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training & coaching

*Helping organizations achieve their goals
through recruiting and motivating others*

Organizer's Edge ▶

Greetings!
On Electoral Politics
-- Mike Miller*

As did the Ronald Reagan presidential election victory in 1980, so the Donald Trump victory in 2016 is forcing many organizers to examine or re-examine their views on electoral politics. I would like to propose a context for this thinking.



Mike Miller

Consider these propositions:

Political parties tend to be run by politicians who have a deep interest in controlling them. Thus “member-run political parties” tends to be a contradiction in terms. International experience in countries with democratic elections and competing political parties, as well as that in the U.S., confirms this.

Politicians tend to have an interest in moving up to higher offices. Thus they have in mind two constituencies—the one that elected them to a current office, and one that they hope will elect them to a higher office. Further, their eyes are focused not only on voters but on who will pay for election campaigns: the more campaigns are dependent on media, the greater the influence on them of money.

What conclusion should community and labor organizers draw? For me, at least these:

Electing a candidate should make a difference, even if it is a marginal one, and you have to hold your nose to vote for the lesser-of-two-evils. The lives of real people are at stake; so is the character of the courts to which elected politicians make appointments. We don't have the luxury of Olympian Heights contempt for both major political parties—however much deserved.

Organizers, leaders and activists should ask themselves what they can *build* in their own organization, as well as what can be won by electing a candidate. “Builds” include a range of competencies that leaders, activists and members might acquire or further develop; increased self-confidence gained

by their presence; recruiting new members, and; recognition as an organization that can deliver people. The way to change the character of the country's politics is to build people power organizations. Electing good politicians, no matter how good they are, is insufficient. Real democracy requires a strong, voluntary, civil society.

Don't simply turn "your people" over to the candidate's campaign organization. Take a task as *an organization* for which you will be responsible. That could be as simple as having a specific day and time when your people are going to staff a phone bank or do door-to-door work, or it could be something more complicated demanding a greater level of commitment.

As you would do in your other activities, build these into the process so that your people learn, grow and gain recognition in the experience:

- Evaluate, interpret and educate: after an outing in the electoral arena, gather the people who participated and have a discussion on what was done and not done, and how those things look in the light of what you planned to do. The most basic of these is turnout: who did what, and were goals met. But there are lots of other things to evaluate. Interpretation gives meaning to what might otherwise seem mundane activities, like knocking on doors or making phone calls. And education looks at a wider picture, placing activities in the context of the ideas and forces at work in the country.
- Reflect: connect the mundane to the core values for which you stand. Making this connection deepens the meaning of action for those who participate in it.
- Celebrate those who did what they said they were going to do and whatever other contributions they made, beginning with the people who showed up, and including those who brought or recruited them.

Whether you look at Francois Mitterrand in France, Syriza in Greece, and certainly Obama in the U.S., promises made before the elections were not kept after the politicians got elected. Across the globe, in the world of formally democratic countries, this consistent lesson can be drawn: *without strong, mass-based, "bottom-up", paid for by their members, organizations that exist outside the framework of political parties and elections, the interests and small "d" democratic values of the great majority of the people will not best be served.*

I don't think we sufficiently applied these ideas in the post-Reagan era. As a result, we ended up with a sometimes slow, sometimes fast, but at whichever speed continuing drift toward concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an ever-fewer number of people, disastrous foreign policy decisions and unchecked empire, ecological disaster, and "neo-liberal" economics. We need to do better next time around.

*Mike Miller was a leader in the pre-1960s birth of the student movement at UC Berkeley, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee field secretary from 1962-end of 1966, and director of a Saul Alinsky community organizing project. He directs ORGANIZE Training Center <www.organizetrainingcenter.org>. He taught community organizing at UC Berkeley, Stanford, Notre Dame, Lone Mountain, San Francisco State, University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee, and Hayward State. His books are, *The People Fight Back: Building a Tenant Union*, *A Community Organizer's Tale: People and Power in San Francisco*,

People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky, and Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction. He has written numerous articles on labor and community organizing, politics and related fields.

Feedback Welcome

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Who else you will hear from.....

We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Jessica Tang: Boston Teachers Union, AFT
George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,
Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,
Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,
Caesar McDowell of the Interaction Institute for Social Justice,
Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,
David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,
Attica Scott, State Rep Louisville, Kentucky
Bob Van Meter with the Local Initiative Support Corporation in Boston,
Walter Davis, of the Tennessee, Health Care Coalition.
Debra Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,
Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,
Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,
Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,
Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles
and others, hopefully, including YOU

Other Useful Links

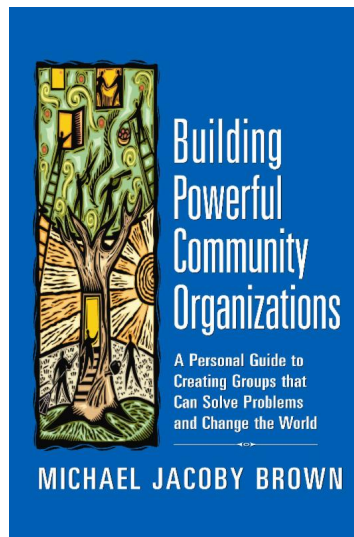
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