



How Grassroots Engagement across States and Localities Can Advance Progressive Causes in the Era of Trump

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Since the 1930s, progressives have focused on large scale solutions to social problems – aiming for federal policy measures to address a host of issues including poverty alleviation, women’s rights, civil rights, and healthcare access. Although this approach has succeeded in many domains in the past, it will not be feasible to advance, or even maintain, in the coming years. Instead, focusing on local and regional levels of politics will be the most effective way for progressives to challenge policies coming from Washington during the Trump Presidency.

Already, Democratic lawmakers at the state level have embraced this strategy. Mayors from Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago, and New York, all declared their determination to remain sanctuary cities by continuing to refuse cooperation with federal immigration officials seeking to detain or deport undocumented immigrants. More generally as well, such city officials are pushing back against federal policies that conflict with the progressive values of their states.

But this type of elite-led action is readily feasible only in states such as California and New York where most citizens already support the progressive agenda. Progressive-minded people living in conservative states cannot rely on their political elites to counter the policies of the Trump administration. To stand up to Trump’s policies, progressives need to activate grassroots networks, above all in states where liberal elites are barely present. Grassroots activism is especially important to address gridlocked and polarized issues. Our research reveals how progressives can forge creative alliances with non-partisan groups to activate grassroots advocates throughout the country.

Why State and Local Politics Present Opportunities for Progressives

Our research examines movements pushing for gun regulations and climate change reforms. Until recently, both movements have focused most of their efforts on national initiatives and technocrat-led efforts to change policies – but with little success.

The gun violence prevention movement has for some time touted the work of academics and researchers to provide evidence for nationwide changes. Although this national strategy made sense because regulating the firearm market requires coordinated enforcement across states, it also stymied grassroots movements, giving citizens at the ground level few opportunities to participate in policy development or campaigning. Such activities build social capital among activists and can solidify widespread, committed efforts to keep up the pressure on policy makers. On the other side of the gun debate, for example, the National Rifle Association embraced policy incrementalism at the state level to develop a widely networked and intensely committed advocacy community able to convince lawmakers that a vote against gun rights will cost them their re-election – particularly in conservative states. Defeats of proposed regulations and the steady expansion of gun rights in the states show the effectiveness of this strategy.

Similarly, the climate change movement has relied heavily on elite-level policymaking. Over the past decade, two major legislative efforts were the failed 2009 cap and trade bill and President Obama’s Clean Power Plan. Both resulted from highly bureaucratic policy debates and failed to activate widespread grassroots support. Top-heavy reform efforts left the door open for opposition groups to tap into the electorate - dramatizing higher consumer costs of climate regulations, while also decrying them as “big government” efforts that would kill jobs and stall economic growth. Although grassroots climate change movements do exist, they tend to focus on (currently blockaded) national efforts and they have failed to engage many Americans beyond the ranks of already committed progressives and environmentalists.

Building Grassroots Power through Creative Alliances

To further liberal policy agendas across all states in the era of Trump, progressives need to form creative alliances with a variety of local groups, including those not attracted to the progressive label. Creative alliances can come in many forms and make progress even in partisan-polarized environments – as suggested by joint efforts to reduce domestic violence and gun violence. As gun reforms have languished at the federal level since the 1990s, advocates for abused women have successfully passed firearm regulations even in conservative states. Between 2008 and 2015, states passed 35 laws to protect victims of domestic violence from firearms, including states that had previously resisted all other forms of gun regulation. Domestic violence prevention advocates succeeded where others did not because they leveraged committed citizens in bipartisan networks and alliances. The gun violence prevention movement benefited from such powerful grassroots action, making gains in places like Alabama and South Carolina.

Although climate change remains a highly polarizing topic, activating politically conservative members of conservation and hunting groups, such as the National Audubon Society or Ducks Unlimited, can advance progressive goals in this realm too. Climate change threatens the wildlife that these groups work to preserve. Even though partisanship keeps conservatives from politically engaging highly polarized “climate change” reforms, advocates often can attract support from members of conservative and hunting organizations for local legislation to protect wildlife habitats. This builds alliances and unleashes new generations of activists.

Moving Forward

In this era of conservative control of all three federal branches of government, progressives will need to refocus their efforts on local and regional policymaking. But this recalibration cannot ignore states whose political elites are unlikely to introduce liberal policies. A focus on grassroots activism around concerns shared by groups of various persuasions can in practice advance progressive goals in areas such as addressing climate change and preventing gun violence, both long stalled at the federal level. Specifically, reformers in these movements must be attuned to possibilities for creative alliances with groups not traditionally linked to progressive policy advocacy. Through flexibly fashioned alliances, progressives can overcome partisan polarization on critical issues, unleash new waves of activism, and promote what are – in effect if not name – truly progressive policy changes at the state and local levels.