

Sam Osherson
sam@osherson.com

Communities of Support: The hope and power of small, local groups

*Twenty- One Tips and Techniques for
Neighbor-to-Neighbor Organizing and Empowerment*

“...if you look at our country’s history, change doesn’t come from presidents. Change comes from large groups of angry people. “

--Aziz Ansari, Humorist and Social Commentator

What’s next?

Many of us are feeling alone and worried and uncertain in these dark times. Yet, as some of us are already learning, there is great hope and power in coming together in community to effect change about what matters most to us. We are learning that others around the country are also coming together. And, we are learning that effective groups don’t just form without taking a few manageable steps to organize and empower ourselves.

You may be someone experienced in political activism, or you may be someone who has been historically unengaged and now wants to “do something.” Either way, in what follows we hope to offer some tips and advice that will be useful to you.

Who are we?

We are a small group of neighbors living in southwestern New Hampshire who have come together to talk about what we hold dear, and to find ways to lead and engage in the political process to defend the programs and institutions that reflect those values. Our neighbor-to-neighbor community of support is focused on political action. That can be a difficult discussion! But, it’s working—we are no longer alone, we are developing concrete action steps, and we are supporting each other through what promises to be a long, uphill recovery campaign.

We would like to connect with others doing the same. Contact us at MonadnockUnited2018.net. We’d love to hear from you—if you are an established group, or one newly forming, or an individual who needs support or suggestions how to form a local group in your community.

If you are already in an organized group, you may want to skip or skim the next section and go right to the “How To?” section below.

First Steps

How to find or create a group of neighbors and community members? To begin, you need to find some allies. First step is to do some reading and reflecting—become familiar with the key issues by reading the mainstream press.

Be careful of “fake news” and “alternate facts.” Many newspapers and magazines are now alert to the manipulation of the news and are pointing out when lies and distortions happen. Two good fact-checking sources are: factcheck.org and snopes.com.

Make a list: what do I most value? What issues (state and/or nationally) seem most important to me?

As you read and reflect, you may begin to have ideas on ways to connect with people in your neighborhood and surrounding neighborhoods. Don’t feel overwhelmed— you only need find one

or two allies. They may be people who live on your street, they may be someone you've had conversations with while walking your dog, they may be someone at work. And, they may be Facebook friends whose posts leave you feeling that you have some shared values.

Find one or two allies and begin a conversation with them. What worries you about what is going on in our country right now? What matters most to you? What are the core values that you hold most dear and want to support as an American?

Once you feel comfortable enough among the 2 or 3 of you, each of you can agree to reach out to a few more people. Plan a "meet and greet" at one of your homes and invite a group of no more than fifteen people to come to a first meeting to talk about common concerns. Once you've done that, you're on your way!

And, as you wait for people to arrive for the "meet and greet" you may be wondering, "what do I do now"?

How to?

So, you're about to host a meeting, or you are looking forward to the next meeting of a group of concerned community members. Let's focus on getting an effective group going. Here are some important how-to tips:

Tip #1: Action is not the first step. Establishing group cohesion and trust is crucial. While Action is important, it is vital that all members also have an opportunity to express where they are, what matters most to them, and to feel heard by other members. Create this opportunity in the meeting agenda. We make it our number one item.

Tip #2: Create a group, not a collection of people. Trust, cohesion, and mutual respect are all qualities of an effective group. This is essential for the long-term effectiveness of political action. We expect that the next several weeks, months, and years will require extraordinary commitment and engagement. There is a lot going on! Effective groups form—and, endure—when people feel heard and hopeful and valued. Together, we sustain the effort.

Tip #3: Not everyone will agree. Nor is it necessary that everyone agree on what matters most to each member. There is room for many voices in an effective group. While requires patience, over time, a group that listens and trusts can accomplish a lot more than a collection of people who hurry into actions that eventually leave them disappointed and discouraged, or worse, left out.

Tip #4: put a check-in on the meeting agenda.

This ensures that members have time to talk about their grief, anger, and despair these days. A check-in gives members time to voice what's of most value and what they hope to accomplish. This is different from venting. A movement toward action will come from allowing people to talk about what matters most to them, and what they feel is most threatened today, and over the long haul!

Tip #5: share your story, share your events, share your activities.

Doing this benefits others by virtue of networking, adapting ideas and actions, and increasing turnout. There are so many things an effective group can do in these dark times.

Tip #6: Roles are important. Identify a person at each meeting to be the moderator or coordinator. This person keeps an eye out on the group-as-a-whole, making sure each person has a chance to speak, that the group keeps to the agenda when in danger of getting sidetracked, and that meetings start and end at the agreed-upon time. This role can rotate or remain consistent with one individual. Identify a scribe or secretary to take notes and summarize the meeting for the group. Make sure to set a date for the next meeting.

A Bit More About Our group

We started in 2012 when six of us met to discuss how to support President Obama's reelection. We came together again in 2016 to support Hillary Clinton and Maggie Hassan, our candidate for Senator in NH. And, in 2017, we are together again to take stock of what to do and how to engage to achieve the best possible outcomes.

In a nutshell, we realized the advantage of a small, stable group. It provides important support and encouragement that enables us to take steps we might not if we were working on our own and over time. A also found that a trustworthy group that meets regularly is an important antidote to the "engagement fatigue" that may come from the many struggles and protests that lie ahead. You can find more detail about us in Appendix 1. What we learned, though, leads to our next series of tips

TIP #7: local community-based groups are effective. In this polarized time when we are living in silos, neighbor-to-neighbor conversations are one of the most effective forms of political persuasion. For more on this, see appendix 2.

The appeals and activities in our group emphasize community welfare and the issues that unite many of us, not Party affiliation.

TIP #6: Cautions. Because our fund-raising took off, we raised enough money to meet the state criteria for a nonpartisan political advocacy group. So, we listed ourselves as a political committee with the NH Secretary of State, and filed reports with that Office as required. There may be similar legal requirements in other States. Look for them.

We aimed to avoid becoming "loose cannons" or to go "off message" from the campaigns. We worked in loose affiliation with the Clinton and Hassan campaigns. For example, we consulted the campaigns when we developed ad content. If there were questions that came up during our neighbor-to-neighbor contact and Not sing, we talked with campaign staffers where and when we needed clarity. In the Clinton and Hassan's campaigns, it was very helpful to be in touch with a one, specific staffer.

As our work continues, we aim to maintain independence from Party affiliations to make room for people with a variety of points of view and allegiances, all focused on what we care about.

Why Now and What To Do? Thoughts For More Advanced Groups

In addition to what we are learning as a group on the frontlines, studying the 2016 Presidential election cycle results, we have also realized that although we work hard in Presidential election cycles for candidates who most closely uphold our ideals, we tend to lose focus in the Midterm elections.

This has cost us dearly. The GOP has built an electoral system that places voters and representative governance at a significant disadvantage due to restrictive voting regulations and gerrymandered Congressional districts throughout the country.

Taking The Vote Away From Citizens. Over the last 10 years, Radical Republicans have built structural advantages that include voter ID laws meant to disenfranchise countless voters, and gerrymandered state and Federal legislative offices aimed at homogenizing the Congressional roster. Consider this: In the last election, the margin of victory in Wisconsin was approximately 27,000 votes (before the recount). According to a Federal Court, there are 300,000 registered voters who lacked sufficient documentation to meet the State's strict voter ID law. This is unspeakably un-Democratic.

Tip #9: Regaining local state legislatures. This suggests to our group that voter access and

securing State Legislatures and Governorships is a priority goal for the 2018 mid-term election cycle. In NH, we are proud to send two Democratic Senators and two Democratic Representatives to Washington—all women. Our targets will be the State Legislature and Governorship. You can find out who your local legislators are, and how they vote, through this excellent website: www.votesmart.org

The next Census is in 2020, and further voting restrictions and gerrymandered districts could result if we don't secure state legislatures.

Tip #10 : The 2018 Midterm election are crucial for control of the House and Senate. Midterm elections are November 6, 2018. Thirty-three senate seats, all 435 seats in the House of Representatives, and 14 governorship's will be up for re-election. Find out who represents you in the House and the Senate, and how they vote, through www.votesmart.org.

Tip #11: Resist the climate of hate and “alternative facts.” Concurrently, our other, emerging priority (things are so urgent we have two #1 priorities!) is to speak out and resist the increasing climate of hate and divisiveness modeled, alas, at the highest levels of our national leadership. We do this by applying pressure to local leaders to speak out against all incidents of racial, sexist, or other forms of hate. We must be able to recognize and counteract “fake news” when we read it. And, we must be fully aware of the unfolding reality of Russian manipulation of the past Presidential election.

Tip #12: Citizen Action Works. We know we can address both priorities in the company in fellowship with others. Citizen pressure has accomplished a lot in the past decade. Examples: David Cole has shown how public outrage ended George Bush's excesses during the Iraqi war. *Talking Points Memo* has recently written about how public resistance in 2005 put an end to Bush's attempt to privatize social security. The *NY Times* recently published several articles about how much cities and states can do to mitigate climate change, regardless of the current administration's position. And, most recently: Standing Rock. (See Appendix 2)

From our group to yours

Once you get together a group of like-minded neighbors. Share what's important, what's of concern. Brainstorm what short-term and the long-term goals seem achievable. People can contribute to group goals in different ways; members should feel free to find the activities that are within their comfort level. We have most recently been discussing delegating activity within our group to cover the range of ways to engage:

Tip #13: Coordinate an ongoing letters-to-the-editor support group: This is a great way to influence public opinion, and there is no shortage of topics. Our group plans to write on several topics: Republican voter suppression efforts and the myth of “voter fraud.” The Republican movement to privatize healthcare, social security, medicare systems, which are nothing more than corporate giveaways and enrichment, similar to the massive privatization initiatives conducted in Russia that has now created a murderous oligarchy in that country. And, we will write in support of climate resiliency efforts along the lines of the growth in renewable energy sourcing we have already achieved thus far. Be relentless!

Tip #14: Be visible: Mobilize people around key issues through phone banks, rallies, marches, and attendance at legislative hearings and other events conducted in public venues. Share attendance within the group, it will be a long haul. Taking a stand in person and being visible in the streets is quite possibly the most effective and energizing way to engage, especially through organized protests where we can support each other to realize a substantive turn out. See Appendix 2 for more references on how to organize for visibility.

Tip #15: Develop communication channels: Create a contact list of people to notify and organize for help and for events. Create a social media and/or Internet presence to extend real-

time contact and network. Be clear, be concise, and be thoughtful in content and in frequency, so as not to overload the group.

Tip #16: Seek feedback, build rapport: Follow Bill Clinton's lead after losing the Arkansas Governorship in 1980. He asked everyone he met, what did I do wrong? Two years later, he won and was on the way to the Presidency. We need to talk to people who voted Republican. We need to understand why would working-class voters support politicians whose policies will hurt them, their families, and communities. We will need to learn how to build bridges to others based on shared needs and values in order to build a workable coalition. Many people who voted for Trump share values with those who voted for Clinton. We need to find ways to listen to and talk together, particularly as disillusionment with what is about to happen sets in among working class white voters.

Tip #17: Coordinate with Party reps: They can be a good resource for your neighbor-to-neighbor community efforts.

Tip #18: Develop a network: Contact other groups of concerned citizens in your state and across the country for ideas, support, and to share stories and successes. For example, we plan to contact people around the our state to encourage similar groups so that we can work together on key issues and shared interests. We welcome hearing from groups forming in other parts of the country.

Tip #19: Blue State folks can help Red State folks and vice versa. We need everyone now. People who live in Democratic- voting counties and states often feel there's little for them to do locally and folks in Republican- controlled areas often feel helpless to regain local control. Blue State folks can support and help Red State folks, sharing encouragement, resources, and ideas. And vice- versa. Look for the nearest swing district and reach out to people there. You can find the swing district nearest to you at this website: swingleft.org/

Tip #20: Be in touch with and influence your local representatives: Direct contact with voters via letters, email, or office visits is an extraordinarily effective way to influence your legislator, state or national. One Congressional staffer has advised that, "The best thing you can do to be heard and get your congressperson to pay attention is to have face-to-face time - if they have town halls, go to them. Go to their local offices. If you're in DC, try to find a way to go to an event of theirs. Go to the "mobile offices" that their staff hold periodically (all these times are located on each congressperson's website). When you go, ask questions. A lot of them. And push for answers. The louder and more vocal and present you can be at those the better."

A group of progressive Capital Hill staffers has created a how-to manual that has lots of valuable information in it, *Indivisible: A Practical Guide to Resisting The Trump Agenda*. (See Appendix 3). To find your local state legislators and your Representative and Senators, and how they vote, go to votesmart.org/candidate/

And, finally, for now, to repeat:

Tip #21: Create a group, not a collection of people: An effective group has cohesion and offers a safe, trusting, and mutual respectful space essential for the long-term effectiveness of political action. The next several years will be require much more engagement, urgently. Effective groups form when people feel heard and valued and hopeful. Such a group is an antidote to "engagement fatigue."

We would love to hear from you! Please contact us with ideas, questions, suggestions through our website (monadnockunited2018.com) or via email: monadunited@gmail.com

Many thanks to Andrea Hodson, Jim and Sharon Rousmaniere, and Michelle Burke O'Reardon

for their invaluable help in creating this document.

Appendix 1: Details of our group activities and approach

We started in 2012 when six of us met to discuss how to support President Obama’s reelection. Over time, we decided to raise money to purchase ads in local papers outlining why we were voting for him, and listing others who felt the same. We thought a neighbor-to-neighbor effort, independent of Democratic Party efforts—but not in conflict with the Party—would be the most honest and effective way to go. We raised enough money to place the ads in all our local papers.

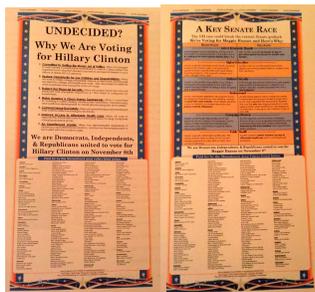
We came together again in 2016 to support Hillary Clinton and Maggie Hassan, and raised our goals: two separate ads supporting Clinton and Hassan. Though we supported the whole ticket, we felt it would be more effective to focus on the Presidential and Senate candidates. As in 2012, we aimed to reach Democrats and Republicans and Independents.

In both election cycles, our core group met weekly to clarify goals and key points for the ads, determine budget and costs, write ads, create timeline, and monitor our success in meeting our goals. We formed easily into roles that reflected members’ skills and comfort levels. One member with finance experience volunteered to be the treasurer, another helped create our websites and database. Those comfortable with canvassing did so, other less comfortable with ringing doorbells wrote letters to the editor. There were many different ways to contribute.

Everyone agreed to reach out to neighbors we thought would be receptive to our project. We also considered how to approach our neighbors—how to avoid unhelpful partisan arguments, how to approach people, how to listen, and what key points to make. And, we created social media and a website to extend outreach beyond F2F community contact.

As importantly, being in our group energized us through long and difficult election cycles. Every time we contacted someone we heard back gratitude for offering others something tangible, something to do. In 2012 and 2016, it was contributing to and signing their candidate endorsement with neighbors. We suspect our efforts energized others to do more than they would without personal contact, and, reminded everyone of the importance of their voice and vote.

Here are examples of the ads we placed in 2016:



What we achieved. We needed to raise \$10,000 to place all our newspaper ads. This felt like a daunting amount and each of us worried that we’d never be able to reach that goal. The result? We raised over \$14,000. Over 300 community members signed the ads. This generous financial support enabled

1. Full-page, color print ads for Clinton and for Hassan in the daily *Keene Sentinel*, the twice-weekly *Peterborough Transcript*, and the weekly free-distribution *Monadnock Shopper*.
2. Digital ads and banners for Clinton and for Hassan that appeared on the websites of both the *Sentinel* and the *Transcript*.
3. Radio ads—written and recorded by our group—that aired on all three major AM stations in Keene, 4X/day for Clinton and for Hassan the entire week before the election. (Our rural region doesn't support a locally-focused TV broadcaster. If it had, we would have been in touch with the station.)
4. And, a letters-to-the-editor campaign evolved from our group as well. (Letters to the editor are a particularly effective form of local political persuasion short of being there.)

We don't have formal measures of how we impacted the election, but anecdotally it's clear we had some real impact: Clinton won NH by less than 3,000 votes, but she won **in our** Monadnock region by over 5,000 votes. Hassan won her Senate seat by under 1,000 votes statewide, but won the Monadnock region by almost 6,000 votes.

We are confident as we organize in 2017 that we will make a difference.

Appendix 2: Resources

About Persuasion and Conversation:

“How Do You Change Voters' Minds? Have a Conversation.” NY Times, Oct 4, 2016
<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/10/magazine/how-do-you-change-voters-minds-have-a-conversation.html>

Dale Carnegie, *How To Win Friends And Influence People*. (A great resource, really!)

About Influencing Your Legislators, locally and nationally:

Indivisible: A Practical Guide to Resisting The Trump Agenda. They include detailed advice on how to be in touch with and influence your local representatives. You can find the document here: <http://bit.ly/2iOH7un>.

And, here is a shorter version, “Democrats Can Learn From The Tea Party”, <http://nyti.ms/2iFELv>

About Organizing In General:

Eric Mann, *Playbook For Progressives: 16 Qualities Of The Successful Organizer* (Beacon Press, 2011)

Costa Panagopoulos and Aaron Weinschenk, *A Citizen's Guide to US Elections: Empowering Democracy In America* (Routledge, 2016)

Jeff Blodgett and Bill Lofy, *Winning Your Election The Wellstone Way* (Univ Minn Press, 2008)

About The Effectiveness of Citizen Protest

David Cole, *The Way To Stop Trump*, New York Review of Books, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/14/way-to-stop-trump-lessons-of-war-on-terror/>

Lauren Fox, "Nancy Pelosi Vows to Fight Against Medicare Privatization," Talking Points Memo, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/nancy-pelosi-vows-to-fight-against-medicare-privatization>

"Cities and States Lead On Climate Change, New York Times, [hwww.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/cities-and-states-lead-on-climate-change](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/cities-and-states-lead-on-climate-change)

Appendix 3: The Effectiveness of Phone Calls To Your Representatives

According to a former Congressional staffer, the most important thing that people can do is calling. "Calls are what Representatives and Senators pay attention to. Every single day, the Senior Staff and the Senator/Representative get a report of the 3 most-called-about topics for that day at each of their offices (in DC and local offices), and exactly how many people said what about each of those topics. They're also sorted by zip code and area code.

And, note this: "Republican callers generally outnumber Democrat callers 4-1, and when it's a particular issue that single-issue-voters pay attention to (like gun control, or planned parenthood funding, etc...), it's often closer to 11-1, and that's recently pushed Republican congressmen on the fence to vote with the Republicans. In the last 8 years, Republicans have called, and Democrats haven't."

So, when you call:

A) When calling the DC office, **ask for the staff member in charge** of whatever you're calling about ("Hi, I'd like to speak with the staffer in charge of Healthcare, please") - local offices won't always have specific staffers assigned to specific topics, but they might. If you get transferred to that person, great; if not, that's ok - ask for their name, and then just keep talking to whoever answered the phone. Don't leave a message (unless the office doesn't pick up at all - then you can...but it's better to talk to the staffer who first answered than leave a message for the specific staffer in charge of your topic).

B) **Give them your zip code.** They won't always ask for it, but make sure you give it to them, so they can mark it down. Extra points if you live in a zip code that traditionally votes for them, since they'll want to make sure they get/keep your vote.

C) If you can **make it personal**, make it personal. "I voted for you in the last election and I'm worried/happy/whatever" or "I'm a teacher, and I am appalled by Betsy DeVos," or "as a single mother" or "as a white, middle class woman," or whatever.

D) Pick **1-2 specific things to focus on.** Don't go down a whole list - they're figuring out what 1-2 topics to mark you down for on their lists. So, focus on 1-2 per day. Ideally something that will be voted on/taken up in the next few days, but it doesn't really matter - even if there's not a vote coming up in the next week, call anyway. It's important that they just keep getting calls.

E) Be clear on what you want - "I'm disappointed that the Senator..." or "I want to thank the Senator for their vote on..." or "I want the Senator to know that voting in _____ way is the wrong decision for our state because..." Don't leave any ambiguity.

F) They may get to know your voice/get sick of you - it doesn't matter. The people answering the phones generally turn over every 6 weeks anyway, so even if they're really sick of you, they'll be gone in 6 weeks.

Finally, here is a link to **an easy- to- use directory of current and former Congressional staffers**: congressional-staff.insidegov.com.

The **website insidegov.com** is a trove of useful information for keeping current with what your representatives and senators are doing.