

## **The Path to Partnership:**

*Six Keys for Building Strong, Long-lasting Coalitions*

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Introduction .....	3
Description of the Partnership Project.....	4
Conditions for Success .....	7
Good Timing.....	7
Visionary Funding.....	8
Common Interests and Goals.....	10
Self-Governance.....	10
Trusting Relationships .....	12
Incentives for Organizational Participation: Benefits that Outweigh the Costs.....	13
Assessing the Success of the Partnership Project.....	17
Conclusion.....	18
Acknowledgements .....	21
Sources .....	21

## Introduction

In 1997, the Executive Vice President and General Counsel for the National Environmental Trust, Thomas Wathen, wrote a white paper describing “The Art of Building A Coalition Campaign.” (Wathen 1997) The piece describes the conditions under which coalition campaigns tend to be successful and those under which they tend to fail. It stresses the importance of identifying a set of clear, result-oriented goals for a campaign, rather than selecting process-based goals or leaving the objectives amorphaously defined. When no concrete goal is agreed upon, Wathen argues, campaigns may persist beyond their effectiveness and prove unsustainable and unsatisfying. Now, ten years of coalition organizing later, Wathen claims that his understanding of coalition campaigns has only been reinforced. (Wathen 2006)

However, what happens when a coalition is built that is larger than any single campaign? When the coalitional group is so tightly bonded that is it able to work on multiple different campaigns simultaneously? When the coalition is so strong that individual organizational members are able to support campaigns that fall outside their specific missions to benefit the whole? When there is no specific goal or endpoint, other than to improve conditions broadly across a spectrum of issues? The Partnership Project, a seven year-old coalition of the largest 21 environmental advocacy organizations in the nation, has proven that it *is* possible to be all of these things and be impressively successful. Described glowingly by its members, the Partnership Project has succeeded beyond anyone’s wildest expectations, building more than just campaign victories; perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the Partnership has been its surprising ability to foster a new culture of cooperation within the environmental movement.

Puzzlingly, the Partnership Project (PP) has been unique in its success. Several other social issue-groups have sought to build long-lived coalitions, modeled after the PP, but none have

functioned as smoothly or proven as powerful as the organization that served as their inspiration.<sup>1</sup>

This paper lays out the six conditions that have allowed the PP to become a powerhouse of collaboration, while others have failed. Once we have described these conditions, we will explain how they have led to the success of the PP, how this success has been assessed, and how this information may be applied to the development of future long-living coalition groups.

## **Description of the Partnership Project**

The Partnership Project is the most significant infrastructure tool that the environmental movement has developed since the League of Conservation Voters was created in the 1980s. In the words of one board member, the project is the most effective center for collaboration that the community has ever had... [it] represents a bold and innovative approach to bringing national environmental groups together, and has created a vehicle for organizing and mobilizing the expanding environmental constituency. (Ross 2000)

The Partnership Project is a coalition of 21 of the nation's largest environmental advocacy groups. Becoming operational on September 1, 1999 with a \$5 million grant from the Turner Foundation, the 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization represents over four million members. When originally discussed, the project was only envisioned to act as a "national lists project," a central location for merging and appending partner groups' membership databases with voter and demographic data (such as voting history, congressional district, age, income, presence of children, etc.) However, once the Partnership's eight founding members actually began meeting, their

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<sup>1</sup> During our interview process, many subjects mentioned a few other attempts to develop Partnership Project-style coalitions. These efforts took place within the choice community and the hook and bullet community. Though we did not fully investigate these projects, we did speak with Paul Hansen, head of the "Teddy Roosevelt Conservation Partnership," (TRCP) a coalition of conservation and recreation groups working "to preserve the traditions of hunting and fishing." Hansen could offer many insights into the differences between the PP and the TRCP because he also serves as a PP Board member through his position as the Executive Director of the Izaak Walton League. Our conversation with Hansen revealed that, though TRCP was originally modeled after the PP, it has really become a very different kind of project, hiring twenty staff people and publicly branding itself as its own entity. (Hansen 2006)

ambitions for the project expanded. The Partnership Project became a new forum for collaboration, providing the environmental community powerful new capabilities in outreach and issue advocacy, broadening the array of communication tools employed by environmental groups to include phone banking, online activism, and more strategic direct mail campaigns. (Dewey 2006) The official mission of the PP is “to bring full measure of the national environmental community to bear on shared policy concerns (in order to) increase the priority that national policy makers place on environmental issues.” (Ross 2000) The Partnership Project has taken on numerous national campaigns since its inception, including but not limited to work on Clean Air, Clean Water, Endangered Species, Everglades Restoration, Climate Change, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Snake River Dams, fighting anti-environmental riders on spending bills, and voter participation. (Ross 2000, Gardiner 2002, [www.saveourevironment.org](http://www.saveourevironment.org)) In addition to its primary focus on federal efforts, the PP has also tackled over 30 statewide regulatory campaigns and ballot initiatives, including work on vehicle emission standards in California, assisting state coalitions already working on these issues. (Ross 2000, Waterman 2006)

The public face of the Partnership Project is the Web site “[www.saveourevironment.org](http://www.saveourevironment.org),” launched by PP member groups on Earth Day 2000. It showcases nineteen of the twenty-one partner groups and has helped to create a framework for proactive organizing campaigns among all member groups, without becoming an overbearing force upon the individual groups themselves. In addition, it has been responsible for recruiting over 400,000 “e-activists,” individuals who have signed up to receive email alerts and remain engaged in PP campaigns, since its inception.<sup>2</sup> These e-activists are generally not associated with any of the participating organization’s member lists, but represent a new set of individuals involved in the movement. This list is one of the largest such e-activist lists in the environmental community. (Waterman 2006)

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<sup>2</sup> The PP grew its email list by running campaigns on “for-profit” Web sites. (Dewey 2006)

The initial construction of the Partnership Project took less than a year, though it had no model to follow in its development. A brainchild of the Turner Foundation, the coalition was designed to avoid becoming a full-scale environmental group of its own, competing for funding and members with existing groups. The foundation was adamantly in agreement with the leading environmental groups that there should not be an effort to create a single organization that purported to speak on behalf of the entire environmental movement. (Bahouth 2006) After a period of negotiation with participating environmental groups, the Turner Foundation agreed to offer them the opportunity to take the lead in designing the rules that would govern the PP. The resulting governance structure was thus developed collaboratively by the initial member groups in discussion and negotiation with the Turner Foundation. (Bahouth 2006)

It is also important to note that the PP's operational strategy has been enhanced by the creation of the Collaborative Environmental Campaign (CEC). The CEC, formally known as the "Collaborative Defense Campaign," was launched as an informal subsidiary to the PP in December 2000. It was created, not long after the PP was established, to provide a set of tools for the environmental community that the PP was not designed to offer, such as paid organizers, earned and paid media, and opinion research. (Gardiner 2002, Weiss 2006) The CEC began as a forum for environmental groups to collaborate on the defense of key environmental legislation after the election of George W. Bush in 2000, and recently, the CEC effectively merged with the Partnership Project (Schlickeisen 2006, Weiss 2006). The CEC is administered by Dan Weiss, former Political Director of the Sierra Club and current Senior Vice President of M&R Strategic Services. Much like the PP, the CEC is not intended to be a publicly known entity, because it wishes to avoid drawing attention away from the participating organizations themselves. Rather, all CEC actions are undertaken in the names of the organizations that are a part of the CEC and the PP, and CEC management takes great pride in the fact that the Campaign remains "un-googleable." (Weiss 2006)

The PP, in conjunction with the CEC, has a \$2.3 million budget in 2006 and has, over its lifespan, raised a total of \$15 million in funds, primarily from foundations including the Beldon Fund, Pew Charitable Trusts, the Turner Foundation, the Energy Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the Packard Foundation, the Scherman Foundation, the Brainerd Foundation, and the John Merck Fund. (Ross 2000 and Waterman 2006)

### **Conditions for Success**

We have identified six qualities that have led to the success of the Partnership Project: good timing, the presence of visionary funding, alignment around common interests and goals, a structure for self-governance, the development of trusting relationships among coalition members, and the presence of proper incentives for organizational participation. Many of these qualities were identified for us by PP coalition members during our interview process; others have been discovered through analysis of our own.

#### *Good Timing*

A crucial factor in the Partnership Project's success was the timing of its inception. Only twenty years ago, there was very little coalition activity on any level within the environmental community. Prior to the 1994 Republican "revolution," environmental groups were hostile to the idea of collaboratively sharing membership lists with one another for advocacy purposes. (Dewey 2006) Organizations feared that their lists would be "captured," and collaborative propositions were usually met with great resistance. In addition, by comparison groups rarely used their membership lists for advocacy, especially collaborative advocacy – lists were seen primarily as fundraising devices.

However, in the late 1990s when the Partnership Project was born, environmental groups were struggling to get their voices heard and their issues addressed in the national arena. The

Clinton Administration had not allied itself closely with an environmental agenda, despite the pro-environmental leanings of Vice President Al Gore. The organizational histories of the major environmental groups reveal that this was an era of stagnation and frustration with regard to federal environmental standards. (Bahouth 2006) The old strategies for engaging grassroots activists and lobbying the federal government were no longer working as effectively. When the Bush Administration took power in 2000, environmental groups realized that they would have to mount a much stronger defense than they had previously attempted. As noted by Debbie Sease, Legislative Director of the Sierra Club and PP Board member,

In another era, we were fighting over how many parts per billion of pollution we should allow to protect water quality. At that time, there may have been less in common and less value in collaborating. But when we formed the Partnership, we knew we had to be as consolidated as possible. And once you invest in a relationship and create a structure that is meeting your needs, you use it and work with it in good times and bad. (Sease 2006)

The realization by the Turner Foundation and other environmental donors, including the Beldon Fund, that they would not be able to afford funding all of the existing environmental advocacy groups' projects individually, led them to conclude that a more coordinated effort would be necessary. (Weiss 2006) Based on these realizations and the changing political climate, these foundations provided the initial funding for both the Partnership Project and the CEC; significantly changing the way the environmental movement would function into the future.

### *Visionary Funding*

The Partnership Project exists because of the generosity and vision of the Turner Foundation. (Ross 2000)

In the fall of 1999, Ted Turner approached the environmental community with a very unique funding proposition. His foundation expressed interest in giving out several large grants to

the major environmental groups, but it wanted to do so without calling any public attention to the donations. The goal was to provide general support grants for groups to spend on 501(c) 3 charitable purposes. Turner, known for speedy implementation, committed to giving \$5 million to what became the PP in the first two years and \$3.8 million in 2001. (Waterman 2006) According to Peter Bahouth, head of the Turner Foundation at the time, the Foundation had a reputation for being open and willing to listen to organizations and learn about their needs. It approached its funding relationships with an open mind, perceiving the groups seeking funding as experts and itself as a facilitator in project development. By supporting list enhancement for the whole coalition of groups, Turner believed he would be supporting the individual groups as well. As Bahouth pointed out, “Turner was consultative, and I think that was very important... [the environmental groups] are giving us an education, and that’s as important as the money we have to give.” (Bahouth 2006)

The money pledged to the environmental community by the Turner Foundation was proscribed for a fairly narrow activity, list enhancement and collaborative campaigns (a task that groups might not have been able to undertake without the Turner money.) Because this project was so specific, it was not very threatening to member groups. (Dewey 2006) According to Robert Dewey, a senior staffer at Defenders of Wildlife, Turner used this strategy to become, “a really effective catalyst for collaboration.” (Dewey 2006) In fact, by the time Turner money was actually pledged, much broader goals had been adopted. It was decided that if Turner money was to be used at all, it had to be used in collaboration. (Schlickeisen 2006)

Throughout the development of the PP, funders have been more involved in the project than is typical in relationships between donors and recipient organizations. According to Schlickeisen,

In the case of the Partnership, funders were much more engaged in developing and designing the project, and for the first couple of years, Turner was very involved in how it was operating. To this day, we continue

to have monthly calls with donors to update them on our work. They are much more engaged than usual. (Schlickeisen 2006)

This unique communication and cooperation with donors has without a doubt aided in the success of the PP over time.

### *Common Interests and Goals*

As Wathen describes, “Given its complexity and the need for groups to work together, a coalition campaign only makes sense when groups share a common objective and realize that they cannot obtain that objective by working independently.” (Wathen 5) According to Bill Meadows, Executive Director of the Wilderness Society, one of the most important qualities allowing for the success of the PP is the fact that all of the groups involved are working towards the same broad goal of acting on behalf of the environment. (Meadows 2006) Because of this, the purpose of the PP is clear. As it is written in the Bylaws of the PP, “The Corporation is organized and will be operated exclusively to enhance protection of the natural environment by improving the effectiveness of environmental organizations.” (Bylaws 1999) All of the groups, whether they are focused on wildlife, wilderness, or waterways, are able to unite behind a common set of values focused on preserving the natural world.

### *Self-Governance*

The Partnership Project’s unique governance structure ensured that, initially, decisions were made by a Board of Directors that had been elected by a majority vote<sup>3</sup> from among the organizational representatives. (Bylaws 2000) According to the formal Bylaws of the PP, the Executive Committee of the Board is to be given a great deal of decision-making authority; it is the

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<sup>3</sup> “Unlike the Green Group, where consensus is required to take action, the Partnership Project’s Board can act with a simple majority that includes at least three-fourths of the executive committee.” (Ross 2000)

body that recommends new participating organizations, suggests additional Executive Committee members, proposes the annual budget, yearly meeting schedules, and governing policies, and outlines the terms of the collaborative agreement governing the use of lists. The Executive Committee is made up of ten board members, six of which represent of the largest participating organizations (based on membership or donor lists) and an additional four that are elected by the Board from its membership. The Executive Committee possesses greater authority than the rest of the Board, because it exercises the authority to unilaterally take action between Board meetings.

(Ross 2000) As Debbie Sease describes,

The Partnership Project's governance is owned by the people who are participating in it. This represents a major difference from other coalitions. The Partnership group chooses its sole staff member, is self-directed by its nature, and offers its members freedom and free will. (Sease 2006)

The freedom implicit in this governance structure allows PP members to maintain a sense of ownership over the project and to ensure that the PP continues in a direction that meets their needs.

However, as PP Board Chair Rodger Schlickeisen explains, the true success of the PP's governance structure has revealed itself in its own growing obsolescence. As he describes,

The Partnership was formally set up with clear guidelines and roles, but within a year, there was so much consensus among member groups that we rarely ever used the Executive Committee, except for efficiency in decision-making. All of those rules were set up initially because we didn't know how much we could trust one another. The initial rules made everyone confident that they didn't have to risk anything and that they could trust the Partnership organization. They wouldn't be embarrassed; lists wouldn't be abused. Once we got started, the use of formal rules and weighted voting proved to be less useful. (Schlickeisen 2006)

The importance of trust in streamlining the Partnership's success must not be underestimated.

### *Trusting Relationships*

One of the essential components of the Partnership Project has been the sense of trust that participating CEOs and executive staff<sup>4</sup> have developed for one another. Most of these individuals know each other personally and have long histories of working together. Many of our interview subjects have suggested that these relationships had already been well developed through the CEOs' involvement in the Green Group, an informal coalition of environmental leaders, originally known as "the group of 10," that has sought to determine the major legislative priorities for the environmental advocacy community for the last several decades. By collaborating in Green Group decision-making, many of the CEOs now involved in the PP became familiar working partners. Now the PP has cultivated a symbiotic relationship with the Green Group, which continues to foster a deep sense of community within the environmental movement.

Working together in the Green Group also helped participating organizations select a trusted President/Campaign Director for the PP, Julie Waterman, former Green Group coordinator.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the creation of the Partnership Project, Waterman was known and respected by the participating CEOs. A formal evaluation of the PP, completed in 2000 by Donald K. Ross, reported that, "every [PP] board member interviewed was pleased with her performance." (Ross 2000)

Another suggested reason for the group's success has been the strong leadership of Rodger Schlickeisen – the widely popular leader of Defenders of Wildlife. Time and again, the people we interviewed suggested that Schlickeisen's Board Chairmanship and standing among his peers has helped build support for the collaboration process. This leadership component has been identified as key to the success of the PP, helping to nurture a culture of intimacy within the Partnership

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<sup>4</sup> This ratio of participating staff is best illustrated through typical Board Meeting attendance; where one representative from each organization participates. Roughly 1/3 of participants are CEOs, while 2/3 are Legislative Directors. (Waterman)

<sup>5</sup> Waterman was hired by the Green Group in 1993.

Project. Though Schlickeisen is scheduled to leave his position as Board Chair in the fall of this year, the legacy of trust and respect that he has built will be picked up by his successor, Bill Meadows of The Wilderness Society, who has established strong relationships with many PP members through his two-year Chairmanship of the informal Green Group.

Impressively, the PP has actually helped to strengthen this trust over time. Since its inception, verbal agreements have become more common than formal written agreements within board meetings. (Dewey 2006) Formal voting has gone by the wayside, because now almost everything is approved by consensus. (Schlickeisen 2006) Though preexisting feelings of trust helped the PP develop, it has succeeded in harnessing those feelings to create a powerful culture of cooperation.

*Incentives for Organizational Participation: Benefits that Outweigh the Costs*

Membership in a coalition often offers highly dispersed strategic benefits, while creating very concentrated, individual costs. As Wathen argues,

...It will often cost more money for groups to work collectively than it does for them to work apart...The committee nature of coalitions compounds the difficulty of developing an effective campaign strategy...The resulting 'transaction costs' – meetings, negotiations, ongoing decisions about budget and strategy – are high. (Wathen 5)

But the Partnership Project has been ingeniously devised to minimize the potential costs to groups of participation, while providing significant benefits.

One of the greatest costs to an organization of joining a coalition is the threat to its autonomy and individuality in the eyes of its members and its funders. The PP has been designed to minimize the threat to the autonomy of participating organizations. By keeping the Partnership Project itself relatively invisible to the public, participating organizations remain free to act in their own names and to avoid being associated with campaigns on which they do not want to work. “The

Partnership Project” does not run campaigns: the individual groups that are members of the Project do. The PP is hidden, providing a series of list-based organizational tools for campaign efforts. The closest thing it has to a public face is its Web site, [www.saveourevironment.org](http://www.saveourevironment.org), which never references the Partnership Project, much less discusses its inner workings. This Web site serves as a portal to the larger environmental community by providing links to each member groups’ individual Web site. This helps each group keep its unique identity in the eyes of its members and its donors, a critical concern for organizations working in such a competitive funding environment.

In addition, a group’s sense of autonomy is protected by the understanding that it will maintain ultimate control of its member and donor lists, and it will be allowed to determine the campaigns in which its lists are used. As originally agreed, member groups are required to participate in two campaigns a year to remain full members of the PP. In practice, all groups have participated in many more campaigns than required. (Waterman 2006) Nonetheless, the minimum participation requirement has allowed organization heads to be able to strategically align with or distance themselves from individual campaigns as they see fit. (Bylaws 2000, Waterman 2006) If an organization fears that its own senior staff or Board will not support its involvement in a particular campaign, it may either opt out of participation or agree to contribute its list without being publicly associated with the campaign. (Waterman 2006) When groups do decide to participate in a campaign, they are only asked to share the names of those members and donors who give less than \$100 per year. (Schlickeisen 2006) Organizations are thus allowed to guard the names of their larger donors, to avoid unnecessary threats to their financial bases. Overall, list security is a top priority for the PP, and organizations trust Julie Waterman, the Project’s President/Campaign Director, to control the distribution and use of their lists, as they deem appropriate.

The presence of shared goals among members of the PP also decreases the autonomy costs of participation. Because they understand how their missions overlap, diverse environmental groups

are able to sincerely participate in coalitional decision-making; they understand that ultimately, they are working toward a set of commonly desired outcomes.

Perhaps even more importantly, the environment of trust that has been developed through partnership has played a critical role in reducing the perceived costs of participation. Because of their long histories working with each other and the strong personal relationships they share, members of the PP feel safe from being tricked or betrayed by other coalition groups.

Furthermore, while the coalition has always been run democratically, initially, the larger groups who had more to lose tended to be given a larger say in the decision-making process. As described, the Executive Committee of the Board, for example, is made up primarily of the largest organizations (those with the largest budgets and member lists) in the Project. This attracted larger organizations to the Partnership and ensured that their interests would be protected throughout the partnership process. Once again, however, as increasing trust developed between PP member groups and the perception of risk to larger groups diminished, the PP's formal governance rules and incentives were overtaken by a switch to consensus-based decision-making, helping to distribute power more evenly. (Schlickeisen 2006)

The more direct financial costs of participation in the PP have been insignificant, according to Julie Waterman. Initially, this was due to the generous funding granted to the project by the Turner Foundation and others. There is no membership fee for 501(c) 3 groups to participate, though 501(c) 4 groups like the League of Conservation Voters<sup>6</sup> are required to pay their own enhancement membership costs. Even now that Turner Foundation support has declined, member groups do not perceive participation costs to be great enough to limit their involvement. (Waterman 2006) The costs of providing Julie Waterman's salary, maintaining data sets from list enhancements,

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<sup>6</sup> As 501(c) 4s, the Sierra Club and the U.S. Public Interest Research Groups are also required to pay their own costs of membership. (Ross 2000)

and running collaborative campaigns are generally not charged to the member groups, but paid for by various interested funders. As outside funding becomes harder to secure, however, some costs are being picked up by the member organizations, which view the Partnership to be so valuable that they are willing to fundraise on its behalf. (Waterman 2006)

In fact, contributions from member groups played a significant role in getting PP off the ground from its onset,

One of the reasons the Project was able to accomplish so much with only one person is the amount of staff time donated by member organizations, most notably the League of Conservation Voters, NRDC, and Defenders of Wildlife. LCV staff helped construct the original proposal, and then spent considerable time during the year working with the Project, much of this work supported by a separate Turner Foundation grant. NRDC donated considerable staff time helping design and manage the web site. Rodger Schlickheisen, the unpaid chair of the Partnership Project and full-time director of Defenders of Wildlife, estimates that he spent about 20 to 25 percent of his time in 2000 on the Project, with even more time devoted in the early months. Without these and other contributions, the Project would not have been able to exceed its administrative and program goals. (Ross 2000)

Thus, in contrast with most coalitions of its scale, the PP presents minimal costs to its members, but offers significant benefits for participating. As Wathen describes,

The synergy which results [from a coalition] allows for organizations to make the best use of their collective resources and reach out to a broader constituency than they could ever hope to do by themselves. Coalition campaigns can also be a useful mechanism for coordinating the actions of many groups that might otherwise pursue an issue independently of each other. [They can] also foster a more enduring base of activity on an issue. This base is particularly valuable for goals that are long term...Even if it disappears before an issue is resolved, a coalition campaign can make an enduring contribution by establishing sound working relationship between groups and having those groups make the issue a priority within their organizations. (Wathen 2,4)

The benefits of working in alliance with other groups have grown impressively in the last several years, largely due to the ripening of political conditions for this kind of strategy. As promised, the

PP has been successful in providing services to its participants that had been previously unavailable, such as immediate grassroots mobilization through its combined membership database and its SaveOurEnvironment.org Web site, greater strategic coordination, and in some cases, the support of somewhat untraditional allies. The successes that members of the PP report, as described in the next section of this paper, have far outweighed the costs of participation. In this sense, incentives to be an active member in the PP are well aligned to encourage involvement. In the end, membership in the PP coalition offers groups much to win and little to lose.

### **Assessing the Success of the Partnership Project**

I have been involved in many coalition efforts, but this one has been uniquely successful. – Debbie Sease, Legislative Director, Sierra Club

I don't think we could have had any success over the past five years without the Partnership Project. – Bill Meadows, Executive Director, Wilderness Society

According to our sources, the Partnership Project has allowed environmental groups to work on an impressive variety of campaigns, while leading to increasing campaign victories. Three primary metrics have been used to evaluate the Partnership Project: the response rate generated using various outreach techniques to member lists, the impact related activities have had on public policy decisions, and the perceptions of PP member groups. (Dewey 2006) While success may be difficult to quantify, the PP reports the following on its 2004 fiscal year tax documents:

[The Partnership project] strengthens the environmental community by assisting with research on a wide variety of direct mail, phone banking and email advocacy projects. As a result of some of this research, we have achieved a response rate of up to 25% on our mailings and an agreement rate of 70% on our phone programs. (IRS 2004)

According to the Ross evaluation, “Every board member interviewed, as well as other environmental activists and donors, expressed satisfaction with the progress of the Partnership Project.” (Ross 2000)

Thus, the Partnership Project illustrates a complex symbiotic relationship between donors and environmental groups. While the PP has helped to generate awareness of issues through its outreach to members and help on state campaigns, the CEC has put paid organizers on the ground and ads on the air, and foundations have contributed through a continuous stream of strategic funding. In these ways and in its creation of a powerful culture of cooperation, the PP represents a unique success in strategic coalitional organizing.

## **Conclusion**

There are times when the voice of a single group or individual is not loud enough to make change. The last several years have shown environmentalists that coalition efforts are necessary to fight what they see as an aggressive attack on environmental protection and on earlier hard-won environmental regulatory victories. However, instead of relying purely on a series of individual, short-term coalition campaigns, the major organizations representing the environmental advocacy movement have built a long-term coalition, bigger than any single campaign, through which they may pool resources, coordinate their efforts, and harness the synergy of collective action. No long-standing alliance like the Partnership Project has ever before existed among environmental groups, and until this project matured, few thought it was possible. It works because of the way it has been designed, funded, introduced, managed, and enhanced. By studying the factors that have led to its success, it is possible to decipher the proper anatomy of this type of coalition, an exercise that may prove instrumental in building coalitions of this sort in other realms.

Much as environmental groups have been frustrated by their lack of influence under the current administration, many other Left-leaning groups have felt similarly excluded in recent years. Organizations working on behalf of labor, social justice, health care reform, civil liberties, and reproductive choice issues are finding their efforts thoroughly thwarted in national politics, and they too are realizing that pursuing a strategy of alliances and coordination may make them more effective at achieving their goals. Within the larger progressive movement, the conditions are becoming politically ripe for the development of a long-term, overarching coalition that crosses traditional issue lines and presents a clear and unified message.

However, in order for this kind of project to work, the benefits of participation must outweigh the costs. All six of the conditions for success described above must be present – there must be trusting relationships between participating leaders, visionary funding of the project that allows self-rule and democratic decision-making, a set of common goals among participating groups, safeguards in place for the protection of organizational autonomy, and the timing must be right. Without these qualities, the costs of participation appear too high to warrant collaboration, preventing groups from receiving the benefits associated with this strategy.

Whether it would be possible to recreate these conditions in the context of progressive politics is unknown. Many new efforts are currently underway to develop these conditions, though most are not yet fully completed. Relationships of trust between the leaders of various issue groups within progressive politics tend to be either young and tenuous or nonexistent, but some work is being done to help bring these leaders together more, developing their relationships with each other<sup>7</sup>. Funding for Progressive political interests has not historically been especially visionary,

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<sup>7</sup> A few of these efforts include projects by America Votes, Inspiring America, and Take Back America.

though a few notable exceptions have recently been introduced<sup>8</sup>. No clear set of common, overarching goals has yet been identified to unify groups from different issue areas within progressive politics, but a few projects have begun to take this on, working with different progressive constituencies to develop a common vision.<sup>9</sup> Finally, with the exception of the Progressive Synergy Project<sup>10</sup>, and possibly the electorally-oriented America Votes coalition in 2004, no formal effort has ever been made on the Left to develop a long-term, cross-issue coalition that is governed democratically and is designed to work strategically, while protecting the autonomy of participating groups.

It thus remains to be seen whether a Partnership Project-style coalition will be built among progressive organizations, but it appears increasingly possible that this type of strategy might in fact work in the political context. What is clear is that the Partnership Project presents a helpful and hopeful model for coalitional organizing, offering lessons to guide future efforts into success.

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<sup>8</sup> A few of these efforts include funding mechanisms developed by Democracy Alliance, New Progressive Coalition, and Progressive Donor Network.

<sup>9</sup> A few of these efforts include work done by Redefining Progress, Center for American Progress, Inspiring America, and the Principles Project.

<sup>10</sup> The Progressive Synergy Project ([www.progressivesynergy.org](http://www.progressivesynergy.org)) is an effort by Jeni Krencicki and Dahvi Wilson to develop innovative tools and strategies for increasing coordination within the Progressive Movement, maximizing its organizational effectiveness, and communicating a compelling Progressive identity to the American people.

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The Partnership Project has been an incredible inspiration to us – showing us that large-scale collaboration is not only possible, but can be mutually beneficial for those involved. In particular, we would like to thank Julie Waterman and Rodger Schlickeisen for their editorial assistance and generosity with their time. They made both this paper and the Partnership itself possible. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the following individuals for their support and guidance over the course of this research: Peter Bahouth, Jennifer Cox, Robert Dewey, Paul Hansen, Bill Meadows, Michael Northrop, Carl Pope, Debbie Sease, Gus Speth, Tom Wathen, and Dan Weiss.

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