

# Year-round, locally based precinct organizing is essential for moving the Democratic Party forward

By Meteor Blades

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"The most important job I ever had was Precinct Captain." —Harry S Truman

In the past few months, starting shortly before Christmas, the founder of this blog has several times made comments about future elections that make me grind my molars. He has said Democrats likely will win the elections of 2016, but we will lose in 2018 because "our voters" turn out for presidential elections but not in the midterms. He has said we will be stuck in this conundrum until we figure out how to change the dynamic. I hate this message. Because Markos is right. And making him wrong will require lots of what used to be called shoe leather and what my grandfather called "organizational calluses."

We are stuck in a rinse-repeat cycle in which a relatively large percentage of Democratic and Democrat-leaning voters turn out in presidential election years followed by a steep fall-off in said voters every midterm year. Nobody needs persuading that this has massive and massively damaging consequences for the progressive agenda and the vast number of rank-and-file Americans who would benefit if that agenda were turned into policy.

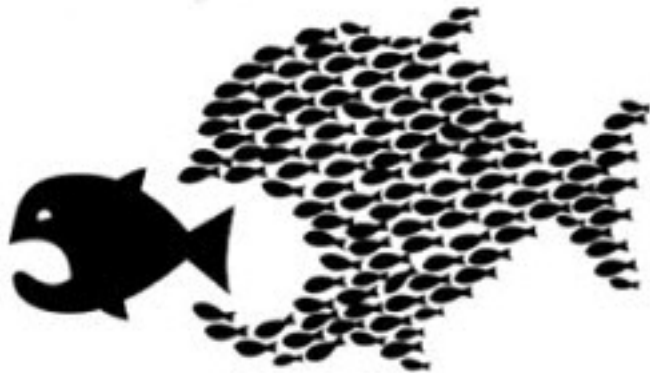
It's true that the older, whiter, richer, more conservative, more male cohorts in America who turn out big in presidential years also don't vote in as high of percentages in midterm elections. But their fall-off is not as precipitous. This Republican advantage is added to (and helps make possible) other right-wing advantages. Two of those: the impact of gerrymandering, which is [analyzed here](#) here by Jeff Singer using a Daily Kos-developed metric premised on the "median district"; and the impact of a move away from split-ticket voting, [analyzed here](#) by Steve Singiser.

These aren't the only advantages for a Republican Party that has become increasingly right wing. For instance, young people when they do vote, are more likely to choose candidates who campaign for liberal rather than conservative policies. But young people are [the least likely](#) age cohort to be contacted to vote.

As we know all too well, chief among the right wing's advantages is the deluge of money —much of it now delivered from secret sources, thanks to the U.S. Supreme Court. While it's not, of course, going to be true in every contest, overall the Democrats will never be able to outspend the Republicans. Plenty of examples show that money—even well-spent money—doesn't always win a race. But it confers a big edge. So, to win more races, we need to engage in an asymmetric electoral approach. In blue states and red ones.

Don't get me wrong. There is no silver bullet. Good candidates at every level of government for every office are a must. And we definitely have too few of those. Good policy ideas are crucial. We've got them, but it's hard to get some elected Democrats to support them. Those are problems to be solved.

But year-round, locally based organizing in each of the nation's 176,000 precincts is a crucial element for the future success of the Democratic Party. Not the party as we now know it, but one that is more progressive and more willing than it has been to fight vigorously for the economic, social, and environmental interests of the working classes that make up the vast majority of Americans. We can't wait for the party to make needed changes from the top. We've already seen what it has done with the 50-state strategy. We have to make changes from the bottom.



Alone, this locally based precinct organizing won't do the job. But without it we'll remain hamstrung. By locally based, I mean face-to-face, door-to-door, shoestring-funded, volunteer-driven, local organizing in every voting precinct in the nation by people who actually live in or close by those precincts. People who know the neighborhood because it's home. I want us to leverage this local organizing into a simple goal: closing the gap between how many Democrats vote in midterm and presidential elections by 10 percent in 2018 and 50 percent in 2022.

Before continuing, a personal note.

I first convinced someone to register to vote in Mississippi in 1964, three-and-a-half years before I could vote. She didn't want to register. She was scared. And she had reason to be. Jim Crow had a tight grasp on voting rolls in those days and myriad means of keeping certain people off them. ... Not just discouraging words. A beating or a murder could be the price for any black person daring to get uppity about their constitutional right to vote. I was born in the South, but I got educated in a new way that summer.

As a consequence of that experience and others that followed, I've been engaged in political work ever since. Not just election politics but also street politics, resistance politics, disrupter politics that have involved everything from petitioning and protests to prison. Many people disdain resistance politics. They can be messy. And they can be diverted into bad directions either by the authoritarians of the surveillance state or by bad resistance leaders. But I have no doubt we will always need these in-your-face

politics to achieve many of our aims. Just as our progressive predecessors have done on a wide range of issues.

From the nation's founding, these disrupters have confronted the powers-that-be from outside the organized political system. Whether union organizers or feminist advocates, they started out always with tiny minorities, with most Americans—especially most Americans in political office—opposed to their views. Like the abolitionists, some resisters broke the law—in this instance the pernicious Fugitive Slave Act that made every "law-abiding citizen" an accomplice to evil by requiring them to assist in treating human beings as runaway property that had to be retrieved for owners who had a legally enshrined right to whip or castrate or kill that property.

From the Pullman Strike to the Stonewall Riots, nothing big has been changed before some form of street politics got the ball rolling.

**B**ut the great reforms have also required the passage of confirming legislation, statutory or constitutional. Which has meant convincing incumbents or electing challengers who are already convinced that a reform is the right thing—or at least the necessary thing—to do if they expect to remain in office.

Progressives have a laundry list of political changes we'd like to see enacted and many of us are directly engaged at various levels in being disruptive of the powers-that-be standing in the way of those changes. We are pushing.

But ultimately disruption cannot reach its objectives without improving our turnouts at the polls, particularly the midterms, so that we can put candidates who agree with us into office, from the local school board all the way to Washington. Without this, the speed with which progressive governmental policies can be implemented will be glacial at best. Working to put good candidates in office doesn't mean abandoning street politics.

We can't wait for a demographic shift to save us. Indeed, without better local organizing, the coming demographic shift will not amount to enough to make the needed political shift.

Which Democrats or Dem-leaning Independents are most likely to vote in presidential elections but not in the midterms? It's the same everywhere: Young people. Poor people. In most places, people of color. Single women. And people on the edge. Getting them to vote requires giving them the advice and encouragement and backing they need to organize themselves. It also means giving them good reasons to vote and running candidates with their interests at heart, candidates from their own neighborhoods. Candidates for school boards and city councils and state legislatures, some of whom emerge from among the ranks of the precinct organizer. (But that's a subject for another essay.)



Isn't the Democratic Party already doing precinct organizing? Isn't Organizing for America and other groups, ad hoc and permanent, running expensive get-out-the-vote efforts? Yes. In some places. In others, barely or not at all. And not just in red areas. In fact, Democrats are poorly organized or not organized at all at the precinct level in many blue and purple areas. This is myopic and it's costing us.

Let me give you a firsthand example.

In 2003, I was still living in a blue area of modest homes and apartments in northeast Los Angeles. Aided by a bogus energy crisis engineered by corporate gaming of state regulations, an effort arose to recall Democratic Gov. Gray Davis, who was less than a year into his second term after 16 years of Republican governorships. Five of us precinct captains contacted the county Democratic headquarters repeatedly to volunteer our services. After several phone calls produced no marching orders, two of us visited the office in person. Still nothing. No assistance, no advice, no literature, not even a "good luck." We didn't shrug. We organized on our own. Each of us assigned ourselves four additional precincts to the one we already served as a precinct captain. Twenty-five precincts altogether, moderately to profoundly blue.

Right away, we found that only nine of them had precinct captains. So we quickly recruited some ad hoc ones, most of whom later became official. And we recruited volunteers to go door-to-door talking to their neighbors. It was an effort that suffered from the speed with which we had to move. But when the recall vote was counted, every one of those 25 contiguous precincts showed an increase in Democratic voter turnout over the 1998 election. About 5 percent overall. Nowhere close to enough to save Davis' bacon, of course.

We expanded for 2004. Twenty-five "sister" precincts were organized. It was the same story: fewer than half had Democratic precinct captains when we began. We recruited enough to fill the vacant slots. We recruited volunteers. We went door-to-door to every Democratic and independent household twice. We listened as much as we talked. We got people registered who hadn't been. We passed out literature for the presidential race and for down-ballot races and created literature of our own. We raised money with block parties. After each canvass, the precinct captains debriefed their volunteers and we five debriefed the captains. Data about each visit was logged by computer. Not as sophisticated as what OFA and other groups have developed, but serviceable. We

increased the turnout of Democratic voters about 15 percent over the previous election in those 50 precincts.

Come 2005, we added 51 more precincts—this time many of them fairly red—and followed the same pattern. That year there was no election, but we canvassed twice anyway. And in 2006, we went door to door three times. Again we boosted Democratic turnout although the wave effect that year made the results better than they would surely have been without it. In 2010, despite a steep drop-off nationally and statewide in Democratic turnout, our 101 precincts averaged about a 20 percent rise over the baseline year of 1998 and a slightly higher percentage over the 2006 Democratic turnout. When I left Los Angeles in early 2012, all those precincts had captains, a wealth of data about voter habits and a tested procedure that worked.

There are useful tools we didn't deploy, particularly social media and phone banking. That wasn't because we think these aren't valuable. We just collectively felt door-to-door, face-to-face contact from a neighbor is more effective than a Facebook poke or a phone call from someone they don't know who lives in Ohio and can't pronounce their name right. Over those five elections, we got to know people in our precincts and they got to know us.

In some precincts, districts, and entire states, this kind of organizing will obviously not be as effective as we were in Southern California. But even in places where Republicans regularly produce victories with 60 percent or more of the vote or where the margin is so lopsided, no Democrats even run for office, gains can be made. Increasing Democratic turnout in a congressional and legislative contest by 10 extra voters per precinct may not win the district, but it can boost a statewide candidate—say attorney general or secretary of state or even a senator caught in a tight race—into office. A few victories like that, or just an improvement in margins of defeat, can energize Democratic voters next time around. And, as even the most impatient of us knows, winning is about sticking at it for the long haul. One Virginian is definitely in it for that.

W. Ferguson Reid, shown on the left side of this election poster, was the first African American elected to the General Assembly in the 20th Century. A medical doctor and community leader in Richmond, Reid was one of the founders of the Crusade for Voters, organized in 1955 and one of the most formidable political organizations in the state. It lobbied for voter registration among African Americans, conducted get-out-the-vote drives, and enabled Reid to win a seat in the House of Delegates 1967 on his second try. Even though you've probably never heard of him, Ferguson Reid, now 90, has been called a civil rights icon. He certainly is. You can read [about him here](#). In honor of his legacy, the "90 for 90" project was launched. The plan is to register at least 90 voters in each of Virginia's 2,550 precincts. Wills Dahl reports: A glance at the electoral map reveals what a game-changer this could be. If the "90 for 90" project can register the 250,000 new voters it intends to—or even achieve half of that—it could lock out Republicans from the Electoral College for good.




**TUESDAY, JULY 13, 1965**  
IS  
**ELECTION DAY**

*A Solid Negro Vote Can Give Us  
Representation In Virginia's  
General Assembly*


**You Can Do It By Voting And Urging Every  
Other Negro To Vote On Election Day**

*Vote The Crusade For Voters Recommendations*

The Research Committee of The Crusade For Voters  
Will Send Each Voter Our Recommendation of  
Candidates Based Upon Securing the Best Possible  
Value for the Negro Vote



**WILL FERGUSON REID**  
For The House of Delegates



**GORDON S. LEWIS**  
For The House of Delegates

**IN SOLIDARITY  
THERE IS  
STRENGTH**

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If Necessary, Ask Your Employer  
for Time Off to Vote

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Call that optimistic if you like. But it's a worthy goal. And it will have down-ballot consequences as well. Such a campaign in the 8,300 precincts of Texas would produce 750,000 new voters, in California's 24,000 precincts, 2.2 million new voters. But there are scores to hundreds of already registered citizens in every precinct who we **know** vote—in presidential years. Getting a larger fraction of them to also show up for the midterms could make an even bigger difference than registering all those new voters. We should, of course, do both.



Dr. Ferguson Reid today To repeat, there is no silver bullet. Precinct organizing by itself won't win elections. But in too many places we are without it, or the organizing is ineptly done or given no encouragement or assistance from the local or state party. The resulting election outcomes are awful. Consequently, so are the policy outcomes.

There is value in having outsiders parachute in for the final months or weeks of a crucial campaign. National organizations have the resources, the technology and well-honed techniques to boost turnouts. But when the election is over, those organizations leave, taking their resources, and often, the local data they've collected

with them. Moreover, they can only organize in a limited number of places. To reiterate, needed are local volunteers doing local precinct organizing year-round: Collecting data, spurring greater participation, keeping good records, training replacements. It all sounds so simple when said like that, doesn't it?

The truth?

It takes time people could be doing something else. Time they could be spending with family or reading a book or tending a garden. Time, energy, and the ability to take rejection with a smile and defeats with renewed determination. Not everybody has the psychological makeup to make door-to-door political visits. But even the shyest person can contribute to precinct organizing by doing other needed tasks.

If your area already has an active Democratic organization at the precinct level, join it. If it has one but the leaders are lazy or incompetent, figure how to boot them out and replace them. If there is no organization at all, get one going. The payoff may be in the next election or a decade from now. But it's a crucial aspect of a progressive future.