

# GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

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## Building Political Power

*“Power is the ability to achieve a purpose.  
Whether or not it is good or bad depends upon  
the purpose.”*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to help us think about our work through the lens of building political power, in particular the kinds of power we need to build and exercise in order to reach our broader social justice goals. The paper uses the “3 faces of power” framework as a tool for this examination. Most organizers and leaders deal regularly with the realities that are described by these terms. The purpose of giving distinct names to those realities is to help us make choices about how we allocate our time and energy, to help us be more strategic.

### The Three Faces of Power

Our analysis of power is based on a conceptual framework called the *3 faces of power*. The 3 faces of power are: 1) direct political involvement; 2) organizational infrastructure; and 3) ideology and worldview. We use this framework for critical analysis and evaluation of groups’ activities and areas of work: issue campaigns, relationships among coalition partners, electoral work, and re-framing issues in a larger worldview context. For some groups, building progressive power requires shifting time and resources from the 1<sup>st</sup> face into work more connected to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> faces of power.

### The 1<sup>st</sup> face of power: Direct Political Involvement

Groups often think of power in society in terms of shaping the results of political decision-making and electing law-makers and leaders: policies, laws, rulings and

decisions made by public officials, legislators, and members of the executive and judicial branches of government. Progressive groups are attempting to exercise power in the 1<sup>st</sup> face when they lobby for bills or fight against bad laws, register voters, hold accountability sessions with public officials, and are involved in activities connected with day-to-day politics.

When asked why he robbed banks, Willie Sutton replied, “Because that’s where the money is!” Likewise, social change organizations spend a great deal of time responding to and attempting to influence decisions made in these 1<sup>st</sup> face arenas because, well, that appears to be where the power is. Gaining access to the arenas where decisions are made is very important. But it can be all consuming. It can keep us focused on the short-term, on this election and this legislative session. It can divide and fragment us into disparate issue groups, each reacting to the immediate challenges in its issue area. Even multi-issue groups fragment their work, as it is often an effective way to organize in the short run. The downside of working in a fragmented way is not always obvious.

Power dynamics in the visible decision-making arenas often are described as being like a game. There are players and there are rules. A popular assumption about the way power works in a democracy is that anyone can get into the game as long as they play by the rules. The players represent competing interests that come together on equal ground in the political process. This is sometimes described as a *pluralist* view of power and decision-making. The trouble with this analysis of power is that it assumes the rules are fair and that the playing field is more or less level. It overlooks all the unacknowledged rules that tend to reinforce the structures of power that shape our society; this means that many groups in society have little or no access at all. To better understand how power operates to keep so many people out of the game, we need to look at power’s other faces.

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Face of Power: Developing Infrastructure

Behind-the-scenes forces exercise their power to shape and constrain the political agenda. Organizations create formal and informal networks to wield power. Coalitions, trade associations, overlapping boards, and country club memberships are ways of building ties between organizations to pursue common goals. We use the term *political infrastructure* to indicate the most developed and coherent networks of organizations, with implicit or explicit goals that go beyond the immediate interests of the member organizations.

**Power in civil society.** Just how do these behind-the-scenes forces exercise their power to shape and constrain the political agenda? They usually do it through organized networks. The arenas through which similar interests come together and develop strategies for shaping and constraining agendas exist in civil society—outside of, though very much linked to, government and politics. Corporations, trade unions, think tanks, universities, media, religious groups and other organizations try to influence what is on the political agenda.

**Political infrastructure.** The American Heritage Dictionary defines *infrastructure* as the underlying foundation for a system. It is telling that the example they use is the conservative infrastructure in this country. We would argue that it is actually a corporate and conservative infrastructure, given the centrality of corporations in this network. The corporate-conservative infrastructure consists of a loosely coordinated and overlapping network of organizations operating at national, state and local levels. Some of the more prominent organizations include the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Christian Coalition and conservative denominations; the anti-abortion groups, the NRA; think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, and much of the Republican Party.

The corporate-conservative infrastructure has exercised power to shift the political agenda to the right for decades. They nurture new issues and develop them to the point where they can be brought into the political arena. They try to keep other issues off the agenda, such as single payer health insurance or labor law reform.

While there are thousands of progressive organizations and coalitions and networks, it is harder to identify something we could call a progressive infrastructure. The potential is there: the trade unions, liberal denominations and religious groups, thousands of groups organizing at the state and local level, and liberal-progressive national

issue organizations. But this infrastructure is much less cohesive, less coordinated, and less powerful than the corporate-conservative infrastructure.

A powerful progressive infrastructure would be more than a list of issue- and constituency-based organizations. It would consist of inter-connected alliances and networks with a shared strategic orientation. It would represent diverse constituencies and issues that can impact state, regional and national politics. Here are some examples of using the second face of power for social change:

- | Building sustained membership involvement and organizing people for collective action.
- | Developing grassroots leaders who can guide our organizations and alliances.
- | Identifying and developing candidates for public office.
- | Building and maintaining coalitions, alliances, and other forms of collaboration.
- | Bringing in new constituencies to help develop and support a bold, new progressive agenda that unites different issues.
- | Engaging in year-round electoral work

To strengthen progressive infrastructure, organizations in statewide, regional and national networks could begin to discuss long-term strategic goals, and share their work on developing progressive worldview and progressive agendas. Agreeing on a progressive agenda does not mean that any one organization is engaged in immediate struggles around all the elements of the agenda, or even that it is formally adopted.

Another way to shift toward building an infrastructure is to involve the members at the bases of the participating organizations more directly in the coalitions. Imagine meetings attended by grassroots members of unions, community groups, social justice organizations, and churches. Further, imagine that these meetings became places where coalition agendas and priorities are debated and acted upon. The coalition could provide a way for an organization to be able to work on its immediate issues and also participate in other struggles.

One other critical role for a progressive infrastructure is bringing in new groupings of people, based on a progressive agenda that offers people who are currently left out of the political arena significant reasons to participate. This is one important way to bring people together across identities: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and more.

## The 3<sup>rd</sup> Face of Power: Ideology and Worldview

*"Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."*

Abraham Lincoln

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Dominant power relations are maintained through the power to shape people's understandings of the world in ways that prevent them from asking questions or seeing any possibilities for change. This kind of power operates in the arena of worldview, culture, myths, stereotypes and values. It is exercised in part through control of the institutions that shape and create meaning: religious institutions, the media, television, mass consumer culture, popular ideas about government and about workers and bosses, etc.

For our organizations, the third face is about using cultural beliefs, norms, traditions, histories, faith traditions and practices to shape political meaning. We do this by connecting our issues to the larger context of worldview, or the ways that people understand the world around them, their roles in the world, and what they see as possible.

Many different ideas and belief systems in our society compete for attention. For example, belief in individualism and the free-market system are very pervasive the United States. This does not mean that everyone blindly accepts everything that is said about individualism and the market, but these ideas play a role in shaping how people behave toward and understand many political and economic issues. Contrasting beliefs about inter-dependence, community and cooperation compete for peoples' attention, as well. Despite these competing beliefs, there is a set of beliefs and conceptions about the world that we can identify as the **dominant worldview**. The dominant worldview provides the context for the problems and issues that we are struggling with. When we confront powerful institutions and challenge decision-makers, we also are confronting the ideas and assumptions in society that support the status quo.

Conservatives have been very successful at building power on the terrain of worldview. They draw upon themes that shift the dominant worldview to the right. The core themes they use in their issue frames and political narratives are: rugged individualism, competition and market fundamentalism, and a minimalist role for government. Appeals to race-based identities, racial resentments and, especially, notions of white supremacy often are

woven through these themes to create a 'chain of meaning.' Other inter-lacing themes include gender and family, sexual orientation, notions about equality and class, patriotism and militarism.

To build power at all levels, we need to challenge the dominant worldview and frame our issues to reflect our broader goals for social change.

**Ideas and Powerlessness.** If we look only at the way power operates along the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> faces, we will focus on groups that are already in the game, and on their attempts to influence the decision-makers. However, if we look at the 3<sup>rd</sup> face of power—the power to keep people from seeing themselves as agents of change, or to even believe that change is possible—then non-action and non-participation become much more important problems. Non-participation breeds a greater sense of powerlessness, making participation by oppressed groups even less likely. This is corrosive to democracy, and greatly limits the abilities of diverse groups to participate in making history.

Status quo power relations are reinforced by the fact that most of us experience powerlessness as part of everyday life. The experience of being shut out of decision-making processes gets internalized and understood as the 'natural state' of things. Consider the following reflections on powerlessness from Adrienne Rich:

*"When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard."*

**Overcoming powerlessness.** An individual's sense of powerlessness is reinforced by the experience of social isolation. Too often, people who are disaffected from political and economic decision-making have no spaces in which to come together, think and discuss and struggle together to articulate their grievances into a set of demands.

In spite of the historical imbalance of power in this country and corporate power over decision-making, agenda setting and meaning, we have a rich history of

resistance. Social change groups organizing in diverse communities and workplaces give people a place to act together, reflect on their actions, engage in collective analysis, and challenge the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> faces of power with new ideas and experiences.

## **Conclusions: Using the 3 Faces of Power**

We are suggesting that progressive organizations need to shift resources into the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> faces of power, and shift from primarily short-term strategies to linking short-term to long-term strategies. We talk about this in terms of making a series of strategic shifts:

- | from messages to shifting worldview
- | from issue campaigns to a progressive agenda
- | from weak links between organizations to building infrastructure
- | from mobilizing for candidates to using the electoral arena to build power
- | from diversity to anti-racism
- | from organizational cultures focused on short-term effectiveness to democratic organizational cultures that empower and develop all the people involved.

Organizational change is difficult, it takes patience and time. Change can happen through dynamic processes for incorporating into a larger strategy all the elements of what organizations do in the course of working to achieve their social change missions: their campaign and issue work, organizing, member and leader development, staff development, fundraising, participating in coalitions, electoral work, etc.

We hope that the “3 faces of power” framework embodies Kurt Lewin’s aphorism: “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” Like good popular education, a dynamic theory doesn’t tell people what to do or think, but it does help them figure out what they know as well as what they’d like to understand better. It gives people tools and frameworks for discovering, synthesizing, evaluating and rediscovering things about the social and political contexts in which they are working, and to engage in collective analysis and planning. n

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