LOCAL POLITICAL PARTIES AS NETWORKS

A Guide to Self-Assessment

SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

The 2020 election season offers extraordinary opportunities for local parties to welcome new members, grow their ranks, and serve as networks of civic connection. This self-assessment document provides a set of diagnostic questions to help parties to play those important roles. COVID-19 presents unprecedented challenges: contagious disease, economic crisis, and restrictions on face-to-face contact. With these realities in mind, the final section specifically addresses party-building during a time of pandemic crisis and social distancing, presenting strategies that local groups have innovated to carry forward the community-based work that is more urgent now than ever.

Leaders of local parties do critical work in American democracy. They are almost entirely volunteers, laboring without pay and largely without recognition. They operate under the severe constraints of too few people and too few dollars to accomplish everything they might hope. They—for the audience of this brief, YOU—have too few opportunities to go beyond their many responsibilities and reflect on how to make parties more effective as civic and political organizations.

The goal of this brief is to provide local party leaders with tools to assess their organization's strengths and think through where they might focus their attention as they move forward. Whether local parties are active year-round or only at election time, filled with burgeoning memberships or in search of renewal, they should find suggestions of interest in this guide. Nevertheless, it should not be taken as a laundry list of all the things a local party "should" be doing. Party activity will and should vary widely depending on available resources and community context. Instead, the questions raised are intended to help interested leaders brainstorm new ideas and tactics for bringing in new members, supporting citizen engagement, and strengthening the party for the long term.

The authors of this self-assessment guide, listed on the final page, are professors and researchers at a variety of universities across the United States. This document emerges from conversations with state and local party leaders, in the communities where we live and beyond, about their experiences as they build their organizations. We hope some of the suggestions here will be helpful to other local party members and leaders as well. Again, we seek not to overwhelm, but to celebrate your work and to offer practical suggestions to make it more effective.

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CONTENTS

BUILDING ON ASSETS

I. EXISTING RESOURCES

Consider first the assets and strengths you currently see in your party: dedicated individuals, institutional memory, resources (including physical space, voter lists, money, or volunteers), new energy, or partnerships with elected officials, national parties, or civic groups. Listing out your assets on paper may help you reflect and take stock.

- Do members of your party or leadership committee meet regularly to further the party business?

- Do you have a year-round local office, staffed by volunteers at predictable times?

- How up-to-date and detailed are your voter lists?

- What is the state of your party's finances?

- Is your website informative? Do you have an inviting presence on social media?

- What mechanisms are in place to communicate news and events to local party members and voters?

II. YOUR PEOPLE

Volunteers are the lifeblood of any party organization. New energy can be invigorating for a party organization that has clearly established how to welcome incoming members, but socializing new members into the organization takes time and effort. If there has been a recent uptick of interest in the party from new people, you might ask yourself these questions:

- Who in the party is responsible for welcoming new members? Is there a person or committee who will follow up and get to know them?

- How do you learn about new members' interests, goals, and unique experiences? How do you figure out what they can contribute to the organization?

- How readily are new members incorporated into the group? Are their ideas being listened to? Are they listening to others?

- Do you have formal or informal strategies for training volunteers in key party tasks? Do established party leaders delegate substantive tasks to experienced volunteers and mentees?

- Is there diversity among your volunteers along lines of age, gender, race, income, and occupational background?

    Tip: It may be helpful to set up a system to keep track attendance at party meetings (including both committee members and members of the public) and track

volunteer-focused events and their attendance. Clarify who is in charge of following up with new volunteers. Consider instituting formal mentorship programs to develop the leadership skills of engaged volunteers.

If there has not been an uptick in new volunteers, could the party be doing more to foster a welcoming environment? For ideas, see the section on growing the organization.

REACHING OUT TO ALLIES

I. ASSESSING EXISTING AND POTENTIAL ALLIANCES

Consider how your party fits into the ecosystem of civic and political groups in your local community.

- Who else is active within your territory? Consider:
    - Non-profit civic or issue-based organizations (e.g. environmental or gun rights groups)
    - Partisan-aligned grassroots organizations (e.g. Tea Party or Indivisible groups)
    - Organizations focused on voter registration or independent canvassing (e.g. NextGen or Americans for Prosperity)
    - Political groups at nearby colleges and universities (e.g. College Democrats or Young Republicans)
    - Unions (from regional labor councils down to individual locals) or other labor organizations and campaigns
    - Houses of worship or faith congregations

- Are there other groups on the periphery of your ecosystem that could be potential allies for certain issues or elections?

II. FORGING NEW CONNECTIONS

- Once you've identified the groups that make up your community's political ecosystem, identify the local leaders. Have you met individually with each to ask about group history, demographic and geographic reach, current priorities, long-term goals?

- Do you have a point of contact in the state party? Can someone in the state party answer questions about nitty-gritty details—e.g. party by-laws or governance requirements, state and local laws governing campaign finance and coordination with other groups?

    Tip: It might be helpful to develop a contact in a position similar to yours in another area with whom you can share information and brainstorm ideas.

- Do you have positive relationships with any local officeholders? Are there mutually beneficial alliances that could be cultivated with local elected officials?

- Bring your party leaders together to hear a report on the results of this review of the ecosystem and brainstorm what it means for your group. Given this local civic context, what are your committee's strengths? Which groups do you already have strong ties with? Whose work do you seek to complement? What things do you do that no one else does?

REACHING OUT TO VOTERS

I. EXPANDING THE ELECTORATE DURING PARTY PRIMARIES

Primaries can be important opportunities to revitalize local party life and ensure responsiveness in the electorate, but they can also contribute to polarization and dysfunction. You might ask yourself whether there are opportunities for your party to shape its primary in a positive way.

- How can the party help voters understand their choices on primary day? Does the party provide a central website with primary candidate information or platforms?

- What efforts are in place to expand voter turnout for the party primary? Is there an outreach strategy for reaching young, minority, or lower-income voters? Are there opportunities to strategize with outside groups to expand turnout in the party primary?

- Will primary candidates share a list of supporters and voters contacted with the party after the primary election?

- Do you have ideas about how to maintain the energy and activity of those who volunteered for losing primary candidates through the general election?

II. OUTREACH PRIOR TO THE GENERAL ELECTION

Precinct or neighborhood organizing programs can be an effective way to reach new voters and potential new party members, and to represent your party in your community.

- Is there a neighborhood organizing program in place that divides your county, city, or township into smaller geographic sections for electoral activity and outreach?
  - If not, what are the necessary steps to identify relevant precincts or neighborhoods and appoint local captains to each area?
  - If so, are each of the neighborhoods organized, with elected or appointed leaders? Can party members be appointed or new members recruited to manage outreach to specific localities?

- How are precinct or neighborhood organizing responsibilities divided? Roles can span various types of engagement, including data entry, logistics (planning meetings, securing transportation), or voter interaction. Orienting questions for organizing neighborhoods include:
  - Are residents registered to vote?
  - Are residents aware of voting times, locations, and election deadlines? Do they have a plan to vote and a method of transportation if needed?
  - Do residents have concerns to share with the local party or local elected officials?
  - Are they aware of the local party's platform, values, and candidates? Have they been invited to attend a party meeting or other social event?

> *Tip:* Take steps to ensure all precincts in your area are organized, with at least one person in charge of outreach in that area. Consider setting clear goals and guidelines for precinct outreach, and make contact information for precinct leaders publicly available.

- Are there other groups on the periphery of your ecosystem that could be potential allies for certain issues or elections?

  > *Tip:* It is often easier to recruit individuals through their friends, networks, and associations than as isolated individuals. Reaching younger and lower-income voters may require thinking outside of the box. Outreach strategies for hard-to-reach voters include:
  > - Face-to-face recruitment
  > - Developing ties to a diversity of political and non-political community centers (e.g. the YMCA, afterschool programs)
  > - Varying the time of day for party events or meetings
  > - Securing free childcare to help working parents attend party events

III. BALANCING NEW AND OLD FORMS OF OUTREACH

Different outreach strategies have different advantages, and people at various stages of life may be more and less accessible depending on the approach taken. Tactical variety is a smart strategy!

- How do community members find information about your local party? How do they learn about events in their neighborhood or precinct?

  > *Tip:* The ways that people learn information about your party can affect its breadth, so it may be helpful to ask people who come to meetings how they found out about them. You could also survey party-aligned voters who have never attended a meeting and ask how the party could help them get involved. Consider where they live, their age, educational background, or occupation, etc.

- Do you have a strategy for face-to-face, door-to-door outreach? Does that strategy rely on local residents or outside volunteers?

- Is your party present at festive community events, e.g., the county fair, Fourth of July parade, or annual commercial festivals hosted by local businesses?

- What technology platforms do you use for outreach and communications? What challenges or constraints do they impose? Are there other platforms or tools you should consider?

- Do you post video recordings of events or meetings so that interested folks who couldn't attend in person can access such events virtually?

GROWING AND SUSTAINING THE ORGANIZATION

I. BEING ACTIVE AND REACHING OUT – YEAR-ROUND AND OFF-CYCLE

Periods between elections are opportunities to catch up on party-building. What are your goals for this relatively "quiet" time between cycles? How do you want to grow your party organization's capacity and reach?

- Do you have a schedule of regular, publicly visible events organized year-round? How do you make them engaging, relevant, and attractive?

    Tip: Consider hosting events with current officeholders, or issue forums in partnership with other community organizations. Don't underestimate the value of a social event, as well!

- Consider opportunities for volunteers, small-dollar donors, and everyday voters to meet elected officials outside of election time.

II. CREATING CLEAR RULES AND PROCESSES

Efficient processes and institutional memory will make it easier to get things done. Knowing the rules—both formal and informal—saves time and reduces conflict.

- Are local party committee by-laws and mission statements up-t0-date? Do they accurately reflect the current party organizational structure?

- Are officer elections held on a regular, predictable basis and open to all eligible participants? Are key leadership posts (e.g. Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer) filled by active leaders?

- Do party leaders invite newer members to exercise meaningful responsibilities? Do you have party officers with institutional memory, and is there a method, formal or informal, to preserve valuable institutional knowledge?

    Tip: It is generally good practice for an organization to have a balance of more seasoned officers with institutional memory and newer officers who can provide fresh energy and perspectives.

- Does the local party meet sufficiently regularly to develop a commitment to norms and procedures? Do your meetings combine regular party business, led by officers, with an agenda that is more broadly engaging? Do you have a process to welcome new faces to your meetings?

    Tip: Many county or city/township parties hold monthly public meetings to which all are welcome. In smaller places or where partisans are in a minority, parties may prefer

9

to gather every two or three months. Be aware that the meeting time may influence who can attend.

- Are there sub-committees or task forces to distribute the party's workload? If so, are there clear expectations about how subgroups will report back to the larger party committee?

- Is there a non-public, informal handbook in which ongoing officers keep track of annual cycle to-dos, internal policies, and key communications infrastructures?

    Tip: If not, create one. It will save time and be a great asset for the future.

III. DEVELOPING PROCESSES TO SHARE IDEAS AND MANAGE CONFLICT

- Sometimes the goal of group discussion is to brainstorm, in which case leaders want to make sure all participants are comfortable sharing their ideas. Other times the goal is to come to a resolution, in which case leaders may need to manage conflict. These goals require very different leadership techniques. Does the group have processes in place for each? Is there space for civil disagreement among party regulars with different priorities?

    Tip: If the goal is to brainstorm, then having people with diverse knowledge, experiences, and priorities in the room is essential. In group discussions, those with higher status speak more and have their ideas taken more seriously. Active steps are needed to counter this pattern, so that a broader range of people feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. Engage in role *assignment* by explicitly identifying some of the relevant information and experiences that group members have to contribute. This encourages people to speak up and share it in their own words.

- Disagreement and debate among members of the same party is normal, even expected! When conflict arises, and if leaders believe several conflicting viewpoints are legitimate, they should seek to engage rather than suppress discussion. Suppressing it just makes it bleed over into other activities and conversations.

    Tip: If the goal is to work toward a decision, then interpersonal conflict may not be avoidable. Decide in advance how much consensus you really want. Be wary of framing group discussions as "reaching for unanimity", as participants are far less likely to share unique information and experiences if they worry that doing so will "break" unanimity.

- Managing conflict is not easy and not always successful. Sometimes "agreeing to disagree" is the best that can be hoped for. Whatever path you take, leaders should make sure to focus organizational activity on things that all or most members can agree upon—like building membership rolls or planning visible community events.

    Tip: Deepening personal relationships with one another—through structured action, and through informal personal interactions—can help groups handle strongly-felt differences more effectively, and resume work more smoothly after hard decisions.

10

IV. CANDIDATE RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

- Does your party recruit candidates for office? Does the party have strategies for creating a diverse and representative candidate slate, with candidates of different genders, ages, experiences, and backgrounds? What skills and connections can the party offer to new candidates?

- What groups or connected individuals outside your usual networks have you asked about candidate recruitment? Do you introduce candidates to potential funders?

- Can you help party candidates understand public opinion in their district and hear from a representative set of stakeholders?

- What are your formal policies around incumbents and challengers?

  > *Tip:* A strong and diverse pipeline with multiple points of entry is crucial to long-term party health. If your party has a firm practice of supporting incumbents, is it also supportive of *other* routes through which potential future candidates can find training, guidance, and encouragement?

- How do you balance the needs of multiple candidates and ensure the party supports all its candidates, and not just a single official?

V. STRATEGIES FOR FUNDING YOUR WORK

Fundraising is a necessary and sometimes daunting party function. Some fundraising tactics can be fun and make the party more connected and engaged with its members. In fact, building participation can go hand in hand with building fundraising. Active volunteers usually become *more* willing not only to commit their talent and time, but also to contribute funding.

- Have you established a workable and effective system for ensuring full compliance with campaign finance laws?

- Do you keep track of donors—including small-dollar donors—and their giving history? Do you have a process for expressing thanks to donors at all levels?

- Do you have a reliable online payment system for collecting contributions? Is the system easily accessible by most potential contributors? Are there multiple donation opportunities for contributors with various levels of tech familiarity?

- Does the party operate a grassroots donor program? This may include both modest monthly contributions and well-timed solicitations for small-dollar contributions specific to individual tasks, such as providing water bottles and lunch for volunteer canvassers.

- Is there a regular, large-scale, high-dollar fundraising event that provides face time with candidates or elected officials? This often takes the form of an annual dinner or gala with a featured guest speaker.

  > *Tip:* Encourage candidates and office holders to invite volunteers and small-dollar donors to special events. This may be an effective and meaningful way to show donors that their voices and labor, not just their money, matters.

11

PARTY-BUILDING AMID COVID-19

We are facing an unprecedented medical and economic crisis, which presents a critical moment for political response. And yet this same crisis also constrains many of the outreach and organizing techniques that volunteer leaders rely on, such as door-to-door canvassing, public protest, town halls and other meetings.

National advocacy groups have emphasized the adoption of digital tools for "distributed" political communication, such as texting apps that allow volunteers to log in from anywhere and click through a list of voters and share information about mail-in ballot requests. Those tools have their place, but there is also much work to be done forging connections in your community—and local party groups like yours have an essential role to play in it.

You are part of your communities, and responsible to them. There is no need for a false division between your political mission and your service mission, as the two are inherently interconnected. In this time of crisis, you should reach out to check in with your own committee-members and your community members more broadly, and connect those in need to resources that can help.

As states and regions shift between different alert levels over the coming months, it will be crucial to strengthen your ability to communicate through a mix of channels and techniques so that you remain connected to committee members and constituents who are at higher risk and whose isolation will extend even when restrictions abate.

Here are some of the key tactics we have seen local party organizations begin to implement:

- Monthly videoconference meetings among your core membership for continuity and planning

- Phone trees for wellness check-ins and sharing election information (these can be used to reach out to all members of your committee: or can be even more ambitious, using your committee-members to reach out to voters in their districts)

- Online meet-ups open to the public, sometimes with candidates or others as guest speakers, for information and capacity-building

- Volunteer phone-banks for candidate support

I. TAKING CARE OF YOUR COMMITTEE AND COMMUNITY

Support each other within your group. Some will be at high risk due to age, others because they are health professionals or other essential workers. Put together a group-care task-force that can make calls to each of your members to ask what their needs are. Figure out what the consolidated regional resource point is (in many places, a United Way hotline serves this role). Connecting people to reliable resources is better than trying to improvise unreliable ones yourself. But also follow up to make sure those resources really did turn out to be reliable.

Set up a system of regular phone check-ins on residents within your districts. Connect them with food drop-offs (or provide them if you can consistently do so). Even simply providing human contact can protect against the emotional cost of isolation. Civic groups including neighborhood associations, churches and synagogues, food banks, and local associations for the aging are hurrying to set up such systems. Find out who else is doing this work locally and partner with them, or coordinate so you cover areas they aren't reaching.

II. TECHNOLOGY AND CONNECTION

Your members will have different levels of comfort with and access to technology. These differences are necessarily going to impact participation and group dynamics. Members may lack access to laptop computers or high-speed internet, or may already be struggling to manage communications from schools, work, and more on smartphones with limited data plans. The telephone call, by contrast, is a technology with which almost everyone will be comfortable.

Video-conference meetings are working well for those groups that have many members who are already using the online platforms daily in their work now. But when some participants are comfortably joining from their laptops, and others are dialing in from cell phones without the ability to see chat messages or links, virtual meetings can reinforce communication gaps along existing divides of wealth, age, or race in damaging ways.

One way you can work actively against this is by ramping up one-on-one phone conversations between leaders and key members as a supplement to whole-group virtual meetings.

Another key tactic is to set up phone trees that echo the lines of existing structures—that is, you mail a volunteer a list of ten people within their precinct to call, and have them report back to you when they've done so. Moreover, have it be the same individual calling those same ten people every time for the next few months. Phone trees can achieve dual goals—*both* serving as well-being check-ins and sharing information about upcoming elections, such as changed primary dates, mail-in ballot steps, and so on. Political groups and electoral campaigns have found that, in our current moment, it feels very organic to do both tasks hand-in-hand, and that it feels inappropriate to reach out *just* about politics without foregrounding the question "Are you okay?"—and being prepared to point people to concrete local resources if the answer is no.

We conclude by emphasizing our core theme amid changed circumstances: building personal relationships is central to political organizing now as much as ever, and at a time of physical isolation those connections are also crucial to emotional well-being and to resilience for our communities.

We thank all the local party leaders, too many to name, who generously answered questions and read drafts as we worked on this brief. We hope that this guide has been helpful and would like to hear from you with your stories and questions.

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