



# GRASSROOTS-LED CAMPAIGNS

Lessons from the new frontier of people-powered campaigning platforms and programs



MOBILISATION LAB.ORG

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# ABOUT MOBILISATION LAB



MOBILISATION LAB.ORG

**We exist to transform how campaigns are fought and won, pioneering a powerful new era of “people-powered” strategies that amplify campaign impact and create positive change.**

The Mobilisation Lab at Greenpeace provides the global organization and its allies a dynamic, forward-looking space to envision, test, and roll out creative new means of inspiring larger networks of leaders and people around the world to break through and win on threats to people and the planet.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Colin previously worked as a Senior Strategist at M+R Strategic Services, Senior Email Campaigner for Advocacy and Elections at Organizing for America, and Internet Director for Joe Sestak's 2006 congressional campaign.

# METHODOLOGY

**We conducted 9 total interviews with a diverse group at the leading edge of grassroots-led campaigns:**

- 13 total people interviewed, including project leads and other staff.
- Spoke with five campaigning organizations with active platforms, one group considering starting, two businesses, and one individual.
- Of the eight campaigning organizations or businesses, three are based in non-U.S. countries and three are active in multiple countries.
- Groups ranged from having no platform to established, years-old platforms.

# METHODOLOGY

- Due to Mobilisation Lab's global mission, we prioritized international diversity with our limited time. We were also interested in the interplay between traditional online campaigning models and grassroots-led campaigns.
- We were not able to include some smaller U.S.-based groups, like OccupyOurHomes.org or Coworker.org, which base almost all their work around grassroots-led campaigns.
- Our results thus reflect the lessons of large online campaigns organizations, but we believe the insight gathered can be useful to many.

# DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Grassroots-led campaigns (GLCs)** – Online campaigns created by everyday people instead of paid campaign staff. Usually rooted in an online petition. Also known as distributed petitions (See pg. 7).

**Grassroots-led campaigns (GLC) platforms** – Can refer to either the *technology* that allows people to start a petition and run their own campaign, or an organization's *program* encouraging this work.

**Campaign** – Refers to a single petition and follow-up, as used in online organizing. This is as opposed to the traditional definition of online asks as tactics in bigger, multi-faceted campaigns.

**Members** – Individuals on an organization's email list.

# NOTE ON “GRASSROOTS-LED CAMPAIGNS”

Why not just call them “distributed petition platforms”?

All of the platforms we studied start with petitions. But petitions are often just the start of online campaigns that include follow-up asks, in-person deliveries, and other tactics.

It’s true that there were grassroots-led campaigns long before there were distributed petition platforms (or online campaigns!). In a sense, these tools are bringing digital strategy back to tried-and-true organizing techniques.

What is new is the scale, the pace, and the tactic (individual online petitions), all driven by new technology. But, for lack of a perfect term, we chose “**grassroots-led campaigns.**”

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our sincerest appreciation and gratitude to:

38 Degrees  
Avaaz  
Change.org  
ControlShift Labs  
CREDO Action  
Dave Karpf  
GetUp!  
Greenpeace India  
MoveOn.org

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# THE BASICS

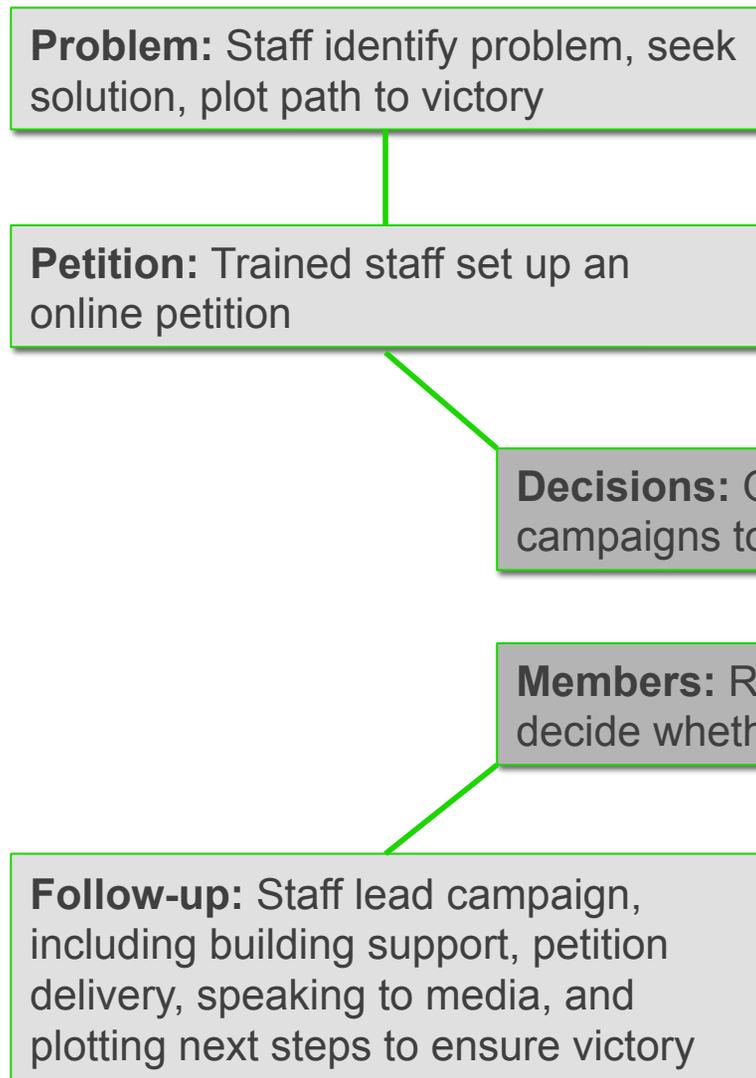
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What are grassroots-led campaigns? Are they right for you?

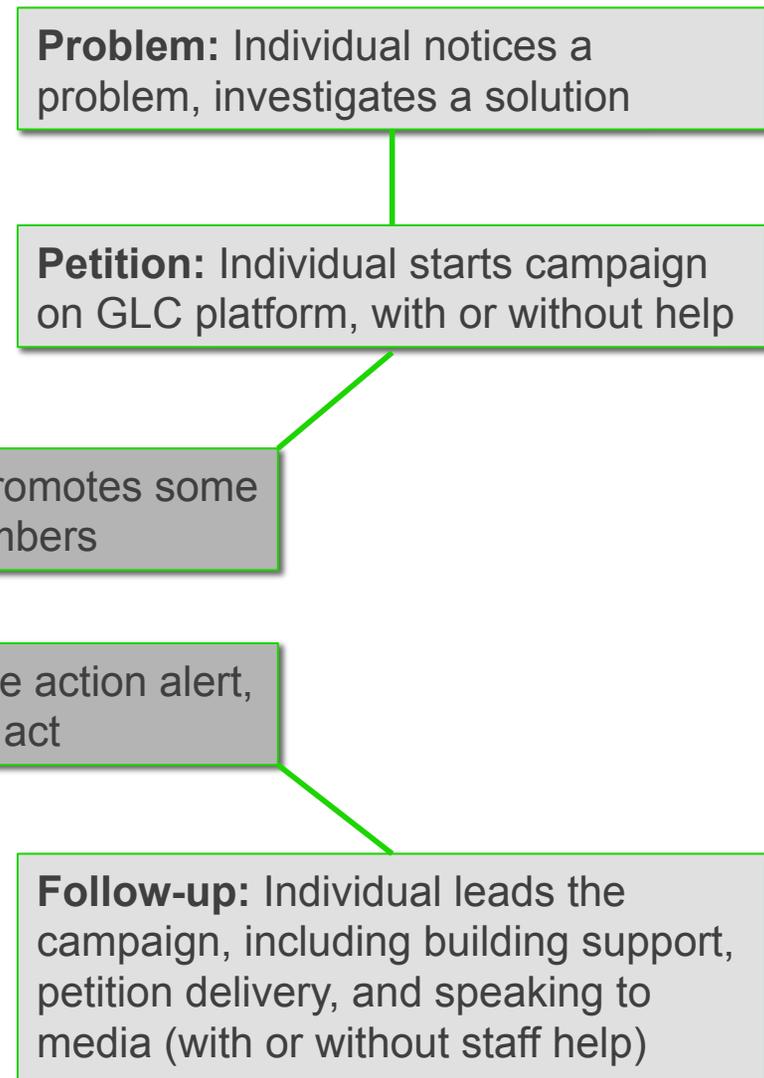
# THE BASICS

- Understand the grassroots-led campaigns model
- Review of history and technology
- Why you should care
- Five key takeaways from this study

## TRADITIONAL MODEL



## GLC MODEL



# GROWING FAST



# SIX EXISTING TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS

- Avaaz (Free)
- MoveOn (Free; Partner program inc. mini-grants)
- The Action Network (Free; Full set of campaigns tools)
- Change.org (Free; Paid partner program)
- Care2.org (Free; Paid partner program)
- ControlShift Labs
  - Sole current provider of out-of-the-box GLC toolset
  - Allows you to set up your own branded platform and receive all list growth
  - Powers GetUp! CommunityRun, 38 Degrees CampaignsByYou, CREDO Mobilize, GreenpeaceX, DemocracyForAmerica YouPower, and others



**MoveOn.org**  
DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

START A PETITION | MANAGE PETITIONS | DONATE

CAMPAIGNS | LOGIN | ABOUT | DONATE

MoveOn leaders in action

### Start a campaign with a MoveOn Petition

There are more than 8 million MoveOn shared progress...

**START**

**My Obamacare Story**

We're launching a big campaign calling on the media to start giving balanced coverage to the Affordable Care Act, but for it to work, we need real-world stories from people whose lives are already better thanks to...

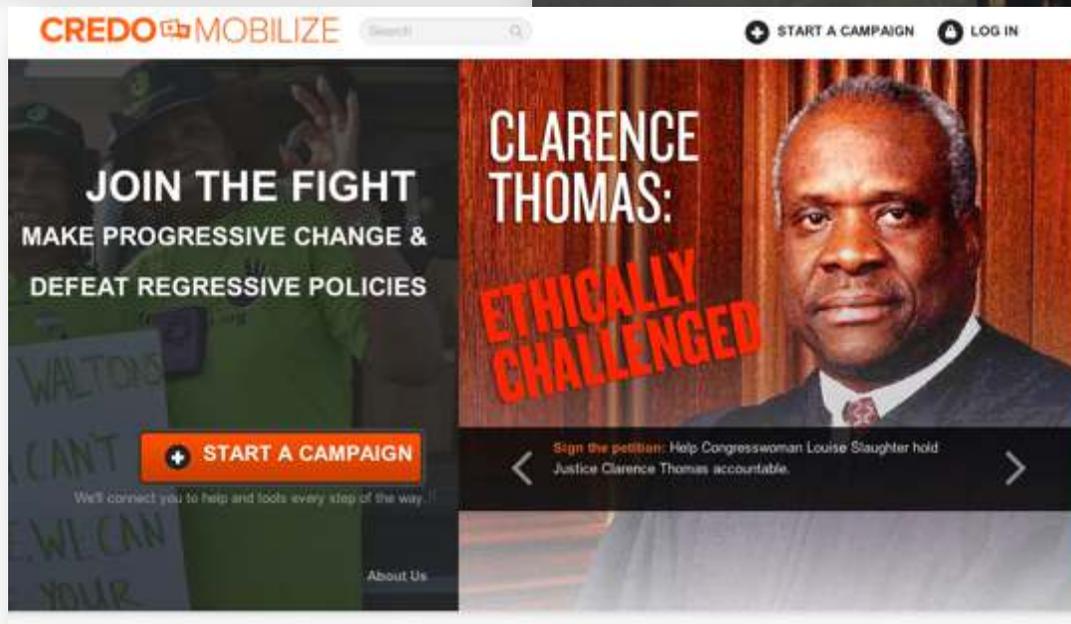


**GREENPEACE**

START A CAMPAIGN | LOG IN

## START AND WIN LOCAL CAMPAIGNS

Over Packed victory! State Expert Appraisal Committee rejects the destructive project due to public pressure



**CREDO** **MOBILIZE**

START A CAMPAIGN | LOG IN

## JOIN THE FIGHT

MAKE PROGRESSIVE CHANGE & DEFEAT REGRESSIVE POLICIES

**START A CAMPAIGN**

We'll connect you to help and tools every step of the way.

### CLARENCE THOMAS: ETHICALLY CHALLENGED

Sign the petition: Help Congresswoman Louise Slaughter hold Justice Clarence Thomas accountable.

# WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

## Benefits identified from interviews:

- List growth
- Development of volunteers and managing partners
- Understanding what your members care about
- Identifying new campaigns
- Ability to take on more campaigns – in some cases

# SOUND GOOD? NOT SO FAST

## **Most common concerns before starting a program:**

- Cost
- Brand risk and inappropriate campaigns
- Added value to organization and members
- “Fit” of new list sign-ups

# FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 1

### **If you generate campaigns and test, you will grow**

- Your GLC program will produce net list growth if you generate a high volume of campaigns, and promote the ones which recruit new people.
- This takes work – and time! Set expectations: You won't grow by 3 million overnight.
- Expect growth in the range of 1% – 10% of your existing list each month (dependent on volume of campaigns and performance).

# FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 2

### **Campaign volume leads to growth and impact**

- Generating dozens of quality campaigns each month is key to growth and, to a lesser extent, impact.
- To generate volume, you need two out of three:
  - A big network of super-volunteers, partners, or coalition members;
  - An email list of at least 500,000 (preferably 1 million); or
  - A “blue sky” multi-issue focus, or an issue with hundreds of different campaign opportunities.
- If you cannot do this, consider clone campaigns (pgs. 41, 45).

# FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 3

### **GLCs win victories and add value but don't entirely replace staff-led campaigns**

- GLCs “win” short-term, specific, tactical campaigns against targets unaccustomed to mass public pressure.
- With some exceptions, they do not tend to impact major legislative or public policy battles, or long-term fights against entrenched opponents.
- GLCs add value to individuals (more power / authority), and organizations (list growth, membership, new opportunities, and media coverage) working for social change.

# FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 4

### **Invest staff time to be successful**

- Devote at least one full time staffer.
- Search out and prompt people to start petitions.
- Provide advice, editing, and support for campaign creators.

# FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 5

### **Initial concerns and expectations are often overstated**

- A thoughtful moderation process can minimize brand risk and bad media from inappropriate campaigns.
- New list sign-ups mesh ideologically and perform on par with existing members.
- Most groups find that benefits to members and their organization outweigh, or equal, costs.
- Success requires investing staff and being patient. Growth is common but exponential growth is rare.

# FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. If you generate campaigns and test, you will grow.
2. Campaign volume leads to growth and impact.
3. GLCs win victories and add value but don't entirely replace staff-led campaigns.
4. Invest staff time to be successful.
5. Initial concerns and expectations are often over-stated.

# IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

- Weigh what it takes to be successful.
- Clearly define your goals and metrics.
- Consider platforms with partner programs, like MoveOn.org, CREDO Mobilize, or Change.org (paid).

Read on to better understand impacts and how to succeed...

# IN SUM

Overcome the **CHALLENGE OF VOLUME**,  
being both willing and able  
to generate campaigns...

...to experience the **VALUE OF VOLUME** in  
building the capacities of individuals and  
organizations to do more.

# IMPACT

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What impact do grassroots-led campaigns have on the world?

# IMPACT ON THE WORLD

## Grassroots-led campaigns are likely to “win”:

- When the target of the campaign is not an elected official, is outside the United States, or is a small business or local government unaccustomed to facing public pressure:

*Petition on GetUp! CommunityRun to local council to save Sleaford Bay*

- When the “ask” is something the target has complete power to change:  
*U.S. Federal Elections Commission denies Tea Party group exemption from normal reporting and disclosure rules after CREDO member campaign*

- When the fight can be won with an initial round of public and media pressure:  
*38 Degrees CampaignsByYou campaign to keep climate change in the curriculum causes media storm*

# IMPACT ON THE WORLD

## Grassroots-led campaigns are less likely to “win”:

- When the targets of the campaign are elected officials or major corporations accustomed to public pressure on this topic:

*Tell Parliament: Eliminate predatory lending!*

- When the “ask” is not something the target can change quickly:

*Tell Congress: Stop climate change!*

- When the campaign requires long-term organizing to build public pressure and political will:

*Tell the President: Expand Social Security!*

# IMPACT ON THE WORLD

## Grassroots-led campaigns have the most impact:

- When the problem might not have otherwise received significant attention:  
*38 Degrees members stop local library and museum closures*
- When large organizations might not have otherwise engaged in the campaign:  
*Justice for Trayvon Martin*
- When they are rapid-response campaigns from fast-moving individuals:  
*After Abercrombie & Fitch CEO makes disparaging comments,  
Change.org petition demands company make clothes for all sizes*
- When they attack big issues on multiple fronts simultaneously:  
*MoveOn members launch state, local, and corporate campaigns on gun  
violence*

# IMPACT VS. VALUE

We asked:

“What **impact** do grassroots-led campaigns have on the world?”

We should have asked:

“What **value** are grassroots-led campaigns to people trying to change the world?”

# VALUE FOR INDIVIDUALS



- Ability to start campaigns on problems you care about.
- Ability to win campaigns without an intermediary organization, or better engage with a favorite org.
- Experience running and winning a campaign.
- Increased sense of agency and ability to make a difference.

# VALUE FOR ORGANIZATIONS



- Membership growth
- Relationship with members and partners
- Volunteer development
- Campaigns and staffing
- Media and narrative

# ORGANIZATIONS: MEMBERSHIP GROWTH

- Every group interviewed reported growth.
- You must invest time, generate volume, and test.
- Expectations around the rate of growth and concerns about the “fit” of new members both tend to be over-stated.
- Every group factors a campaign’s potential ability to recruit into the decision to promote a campaign widely. But even those who give it less weight still experienced growth.

# ORGANIZATIONS: VOLUNTEERS



- Members gain experience planning and running campaigns, which builds capacity for future work.
- Many members continue their work even after the campaign concludes.
- These platforms are quickly becoming a service that active volunteers expect from an org.
- With other platforms available, volunteers will start campaigns anyway – but you won't benefit from knowing what your volunteers care about, or be able to reach the people they recruit.

# ORGANIZATIONS: CAMPAIGNS & STAFFING

- Groups reported exploring types of campaigns they may not have otherwise:
  - CREDO Mobilize, media accountability: [“Tell NBC News: Correcting Republican Lies is Part of Your Job.”](#)
  - GetUp! CommunityRun, most successful campaign: [“Stop the Super Trawler”](#)
  - 38 Degrees CampaignsByYou, local victories: [“Saving Herefordshire’s Libraries”](#)
  - Greenpeace India’s GreenpeaceX, mass outcry on animal cruelty: [“Leopard Burned Alive in Uttarkhand, India”](#)
- Many groups said that a GLC platform builds capacity to run more campaigns at once – but others found no benefit. Test it yourself!

# ORGANIZATIONS: RELATIONSHIPS



- Completely change the way you listen to members. Instead of low-response surveys, analyze new campaigns to understand what your members care about and where they stand on complicated issues.
- Provide a service to your members by giving them the power to start campaigns, instead of waiting for you to ask them for help.
- Test partner requests or volunteer ideas with minimal effort, instead of taking up time or having to say “no.”

# ORGANIZATIONS: MEDIA AND NARRATIVE

- More campaigns mean more chances for media coverage, and non-traditional campaigns lead to non-political media.
- Media are more likely to report on a grassroots-led campaign than one created by an organization.
  - *“We hadn’t gotten press on an internet petition in years, until regular people started creating them.” – MoveOn.org*
- Wins matter – your members’ victories show your organization to be strong and effective.

Grassroots-led campaigns harness the  
**VALUE OF VOLUME**

to increase the capacity of individuals and organizations to create social change.

...but are not yet a replacement for long-term, staff-led campaigns when it comes to big problems.

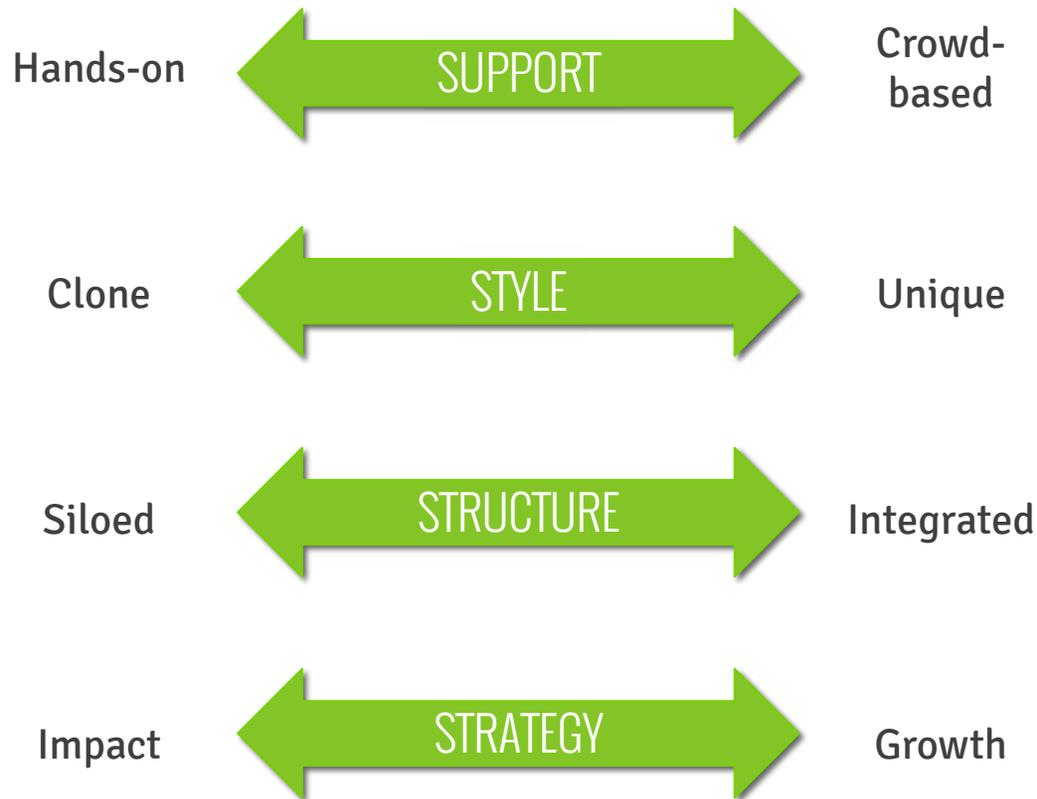
# LESSONS

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What can we learn from current platforms?

# NO TWO PLATFORMS ARE THE SAME

There are four dimensions that differentiate GLC programs:



# SUPPORT

## HANDS-ON

- Staff often seek out and coach people to start campaigns, and spend significant time helping all creators
- Staff opinions play a bigger role in which campaigns to promote widely
- Tend to be newer, smaller, or single-issue platforms like CREDO Mobilize or GreenpeaceX

## CROWD-BASED

- Campaigns start unprompted or in response to mass email, and staff provide significant support to featured campaigns only
- Automated testing or member surveys play a bigger role in which campaigns to promote widely
- Tend to be older, larger, and multi-issue platforms like Change.org or MoveOn.org

# STYLE

## CLONE

- Staff plan campaigns and seek members to “start” them, or to lead a local part of national campaign
- Distributed version of current campaigns model, with many similar petitions instead of one
- Range from pure clone campaigns with identical petitions and targets to “franchise” campaigns with set goals but strategic freedom

## UNIQUE

- Members choose which campaigns to start, and staff role is to identify and support the best campaigns
- Unique campaigns with different topics, petitions, and targets
- Range from hyper-local, non-replicable campaigns to staff support for a single successful petition (e.g. Justice for Trayvon Martin).

# STRUCTURE

## SILOED

- GLC platform not a part of overall organization's goals and benchmarks
- Tend to invest only a single or part-time staffer, few resources for seeking and promoting campaigns
- Rarely incorporate GLCs as tactic within major, long-term, staff-led campaigns

## INTEGRATED

- GLC platform included in organization's goals and benchmarks
- Tend to have multiple staff involved in program and significant resources (such as email calendar) devoted to seeking and promoting campaigns
- Likely to view (unique or clone) member campaigns as a tool for advancing staff-led campaigns

# STRATEGY

## GROWTH

- Primary goal of program is growth in membership (email list)
- Promote the campaigns that will recruit the most new members
- Tend to be siloed, unique, have limited staff and resources invested

## IMPACT

- Primary goal of program is creating impact through campaigns
- Promote the campaigns that will have the most impact (as well as recruiting new members)
- Tend to be integrated, mix of unique and clone campaigns, with multiple staff and more resources invested

# ALL PLATFORMS ARE A MIX



- Even big “crowd” platforms sometimes push friends to start campaigns on newsworthy topics.
- Organizations will encourage members to start “clone” versions of a “unique” campaign started by another member.
- Most programs start out “siloeed” – and that’s a good thing! (See: Start Smart, page 52).
- Every organization tests for growth – it comes down to priority.

# CONSIDER CLONE CAMPAIGNS

- Clone campaigns are a distributed version of the typical online campaign model where volunteers lead one aspect of a national campaign.
- Range from “wildfire” campaigns with identical petitions to localized targets, to “franchise” campaigns with set goals but member freedom to decide strategy.
- This style gives members more power and ownership than traditional online campaign models, and can result in marginally more growth.
- Groups reported that members could be less invested in these campaigns than those they created from scratch.

TIP: Consider clone campaigns as a tactic that gives members a bigger role, or as a stepping stone to a bigger GLC program.

# STAFF-LED CAMPAIGNS MATTER



- GLCs are almost always an addition to your current approach, not an alternative.
- There will always be a value to the inside game, long-term planning and organizing, and framing by staff with knowledge and experience.
- We are simply seeing a new equilibrium established in online campaigns, allowing members to be more effective and have more control while staff continue to coordinate big fights.

# GLCS REQUIRE DIFFERENT STAFF SKILLS

- None of the people managing successful platforms today had experience with the model before they started.

TIP: Just look for someone who understands online campaigns, likes working with volunteers, and believes in testing.

- Existing staff roles change, however:
  - Campaigners must act more like organizers or coaches, cultivating volunteers or walking non-experts through a campaign instead of moving swiftly and independently.
  - Media staff should be as comfortable pitching a personal story-based petition to the *Ellen Degeneres Show* as they are hyping a legislative campaign to the *Times of India*.

# TRUST YOUR MEMBERSHIP



- Don't ask members to start campaigns, and then decide the topics they care about aren't important! GLCs are not just new technology. They reorient the way online organizations interact with members and volunteers.
- Realize that every petition creator is different. Some will devote their entire life to a campaign. Others will lose interest after it gets a little attention. Both are okay.

# PROGRAMS CHANGE

- New programs tend to be siloed and hands-on.

TIP: Have a plan to show value to staff and members in order to become more of an integrated, crowd-based program.

- Early success or failure can be misleading:
  - One group said GLC action rates started out below their other campaigns, but have since surpassed them.
  - Another group devoted significant staff to supporting GLCs, then scaled back after seeing membership growth but limited impact.

# STORYTELLING IS KEY



Telling the story of a successful campaign will model the behavior to others, show that an individual can make a difference, and build your platform's brand as a place to create change:

- Invest in generating media coverage of campaigns.
- Report back on successful campaigns to signers (or even your whole list).
- Highlight victories on your website.

# STEPS TO SUCCESS

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What practical rules will help you succeed?

# START SMART



- Make sure leadership on board before you begin.
- Don't take this on in your spare time – invest in staff.
- Don't issue a media release announcing your ground-breaking new program before you know it will succeed.
- Launch a minimum viable product (MVP) to assess whether it works for you:
  - Three months;
  - One staffer + full team support;
  - Email calendar / access to volunteers or partners; and
  - Functioning petition platform.

# ASK

- A “Start a Petition!” button on your site is not enough.
- Take a **hands-on** approach and ask:
  - Members who write in with campaign ideas;
  - Partners requesting help;
  - Friends or friendly bloggers fired up about an issue; or
  - Volunteers willing to take on a great idea that’s not their own.
- Tap the power of the **crowd**:
  - Series of emails asking volunteers or local leaders to start campaigns;
  - Regular (monthly or quarterly) prompts to full list;
  - Asks at the end of report-back emails; or
  - Prompt people to start clone versions of other members’ campaigns.

# MODERATE



Avoid bad media by being smart up front. Decide what conditions a campaign must meet before it is:

- Posted on your site at all;
- Viewable, but only if you have the URL;
- Publicly viewable and searchable;
- Removed, after going live (can be worse than not publishing!);
- Featured on your GLC platform homepage;
- Tested to a sample of your list;
- Promoted on social media; and
- Promoted to your full list.

# SUPPORT

- Leading a campaign is harder than signing a petition or even attending an event. Make time to contact and support creators.
- Where possible, provide a basic level of support:
  - Editing, framing, fact-checking, and advising on target and ask.
  - Help promoting, collecting, and delivering petition signatures.
- Invest in the best campaigns. For instance, groups interviewed:
  - Promoted them to lists and networks;
  - Made sure the full-time project lead could issue media releases, send emails to the list, and had time to support campaigns;
  - Assigned campaigns or media staff to focus on GLCs on a rotating basis;
  - Established a team devoted to turning the best campaigns into huge wins;
  - Sent a videographer to help tell the campaign story; or
  - Connected the campaign creator with local partners working on that issue.

# TEST

- Test campaigns before promoting:
  - Establish a minimum of support campaigns must meet before testing.
  - Consider testing first to people likely to be interested in that issue.
  - Before sending full-list, test to a random sample.
  - Evaluate list growth as well as overall signature numbers.
  - Pay attention to which campaigns are shared on social networks.
- Constantly evaluate your program:
  - Format and content of emails prompting people to start campaigns;
  - Format and content of emails asking members to join a campaign;
  - Campaign creator experience and support; and
  - Membership growth and campaigns impact.

# FIVE STEPS TO SUCCESS



- 1. Start smart**
- 2. Ask**
- 3. Moderate**
- 4. Support**
- 5. Test**

# CONCLUSION

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Where do grassroots-led campaigns go from here?

# FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. If you generate campaigns and test, you will grow.
2. Campaign volume leads to growth and impact.
3. GLCs win victories and add value but don't entirely replace staff-led campaigns.
4. Invest staff time to be successful.
5. Initial concerns and expectations are often over-stated.

# THE FUTURE



Despite their growth, grassroots-led campaigns are in their infancy.

The future lies in:

- 1) Refining crowd-powered platforms.**
- 2) Expansion of the hands-on model.**

# THE FUTURE

**The crowd model will continue to be refined, with a focus on finding the right people and giving them more support:**

- New techniques for identifying people who will start great campaigns, and supporting them at scale.
- New tools to let campaign creators do more than start petitions.
- New analytics to better listen and model behavior.
- More integration into organization and campaigning.

# THE FUTURE

## **More groups will incorporate GLCs into their existing work, instead of building a new open platform:**

- Unclear how big of a market there is for additional unique, crowd platforms, especially single-issue platforms. Existing platforms' partnership programs also offer some benefits.
- Groups will grow the hands-on and clone approaches:
  - Tasking organizers to work with local leaders to run campaigns;
  - Offering platforms to affiliates, coalitions, or partners; or
  - Incorporating clone tactics into every campaign.

# MORE?!



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