

Organizing at Scale: Reinvesting in Functional Organizing

Prepared By Peter Murray – February, 2012

The Challenge

How can we organize at scale for social change?

We are consistently out-organized by conservative business and social forces.

The decline of union membership and liberal church attendance has crippled the largest progressive organizing institutions.

The confluence of rapid globalization, rising corporate power, global climate change, and increasing economic segregation creates a critical challenge: how can we organize at scale for social justice and progressive change? **How can we build progressive institutions that engage and build trusted, long-term relationships with millions of Americans?**

Today, progressive organizations are too often out-funded and out-organized at national, state, and local levels by conservative business and social forces. Across the country, conservatives are slashing public services, loosening already weak business regulations, and launching attacks on the rights of workers, immigrants, LGBT individuals, and women. And even the policy advances that we have secured, such as healthcare reform and financial reform, have been tempered by significant compromises with business interests and conservative institutions.

The reality is that we simply do not have the large-scale progressive institutions that we need to spearhead policy change and hold elected officials accountable. **Labor unions and liberal churches, the two major base-building institutions that fueled the major progressive advances of the past century, have been in steady membership decline for thirty years.** From worker rights to the New Deal to civil rights, labor unions and churches have been the people-powered engines of our movements. But over the past thirty years, the percentage of Americans who are union members has been cut almost in half,¹ and the increasing secularization of liberals² has steadily eroded the membership of liberal churches.

The declining memberships of unions and liberal churches creates a critical need to develop new models for rebuilding our base and organizing at scale.

The Power of Functional Organizing

The largest institutions in the country share the same model: functional organizing

Functional organizing fuels all of the largest institutions on the left: unions, churches, Planned Parenthood, and the Sierra Club

The largest membership organizations in the country all share the same organizing model: functional organizing. Functional organizations attract members with benefits and services and then build on this base to advocate for their members.³

From churches to AARP to professional associations to YMCAs to labor unions to 4-H clubs to business associations, all of the major membership organizations in the country are functional organizations—providing key material and social benefits for members, whether that be discounts from AARP, the spiritual fellowship of a church, the business services of a local chamber of commerce, or the benefits and collective bargaining of labor unions.

Tellingly, the largest institutions on the left are those that utilize functional organizing.

- Fifteen million workers belong to unions that provide better wages, benefits, and worker protections for their members and then activate them for political and advocacy efforts.
- Eight million self-described liberals attend church regularly to be a part of a spiritual and social community.
- Planned Parenthood provides reproductive health services and education to five million women each year through 825 health centers across the country.
- The Sierra Club runs hiking clubs and regular outings, and then activates their million plus members into a powerful political voice for the environment.

¹ From over 20% in the early 1980's to just 12.3% in 2009. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009.

² By 2009, nearly twice as many church-goers identify as conservative than identify as liberal. Pew Forum, 2009.

³ Academics have traditionally used the terms "utilitarian" (material benefit) & "solidary" (social benefit) organizing. Clark & Wilson 1961. I use the new "functional" organizing frame to encompass both of social and material benefits.

The left has come to rely too heavily on issue organizations that face inherent limitations in scope and scale.

Amidst the steady decline of union membership and liberal church attendance, the left has tried to rebuild our base with issue organizing. However, although issue organizations play an important role in advancing focused policy agendas, they are inherently limited in scope and scale.

Issue organizations start with the assumption that people will join institutions because they care about the issues and want to “get political.” But **most Americans simply don’t have the time, energy, or money to dedicate to purely political pursuits**—most people are too focused on taking care of their daily needs. As a result, issue organizations very rarely grow to engage more than a few hundred thousand members.

In order to rebuild our base and engage tens of millions of Americans, the progressive movement needs to reinvest in functional organizing and respond to the daily needs of Americans.

Advantages of Functional Organizing

Functional organizing creates long-term, deep relationships with members and generates sustainable revenue streams

Functional organizing offers several key advantages over issue organizing:

1. **Scale** – by supporting people’s daily needs, functional organizations can tap into broader networks of Americans who may not otherwise be drawn to political organizing.
2. **Deep Member Engagement** – members are consistently engaged in the organization’s activities; from church masses to NRA hunting outings to business networking events to union hall socials, functional organizations have regular opportunities to engage members.
3. **Financial Sustainability** – by providing benefits and services that members need, functional organizations create revenue streams for sustaining and growing their organization.

There are clearly limitations to functional organizing as well. Functional organizations rarely have the same ideological coherence as issue groups and can struggle to activate their members for political and policy objectives. Consequently, many of the most effective functional organizations are those that find a tight connection between the services they provide and the issues they advocate for (e.g. the NRA, Planned Parenthood, and labor unions).

Progressive identity-based organizations are particularly well positioned to incorporate functional organizing efforts by offering benefits and services to members. However identity organizations rarely receive the long-term investments needed to build sustainable services and benefits models.

The Conservative Base

Conservative successes in policy-making and politics are driven by three forces: business associations, conservative churches, and gun clubs

Conservative success in politics and policy-making is driven and funded by a powerful triumvirate:

1. Business interests led by the Chambers of Commerce;
2. Conservative church networks spearheaded by Focus on the Family; and
3. Gun clubs fueled by the National Rifle Association.

Business interests swamp all other spending on lobbying and political campaigns. In 2009, various business sectors combined spent \$2.9B on federal lobbying while labor unions spent just \$44M and all ideological groups combined spent only \$156M. On the political contributions side, business accounted for 75% of contributions in the 2010 cycle, while labor accounted for only 4% and all ideological groups combined accounted for just 7%.⁴

Just as critical to conservatives’ success as the deep pockets of business, though, is the huge base of citizens that conservatives cultivate and activate through business associations, churches, and gun clubs. The almost four million members of the NRA block even the most basic gun control legislation, regardless of the party in power. Conservative Christian groups organize the millions of members of conservative churches in order to keep social issues at the center of political debate.

⁴ Open Secrets, 2010.

And business associations for every segment of the corporate world organize business leaders and advance their agendas at local, state, and national levels.

These conservative institutions are all functional organizations: providing tangible, critical benefits to their members before engaging them in politics

These conservative base-building institutions all rely on functional organizing—providing valuable benefits to members first and then activating them for political purposes. Industry associations have build powerful networks of business leaders by offering group benefits and services and facilitating valuable networking. The NRA has attracted nearly four million members through conferences, magazines, hunting outings, and member benefits.⁵ And conservative churches are growing rapidly by becoming full-service functional organizations with babysitting, youth groups, bands, summer camps, sports leagues, and private schools.

Functional organizing is what makes conservative base institutions so large, dynamic, and well-funded. Functional organizing also facilitates deep relationships with members—these institutions engage members dozens of times each year, providing ample opportunity for politicization.

Conservatives have launched effective campaigns to undermine our base institutions

Conservatives fully understand the power of functional organizing. That is why they have launched sophisticated campaigns to restrict union organizing, defund ACORN, and isolate Planned Parenthood, striking at the heart of key progressive functional organizing institutions.⁶

The Elements of Effective Functional Organizing

The key to functional organizing is that individuals become members in order to gain access to benefits or services that fill a critical need in their lives.

Not all functional organizations, however, have outsized policy influence. Some never grow to scale because their benefits serve a niche market. Others do not have the ability to deeply influence their members politically.

The foundation of every functional organization is a set of benefits and services that fill a critical need in people's lives.

There are four core characteristics of high-impact, large-scale functional organizations:

1. **Filling a Scaled Market Need** – effectively fills a critical market need that millions of people have in common; for example, the AARP discount card, YMCA health and fitness centers, and Planned Parenthood women's health services.
2. **A Revenue Engine** – a core business model that generates significant revenue from each member through membership dues, donations, or revenue from services and advertising.
3. **A Trusted Relationship with Members** – builds a trusted relationship through community, services, and information; examples include the NRA Magazine, church sermons, and union member-to-member political advocacy.
4. **Common Interests in Membership** – some common connection between members that the organization can speak to and advocate for in the policy arena.

Effective functional organizing must develop long-term, trusted relationships with members.

Functional organizations often operate much like businesses with clear bottom-line profit goals and a focus on growth. This approach can create challenges and conflicts of interest for effective advocacy, but these business models have driven the growth of our nation's largest institutions.

Progressive Functional Organizing Opportunities

There are a wide range of possible opportunities to use functional organizing within new and existing progressive organizations.

A number of functional organizing efforts have emerged in recent years to engage low-income Americans, such as local worker centers, tenant organizations, day laborer associations, and

⁵ One member benefit of the NRA is thousands of dollars of accidental death & dismemberment coverage and firearm insurance.

⁶ See Ilyse Hogue's March, 2011 article in *The Nation*, *Why the Right Attacked Unions, ACORN and Planned Parenthood*

domestic worker alliances. However, these efforts are deeply undercapitalized with little investment from funders to expand benefits and services that are crucial for membership growth.

There are a number of opportunities to launch new functional organizing initiatives that have the potential to grow to scale and transform policy-making, including:

- **A New Americans Association:** creating an association providing immigrants with services ranging from discounts on remittances (a multi-billion dollar market), to assistance and financing for naturalization processes, to English classes, to job networks.
- **A National Parents Association:** creating a national parents association that provides health, financial, and childcare benefits, discounts, and community support to parents across the country—an opportunity to organize tens of millions of parents across the country to advance equal opportunity for all children and families.
- **A “Good” Bank:** creating a bank (larger potential scale than credit unions) serving the interests of depositors and customers first that can be a progressive financial policy voice.
- **Nonprofit Newspapers:** buying local newspapers and turning them into nonprofits using models similar to local public radio with individual, corporate, and foundation donors.
- **Local Food Networks:** employer-based CSAs that provide weekly farm shares to employees creating opportunities to organize around food and environment issues.
- **Student Networks:** creating online communities for every college and university inside of Facebook where students can share, connect, and get information and resources.
- **Online Social Networks:** creating apps on Facebook to enable progressive organizations and networks to effectively organize on the world’s largest social network.

A range of leaders and organizations are advancing these ideas, which are in varying stages of development ranging from basic ideation to feasibility analysis to pilot preparation. In order to advance new organizing models, it is critical to fund market testing and pilots of these ideas.

Additionally, most existing progressive organizations have revenue-generating functional organizing opportunities that they haven’t tapped. From financial services to health information to insurance pooling to worker services to childcare and family supports, local and regional organizations have a wide range of opportunities to provide and broker critical services for constituents.

What is Needed Now

Reinvigorating the movement’s base building efforts will require:

- 1) A small group of key funders and movement leaders working together to **deepen our understanding of models for organizing at scale**
- 2) A core group of funders who are willing to **invest in early market research and piloting** of functional organizing initiatives
- 3) A **for-profit venture fund** for revenue generating organizing efforts
- 4) A wide range of **social entrepreneurs** developing new functional organizing initiatives
- 5) **Online social networking tools** that enable organizations to more effectively organize online (which will be crucial to rapidly scaling functional organizing efforts)
- 6) **Existing progressive organizations** willing to test new functional organizing initiatives

This memo was prepared by Peter Murray, President of the Center for Progressive Leadership (CPL). At CPL, Mr. Murray has overseen the training and coaching of over 6,000 progressive candidates, elected officials, policy leaders, nonprofit staff, union leaders, and local organizers since 2004. Prior to CPL, Mr. Murray was President of the Empowerment Group, an entrepreneurship training and incubation center in Philadelphia.