GOVERNING POWER

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WHY WE ARE EXPLORING THE CONCEPT?

Why are we exploring the concept of "governing power"?

Over the years, as organizers, we have seen the vast space between the campaigns that we wage every day and the larger dreams that our people dream. And as we continue to experiment with different approaches to our political fights that get us closer to bridging that gap, we have learned through hard experience that we can't win all of what our people need by securing small changes within this oppressive system as it is structured. The only way that we change this system is if we, as a movement, can take control and win what we call "governing power."

WHAT IS GOVERNING POWER?

Governing power is the ability to [1] win and sustain power within multiple arenas of decision-making so as to [2] shift the power structure of governance and [3] establish a new common sense of governing.

Said another way: To win governing power, we need the capacity to design, drive demand for, legislate, enforce and defend a structural reform agenda that serves the interests of our people (rather than the wealthy few). This requires us to reshape the structure of the government itself, so that it can advance democratic control, redistribution and reparation.

ESTABLISHING A NEW GOVERNING PARADIGM

The most recent governing paradigm of neoliberalism came to dominance through the intentional, strategic work of the conservative, corporate establishment. That paradigm is now in a moment of deep crisis, brought on by climate change, changing international conditions, and extreme inequality, which it has largely created. Our job as organizers is to forge a new governing paradigm or "common sense of governance," that reflects deep democracy, sustainability and equity.

WINNING POWER IN MULTIPLE ARENAS OF DECISION-MAKING

To establish a new governing paradigm, we need to contest and build governing power in six separate and interrelated arenas of decision-making:

ELECTORAL ARENA

where voters have a direct say in who is elected to public office or where voters directly approve or reject laws by referendum. // Case Study: Million Voters Project - Building governing power in the electoral arena

LEGISLATIVE ARENA

where elected leaders convene to create or change laws. // Case Study: The Congressional Progressive Caucus - Building governing power in the legislative arena

ADMINISTRATIVE ARENA

where the directives of the electoral and legislative arenas are transformed into actionable rules and where the process of implementation is shaped. // Case Study: Our Minnesota Future - Building governing power in the administrative arena

JUDICIAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL ARENA

where laws and rules are interpreted and applied. // Case Study: The American Constitution Society (ACS) and the Florida Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative - Building governing power in the judicial and constitutional arena

ARENA OF WORLDVIEW

where different ideological and political forces deploy narratives to shape popular values, beliefs and what we come to understand as "common sense." // Case Study: The Sunrise Movement - Building governing power in the arena of worldview

THE ECONOMY

where our wages, work-life and consumer choices are decided. // Case Study: California Fast Food Council - Building governing power in the arena of the economy

Organizing today tends to be heavily focused on the electoral and legislative arenas. Adopting an approach that aims to build the power to win in these many intersecting arenas of decision-making would be a crucial step towards building governing power.

SHIFTING THE POWER STRUCTURE OF GOVERNANCE

We don't want to be limited to the terrain of governance as it is today, because our ambitions are greater than wielding power within the system as it is. We also want to shift the power structure of governance to better serve our communities. Shifting the power structure of governance means ensuring that the people who are closest to the problem have the power to put the solutions on the table themselves. Embedding popular democracy into government is foundational to the concept of governing power. This task—of moving decision-making power closer to as many of our people as possible—requires elected and appointed leaders to not only see themselves as the agents of change, but to also work to structurally shift power into the hands of the communities they serve.

GOVERNING POWER STRATEGY

To build governing power requires a **governing power strategy**: a long-term, integrated approach to organizing, campaigning, movement infrastructure and narrative that is oriented toward winning the scope and scale of power necessary to control the levers of the government.

A governing power strategy requires us to shift from a dominant approach in organizing today which focuses primarily on winning policy victories to an approach that focuses primarily on building power as we fight and that considers the work needed to sustain the victories that we win, in the face of backlash, and to ensure their implementation.

There are five critical shifts in how we approach our organizing that are needed to advance governing power strategy:

1.

Shifting from a Target-focused Power Analysis to a Governing Power Analysis

A power map is a tool familiar to many organizers; it identifies the relationships that influence the target of a campaign. But, to really understand who governs, we need to develop an understanding of the broader terrain of power in our states: What political and economic forces really hold power in our states, and how do they exercise their power? There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but in order to better understand their political terrain, organizers can ask themselves questions like: Who holds extreme wealth in their state? How are those people and corporations connected to each other? How do they exercise power and influence - directly or indirectly - over governmental decisions? What think tanks, advocacy groups and political entities do they fund? What can you understand about the extremely wealthy by looking at their political agendas?

See Case Study: Rise Up Colorado: From a Target-Focused Power Analysis to a Governing Power Analysis

2.

Shifting from Short-Term Campaigns to a Long-term Governing Agenda

In order to build governing power, we need to move from waging short-term campaigns to developing long-term governing agendas that extend the strategic time horizon of our work, incorporating milestones and stepping stones toward our longer-term transformational goals. A long-term governing agenda is not a linear plan that never changes; it recognizes the political terrain is continually evolving and that our specific campaign plans need to adjust as opportunities and barriers present themselves. Keeping the long view in sight at all times allows us to continue to move in our intended direction, even as conditions shift. If we are rigorous in our long-term thinking, we will get clearer on the scope and scale of power we need to bring home our long-term objectives, and this will help us to raise our power-building ambitions.

See Case Study: Million Voters Project: Extending the Strategic Time Horizon and Making Power-Building as Important as the Win and "The Creative Methods Workers Are Using to Stop Bosses' Abuse" (Scott 2022) about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) embedding power-building and enforcement into policies

3.

Shifting from Tactical Messaging to Leveraging Narrative to Govern

We only need to look at how the governing consensus of our country has shifted to the right over the last 50 years to see how much narrative can shift through deliberate political effort in the worldview arena and how much these narratives can impact the broader political terrain. As organizers, we need to do at least two things to exercise our power on the terrain of narrative. First, we need to deepen our ability to make meaning of the broader dynamics in the world around us. This means understanding and exposing the dominant narratives that benefit the 1% and identifying the values and beliefs that we share within and across communities that inspire us to act and that align us ideologically. Second, we need to wage persistent, artistic and durable campaigns to reshape the narratives of the larger world, especially around the economy, the role of government and race.

See Case Study: Invest in Our New York (IONY) Campaign: From Tactical Messaging to Leveraging Narrative to Govern

GOVERNING POWER STRATEGY

4.

Shifting from Winning One-Off Elections to Developing Independent Political Infrastructure and Co-governing

To build strategic relationships with elected leaders that allow us to advance our long-term agenda we need to do three things. First we need to create independent political infrastructure that is controlled by, and accountable to, our organizations, including 501(c)4s, political parties, political action committees and other formations that are extensions of our organizational vision. Second, we need to shift the role of our grassroots organizations from ground troops to strategists in our electoral fights. Third, we need to adopt a co-governing approach when working with our elected officials. This means learning to view the tenure of our champion's time in office in the timeline of what it will take to win our potential victory and to shed a deeply-held idea in community organizing that elected officials are separate from us as a movement.

See Case Study: Working Families Party: Developing Independent Political Infrastructure

5.

Shifting from Narrow Base Building to Building Majoritarian Power

We cannot win, wield and sustain governing power without majorities. Yet, in our work as organizers, we often do not strive to build majoritarian power. To do so requires three shifts in our current approach: 1) Building much stronger bases that have a much wider reach into our specific constituencies 2) building power beyond our specific constituencies, uniting people across different (and sometimes disagreeing) constituencies in order to build towards a consolidated multi-racial working class majority, and 3) building across our specific organizations and transcending traditional coalition frameworks and - instead - forging long-term cross-organizational alliances to advance our long-term agendas and to change political conditions. The strategic power-building alignment tables that have taken root in several states are good examples of this approach.

See Case Study: Harold Washington for Mayor: Building Base to Lead a Constituency and Building a Multi-racial Working Class Majority

Minnesota Alignment Tables and a Path Toward Governing Power (case study)

Organizers across the country have looked to the evolution of organizing in Minnesota over the last decade to think about how to orient toward governing power. While no one would claim that Minnesota's power-building organizations achieved governing power in the state, their innovations in strategy, alliance-building, power analysis and working across different arenas of power does provide a helpful reference for others who are beginning to explore building governing power in their own context. This case study of on-the-ground organizing provides life and depth to the governing power framework.

CONCLUSION

If we - as organizers - pursue governing power we can move past the limits of our current role as protesters on the outside and move into the role of being the decision makers who can meet the needs of our communities. The process of both gaining control over government and transforming the structures of governance will not be linear. It will happen piece by piece, with steps backwards and leaps forward over the course of years. But setting our course in the direction of governing power allows us to navigate these back-and-forth dynamics while continuing to head towards a future where our most deeply held dreams are made real.