



## **Chapter 12**

# **Coalitions and Constituencies**

## **Working with Other Groups**



# Coalitions and Constituency Groups

## What is a Coalition?

A coalition is a group of organizations working together for a common purpose. These organizations may have different structures and diverging interests, but are bound together by the common purpose. Coalitions are about building power. The reason to spend the time and energy building a coalition is to amass the power necessary to do something you cannot do through one organization.

### Types of coalitions

1. Working or Paper
2. Permanent or Temporary
3. Single or Multi-issue
4. Geographically-based (national, local, etc)
5. Constituency-based (women's, religious)

## What is a Constituency Group?

An electoral constituency group is any group of people bound by a common trait, interest, or affiliation in a given district. A constituency group presumably votes generally in the same way. Candidates have an interest in building a relationship with these groups for the purpose of winning an election in which the group can help the candidate reach his or her vote goal. A constituency group may also have an interest in helping the candidate become an elected official. The constituent group can then hold accountable this official on issues that affects the constituency.

### Electoral Coalitions

Endorsements might come in name only or with money and people. These are accompanied with the expectation that once in office, the elected official will act in the interest of the endorsing group. A campaign will seek the support of many different constituency groups, and constituency groups will scrutinize many different candidates.

## Evaluating the Need to Build a Coalition or Court a Constituency

Building bridges for the sake of building bridges wastes and organization's resources and often leads to misunderstanding between groups. Organizational relationships are built on the need to work together, by a common purpose with a stated goal – not by the mere existence of the other group. Investing in these relationships cost resources – people, time, and money. Often these relationships allow groups to make the best use of their combined resources.

### Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages	Disadvantages
- Allows an organization or candidate to speak credibly to more people.	- Lose a measure of control; make too many compromises
- Increase the campaign or organization's resources: more people, more money. Work done to achieve a common campaign goal.	- Distracts from other work, group and coalition politics, false expectations cost the coalition members.
- Broaden scope and appeal of the candidate or organization.	- Unforeseen political consequences, or reactions from other groups

Candidates running for election should quickly become familiar with potential constituency groups. Electoral campaigns can quickly determine the necessity of various constituency groups. Groups with a large membership, influence, or pockets can be directly helpful. Organizations which represent a significant portion of the vote goal can become critical allies of a campaign. If the vote goal for the campaign is 3500, and the district has 1000 registered South Asian voters, then the candidate could take care of a large portion of his or her vote goal by investing in a relationship with a local South Asian political group. The same principle applies when targeting elected officials in advocating public policy. Citizen lobby efforts should work to incorporate constituent organizations in their lobbying efforts.

## Principles of a Successful Coalition

### 1. Respect Organizational Interests and Decision-making

Each organization brings its own structure, values, culture, and decision making processes. They enter into a coalition relationship for their own sake. Understanding what brings the organizations to work together is an important part of making that relationship work. Different values and decision-making processes will lead organizations to respond differently throughout a campaign. From the beginning organizations may have some areas of disagreement. If these areas are acknowledged and respected, the coalition's common purpose will guide the relationship, not the differences.

### 2. Set Realistic Expectations

Contributions from different groups may vary widely. Groups may have different strengths and weaknesses. Groups should be targeted for relationships based on what strengths a group brings to the table (and also what challenges the group will bring). Work with group leaders to maximize their potential contributions throughout the campaign. Be explicit with the roles and responsibilities of the partnership. What are the shared resources of the partnership - cost sharing, list sharing, a shared timeline with benchmarks? The coalition should determine how decisions are made for the group.

### 3. Distribute Recognition Where Due

Each group has a reason to get involved with the campaign. Acknowledging this reason will help the organization distribute credit. For advocacy groups this may be done by sharing contacts, relationships, and media exposure. For electoral campaigns, this could be recognition of the constituency group's issues and importance in exchange for a public endorsement.

## Getting Started: Step by Step Relationship Building

### 1) Evaluate the Proposed Relationship

Go into the relationship with a specific purpose and a plan. If the initiating organization cannot articulate a reason, the other organization will not find a reason to be receptive. For example, "we want to see more of you people" is not a good reason.

#### Legally Permissible?

Check to see if your group's legal structure allows for coordination with your target.

### 2) Do Your Homework

Develop a list of key contacts within the organizations with whom your groups wish to partner. Research the target group: its issues, its past positions, its involvement in politics. Resources and literature available from the group will show you some of the group's priorities. Ask public officials close to your group about the target group. For electoral campaigns, it will be useful to know how much a portion of your vote goal this group could tackle for you. However, be careful not to mistake constituency groups as representing a monolithic bloc of voters.

### 3) Cultivate Community Leaders

Understanding whom to contact can be a small challenge. When dealing with unfamiliar communities it is not uncommon to miss important dynamics like infighting or competing organizations. Arrange a personal meeting with the appropriate leadership of the target group. Relationship building requires a good coalition builder to listen more than to speak or demand. Make an effort to listen to the community leaders before asserting a new agenda. Be sure to sort out any existing problems or misunderstandings before or at the beginning of the meeting. This assures the leaders that they are an important aspect of the coalition or campaign. Ideally, the candidate or organization is involved in working on the same issues. Never go into a situation to tell a community what's best for them, but find areas of agreement, invest the target group in the solution, and involve the target organization in the group.

#### **4) Recognition**

As your groups work together, plan to share credit. Understanding the motivations for each group can be helpful in building the relationship. If one group seeks to benefit from media attention, for example, their group should get a mention in media hits, if possible. In electoral campaigns, recognition from a candidate comes in the form of standing up for particular issues of interest to the constituency and access to that candidate after taking office. In return, constituent organizations lend their name and resources over to the campaign.

#### **5) Establish a Structure for Continued Dialogue**

Each group should know the progress of the others toward a goal. Establish quantifiable goals and set benchmarks. Be specific. Numbers. Dates. Work together. Don't just ask how their canvass went, go canvass with the group in the group's neighborhood. After the completion of the goal, the groups should continue to network after the campaign time is done.

### **DFA CASE Study: Fair Share for Health Care**

In 2005, the Maryland Legislature passed a bill requiring companies with more than 10,000 employees in the state to pay their fair share for health care. The law required companies to either spend 8% of their payroll on health benefits or contribute to the state's health insurance program for the poor. In practice, the bill only affected Wal-Mart, because the other qualifying employers (Northrop Grumman, Giant Foods and John Hopkins) already meet the law's guidelines.

Unfortunately, Maryland's Republican governor vetoed the bill in 2005. So the legislature would have to override the veto for it to become law. As the 2005 legislative session approached, DFA worked closely with labor groups, such as SEIU and UFCW, and grassroots groups, such as Maryland for Health Care, WakeUp Wal-Mart, and Wal-Mart Watch, to develop a campaign to persuade undecided legislators to support the override vote. The labor groups brought a strong set of institutional knowledge in the state. DFA and other grassroots groups brought a committed set of activists who were to pressure legislators.

We worked with our coalition partners to developed tailored communications for DFA members. We also developed a list of undecided legislators where we should focus member outreach. This information enabled DFA to develop a broad campaign asking DFA members across the state to contact their legislators, while simultaneously executing a more targeted campaign to put heightened pressured on undecided legislators. Dozens of DFA members from around the state called their legislators to ask them to support the override vote. The labor groups supplemented this grassroots tactic with radio advertisements in targeted districts.

The culmination of the campaign was a high visibility rally in Annapolis on the first day of the legislative session to show support for the override vote. No one coalition group could have developed sufficient grassroots pressure on their own. But working together, we mobilized hundreds of people and swayed several key legislators.

In the end, Wal-Mart pulled out the big guns. They hired the biggest cadre of lobbyists in recent history to try to influence the legislation. But the coalition showed that good 'ol fashioned shoe leather can overcome the special interests.

Ultimately, the Fair Share Health Care Act received two thirds majorities in both houses of the Maryland Legislature. It is the first successful Fair Share legislation in the country. This campaign provides a model for success in other states by demonstrating that a coalition of labor and grassroots groups can overcome lobbyist influence.

