

## *Chapter 1*

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# Starting Out Right: Preparation and Planning

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- ▶ Understand your role.
- ▶ Get ready for hard work and fun.
- ▶ Know that successful campaigns are smart and strategic from the start.
- ▶ Write a plan.
- ▶ Know the components of a plan.
- ▶ Avoid common mistakes.

## Starting Out Right: Preparation and Planning

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, you will find practical, hands-on tools for people who want to elect progressive candidates, run for office themselves, or take action in their communities on issues that concern them. The first step in that process is to take a long view of your goals and objectives. What is it that you want to accomplish by being engaged in political action? What are the problems that you see, and how can you take action to remedy those problems? Do you volunteer for an organization? Lead an organizing drive? Work on an electoral campaign that you believe in? Are you running for office yourself? These are the fundamental questions that everyone, regardless of their experience or background, should ask before taking political action. People can engage in politics in all sorts of ways and at many levels. You are probably reading this book because at a minimum, you have decided to do *something*. You have made a choice to act.

This book was written with three groups of people in mind: those who want to work on an electoral campaign as a staff member or volunteer, those who want to work on an issue-based campaign or organizing drive, and those who want to run for office themselves. As mentioned earlier, we use the word *campaign* to connote both electoral campaigns and issue campaigns. We assume that if you are reading this book, you are getting ready to embark on or are already in the midst of a campaign. With that in mind, we encourage you to think carefully about why you want to take action, what you want to accomplish, and how you can prepare yourself for what you are getting into.

As progressives who believe strongly in the importance of participatory democracy and giving citizens a voice in the political process, you should understand one reality before embarking on campaign work: campaigns require enormous planning.

focus, discipline, and organization. Decisions need to be made quickly and decisively. Each part of a campaign has a unique and important role—from fundraising to field operations to communications—and they cannot function as a cohesive unit unless the campaign's leadership has control of the decision-making process.

This can be a frustrating experience for many people. Volunteers and staff on a campaign might wonder why the campaign made certain decisions and may question the judgment of the campaign leadership. While these concerns may be legitimate, it seriously corrodes campaign morale, unity, and cohesiveness when questions turn into grievances and complaints. This won't happen if the campaign leadership establishes a well-run operation. The leadership must communicate often with staff and volunteers and foster a sense of shared purpose and mission. They need to make people feel that their participation on the campaign matters and is appreciated, and they need to give the campaign staff and volunteers the tools to do their jobs as well as they can. However, that is different from giving each member of the campaign an equal voice in the decision-making process. Before starting on a campaign, be prepared to have fun, work hard, and play a critical role in the success of the campaign. But unless you are a candidate or a campaign manager, understand that you might not have an input in the decision-making process.

In addition to understanding your role on a campaign, you should know that successful progressive campaigns require being smart and strategic from the very beginning. You might be involved in a campaign because you want to change the world (we all do!), but the campaign will succeed only if it has a clear understanding of what it is trying to accomplish and why, and is prepared to make difficult decisions about time and resource management. In other words, a campaign cannot be all things to all people. It needs focus and clear direction, even if that means not talking about some very important issues. We have seen too many campaigns give in to the temptation of trying to take on every issue, only to end up having a diluted message and disorganized field operation.

If you plan on running for office yourself, you need to be totally prepared for what you are getting into. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- ▶ Do you have a sense of how much you will have to work? Do you have employment or family obligations that will prevent you from putting in the necessary time?
- ▶ Does your family agree with and support your decision?
- ▶ Can you summarize your reason for running in three sentences? In one minute?
- ▶ What is the base of supporters that you start with? Do you see a clear path for you to expand that base?
- ▶ Are you ready to raise the money? Have you already asked your family and friends to make contributions to the campaign?
- ▶ Are you ready to door-knock every day if necessary?
- ▶ Do you have good, talented people around you who aren't afraid to say no to you?
- ▶ Do you see a clear path to victory? Do you have a plan to win?

Running for office is an intense, emotional experience. Know your goals and be prepared to work harder than you ever thought you could!

Campaigns are serious business and a lot of work, but they can also be fun, exhilarating, and lead to real change. There is nothing like the energy of a campaign or the deep bonds forged between those who are working on one. It is enormously gratifying to see democracy in action: to watch citizens become engaged in the political process, to see supporters turn into volunteers, and to be a part of an important cause, win or lose. Paul Wellstone found great joy in politics. He was a "happy warrior" who could charge a room with his enormous energy. He delighted in taking part in debates, giving stump speeches, visiting people in cafés, and making decisions in the U.S. Senate that made a difference in people's lives. Paul's love of campaigning was infectious, and he passed on his love of campaigning to many thousands of Minnesotans. We hope we can pass it on to you as well.

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## Planning

Being smart and strategic about campaigning requires having a plan. In every aspect of a campaign, planning is a fundamental first step. It is impossible to run a focused, sufficiently financed, and successful campaign without having goals and a blueprint for achieving those goals. A helpful way to think about planning is to remember that there are always three scarce resources on a campaign: time, people, and money. Remember that. At Camp Wellstone, we repeat this mantra constantly because it is too easy to get caught up in the heat of a campaign and try to do everything. It is of course impossible to do everything, even for the most well-funded and efficient campaigns. Tough choices have to be made about resources and strategy, and they need to be made deliberately and carefully.

That is where planning comes in. A plan helps any campaign answer the question “How do we win?” A plan is the road map for the campaign, clarifying how the three scarce resources of time, people, and money will be managed. The plan clarifies the campaign’s goals, challenges, and opportunities. It keeps the campaign on target and on message, and it helps create cohesion among the campaign organizers. A strong plan charts a course for the campaign, allowing it to reach its goals and maximize scarce resources. It provides focus and direction to the campaign, but it is realistic and manageable.

Despite the central importance of planning in a campaign, it is often discounted or misused. Plans often end up collecting dust in a campaign manager’s desk as things heat up. As one top campaign official told a reporter, “Most campaigns start with a plan; very few end with one.” Too often, organizers plunge into the work and later must react to different situations as they arise. This ad hoc approach wastes money, time, and valuable volunteer resources. In the end, electoral and issue advocacy campaigns that do not make a plan and then execute it usually lose. It is also possible to go overboard and overplan. Some campaign leaders will consume an inordinate amount of time writing “the perfect plan,” one that might make sense for organizing statewide around an issue or running a presidential campaign but is far too ambitious for most issue or political campaigns at any level. Others will rely too heavily on a plan that might quickly become outdated or no longer reflect the current challenges facing the campaign.

Campaigns are dynamic. Events can change the momentum of a campaign in an instant. That's why many campaigns—particularly in the face of a crisis—forgo planning and feel a need to react to daily events as they come up. This is entirely reasonable, and flexibility is important on any campaign. But planning helps you figure out how to win, by harnessing the dynamic nature of political and organizing work, as opposed to leaving it up to luck. The planning process helps anticipate the obstacles and opportunities that the campaign will face and establishes a set of overall goals. A good plan can also be a tool for energizing and persuading volunteers and donors. If the end goals are clear, and the tactics and strategies are in place, it is easier for a volunteer to say yes when asked to get involved in the campaign. Volunteers and donors who are aware of the longer-term strategy are more likely to stay involved to see the effort unfold.

Consider some of the other benefits of planning:

- ▶ ***Resources matched with activities.*** A plan gives you the opportunity to customize your activities to best match your resources. For example, a campaign or organization with a list of very active, Internet-savvy volunteers might create web-based tools to engage and mobilize those volunteers; campaigns and groups with limited money might concentrate on earned media and direct communication strategies; an effort with lots of volunteers will concentrate on building an organization to utilize them effectively.
- ▶ ***Leveraging strengths.*** The campaign plan should be built on the strengths of its message and, in the case of electoral campaigns, the candidate.
- ▶ ***Systematic approach.*** The plan illuminates how all the pieces of a campaign fit together and establishes a support structure for the organization. Even if the organization consists of one or two paid staff members, the plan establishes a framework for the organization and mobilization of volunteers.
- ▶ ***Targeting.*** The plan helps you stay focused on the right audiences.

- ▶ **Creativity.** Creating a plan provides an opportunity to analyze a campaign from all angles, encouraging creativity and innovation. It can help organizers think beyond crisis terms and find fresh approaches.
- ▶ **Flexibility.** It may seem counterintuitive, but a plan increases flexibility. On any campaign, unexpected events and crises occur. If you need to go “off plan,” the decision will be informed and intentional. You will have a clear picture of your capacity, timeline, and vulnerabilities as you change course.

### Elements of a Campaign Plan

The social critic Frances Fox Piven once said, “The genius of an organizer is to know what people are capable of doing and to help them to do it.” Good planning helps us understand those capabilities and how to utilize them. The first step in writing a plan is to define the campaign’s goals. The goals of an issue-based campaign and an electoral campaign may be very different. For an electoral campaign, the main goal is straightforward: to win. So the plan starts with a win number, which in a two-person race is exactly 50 percent of the expected vote total, plus one vote. Usually, you aim for 52 percent of the vote, just to have a cushion. How do you determine this number? From your secretary of state’s office or county/city election board, you can get election results for past, similar elections. For example, if you are running in a presidential election year, you’ll want to look at past elections for the office you seek in a presidential election year. We have a detailed discussion of win numbers and targeting in chapter 5. There may also be subgoals that an electoral campaign sets for itself along the way, for example, the number of volunteers recruited, number of doors knocked, or vote totals.

For an issue-based campaign, goals can vary depending on the campaign. It might be to get the city council to pass a living wage ordinance, or to pass a bill in the state legislature that provides immigrant children with access to two additional hours of tutoring each week. Regardless of what these goals might be, they should be specific and clear. Think about and separate the external and internal goals. The external one is the public goal of the organizing effort—passing a referendum, for example. In-

ternal goals are focused on the organizational and base-building objectives—getting a certain number of people involved, adding numbers to your lists, empowering people who had not been involved in political action before, for instance. Both sets of goals are important and need to be discussed at the outset.

Once the goals are set, it is time for the rest of the plan. The campaign plan can be broken into components. Throughout this book, we will discuss each campaign component in great detail. The following is an overview of the elements of a plan. If you find yourself wanting to know more about each of these areas, don't worry. We'll get to them in later chapters.

### *Message*

As we discuss in the next chapter, the campaign's message is critical. It defines the campaign and what it is trying to convey to its audience, and it engages the audience in a conversation. For both issue and electoral campaigns, progressives need to do a better job of articulating and delivering messages that convey their core values. The "message box" of the campaign is a key part of the plan. Also in the message section is a discussion of how to integrate the message throughout a campaign, how to assure message discipline, and who is responsible for this work.

### *Targeting*

Targeting for an electoral campaign is a process that allows you to identify how many votes you need and where to find them. As mentioned above, every campaign has a win number. Once you determine this number, the campaign then uses a "voter file" to determine where the votes will come from. We will discuss this in great detail in chapter 5. For an issue campaign, the targeting asks, "Who are the key decision makers, and who is the audience?" At times, the target will be the general public; at others, it will be an elected official.

### *Structure and Responsibilities*

This section of the plan details who is responsible for what, including paid staff, volunteer staff, and coordinator roles. The makeup of the campaign structure will vary greatly depending



- ◆ The three scarce resources on a campaign are time, people, and money.

on its size and budget. For a typical legislative race, the campaign will probably not have enough resources to pay more than one or two full-time staffers. A city council race in a major metropolitan area might require one staff member working part-time. Thus, these campaigns will typically have a large number of volunteers in established roles—like volunteer coordinator, scheduler, field director, and fundraiser. If you know in advance who your key volunteers will be, meet with them to discuss and assign roles that each will play.

### *Budget*

Campaigns start by asking, “How much will this cost?” This should be a relatively detailed process because each component of the plan must be itemized and assigned a realistic cost: staff, office, travel, fundraising, mail, advertising, field expenses, and anything else the campaign will spend money on. Use previous campaigns as a guide for estimating costs, but do your own research about ways to minimize expenses and maximize resources. As a guideline, 75 percent of the campaign budget should focus on direct voter contact and/or paid media. It is also important to know when money is needed. You will need to develop a cash-flow chart (see chapter 6 on budgeting) that outlines how much money the campaign needs to have every month and, in the end period, every week, to accomplish the campaign plan. This is critical for effectively monitoring fundraising progress.

### *Fundraising*

A budget is useless unless the campaign knows how it is going to raise money. The fundraising component of the plan sets goals for targeting and soliciting donors and details various fundraising scenarios. Break down realistic fundraising goals by categories: individual contributions both small and large; events; foundations (for issue campaigns); political action committees (for electoral campaigns). How much money will be raised through candidate solicitation, direct mail, surrogate fundraising, or events? What is the timeline for all of the fundraising? It is helpful to develop three tiers of fundraising goals: the bare minimum that the campaign needs, a middle amount that is

achievable but not overly ambitious, and a best-case scenario. These tiers clarify the need for the campaign staff or candidate to know the consequences of failing to raise money and the benefits of raising more than expected.

### *Direct Voter Contact and Field Organizing*

Good field organizing was the reason Paul Wellstone was elected to the Senate, and it is essential for progressives who want to win. The field component of the campaign plan will include details on how the campaign will build relationships in communities in the earliest days, not waiting until the final few weeks. Too often, progressives fail to view their work as a long-term effort that depends on building and nurturing a base of supporters. The plan should include information on how the campaign will reach out to constituents, how it will use the targeting data to conduct strategic canvassing and phoning, and how it will identify and persuade its target audience. It should also have a plan for the get-out-the-vote (GOTV) program.

### *Candidate and Issue Research*

Both issue and electoral campaigns need to extensively research their own positions as well as those of the opposition. In an electoral campaign, the purpose is not to dig up dirt on the opposition but, rather, to have a clear understanding of whether the opponent has taken controversial, contradictory, or damaging positions or made statements that can be used in the campaign. In an issue campaign, research is required to make sure the campaign is in a strong position on the issue and will not be contradicted by evidence presented by opponents. It is also used to research the opposition; there are often stealth groups that take part in issue campaigns and portray themselves as something they are not. Research allows the campaign to identify and define these groups. Both types of campaigns should know how the campaign will develop its policy and issue positions and who has responsibility for this work. Research is also important when a campaign needs to respond to the many issue questionnaires sent out by organizations making endorsement decisions.

### *Paid Media*

Radio, newspaper, and television advertisements might be part of a campaign plan, depending on the size of the campaign. For smaller campaigns, paid media will likely consist of radio and/or newspaper ads, while larger campaigns need to include resources for television. Allocating resources for paid media is a careful decision. We will talk in greater length about the “dominance” of one medium. It is unwise to stretch resources so thin that the campaign is doing a little bit of everything instead of dominating one thing before moving on to the next.

### *Earned Media*

The campaign’s message is extremely important, and it needs to be delivered aggressively. The campaign will not succeed unless it has a strategy for getting press coverage. This requires knowing who reporters are, building relationships with them, holding press events, and maintaining a constant presence in the media. “Earned media” refers to publicity that the campaign does not pay for. The earned media part of the plan should include details about when the announcement or unveiling of the campaign will happen, when important media opportunities will arise, and how the campaign plans to break through a cluttered media market. It should also include a strategy for communicating through letters to the editor, meetings with editorial boards, and press releases.

### *Scheduling*

For an electoral campaign, scheduling is an often overlooked but important activity. The candidate’s time must be well used, with decisions being made strategically based on targeting, constituency, and messaging criteria. Keeping in mind that time is one of the three scarce resources, the campaign needs to define the priorities for the candidate’s time by week and month. Using targeting data, the schedule needs to be built strategically, allowing the candidate to maximize time in the most important geographic regions. The plan should also include a process for providing the candidate with briefing materials.

### *Timeline*

Working backward from Election Day (or, for an issue-based campaign, the critical decision-making time), how does everything in the plan fit together? When will voter contact begin? How many waves of mail will there be, and at what intervals? When will staff be hired? What is the paid media schedule? A detailed campaign timeline will help answer these and other questions. The timeline should also match the campaign budget and cash flow.

### **Common Planning Mistakes**

Many campaigns make the same common mistakes, wasting valuable resources and leading to an ineffective and losing effort. Here are some typical mistakes you can watch out for and avoid:

- ▶ Focusing on too many issues
- ▶ Trying to communicate too much information about one or more issues
- ▶ Appealing to an audience that is too broad
- ▶ Spending time talking to people who will not vote for your campaign
- ▶ Trying to do too much

In nearly every chapter of this manual, we discuss the importance of planning. Each part of an electoral or issue campaign—fundraising, media, field, and so on—should have its own plan, just as the campaign will have an overall plan. The best plans are tightly focused, clear, and measurable. They spell out a detailed strategy for the campaign to articulate a clear message, identify and persuade voters, dominate one medium, and then move on to dominate the next. A good plan is also flexible. Campaigns change over time. Unexpected events can shift a campaign's message and force the campaign to adopt different strategies. In later chapters, we will go into far greater detail on all of these components.