engagement during the 2008 election cycle can be channeled into renewing our cultural and political resources to confront the nation's challenges. That is, the fact that American public policy needs to better reflect the necessities and priorities of working families does not mean that we have the *political capacity* to do so successfully. If that point is not obvious, one need only cite the struggle in early 2009 to produce meaningful economic stimulus or financial rescue policy, and the failure in 2007-2008 to effectively address the crises in healthcare and immigration policy. On many fronts where progressive policy change has looked possible in recent years, our divided national polity has essentially been paralyzed by a combination of factors: recalcitrant congressional minorities, a party system indebted to lobbyists who seek to kill any legislation that threatens their interests, and a widespread grassroots political culture suspicious of government programs as a solution to virtually any social problem.

Yet change can be detected on some fronts. The 2008 Democratic campaign mobilized unprecedented grassroots involvement (and money), driven initially by the compelling duel between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and later by enthusiastic support for Obama, whose operation was built on community organizing tactics. Now Congress and President Obama are under pressure to bring about real improvement in the lives of Americans and to provide concrete evidence that a new, more constructive political wind is blowing in national politics. Americans increasingly affirm that government must step in to address the current challenges. The long bleeding in Iraq may be coming to an end.

Thus, political leaders will face both pressure and opportunities to act aggressively – either through bipartisan agreement or through assertion of a new direction by the president and the Democratic congressional majority. But given the continuing partisan cross-currents in Congress and the caution of politicians wary of losing the next election, assertive policy-making to serve a progressive agenda is unlikely without (small-d) democratic pressure from below.

So the emerging national political context looks likely to offer an opportunity for progressive policy change. The key to exploiting that opening – and not squandering it – may lie in bringing sufficient pressure to bear from the local level. Absent such pressure, the political process may well stagnate anew. The rest of this brief argues that community organizing – at least its more sophisticated versions – has recently developed the capacity to be a significant force in generating pressure at the state and national levels.

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<sup>1</sup>See “Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing” by Richard L. Wood in *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change*, edited by Marion Orr (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007).

### *Organizing capacity: The challenge*

Efforts to build democratic movements in America have gained attention over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> Many analysts have promoted a cautiously optimistic reading of the prospects for democratic reform. But they focus on local movements, and thus beg the question: When so much of the decision-making that determines the quality of life for poor, working-class and middle-class Americans occurs “over the heads” of local political leaders, how influential can locally rooted social movements be? Are they relegated to fiddling on the margins of social policy – perhaps extracting minor concessions, but powerless to affect the decisions of national political elites whose policies determine the availability of societal resources, or the state-level elites who distribute those resources? Together, these state- and national-level decisions severely constrain local options. Can community organizing effectively overcome those constraints?

On first glimpse, little in the history of community organizing as it is usually conceived suggests a positive answer. Its bread and butter – at least in the strand of organizing descended from Saul Alinsky – has *always* been gaining local improvements by fighting (and sometimes working in partnership with) local authorities. From the 1940s through the 1990s, the significant organizing wins came primarily at this level.

Yet this is too narrow a lens to assess the higher-level strategic potential of community organizing, for two reasons. First, a few organizing efforts in that period did successfully project power into higher-level political arenas. The Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, for example, had important success in transforming that state’s public-education policy and influencing other statewide policies (at least until the nearly complete Republican takeover of state politics). The Gamaliel Foundation invoked a sophisticated analysis of regional economic flows to produce some policy change beyond the metropolitan level in several Midwestern cities. And PICO California (formerly the PICO California Project, discussed below) continues to link 18 organizations of the PICO National Network to gain a prominent voice in the policy process in that largest of state political arenas. Second, many of the most important and powerful democratic movements in American history – though not commonly considered instances of “community organizing” – in fact were built upon community organizing foundations. One example may suffice: The Civil Rights movement emerged as a national phenomenon only after many years of organizing and institution-building at the local level, especially through local churches and clergy councils. By itself, in the absence of a national strategy and structure, local community organizing could never have achieved the historic progress of the Civil Rights movement. But without such local community organizing, that national movement would have been stillborn.

With all that in mind, this paper adopts a clear-eyed realism in noting the difficulties confronting

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<sup>2</sup> For in-depth reading on community organizing in America, see the sidebar.  
SEE LIST AT END

any effort to project national power from a base in local community organizing – and at the same time argues that we should advance that possibility where it exists. In that combination lies the audacity of realistic, strategic hope.

### ***Confronting strategic challenges***

To take advantage of emerging political opportunities and successfully overcome the political challenges it faces, community organizing (like other kinds of social movements) must combine mobilizing capacity and strategic capacity.<sup>3</sup> In the past, funders, scholars and organizers themselves have often paid greater attention to *mobilizing capacity*, i.e., how successfully an organization can turn out people to pressure government officials to implement egalitarian policies. This is often spoken of as “using the power of people to counterbalance the power of money in political life.” This is indeed a key item in the toolkit of community organizations, the force behind most of their attempts to change public policy. But the efficacy of an organization’s mobilizing capacity can be reduced *or* multiplied by its strategic creativity. By this I do not mean creativity for its own sake. *Strategic capacity* is the ability to innovate in the face of changing political circumstances and adapt the organization’s strategy and tactics as required. An organization with high strategic capacity can adapt its actions to take maximum advantage of its mobilizing capacity, even when the latter is low. When both strategic capacity and mobilizing capacity are high, public-policy impact becomes far more feasible. As I will show below, the very strongest organizing efforts today have begun to combine both types of capacity in promising ways.

Marshall Ganz shows that strategic capacity is the product of two sets of factors, grouped under “leadership” and “organization.” Strategic capacity is strengthened if the movement includes:

- leaders who mix strong and weak ties within and outside the movement;
- both political insiders and political outsiders;
- and leaders whose past political work gives them experience of diverse tactics, thus creating alternative political possibilities.

Likewise, strategic capacity is strengthened if the movement organization:

- includes structures for deliberation and decision-making that are open and authoritative;
- draws on resources (both money and people’s talents) that come from multiple constituencies, including the groups they are trying to mobilize;

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<sup>3</sup> For recent work on how social movements confront strategic challenges, see Heidi Swarts’ *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-Based Progressive Movements* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and my own “Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing,” pp. 164-192 in *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change*, edited by Marion Orr (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007). Also see Marshall Ganz’ “Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture, 1959–1966” in *American Journal of Sociology* 105(4): 1003-63 (2000).

- fosters creative decision-making;
- and fosters accountability to keep leaders tied to the interests of constituents (in community organizing, usually identified as “working families”).

Integrating the insights of a variety of scholars and practitioners of political organizing, we can say that underlying both strategic capacity and mobilizing capacity are the *culture* and *structure* adopted by a social movement or community organization as it strives to change public policy. The table below summarizes those insights regarding how culture and structure combine to produce strong strategic capacity to confront political challenges.

**TABLE: Organizational, Leadership and Cultural Factors Contributing to Strategic Capacity<sup>4</sup>**

<u>Organizational Factors</u>	
Deliberative structure:	Regular, open, authoritative; creative decision-making
Resource flows:	Money and people from multiple constituencies, including base
Accountability:	Entrepreneurial or democratic accountability
Organizational structure:	Federated (local-state-federal) organizational structure
External networks:	Mix of strong and weak ties to diverse external institutions
Internal networks:	Mix of strong and weak ties among organizing participants; for action at state/national levels, must build “weak ties” across localities
<u>Leadership Factors</u>	
Leaders’ biographies:	Mix of insiders/outside
Repertoires:	Key leaders bring mix of political repertoires
<u>Cultural Factors</u>	
Internal politics:	Promotion of unity; effective undermining of factionalism
Internal communication:	Extensive reciprocal communication, including communication regarding participant “feeling”; some one-way communication
Monitoring:	Regular assessment of participants’ action thresholds
Meaning construction:	Shared interpretation of the <i>meaning</i> of organizing

These, then, are the kinds of attributes community organizations must bring together if they hope to generate the strategic capacity to take advantage of emerging political dynamics and have an impact on policy. To make the resulting political strategy effective, they must also build sufficient mobilizing capacity to be taken seriously in high-level political arenas. There is no easy formula for this. Rather, herein lies the art of political organizing: constructing

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<sup>4</sup> This table and parts of the following section on PICO’s work are adapted and simplified from “Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing” by Richard L. Wood, cited above. I do not summarize in this paper the work of all scholars whose insights are integrated here; see “Higher Power” for the full analysis.

organizations with the cultural, strategic and mobilizing abilities required to exploit the limited political openings that exist at any given time and create new ones where possible. Herein, too, lies the art of strategic funding: identifying organizing efforts that possess those abilities and assuring they have the resources and strategic vision to meet the current challenge.

I now want to explore some of the things one might look for when identifying such efforts, using the “strategic capacity” framework to analyze case studies from two organizing models.

### ***Virginia Organizing Project: Strategic creativity in action***

The Virginia Organizing Project (VOP) provides an example of sophisticated strategic capacity within an organization that is not well-known nationally. VOP was founded in 1995 as “a statewide grassroots organization dedicated to challenging injustice by empowering people in local communities to address issues that affect the quality of their lives.” Because it does not mobilize through established institutions (like the congregations at the heart of the “faith-based” organizing to be discussed below), VOP does not have the mobilizing capacity to turn out many hundreds or thousands of people for political actions. Instead, it combines different organizing tactics creatively, to gain greater political leverage than its limited mobilizing capacity would otherwise allow. By heightening its strategic capacity through years of innovative work, VOP has slowly gained a voice in statewide policy in Virginia.

VOP’s innovative qualities can be seen in everything from its internal structure to its organizing efforts. With a staff of only 15 (five in the central office, 10 as regional organizers), the project is building statewide political capacity in a state with nearly 8 million residents. It does so by tapping into staff talent from more than a dozen statewide groups that are VOP’s coalition partners on various issue campaigns, and from some 45 other agencies and organizations around the state. The latter agencies vary from environmental projects to children’s service efforts to advocacy organizations and beyond. VOP built relationships with this second set of organizations by serving as a traditional fiscal sponsor for them. But these relationships transcend typical voluntary-sector affiliations. As VOP Executive Director Joe Szakos notes, “The relationship does not just let us be their bank, but gives both sides the opportunity to borrow and share power.”

How do they “borrow and share power”? One of VOP’s key new organizing tactics is canvassing campaigns that blanket a particular elected official’s district to learn voter’s concerns and desires. This gives the organization real leverage with officials, who often struggle to stay informed about what is going on in their constituents’ lives. But canvassing is also highly labor-intensive. On a small budget and without massive numbers of volunteers, this tactic would be impossible. VOP periodically draws on staff, members, interns or other representatives from its partner organizations who are interested in a particular campaign, as well as from its statewide coalition partners. This tactic has allowed VOP to regularly carry out impressive canvassing efforts, such as its summer 2008 effort to knock on more than 140,000 doors through its “Civic

Engagement Project.”

After the canvassing campaign, a small group of VOP leaders and members may meet with the official. When they do, they are well-prepared through careful background research in collaboration with partner organizations, and well-informed by what the official’s constituents told them during the canvass. Szakos notes that this tactic has helped the organization turn state legislators around, not by simply lobbying in the state capital, but by meeting legislators on their constituents’ home turf:

Before, people just never met with their legislators. Now we do 60 constituent meetings per year with legislators, back in their districts. Not always very big, but it’s always a multi-constituency gathering. We’ll have labor, environmental groups, LGBT folks, faith groups there, and it’ll always be cross-racial. With that, plus having knocked on doors, you can make a difference. The canvassing operation really lends strength, especially in combination with more focused issue work, a member and staff presence in the capitol, and policy research from other states.

VOP works with major statewide organizations on policy reform campaigns through the typical “give and take” of coalitions. But the organization also lends its staff interns to other groups, to call on constituents during campaigns and help the groups build capacity and capture important issue wins. In addition, VOP can periodically mobilize the staff and members of its partner organizations – going beyond the usual role of a fiscal agent – for its own campaigns. Because they qualify as “program staff” in VOP’s structure, the organization can pull them in for such efforts. VOP believes it has pioneered this model of collaboration within Virginia.

The 3 percent administrative fee that accompanies this relationship also means that VOP faces zero administrative costs for its own core organizing effort – a significant fiscal benefit in the uncertain world of non-profit financing. The organization is also able to make up for modest organizing-sector wages by providing significant security for its employees through extensive health, vacation and professional development benefits, and at least some disability, life and retirement benefits. Thus, the organization strives to provide for its employees something like the structure of long-term security that it seeks in the wider society.

The agency partnerships also bring additional organizational benefits. Again, Joe Szakos:

They have balanced out our public profile: VOP’s organizing work involves raising tension and conflict, which in Virginia is not welcome. VOP’s partners give us a profile of buying books for kids after Katrina, and sponsoring reading programs, and setting up websites on recycling. That helps our public profile while we do our organizing work.

VOP also does extensive political education with its members, pushing them beyond their comfort zones with particular issues by asking them to see connections between, for example, poverty and sexual orientation. Each issue on the organization’s agenda is used to deepen



members' understanding of the workings of power, locally and statewide. Done systematically, this has developed a deep reservoir of societal analysis within the organization, thus heightening the group's strategic capacity.

VOP's leaders strive to ensure that each organizational decision contributes toward this systematic accumulation of capacity. Thus, VOP tries to build the technological infrastructure for its efforts, not haphazardly but by adding one new element annually: one year a sophisticated new database; the next year new technology to incorporate that database into VOP's work, including text messaging as an organizing tool; another year developing a distribution system for letters to the editor, op-eds and media releases to all the newspapers in the state; the next year pooling the resources of 20 allies to develop radio spots related to statewide issue campaigns. Likewise, when the organization decided it needed to bring young people into its work, it did so not with a couple of interns – who in past experience too often became a burden to staff and were unable to really contribute to the work of the organization – but with dozens of interns whose activities were coordinated initially by the director, enabling them to be directly integrated into the work of the organization. During the summer of 2008, for example, 50 interns across the state were part of the door-to-door canvass with members of VOP and its allied partners. Through the canvass and by working at major community events, they distributed about 300,000 non-partisan voter guides in key legislative districts. The underlying question asked of every such move is how it might help “build the organization to scale” – that is, contribute to higher strategic capacity.

Through innovative strategic moves like these, VOP has built its ability to project power in Virginia, despite a relatively thin institutional base. In this way, VOP (along with its allies) has gained local victories on a variety of issues, plus statewide victories on affordable housing, progressive tax reform to help poor Virginians and close tax loopholes for the wealthy, and a streamlined process to restore the civil rights of non-violent felons. But perhaps more profound is a cultural shift among its members, a changed sense of efficacy and hope that the organization has built. The director notes:

But I'd set all [those issue victories] aside. I'd say our greatest victory is that people now think something can change here, that we really can make change in this state. Especially after being a new battleground for the presidential campaign, people can see a connection between our style of organizing and electoral work. The power of the Christian Coalition and Jerry Falwell and Oliver North is slipping away – we can really make big changes.... Today, lots of groups are willing to build and share power in new ways, rather than sitting alone in the sandbox saying collaboration will just suck away their energy. That took a long time coming, to change that attitude. It's all about relationships and power. Now, folks work on how we can build efforts in different parts of state – with a shared vision.

The challenge ahead for VOP involves truly “getting to scale” to produce substantial policy change in Virginia: “To get there, we have to not just raise money, but also find people with skills.... It's easy to be busy, but hard to be strategic.... At this stage, it's not just a matter of

getting more sponsors for bills, it's about overcoming the opposition of the big legislative powers who are clobbering you every time out. We have to be willing to experiment with new approaches." To get there, VOP today continues to innovate strategically, getting actively involved in convening the Virginia C-3 Table, through which progressive organizations with the same tax status can coordinate their non-partisan electoral work.

### *PICO California: Strategic success story – and cautionary tale*

The PICO National Network sponsors “faith-based community organizing” through the work of 50 organizing federations working in 17 states.<sup>5</sup> Each PICO federation provides leadership training for “local organizing committees” in its sponsoring religious congregations (from 10 to several dozen such congregations in each federation, with an enormous variety of Christian denominations and occasional Jewish and other non-Christian congregations participating). These in turn work to push for public policy to improve the quality of life for residents of poor, working-class and middle-class communities. They sponsor “political actions” that draw on the language of sponsoring faith traditions to articulate a vision of a better community, and they ask political officials to support particular policies in pursuit of that vision. Each congregation typically works on issues of concern in its local area, and collaborates with the larger federation to address issues requiring citywide solutions. This model of organizing has often helped produce policy change regarding city services, parks and recreation, policing, low-income housing, healthcare, immigration enforcement, and public education. Its most sophisticated practitioners have helped produce effective teams of leaders in settings with a dearth of effective representation.

For its first 20 years, the PICO National Network focused almost exclusively on such organizing at the *local* level. It is important not to caricature that work: Engaging Americans in public affairs – especially those who have been apathetic or marginalized by political life – requires some prospect of making a difference. Influencing local power represents one way of delivering results. So, like most community organizing efforts, PICO concentrated on influencing decisions at the neighborhood, city and metropolitan levels. But by the mid-1990s, though many PICO projects had discovered they could wield real influence over local decisions, such influence was increasingly inadequate to meet the challenges facing their constituents in working families. In the context of municipal dependence on monetary flows controlled at the state and federal levels, local decision-making only kicks in after more substantial decisions have been made; the decisions that these organizations previously could influence only occurred within constraints imposed by those higher-level decisions. Thus, influencing state and federal policy became necessary if PICO leaders were to respond adequately to the challenges they faced. But how effective could PICO be in these higher-level arenas?

In the mid-1990s, the network decided to use its deep presence in California to experiment with projecting influence in high-level political arenas. Thus was launched PICO California. The statewide effort’s subsequent experience offers impressive evidence of success, as well as

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<sup>5</sup> Several other networks engage in similar work, including the Gamaliel Foundation (primarily in the Midwest); the Industrial Areas Foundation (national, but divided geographically into five separate subregions); Direct Action, Research and Training (primarily Florida and Ohio); the InterValley Project (Northeast); and RCNO (southern California). Though their broad organizing models are similar, they vary greatly in size and organizational culture. Some prefer other labels for their work, e.g. “broad-based” or “congregation-based” community organizing, with concomitant variation in the extent to which they bring other institutions into the work (public schools, labor unions, neighborhood associations, etc.).

important cautionary insights. For my brief purposes here, two kinds of evidence will document PICO California's success: specific victories gained at the state level, and comments from key informants in state government and political society regarding PICO's influence.

Public education, healthcare and, to a lesser degree, housing policy have been the focus of PICO's statewide efforts. Initially, the organization used its pre-existing ties to Gov. Pete Wilson (established by PICO's San Diego Organizing Project when Wilson was mayor there) and its ability to mobilize people from all over California to influence educational policy. Those efforts began at a 1995 assembly in San Jose where some 1,500 people met the U.S. Secretary of Education and the state superintendent of schools – demonstrating PICO's political credentials in the process – and built gradually to a successful 1998 campaign to convince Wilson and the state legislature to provide \$50 million for after-school programs in poor districts around the state. The organization also played an important role in placing Proposition 1A on the ballot in 1998. Proposition 1A, which would provide \$9.2 billion for school repair and construction, passed despite opposition from powerful lobbies, with PICO mobilizing crucial support. In 1999, building on a successful program forged by PICO's local Sacramento affiliate, PICO California worked with legislators and the state education secretary to develop legislation for \$15 million in funding for a parent/teacher home visitation project, extending it to 450 public schools statewide. This legislation has been renewed annually ever since, with PICO successfully fighting to protect it during budget-cutting years – particularly in 2002, when in the face of the worst budget crisis in California history PICO mobilized 3,000 residents to a statewide political action to preserve funding for vital programs in healthcare, education and housing. The home visitation program has now received \$150 million and is widely hailed for fostering educational success by linking families more actively to schools and teachers. Finally, in 2004 Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed PICO-sponsored legislation for \$30 million in incentive money for local school districts to build smaller high schools, again building on the work of local affiliates.

Meanwhile, in 2000 PICO California turned its attention to healthcare policy. Its 18 constituent local organizations brought together 3,000 middle- and low-income residents from around the state – the most multiracial political gathering of this size in the state capital in years, which turned the heads of government staffers and politicians. The organization won passage of the Cedillo-Alarcon Community Clinic Investment Act of 2000, dedicating \$30 million to improving the infrastructure of California health clinics, which serve large numbers of the poor and working poor. The 2000 action also generated attention to health policy within the administration of Gov. Gray Davis, whose political platform had included virtually no agenda for health care. Initial success was limited, but important: The state dropped intrusive quarterly reporting requirements for MediCal (the state's version of Medicaid, the federal healthcare program for low-income people), allowing some half-million families to maintain their health coverage more consistently. Most substantially, after initial setbacks the California project worked with the heads of both houses of the state legislature to obtain the state's commitment to expand health coverage to some 300,000 working-poor parents. Under sustained political pressure from PICO and its organizational allies (including AARP, the California Medical Association and the California Primary Care Association), the federal government agreed to waivers making more than \$400 million available for this program, and the state agreed to use its share of tobacco lawsuit settlements (more than \$400 million per year) to support healthcare, adding \$200 million to the

federal funding. Though the budget crisis of 2002 shot down the funding for the program, the effort placed healthcare on the state's political agenda. It has remained there, as we shall see.

Finally, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger entered office in 2003, PICO built a constructive political relationship with the new administration by repeatedly bringing leaders from its local projects to the state capital of Sacramento – including 4,000 people for the 2005 launch of its children's healthcare initiative. Throughout Schwarzenegger's administration, PICO has had access to the policy-formulation process and appears to have been an important influence on it (see below).

These are impressive concrete gains, fought for and won in California's enormous and highly complex political arena. They suggest that the faith-based community-organizing model can generate the strategic capacity and mobilizing capacity to generate high-level influence. Before turning to the more cautionary side of PICO's recent experience in California – the grinding struggle to extend the healthcare victories outlined above – we will consider a second kind of evidence of the organization's influence: how PICO is perceived by political insiders in the state.

To assess PICO's profile, Paul Speer and his colleagues from the Department of Human and Organizational Development at Vanderbilt University interviewed key informants in California state government and elite political society regarding their perceptions of PICO California.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the interviewees expressed a great deal of respect for the organization's professionalism and rootedness in “real communities and real people.” As one informant noted, the organization “has gained recognition in state politics because many representatives, lobbyists, and experts have begun to recognize the strong relationship PICO California has with the home communities of its affiliates.” Other statements that capture the tenor of these interviews include:

More than any other organization, the PICO California Project's leadership is comprised of representatives of a diverse cross section of the population of California. Perhaps most importantly, its leadership encompasses a unique population of the disenfranchised.

Grassroots groups are often unfocused and undisciplined in their work, often have trouble staying on message....The PICO California Project, however, does not share any of these weaknesses.

Key strengths of the effort seen by these interviewees included the perception that PICO is “disciplined, focused, and competent”; has organizational infrastructure at both local and state levels; represents a diverse constituency; and frames socioeconomic issues from the moral high ground. Speer's analysis emphasized PICO's unique position in California politics, quoting various interviewees: “The organization's faith-based orientation made it quite unique in the

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<sup>6</sup> For the full analysis of PICO's influence, see Paul W. Speer, “People Making Public Policy in California: The PICO California Project” (Knoxville: Vanderbilt University, 2002).

power arena of the state capital ... and lent a `moral credibility' to PICO's issue work." Another informant noted that she had "never seen that kind of sophistication" in a grassroots organization. Still others called PICO "a bomb exploding the business-as-usual style of politics"; argued that its work has "resulted in progress [on healthcare] that would have never been made without the organization"; and said "of all the grassroots organizing groups in California politics, none are as effective as the PICO California Project."

According to the Speer report, one interviewee noted:

The organization also enjoys real and powerful connections with legislators and representatives at the State Capitol. The organization is able to call upon these connections to put strong pressure on local representatives to address the concerns of the organization's leadership. ... This kind of political connection has not been developed by any other grassroots organization working in the State.

Thus, PICO appears to have made a significant impact on the policy process in California, bringing previously marginalized voices into that process to an extent unmatched in these political insiders' experience. As one summarized the organization's political access: "[PICO] has a great deal of power and entree, certainly to a greater extent than most organizations.... Even in critical times when there is a huge crush of demands ... PICO can still get in the door and still get respected. That's rare for someone who doesn't have \$100,000 to donate."

Finally, note that despite fears of some participants at the start of the effort, projecting state-level power does not appear to have undermined PICO's local organizing. In the context of building statewide influence, PICO California expanded from 10 local affiliate organizations in 1993 to 19 such affiliates in 2009, representing more than 350 congregations. PICO argues that this gives it a presence in more than half of the state's legislative districts and representation of some 400,000 families affiliated with sponsoring congregations. Indeed, such widespread presence arguably strengthened local organizing by creating resource flows into which affiliates could tap by influencing city and county decision-making – particularly as local governments drew on tobacco settlement money to fund healthcare for working-class residents, and on state affordable-housing money generated through the PICO-supported bond measure to fund local housing initiatives.

PICO California Executive Director Jim Keddy's assessment of what PICO California has accomplished is somewhat more sober. Working with organizers and leaders from throughout the state, Keddy was the architect of the work throughout the period. From 1998 to 2001, Keddy said, "We were able to shift pretty significant resources toward our priorities, during a time when the state had money.... After the dot-com crash of 2002, we got into a situation of playing defense, trying to protect programs that serve working-class families." He went on to note that PICO underwent a great deal of strategic learning in the latter period, regarding the nature of the taxation system, how the state spends money, and how to run statewide initiatives, which are crucial in California. In many ways PICO was successful, in the sense that California has not had the huge cuts in social spending faced by working people in many states. But Keddy observed, "we want to get out of playing defense, and really play offense again." By 2006, that was

happening: PICO played a central role in getting a statewide initiative known as Proposition 86 onto the ballot. The initiative was intended to provide and fund health coverage for 800,000 uninsured children in California. If successful, it would ultimately represent a major expansion of social provisions to millions of people in the state.<sup>7</sup>

However, here the harsh realities of political power in America today enter the story, and the cautionary side of PICO California's experience comes to the fore. As outlined above, in the last 15 years PICO has built a linked set of local organizations with a statewide reach. Many of them have strong strategic, cultural and mobilizing capacities. Though others are weaker, the overall picture that emerges is one of impressive organizing capacity. The project combines an ability to mobilize several thousand people to statewide or local political actions; a willingness to collaborate and negotiate constructively with political officials of either party who are willing to support social policies that address problems raised by PICO's supporters; the capacity to use a variety of tactics, from press conferences to statewide ballot initiatives to negotiations with top-level state officials to mass political actions that support progressive policy goals; and a sophisticated set of cultural practices to connect political work to the diverse religious frameworks of its constituents.

Despite these strengths, in 2006 and 2007 PICO California ran up against the powerful barriers to progressive policy implementation in American politics. The hardball politics of America's partisan divide scuttled one attempt: At the end of 2005, Republican Gov. Schwarzenegger had vetoed a Democratic bill that would have funded an expansion of existing public healthcare programs. So PICO and its allies turned to the ballot initiative process. Given that California's anti-tax Proposition 13 and the anti-government assumptions that exist in American popular culture together make general tax increases nearly impossible in the state, Proposition 86 proposed to increase the tax on cigarette sales to raise the approximately \$400 million per year needed to provide insurance to uninsured children. That move provoked a massive mobilization against the measure, with \$65 million in funding from tobacco interests. The result: In November 2006, Proposition 86 was defeated, despite polls showing 83 percent of Californians believe all children should be insured.<sup>8</sup> That this defeat, after major organizational investment throughout 2006 by local PICO federations and PICO California, did not lead to organizational demoralization and demobilization suggests the strength of PICO's strategic and cultural capacity. But it was a defeat nonetheless, and a painful one.

PICO remobilized in 2007 to get healthcare funding through the state legislature. It had the implicit support of the governor: Despite his earlier veto, when Schwarzenegger gave his state-of-the-state address early in the year, he made providing healthcare for all children a centerpiece of his agenda. Throughout the year, PICO worked with a variety of prominent foundations, healthcare advocates and labor unions, plus the Republican governor and some Democratic legislative leaders, seeking to craft a bipartisan bill. By the end of the year, a two-part strategy

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<sup>7</sup> See Peter Schrag, "The Cost of Good Works in a Bad System" in *The Sacramento Bee*, Feb. 1, 2006, p. b7.

<sup>8</sup> On the defeat of Proposition 86, see "Insurance for Kids: Back to square one" by Clea Benson, *Sacramento Bee* Capitol Bureau, Monday, Nov. 13, 2006.

for universal coverage had been developed by Schwarzenegger and the Democratic head of the State Assembly, Rep. Fabian Nuñez. Part one of that strategy was laid out in legislation whose children's health provisions were shaped by PICO California; it was passed by the State Assembly in late 2007.

Part two of the strategy involved a healthcare ballot initiative filed by Schwarzenegger and Nuñez to create a trust fund to provide health coverage to all of California's uninsured children plus a significant portion of uninsured adults (about 3.7 million people). Again, PICO's political fingerprints were apparent in the way the initiative was written, in particular in its emphasis on children. When the governor gave a press conferences promoting the initiative before it was filed, the children's provisions it contained were not scheduled to go into effect until July 2010. Yet by the time the initiative was filed less than a month later, children were at center stage: Children's care would begin in July 2009, and \$25 million would be available six months before that to lay local groundwork for the launch. Furthermore, the initiative was written to protect the children's healthcare funding even if other elements of the new program were challenged in court. PICO appears to have played a crucial role in pressing for those changes. After years of fighting for children's healthcare, the organization criticized any further delay, even one proposed by its public allies. As PICO California Executive Director Jim Keddy noted at the time:

[In December 2007] PICO affiliates around the state were pressuring their legislators to make sure that children were a top priority in the negotiations over universal health coverage. I am pleased to report that we accomplished our goals. Children are a top priority in the initiative filed last week.... [In response to the governor and speaker's initial proposal] we indicated that we were not in support of their plan, and would not participate in the press events. This tension was key to winning the concessions [in favor of children's health]. I was called into the Governor's office the evening of December 23rd to review a draft version of the initiative and was pleased to see the \$25 million for January to July for the local children's health programs and the new start date for the expansion of July 2009.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, many other organizations and sources of political pressure shared responsibility for this shift. But it seems fair to credit PICO with a substantial hand in it. Once again, PICO's mobilizing capacity and strategic capacity appeared to have overcome a major hurdle, and gotten healthcare access for nearly four million Californians back on track.

But for the initiative to actually appear before the voters, a final step was required: The California Senate had to vote to place it on the ballot. At the end of January 2008, the Senate refused to pass the bill. PICO's internal analysis is that the bill died as a result of three factors. The first was ongoing animosity between leaders of the Senate and the Assembly, with the former feeling they were given little input in the measure's creation. Second, the bill failed to gain the support of those arguing for a more radical "single payer" approach, which PICO

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<sup>9</sup> This and following quotes are from PICO California Executive Director Jim Keddy, contained in internal PICO communications dated Jan. 2, Feb. 8 and 10, and March 19, 2008.



believes has little chance of winning the required two-thirds vote in the legislature. Third, once again tobacco companies and some health insurance companies lobbied strongly against the measure. Though PICO and its allies considered a grassroots campaign to gather signatures to get the initiative onto the ballot, they ultimately decided that strategy was not viable for 2008, given the short timeline to the election. Thus, major healthcare reform in California died in 2008, killed by a combination of hyper-partisanship, big-money politics, budget constraints and widespread suspicion of virtually any government-led initiative.<sup>10</sup> Even powerful grassroots organizing efforts must operate on that political terrain, in California and at the national level.

These are the sobering realities of organizing for progressive social change. As Keddy noted in the days after the California Senate's action:

There were many people who worked day and night on the policy of this legislation and interest groups made significant concessions to support it. Most health plans, for example, (with the exception of Blue Cross) agreed to "guaranteed issue," the idea that they would insure people regardless of pre-existing conditions. Many in the business community had come to accept the idea of an employer mandate. At a large healthcare conference this week, healthcare leaders were angry, depressed and simply astounded by what happened last week.

Yet healthcare rises again as a key issue for progressive policy change. One of the first acts of Congress and the Obama administration in 2009 was to pass major new funding for children's health insurance (SCHIP), and PICO California is working on a major healthcare ballot initiative for 2010. Grassroots support for healthcare reform is too strong for it to go away. Indeed, Keddy himself noted a few days later:

The collapse of health reform at the State Capitol in January [2008] and our inability to place a children's health measure on the November ballot is obviously a huge disappointment ... we are currently considering keeping the initiative and fundraising movement alive by looking to place a measure on the next state ballot, in June or November of 2010. The various supporters we recruited to our cause over the last month remain willing to fund a children's health initiative in the future, and rather than let this work go to waste, we are looking to seize the next opportunity to bring this issue before voters.

But to win the coming battles for progressive social policy (on healthcare and a host of other issues, in California and around the country), the experience of PICO California suggests two necessary ingredients: The most sophisticated community organizing efforts must be supported with sufficient resources and creativity to continue to build mobilizing and strategic capacity, *and* the terrain of American politics – on which those battles will be fought – must shift. This brief focuses on the former. The latter lies beyond its scope, but I will note that changing the political terrain will require not only political change but also deep cultural change. The

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<sup>10</sup> For one diagnosis, see Daniel Weintraub's post-mortem in the *Sacramento Bee*, Feb. 10, 2008, at <http://www.sacbee.com/110/v-print/story/699348.html>.

conservative movement spent years building a national culture of anti-government hegemony and market supremacy. The demographic and cultural shifts signaled by the Obama phenomenon hold significant progressive promise, but no evidence exists that deep cultural commitments have yet coalesced to systematically contest anti-government rhetoric or pro-market populist appeals (except regarding exorbitant executive pay). Building a different moral-political consensus to undergird progressive political action will require deep cultural work in all our institutions: congregations, schools, political parties, and within popular culture. As I have argued elsewhere, community organizing represents one tool for that kind of cultural work.<sup>11</sup>

The trajectory of PICO California thus highlights the challenges of projecting power into high-level political arenas, and demonstrates PICO's ability to do so. Statewide efforts to address the healthcare crisis and other issues have also emerged in other states, including efforts by PICO Colorado and PICO Louisiana. Perhaps, then, projecting national power might be more promising than it appears. In the next section, I examine "New Voices," the PICO National Network's effort to find out.

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<sup>11</sup> See Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). For other good writing on "cultural work" and the related idea of "public work," see the works by Harry Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, Stephen Hart, Paul Osterman and Heidi Swarts, cited above.

### *National strategic capacity: PICO New Voices*

As PICO's network of federations in cities around the country gained sufficient power to address local (and sometimes state) issues, they also came to see the limits of that power more clearly: As long as they had no voice at the national level, the network's influence would be stunted. Might the network's broad base in 17 states, with teams of active members trained for public leadership in 500 congregations representing some 50 denominational traditions, provide the foundation for projecting national-level influence? And might the experience of fighting for and winning policy change at local and statewide levels have produced an appetite for national policy change? Or would such an effort risk overwhelming local organizing efforts, ultimately undermining their work?

PICO New Voices came into being between 2002 and 2005, through a gradual process of convening internal leaders and organizers to discuss the possibilities and risks. To launch New Voices, PICO leaders and organizers had to deal with significant doubts within their own federations; to be successful, they will have to overcome significant barriers. As PICO Associate Director Scott Reed, a key architect of the New Voices effort, suggested in an interview, "Our leaders increasingly understand the need for the federal-level action, but are constrained by their own realities and by political realities in Washington, D.C., in bringing it about."

Elsewhere, I have analyzed how participants are confronting those barriers, and how factors of organizational structure, leadership, network ties and culture shape the national effort's strategic capacity.<sup>12</sup> In that study, which was based on the organization's situation in 2006, I concluded that PICO's national effort was especially strong on its deliberative process, organizational structure, internal networks, and all the cultural factors considered in the discussion of strategic capacity earlier in this paper. I suggested that the effort was thinner, however, in its reliance on a narrow flow of resources, a set of leaders with relatively narrow biographies, a thin network of external alliances, and a limited political repertoire. Overall, that analysis concluded that PICO New Voices held real promise for strategic efficacy, but also faced great challenges – due both to its need to diversify its resources, leadership, external alliances and political repertoire, *and* to the obstacles inherent in American political life today.

PICO's experience since 2006 largely confirms that analysis. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in mid-2005, the national network had shifted priorities to address the resulting crisis in Louisiana and elsewhere, pushing for immediate aid to limit the devastation in poor communities and throughout the region.<sup>13</sup> Though in one sense a distraction from the main issue

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<sup>12</sup> A much fuller analysis of the PICO New Voices effort can be found in my article "Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing," pp. 164-192 in *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change*, edited by Marion Orr (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007). Sections of the following discussion are drawn from this source.

<sup>13</sup> Axel-Lute, Miriam. Spring 2006. "Picking Up the Pieces." *Shelterforce Online* #145, from [www.nhi.org/online/issues/145/pickinguppieces.html](http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/145/pickinguppieces.html).

priorities of the New Voices campaign, the organization adeptly moved to address this major crisis in one of its core geographic sites – and then pivoted to return to its central emphasis. In December 2006, New Voices launched an effort to persuade key House and Senate members to support reauthorization of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) at a level that would cover 10 million uninsured children throughout the country. In 2006-2007 the national project repeatedly held press conferences and congressional visits in Washington, D.C., drawing on its clergy leadership to frame children’s healthcare in moral terms, and receiving extensive media coverage. More importantly, local PICO-affiliated federations hosted 48 political events “back home” in member’s congressional districts, striving to create the political will to move progressive legislation when SCHIP came up for reauthorization at the end of 2007. PICO New Voices was of course not alone in that effort; a broad coalition of organizations came together to try to translate broad public support for government-backed healthcare for uninsured children into federal policy. But PICO New Voices was one of the key parts of that coalition, in particular in its ability to perform two political tasks crucial to moving legislation: generating grassroots support from congressmembers’ constituents, and publicly framing the healthcare debate within the key moral traditions (especially religious traditions) that shape Americans’ perception of the issue. Thus, within a few years of launching New Voices, the PICO National Network had learned to coordinate its mobilizing and cultural capacities to play a significant role within a broad national coalition on healthcare extension.

As the fall 2007 Congressional vote on SCHIP reauthorization approached, it appeared that the healthcare coalition had successfully generated the strategic capacity to win on one of the more high-profile and controversial issues of the day: whether the federal government should be more active in funding healthcare for uninsured Americans. And indeed, Congress voted to reauthorize SCHIP with an additional \$35 billion in funding over five years, while also raising the upper cap on income that families could earn and still be eligible for SCHIP coverage.

But here again, the constraints of the American political process enter the picture. A president ideologically committed to limiting the role of government twice vetoed the SCHIP authorization, driven by opposition to the increased funding and to the higher caps on family income, and perhaps by the fear that this legislation represented the leading edge of a new approach to social policy after years of anti-government ideological hegemony. For all its strength and despite broad support for the measure, the coalition that had brought SCHIP expansion to the table simply could not generate sufficient congressional support to override President Bush’s veto. After the veto, the coalition successfully lobbied for renewal of SCHIP at then-current funding levels through March 2009, which kept the program alive until a new Congress and president provided significant new funding for children’s health in early 2009. The PICO National Network was a central player in that final approval, testifying before Congress at the time of its passage. PICO’s Scott Reed also spoke at the March 2009 White House Forum on Health Reform, called to lay the groundwork for major healthcare legislation; he spoke at a session attended by 13 members of Congress and moderated by Valerie Jarrett (Senior Advisor to the President) and Zeke Emanuel (White House Health Care Policy Advisor).

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Some within PICO argue that the SCHIP battle in fact represents a victory. As Jim Keddy has argued, whereas some ideological opponents of government programs wished to entirely eliminate SCHIP as unwarranted intrusion of government into the market for healthcare, PICO helped force its renewal until a day when different political conditions may allow real expansion. Nevertheless, to have battled so hard and lost on SCHIP expansion was a bitter pill to swallow – but perhaps not a surprising one. As I argued in my earlier analysis of PICO’s national work:

Powerful constraints rooted in the current political and economic context apply *a fortiori* to the New Voices national effort: massive federal deficits, deep anti-government and anti-tax currents in national culture, and the hyper-polarization of congressional and presidential political dynamics argue against any irenic reading of PICO’s national opportunities. To succeed, New Voices leaders will have to overcome these constraints.

Overcoming such major limitations would be a significant victory, and clearly neither New Voices nor the rest of the movement for progressive new domestic legislation has achieved it. Thus, like PICO California, the New Voices effort demonstrates the impressive “scaling up” of capacity that is possible within the community organizing world – at least where strong organizing foundations, artful and disciplined leadership, and sufficient resources can be brought together – but it also demonstrates the enormous political constraints imposed by the political and cultural status quo of American society. Building on its current capacity, community organizing can, in conjunction with other efforts, create new *possibilities* for public policy, and effectively help implement those that are attainable at the local level. But at the state and national levels, actually delivering on those possibilities will demand strengthening organizational capacity and continuing strategic innovation.

In recent years, PICO has broadened its strategic networks, partly through its engagement in the Katrina recovery but especially through the alliances forged in the healthcare struggle. It has also secured a deeper resource base (most prominently through major funding from the Sandler Foundation for its core organizing work) and built up its political repertoire. Though the resumés of its own national leaders are still somewhat limited, it now draws on the diverse expertise of its national organizational partners, at least partially overcoming that drawback. Thus, the organization has moved forward in meeting some of the explicit organizational challenges it faced even a few years ago. New Voices will continue to require major funding for particular initiatives and issue campaigns, but the stability of the national organizing effort appears assured.

Winning national victories may also entail dealing with some of the cultural and partisan assumptions that have emerged in American society in recent years. PICO strives to confront these assumptions by constructing a culture of sustained public engagement and forging a centrist coalition around issues that can draw support from both parties and make policy headway despite partisan polarization. As we have seen, directly confronting the powerful forces that drive partisan polarization risks failure. But the combination of PICO’s creative cultural work and strong organizing capacity in local congressional districts may create sufficient strategic capacity to overcome those risks – if New Voices can continue to strengthen its strategic capacity and if emergent trends in national politics work in its favor.

### *Raising the bar for future generations*

This paper has examined strong models of strategic capacity within a handful of organizing efforts, focusing on exemplars of broader patterns within the more capable sectors of organizing today. Important strategic capacity exists today within the national-level work of PICO New Voices and the state-level work of the Virginia Organizing Project, PICO California and PICO Colorado. Other important efforts include ACORN, SEIU and the broader labor movement, the recently invigorated Sierra Club, and elements within certain congregation-based organizing networks (the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Gamaliel Foundation, DART, the InterValley Project and RCNO). If brought to bear in the high-level political arenas that set the terms for local organizing efforts, that strategic capacity may make a significant difference in American politics in the months and years ahead. Some efforts are much further along than others in entering those higher-level arenas – and in even having the vision or the means to do so. Others remain mired in what Marshall Ganz has rightly diagnosed as the localist and unimaginative strategic orientations of community organizing of the past. But strategic leaders within organizing and its key funding agencies are gradually building a more ambitious vision and the means to attain it.

More ambiguous is the national economic and political context within which *all* community organizing will have to occur in the years ahead. Economically, the tremendous deterioration of the fiscal situation of both government and private foundations will produce real limitations on policy options and funding for community organizing. Yet the very depth of the crisis argues for bold intervention, which may help justify progressive priorities. Politically, the national power distribution has been partly re-aligned, which appears to have the *potential* to break the stranglehold on innovative policy implementation that has been in place in recent years. If that stranglehold is broken – either through bipartisan cooperation or, more likely, through new assertiveness by the Obama administration – new political possibilities will open up. Effective community organizations can insert the power of organized grassroots constituents into those partially open doors of influence. Groups with the strategic capacity to adapt creatively to this emerging new political context will have far greater promise than those unable to adapt.

The organizing efforts discussed here are raising the bar for others. They have shown the strategic capacity to innovate and have made significant gains in influencing high-level political arenas. Perhaps as importantly, each has had the *chutzpah* and vision to see beyond the status quo whereby community-based organizing fought local battles but rarely aspired to greater power.

Yet none have achieved the level of success they want and that the country needs in order to more fully deliver on its democratic promise to families on the lower half of the economic ladder. The fight for influence has been harder, the level of resistance greater and the public arena less open to influence from below than perhaps any of these leaders anticipated. Today, even highly sophisticated organizing faces an upstream swim against powerful forces. In such a setting, organizing may be one critical element in breaking down the logjam on policy, but to play that role it will have to *simultaneously* achieve several things:

- Sustain a significant organizing presence both in high-level political arenas (where victories have greater impact but may take years) and very local arenas (where victories can occur more regularly and leaders can be formed).
- Recruit and develop organizers with the diverse talents and backgrounds needed to organize effectively and innovate strategically.
- Constantly develop new leaders capable of acting confidently in high-level political arenas.
- Constantly build a stronger strategic capacity within their own organizations.
- Build partnerships with other organizations and with public officials; these are necessary for moving from *potential* strategic capacity into actually formulating, passing and implementing new public policy.
- Link organizing work to deep currents of meaning in American life, through cultural work within both religious and secular traditions.

These are challenging tasks, but if they can be met, community organizing may be well-positioned to play a role in redefining the direction of American democracy. If the 2008 elections are to become more than a temporary partisan shift, progressives must aspire to change the cultural underpinnings of American politics that have fueled conservative hegemony for 25 years: an anti-government/anti-tax ideology, an implicit if unspoken white backlash, and an assumption that religious values *only* motivate commitment to issues of personal morality. The demographic foundations for such a shift are already in place, with new voters far less inclined to succumb to “white backlash” or narrowly moralistic political formulations. But such shifts can only undergird long-term political change if they are consolidated around shared cultural commitments. Such a change in American political culture would open new possibilities for both major political parties to address anew the powerful inequalities that undermine the good things America offers the world. Only ambitious and politically savvy community organizing will be able to help bring those possibilities to fruition.

### ***The art of strategic funding***

If this analysis is correct, the current political moment offers a unique window of opportunity for foundations and individual funders interested in progressive social policy change. That is, if political dynamics are indeed shifting in ways that open up national politics to reformist influence (with ripple effects down to state and local levels) and if today’s stronger community organizing efforts possess an infrastructure and level of expertise not seen in recent memory, then progressive social policy reform may be more possible in the coming years than at any time since the Civil Rights movement. The right kind of targeted funding can contribute powerfully to capitalizing on this strategic opportunity. But what role can funders best play in the current context?

The best sources of insight are probably those with substantial experience in funding ambitious community organizing work in recent years. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Needmor Fund and the Veatch Program at Shelter Rock have all recently funded innovative strategic organizing initiatives. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development has almost four

decades of experience in funding emerging and established organizing efforts in low-income settings. In recent years, The California Endowment has been the core funder of PICO California's healthcare organizing, as well as many other efforts in that state, and the Sandler Family Supporting Foundation provides major support to the work of the PICO National Network and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Other funders seeking to invest in the emerging opportunities for progressive community organizing can learn much from the experience of these funding pioneers (and from dialogue with organizers themselves).

Beyond this, studies of efforts to project participatory democratic power into high-level political arenas (by this author and by others) suggest a few lessons that ought to inform funders' thinking:

1. *Fund ambitiously, with accountability*: Large-scale impact requires substantial and sustained funding. Moving issues in high-level political arenas is expensive, often requiring travel, staffing, polling and the cultivation of political relationships far beyond that required in local arenas. In making that financial commitment, funders can insist on knowing what is being done and what is being learned – that is, they can insist that organizations constantly develop their strategic capacity, while leaving the *content* of that capacity to the organizations' own decision-makers.
2. *Fund experience and creativity; foster gradual learning*: Success in higher-level arenas must be founded on solid experience of success in lower-level arenas, but it also requires creative strategic thinking. Leaders must be willing to try new ideas, evolve tactics to take advantage of emergent opportunities and counter emergent threats, and learn from their initial mistakes and successes. Success emerges from an iterative process of trial/error/success that gradually finds the best approaches in a given political context. Do not insist on quick success; insist on constant, cumulative reflection and learning.
3. *Fund organizations open to collaboration, but do not force it from outside*: In complex political arenas, virtually no political actors are capable of producing policy change on their own – especially not those organizations constrained by their tax status and organizational ethos from intervening in clearly partisan ways. Such organizations can be highly effective, but must work in collaboration with other organizations pursuing the same objectives. Such collaborative efforts can be built in at least two ways: by working with organizations doing similar work in different settings – what might be called “segmented collaboration” (e.g. different community-organizing groups in different parts of the country educating and organizing on the same issue); or by collaborating with other organizations doing quite different kinds of work – what might be called “specialized collaboration” (e.g. a community-organizing group seeking out policy think tanks, direct-mail operations, individual membership organizations, prominent spokespersons or religious authorities, labor unions, and political-process experts to approach policy change from different angles). But forcing collaboration on unenthusiastic organizations has routinely failed, and which kind of collaborative relationships are most useful is best left to the judgment of participating organizations themselves as they learn what they need to win. Be discerning: Organizations that by



policy, ethos or reputation are unwilling to collaborate may win local victories, but are unlikely to influence high-level politics over the long run.

4. *Fund to nurture ambitious organizing*: Visionaries within the organizing world who aspire to influence higher-level political venues often must swim upstream against inertia and habits within their own organizations. Vision and capacity for high-level organizing are unevenly distributed, both across the various “players” in community organizing and within each organization and network. Whoever you fund will gain influence in their networks, so choose well.
5. *Fund to build local-state-national synergy*: A tension exists, and trade-offs may have to be made, between projecting power into high-level political arenas and sustaining a vigorous organizing process at its local roots. However, it is possible to manage this tension by pursuing high-level policy change in ways that create local-level opportunities to nourish organizing in neighborhoods, communities and metropolitan areas. For example, new funding for healthcare won by the PICO California effort was channeled to lower governmental levels, where it was tapped into by PICO’s local federations through city- and county-level political action. In this way, a far broader base of leaders gained experience, and local organizations were strengthened by local political wins.

Neither insights from colleagues nor the lessons gleaned from research provide direct answers to funders wondering who and how to fund in the field of progressive community organizing. Strategic funding will always be more art than science, in the same way that great architecture is more art than science. Building an infrastructure of democratic organizing can draw on lessons from past experience, but ultimately requires initiative, decision-making and risk-taking from funders willing to invest in new strategic ideas. In discerning the most promising opportunities, the art of strategic funding will also require discipline, ambition and humility: the discipline to really learn about the field before investing; the ambition to make a real difference in the policy decisions that shape the lives of people in struggling communities; and the humility to trust others’ work even while insisting on scaling up organizing efforts to confront the real challenges our society faces.

All of this is a tall order, but the rewards are great. Those who find ways to fund a more grounded, creative and effective form of community organizing may contribute mightily to breaking the policy logjam in Washington, effectively addressing our urgent social problems, and renewing the participatory roots of American democracy.

Sidebar text, referred to in footnote 2: best if located about page 2 or 3

For valuable insights into community organizing in the United States, see the following works. Several of them are cited elsewhere throughout this paper.

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