



Why Democrats Need to Open Doors - And How They Can

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There was a time when the Democratic Party was a local presence across most of the modern United States. In city wards and small towns alike, elected party officeholders and active members powered the rhythms of the electoral cycle. But in recent times, powerful trends have propelled disengagement from politics as they did from social groups ranging from bible study meetings to bowling leagues. Working parents had less time. Club members aged. Young folks did not step in. Increasingly, political tasks local citizens had once done together – calling neighbors to get to the polls, organizing candidate events – were outsourced to campaigns based far away. Politics became one more realm where professionals planned from national offices, while workers elsewhere produced and local citizens consumed. Party and candidate messaging could be slick, but face-to-face conversational fine-tuning and peer encouragement disappeared.

In 2007 and 2008, the presidential campaign of Barack Obama offered a brief counter-trend, with its focus on relational organizing. Supporters threw house parties, recruited neighbors, and took ownership. Unfortunately, the lesson many party leaders took away was not that local relationships work: it was that campaign-centric politics could work for the Democrats nationally even when things did not look so good locally. The 2012 Obama campaign was much less grassroots, and the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign doubled down on what had become the default strategy: monetize national support and parachute in for a few weeks before the election. Software spit out lists, staffers followed orders, and most of those involved lacked actual connections to the people or places at stake. Anonymous waves of volunteers knocked on targeted doors five times in two days, often sparking more hostility than support.

The Reawakening of Local Engagement

The November 2016 election of Donald Trump shocked many Americans, and across the country worried people vowed to make a difference. In record numbers, many of them sought out their local Democratic Party, only to discover that in many towns and counties no such thing exists. In many locales, the sole membership opportunities available are a handful of elected slots on ward or township committees. Too often, there is no public information about how many slots exist, when the committee meets, or if visitors are welcome at party gatherings of any sort. If someone set out to create the least-accessible version of a national organization with local chapters, today's Democratic Party in most places is what it would look like.

Newly aroused citizens did not just go away, however. In place after place during the first months of 2017, people invented the groups they had hoped to find. Issued by some former Washington DC staffers, the *Indivisible Guide* offered useful templates to help Democrats take local action. It also argued for a defensive stance and national congressional focus, advice that was only partly taken to heart by locals who quickly realized they wanted to go beyond protesting the dismantling of health reform and calling local legislative

offices. Without coordination, yet with striking consistency, groups of like-minded neighbors joined together to map out upcoming state and municipal elections and dig for information on how Democratic Party structures work. They formed subcommittees for everything from candidate recruitment to canvassing, and made local politics their problem.

Media commentary on “the Resistance” has focused on whether new groups will siphon donations away from the party, or on how far they will push the party to the left. In our views, such concerns mistake what is truly transformative in the current citizen activism. Our research, like other studies from across academia, underlines that ongoing face-to-face connection is an immensely powerful resource. Clearly, a lot of new connections are emerging across many U.S. communities. How sustainable and impactful will they be? One problem is that the newfound groups in which activists are acting largely lack the formal structures that support voice, equity, buy-in, and decision. As feminist theorist Jo Freeman observed long ago, structureless groups are not free of power dynamics: they are just not transparent about how they are resolved.

Reinhabiting the Democratic Party

Despite decades of disuse, the Democratic Party still has the bones of a membership organization. It has bylaws and rules for precinct representation, tax status and liability insurance, quorum requirements for the inevitable day when allies disagree – all of the infrastructure needed to forge diverse desires into sustained joint action locally, regionally, state-wide, and nationally. To let the grassroots in to rebuild seems a win-win on all sides. Yet, so far, national Democratic leaders do not seem to recognize the moment. Many are still fighting Bernie versus Hillary battles. Others pay lip service to local organizing, but rarely go beyond asking volunteers for help in getting “our” message out.

Welcome mat or no, the party reanimations are already under way in suburbs, exurbs, and mid-sized towns. To maximize synergies, and avoid zero-sum battles between new arrivals and existing stalwarts, we suggest key steps Democratic Party leaders can take:

- **Identify structures** for participatory opportunities and face-to-face groups – such as monthly meetings, women’s or youth groups, California-style chartered Democratic Clubs, or non-voting “Associate Member” statuses to allow all local citizens to participate.
- **Create and publicize a toolkit** with formats and procedures – such as sample bylaws, ideas for group activities and meetings, procedures for elected ward or township committees, and ways to encourage voter registration and electioneering. Provide successful examples.
- **Write a guide that can be tailored for each county party website**, explaining the elected ward structure and how to join or get involved with party activities.
- **Create a database of ongoing face-to-face groups, and a web tool through which would-be joiners can find the group nearest their home.** Make sure everyone who clicks “get involved” gets a phone call inviting them to a meeting, not just an automated fundraising email.
- **Promote collaborations between independent citizen groups and the local party.** Urge local officials and committeepersons to reach out and to partner.

Read more in Lara Putnam and Robert Putnam, "[The Real Scandal the DNC Should Avoid](#)," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2017.