



**All. Together. Now.**

## After the Surge Investing in Civic Organizing Tactics that Work

By [Robby Rodriguez](#)

*“When it comes to electoral organizing, it’s not news that the surge isn’t working.”*

It’s the thick of the 2008 election cycle, and all around the country legions of “Paratroopers” – well-funded, well-trained young organizers from New York or DC-based national organizations – are dropping down in Louisville, Kansas City, Las Vegas and my own hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico to help get out the vote.

Sinking enormous resources into short-term electoral campaigns has been the accepted modus operandi for the past few election cycles. Trouble is, it overlooks the fact that Louisville, Las Vegas and the rest of us have already invested years of hard work in building organizing infrastructure that too often gets ignored and supplanted to the detriment of everyone involved.

When it comes to turning out voters and winning elections, it’s not news that the surge isn’t working. In state after state, grassroots groups are banding together to form local, regional and national partnerships, including the fast-growing [Pushback Network](#), to focus on what works.

### **A Better Investment**

New Mexico became a “swing state” after Al Gore carried it in 2000 by a tooth-skinning margin of 366 votes. Things haven’t been the same around here since. The added lure of having over a quarter of our population centralized in Albuquerque, made New Mexico one of a growing number of states heavily targeted by both parties, plus a number of non-partisan get-out-the-vote efforts.

Sounds like a dream, right? Cash galore, free staff and resources aplenty flooding into the state to help get the work done and drive both new and ongoing campaigns toward success.

Unfortunately, the reality doesn’t work quite that way. In previous years, national groups would drop in, cycle after cycle, without even talking to us. Once on the ground, they set up parallel campaigns which doubled or tripled efforts at enormous expense.

New Mexico has been far from alone in grappling with the sudden need to manage the occupation. “In 2004, hundreds of organizers operated in their own universe apart from the rest of the organizing going on in the same building, let alone in the community,” said Lara Granich of [Missouri Jobs with Justice](#).

“There was some really decent training going on with these canvassers,” she continued. “We tried to build relationships with them, but even though our coalition partners have been organizing this community for years we were invisible. Then it was like a spaceship came down and carried them all away. These smart and dedicated, well-trained people were seen as utterly disposable. For those of us left working on the ground, none of this high-level training was offered.”

Paratrooping organizations drop staff in from around the country; but they also hire local folks who, once Election Day comes and goes, are left with no political home.

In her 2006 book, [\*Activism, Inc.: How the Outsourcing of Grassroots Campaigns Is Strangling Progressive Politics in America\*](#), sociologist [Dana Fisher](#) talks about thousands of young activists, excited by the prospect of making a difference, who take jobs canvassing in neighborhoods and states far from home. The experience is often so discouraging that it turns them off on progressive politics for good.

If their ability to build relationships with the people they are working for isn't a critical part of campaign strategy, then post-election these well-trained activists, and their energy, skills and experience, are lost. "We're good at building sustained, trusted, relationships," said Granich. "How many election cycles can we strain our capacity to assist others when that very capacity isn't helped at all in the end?"

What happens to the technical hardware, the database lists and volunteers? It is costly to set up new operations year after year. Training people is expensive. Paratrooper strategies ensure that cost is paid again and again – often by the same funders.

### **Missing Base Building Misses the Point**

Invasive, extractive paratrooper tactics begin losing ground before they even leave home. Although driven by good intentions, they're flawed by design. A database driven, magazine subscription-derived national strategy that is piloted from New York or D.C. is at a disadvantage from the beginning.

That these strategies continue to be employed highlights outcome motivations that differ vastly from K Street to Main Street. As grassroots organizers, our work is anchored in strategies for sustainable social change. To manage this, our work grows through a ripple effect that builds upon its successes.

SWOP has been working in New Mexico for 27 years, and our organization and communities get stronger every day because we're invested in long-term goals. A national group may be in town to pass a bill or proposition or even elect a candidate, but they've only got a few weeks or months to do it. To achieve their objectives they contact vast numbers of people who they don't have time to get to know very well, and they have to start from near-scratch every time.

Although we may share similar short-term objectives, our long-term goals can be miles apart. Still, our relationship to national organizations cannot be one of: you're either with us or against us. Complementary strategies offer the opportunity for both of us to succeed to even greater capacity.

In New Mexico, and in each of the eight states that make up Pushback Network, we push for civic engagement in the broadest sense. An important part of what we do to achieve that goal is the development of local leaders with an eye toward changing the landscape not just now, but in the future. This is an approach where small investments generate enormous results.

Pushback Network allows dozens of grassroots groups to work together year round and share resources both within and across state-lines. For our work to achieve national impact requires an

increase in our collective ability to develop messaging, to run polls, focus groups, and trainings at the local and regional level.

Because of our work with Pushback Network, on-the-ground groups in New Mexico are in a much better position to offer and receive help than we were in 2004. Working in partnership we have been able to insert ourselves into the conversations where the strategic decisions are being made that affect our work.

This year we've demanded an early seat at the planning table with those whose national strategy includes organizing in our back yards. The advance collaboration is already showing signs of success. As transparent allies, we can share both our databases and our analyses of the key constituencies and geographic areas where help and resources are most needed, and can have the greatest impact.

### **If we want a win, it's time to up the ante.**

We all want to win. The good news for national and GOTV groups is that neighbors are the best messengers for getting out the vote. This equation works both for those who see the needs of their communities being met and those who time and again are underrepresented and left behind.

Community organizing is fundamentally about building the relationships that move people toward civic participation. Those who are engaged in the communities where they live maintain those relationships and the trust that goes with them. It is counterintuitive to think that any national group, especially in a short time, can have a deeper impact than those at home.

Local groups can learn plenty from nationals who have the resources and training opportunities about which many rural organizers can only dream. National organizers also have a lot to learn from those of us who live our lives in the trenches.

“There's a lot of synergy in our operations that nationals are missing out on,” said Granich. “We've developed leaders who are very assertive, detailed and clear about what we're doing. The learning curve can go both ways.” But none of us can learn if we're not in dialogue, and we can't learn after the fact.

Local organizers don't object to a helpful influx of information, resources and help. But current civic engagement models prioritize obsolete and militaristic strategies. Can we use the help from the big guns? Absolutely. But let's work together to make sure it *is* help. We can all win by trading in paratroopers for cooperative reinforcements.

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