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# The 10 Laws of the GRASSROOTS

THE TOP-DOWN WORLD IS GONE. No longer can you grow your non-profit, your candidate, your cause or your business with nothing but money and noise. It's now impossible to get your project approved, your candidate elected or your funds raised just by buying some media or knowing a few people. *continued* ▶

by Donna Brazile

The future lies in what worked in the past — finding the grassroots. Working with the masses directly and invigorating them, making it easy for them to share your passion and share your idea.

I learned this the hard way. I learned it by going from parish to parish, precinct to precinct, working the communities and building the support I needed.

The good news is that you can do the same thing. You are not powerless. In fact, because you realize just how important this is, you have a huge advantage. You have an advantage of the entrenched interests, over the lazy fat cats, over the organizations that just aren't willing to follow to the ten laws.

As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, “The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen.” The key to reinvigorating electoral democracy is you!



For grassroots organizations and leaders, the most important ingredient in stirring up a new recipe for victory is to actively engage citizens to become participants in their own government. Grassroots campaigns directed toward making our political leaders more accountable for their actions could empower citizens to become active in the public policy decisions that impact their lives and our country.

As I wrote in my new book, *Cooking with Grease: Stirring the Pots in American Politics*, one person can make a difference. It has in the past and it will in the future. By organizing at the grassroots level (the simple way of saying “the point of contact” with individual citizens), your campaign can go as far and grow as fast as you envision it to spread.

The most important goal is to reach citizens where they live, eat, shop, work, play and pray. It is important to give them a compelling reason to both improve and change their lives. Let them know that one person can make a difference, and that people working together can and will effect change. The following tips should help you get started:

# 1

## **Develop your vision and clarify the objective(s) and specific goals of your grassroots campaign.**

Why do you want to change the status quo? Who should be involved in helping you succeed? How much time can you give to this effort? Will it involve raising money? How will your organization utilize supporters and volunteers? Do you have a specific timetable to achieve your goals? These are important questions to answer before you begin to “stir the pots.”

# 2

## **Evaluate the political landscape.**

Before launching your grassroots campaign, spend some time evaluating the current political landscape. Is your issue ripe for change? What obstacles must be overcome in order to accomplish the goals of your campaign? Familiarize yourself with the persons and organizations that oppose or are likely to oppose the goals of your grassroots campaign and evaluate their position. Before you get started, draw up a list of potential supporters and send them some background information and materials.

## 3

### **Simplify your mission.**

Your vision for change will manifest if you are discipline, well organized, focused and credible in delivering your message. At times when you're trying to change the status quo, it may require tremendous courage. Your organization may come under attack and pressure to back down. Some leaders will react with suspicion and others will feel threatened by your organization's message for change. Hang on to your belief in what you are trying to accomplish. In pages 73 through 92 of *Cooking with Grease*, I discuss how a few young, inexperienced but dedicated grassroots organizers worked to build a credible campaign to make Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a National holiday. Do not be daunted, and remain committed and focused when confronted with opposition to your goals. Your confidence will increase as your network expands. Success breeds success.

## 4

### **Build coalitions and networks.**

From the very beginning and throughout the grassroots campaign, contact community leaders to gain their support. Ask for their endorsement. Request lists of potential supporters and volunteers. Bring your co-workers, friends, neighbors and family members on board. Attend rallies, town meetings, community forums and public events. Find organizations or activists with whom you can join forces. During the upcoming Presidential debates, hold citizens' house parties to educate potential supporters about the issues.

## 5

### **Expand Your Assets.**

If fundraising is important to achieving your campaign goals, write down a list of political assets. Where did you go to school? Can you count on your classmates? What about local businesses? Will they contribute? Find out what types of connections people in your inner circle (family, friends, neighbors and co-workers) have and do not be afraid to ask them for support. During Jesse Jackson's historic Presidential campaign in 1984, our motto was "A poor campaign but a rich message." Without massive campaign contributions, we got out our message by simply appealing directly to the voters.

## 6

### **Stay on Message.**

Be consistent in your talking points. Repeat and emphasize your goals. As a leader of a grassroots movement, it is important to increase your visibility and accessibility in the community. Invite local leaders and activists to assist in the development of a message that is consistent with the vision and the goals of the campaign. Keep the message simple. Tell your story: Talk to people; tell them why you choose to be politically active and what's at stake in this election. Pursue free media opportunities. Whether your message is broadcast through free or earned media, the message should focus on and resonate with the issues in your local

community. Increase visibility: Submit op-ed articles, letters to the editors of local newspapers, and request the opportunity to be interviewed on local network talk shows. Scout community calendars for events offering a public forum for your message. If funds permit, distribute campaign bumper stickers and yard signs, etc. While bumper stickers and signs are not the most effective method of campaign advertisement, supporters love them and they help to keep morale high. If local activists are to advocate for campaign issues, strive for consistency in delivering the campaign message.

## 7

### **Stay informed.**

Knowledge is power. We live in the age of information. With the 24-hour cable news cycle, stay up-to-date on changing developments. In addition to watching the news, listen to talk radio, read print publications and follow online blogs. Review national and local polls conducted by the media and non-profit organizations. Check the “talking points” of political parties, political candidates and major national organizations on their websites. They have information already laid out for you.

## 8

### **Keep others informed.**

One of the greatest mistakes in American politics is our inability to communicate the truth to voters. Filter what you learn and start your own newsletter on the web or in print and distribute it around your network; have each person send it to a friend and see how quickly your network will grow. If appropriate and if funds permit, publish and mail campaign literature to persons likely to vote. Following every event, fund-raiser, press opportunity, political debate, public forum, and voter registration campaign, discuss with your grassroots operation the effectiveness of your message delivery and ways it can be improved. Update your website often and encourage citizens to provide feedback and information.

## 9

### **Register new voters.**

The majority of Americans are not Democratic or Republican. They are not independent nor are they working for a third party candidate—they are simply non-voters. As a grassroots organization, encourage your volunteers and supporters to register new voters and to bring new energy and excitement to electoral democracy. Solicit volunteers to register voters-at-large. Don't forget to target young voters with a special emphasis on "youth at the booth." Encourage young Americans to participate. With the assistance of community-based organizations, also target potential voters who would likely be supportive of your campaign.

# 10

## Get out the Vote.

Tuesday, November 2, 2004 is Election Day across the country. This is a great time to recruit new supporters and to help mobilize citizens to get to the polls. Encourage your supporters to vote early or absentee to avoid long lines on Election Day. If your grassroots campaign involves a ballot measure or initiative, identify political partners to help you contact voters well in advance of the election. Line up volunteers to staff phone banks and to make local telephone calls. Send weekly e-mails to alert them about upcoming pre-election events. Encourage your volunteers to assist with getting out the vote. Don't forget to educate potential voters about the mechanics of voting (date, times and location of correct polling site, voter registration card, requisite identification needed, and review the sample ballot.)

And so what if you're not trying to elect a President? You are trying to elect something or somebody. You are trying to raise money or raise awareness or raise the possibility of success. And with just one or two exceptions, every one of these laws is going to help you get there. Don't stop until you do.

## Resources

For more information on organizing an effective grassroots campaign:

Brazile, Donna, **COOKING WITH GREASE**: Stirring the Pots of American Politics

<http://www.cookingwithgrease.com>

Britell, Jim, **ORGANIZE TO WIN**: A Guide to Help People Organize Community Campaigns.

<http://www.britell.com/text/tgrassroots.html>

### **POLLINGREPORT.COM**

<http://pollingreport.com/>

### **ROCK THE VOTE**

<http://www.rockthevote.org/>

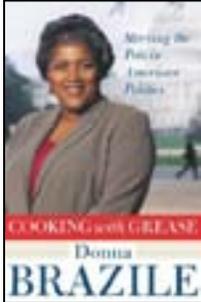
**LOCAL VICTORY**: Your Guide to Winning Local Elections:

[http://www.localvictory.com/Articles/voter\\_registration.html](http://www.localvictory.com/Articles/voter_registration.html)

### **ON THE ISSUES**

<http://www.issues2000.org/default.htm>

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## BUY THE BOOK

For more details or to buy a copy of Donna Brazile's book, *Cooking with Grease: Stirring the Pots of American Politics*, click here.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Brazile is a senior political strategist and former campaign manager for Gore–Lieberman 2000—the first African American to lead a major presidential campaign. She is currently chair of the Democratic National Committee's Voting Rights Institute and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University.

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