

# Potluck Insurgency Analysis of the 2020 Election in Iowa

## Introduction to Potluck Insurgency and Overview of Debrief Project

Potluck Insurgency is a grassroots organization in Iowa City that began meeting in January 2017, shortly after the presidential inauguration. Our mission has been to return our country to the democratic ideals we hold dear by advocating for Democratic policies at the local, state, and national level and by helping to elect local, state, and national Democratic candidates. Since January 2017 we have met almost monthly to hear from a variety of guest speakers and presidential candidates, to do fundraising for Democratic candidates, and to advocate for the values of the Democratic Party.

In November 2020, we celebrated Democrats' success at the national level. However, we were disappointed by former President Trump's 8-point victory in Iowa, by our loss of two Congressional seats, and by our inability to gain any seats in the Iowa House or Senate. In fact, instead of achieving an expected gain of four seats in the Iowa House, we lost six seats. In the Iowa Senate, 25 seats were up for election, and neither party gained any seats.

We wanted to understand what happened in Iowa in 2020 and figure out how Democrats can win in 2022. In a broader context, we're committed to articulating what Iowa Democrats need to do to rebuild the Democratic Party after several years of losing ground. This document reports what we learned from our conversations and offers our recommendations so we can achieve greater success in Iowa. If we have misunderstood relationships between official entities in this report, we acknowledge them, but such misunderstandings emphasize the need for a less opaque and complicated political infrastructure.

Starting in early December 2020, four members of our Steering Committee interviewed local grassroots groups, Iowa House and Senate candidates, a Congressional candidate, former chairs of the Iowa Democratic Party, and others. The Potluck debrief team consisted of **Janice Weiner**, **Sarah Prineas**, **Emily Silliman** and **Rosanne Cook**. Each of our interviews, using questions formulated in advance, lasted about an hour and we had many open, honest, and very enjoyable conversations with our interviewees. We wish to preface this report by thanking and acknowledging the many people who were so generous with their time and insights.

### *Local Grassroots Groups*

**Temple Hiatt**, whose election volunteer work in Johnson County was done primarily as a member of gun safety group Moms Demand Action.

**Sharon Lake and Tara Shochet**, part of the leadership team of the Eastside Democrats, a highly organized voter contact and turnout organization based in Iowa City.

**Sarah Prineas and Kiran Patel**, part of the leadership team of the Northside Democrats, a group based in the north side of Iowa City with a similar mission to that of Eastside Dems.

**Cindy Doyle and Jodie Theobald**, Westside Democrats, based on the west side of Iowa City; shares a mission with Eastside and Northside Dems.

**Christine Lewers and Tricia Windschitl**, leaders of Flip It Iowa, based in Iowa City, which identified Iowa House candidates in flippable districts in 2018 and 2020, and worked with local teams to organize fundraisers for those candidates.

**Jocelyn Roof**, leader of Hawk the Vote, a project of the Undergraduate Student Government at the University of Iowa with the goal of registering students to vote and turning them out to vote.

### *Candidates for the Iowa House*

**Kelcey Brackett**, HD 91, which includes the city of Muscatine and the surrounding rural area.

**Lonny Pulkrabek**, HD 73, which includes some Johnson County precincts, all of Cedar County and some of Muscatine County. **Paul Deaton**, Democratic activist in the Solon area.

**Andrea Phillips**, HD 37, a mostly suburban district with two rural precincts in the Ankeny area north of Des Moines.

**Marie Gleason**, HD 94, which includes Bettendorf and some smaller surrounding communities and two Davenport precincts.

**Karin Derry**, HD 39, which includes Johnston, Grimes, some precincts in the northwest corner of the Des Moines Metro area and one precinct in Urbandale.

**Ruby Bodeker**, HD 75, a rural district which includes the townships of Marengo, Benton, Fairfax, Palo, and Vinton.

**Kayla Koether**, HD 55, a rural district that includes large sections of Winneshiek and Fayette Counties plus a sliver of Clayton County.

**Eric Gjerde**, HD 67, which includes northwest Cedar Rapids, West Marion, most of Hiawatha and Robins.

**Mary Mascher**, HD 86; **Dave Jacoby**, HD 74; **Christina Bohannan** HD 85, all in Iowa City/Coralville.

#### *Candidates for the Iowa Senate*

**Joe Bolkcom**, SD 43 State Senator in Johnson County.

**Mary Stewart**, SD 41, which includes four counties in southeast Iowa. Mary ran in the special election held January 26, 2021 for the seat vacated by Marianette Miller-Meeks.

**Kevin Kinney**, State Senator in SD 39, a mostly rural district that includes some precincts in Johnson, Keokuk and Washington counties.

**Chris Brase**, SD 46, which includes the city of Muscatine and the surrounding rural area.

**Amber Gustafson**, candidate for SD 19 in 2018. She remains an activist through Ankeny Area Democrats and other organizations, including the OPE! PAC.

#### *Congressional Candidate*

**J.D. Scholten**, a candidate for Congress in Iowa's fourth district in 2018 and 2020.

#### *Former Chairs of the Iowa Democratic Party*

**Mark Smith**, chair of the IDP from February 2020 until the end of 2020. Mark has served the Democratic Party in Iowa for many years, including 20 years as a state representative.

**Troy Price**, chair of the Iowa Democratic Party from July 2017 until February 2020. Troy has served the Iowa Democratic Party in a variety of roles.

#### *Johnson County Board of Supervisors*

**Rod Sullivan and Lisa Green-Douglass**, both incumbent candidates for the Johnson County Board of Supervisors in 2020.

#### *Representatives of Cedar County Democrats*

**Jim Glasson**, member of the Cedar County Democrats Central Committee and leader of the West Branch Democrats, and **Jodi Clemens**, Democratic activist, who ran for the Iowa House in HD 73 in 2018. At the time of our interview she was a candidate for Chair of the IDP.

## **Section 1. Messaging**

### **Articulating Our Message and Combatting Conservative Right-Wing Messages**

In our interviews we heard frequently about how right-wing media messaging is negatively branding Democrats. These messages are delivered non-stop in outlets such as Fox News and conservative radio talk shows, and they frequently label Democrats as “socialists,” and claim we want to “defund the police,” “grab guns,” and “kill babies.” Democrats do not have similar year-round outlets, and our messaging tends to be in high gear only during election cycles. Because conservative voters are subject to a constant barrage of negative right-wing messaging, many interviewees felt it was challenging to combat attitudes that have developed over time with messaging that is heard only during a campaign.

Another dimension of negative messaging is the fear and intimidation it imposes on Democratic voters, particularly in rural areas and small towns. Interviewees said that many people are afraid to identify themselves as Democrats. Voters are sometimes reluctant to display yard signs for Democrats because they fear repercussions in their community. As a result, grassroots organizing and maintaining active Democratic central committees are a challenge in these areas.

Our interviewees discussed whether Iowa House and Senate candidates should go negative against their Republican opponents, or respond to their opponents’ negative attacks. Democratic candidates were frequently attacked in ads by their Republican opponents with exaggerated claims and lies, so candidates faced the dilemma of what to do about those negative ads. Several Iowa House and Senate candidates said they felt some pressure from the Truman Fund or Senate Majority Fund to respond by going negative against their opponents. Most resisted this pressure; some who acquiesced said they later regretted doing so and felt it hurt them. Even so, the question remains of how best to counteract negative messages frequently used to demonize Democrats in general and Democratic candidates in particular.

Interviewees also talked about the relative lack of simplicity and clarity in Democrats’ messaging. One interviewee theorized that Democrats want to get things right and so we usually try to describe the complexities and nuances of a problem or issue. However, this style of explaining issues at length may be a weakness if we want to win races, particularly when Republicans use short, pithy messages—slogans—to label Democrats.

Some of the Iowa House and Senate candidates we spoke with felt that Democrats’ messaging is too top-down, originating from the IDP/Truman Fund/Senate Majority Fund/coordinated campaign. We assume this messaging is developed in coordination with consultants who engage in polling and work with focus groups. The process is opaque, however, and seems to lead to inauthentic, ineffective messaging. Several candidates spoke about the rigidity of Democrats’ messaging and felt that candidates were not trusted to know their districts and to articulate messaging on issues that mattered in their districts. Candidates said they thought broad messaging and cookie-cutter ads were not effective, and that campaign messages needed to be tailored in order to be specifically relevant to what matters to voters in different areas in the state. For example, one candidate was told to message on education funding, which in their rural, aging district was parsed by voters as “Democrats want to raise my property taxes.”

Candidates’ messaging should be personal – candidates should talk about how their own experiences are relevant to the issues. Addressing issues through the lens of personal experience can help voters begin to understand that there are legitimate opposing viewpoints to what they’re hearing from right-wing media. As one interviewee described it, we need to create a narrative about what is happening and help people find themselves in that narrative by using authentic voices from different groups. We need to talk to voters about what we can do to help them.

Many of our interviewees agreed that we cannot assume voters know much about state level issues. Most people don't read newspapers like the Des Moines Register and they don't watch local and state news on television. Consequently, we need messages that seek to educate voters on issues and we need to deliver those messages in ways and in places where people will see and hear them.

### **Recommendations: Section 1. Messaging**

1. Democrats should engage in year-round messaging. A Communications advisor from the IDP might help develop such messaging for local Democrats. Consider identifying public relations chairs in county parties and offering them specialized training in communications/messaging.
2. We need centralized messaging on brand-related issues, but there should be less top-down control of individual candidates' messaging.
3. Democrats should be more aggressive with their counter messaging and work harder to hold Republicans accountable for their lies and distortions. Often the most effective way to counter a message is to reframe the issue on our own terms. Reframing is a specialized communications skill; training on this should be offered. For example, when Democrats talk about a "social safety net," Republicans hear "some people don't want to work as hard as I do." How might the issue of social programs be reframed so Republicans can hear that government exists to help people?
4. Democrats need to strive for greater clarity and simplicity in their messaging. Billboards and bumperstickers are examples of ways to deliver pithy messages.
5. Democratic activists and candidates should get out to talk to people. If candidates know what the voters care about, their messaging will be more effective.
6. When appropriate, Democratic activists and candidates should consider organizing and messaging around issues that affect rural communities, such as maintaining rural hospitals, the impact of companies like Dollar General and large meat packing corporations, or a simple economic message: we see you, we want to ensure you have good jobs that pay a decent wage.
7. The Iowa Democratic Party and candidates for office need to focus on the messages that are important to Iowa. Messages that dominate political discourse at the national level may not reflect what voters in Iowa care about.
8. Candidates' messaging should be personal—candidates should talk about how their own experiences are relevant to issues they're talking about. We need to talk to voters about what we can do to help them.

### **Section 2. Party Building**

Many of our interviewees told us that the Democratic Party in Iowa needs to rebuild itself. We heard stories about county party central committees which rarely meet, and meetings where only a few of the same people show up. This is the case especially in rural counties. One candidate running in a rural district said she felt that she was trying to build the party in her county at the same time that she was trying to run a campaign—a major challenge.

As one interviewee described it, organizing used to happen at the county and precinct level, but many couldn't handle the work, so paid organizers and the coordinated campaign took over. As a result, the whole operation became top-down and highly metrics driven. However, this shift has discouraged local Democrats and has hurt party building at the county level. We need a middle ground where the IDP works cooperatively with county parties and grassroots groups.

Many organizations can participate in the effort to rebuild: the IDP, county parties, grassroots groups, and unions. Several interviewees thought that the IDP should have a plan for every county and work hard to foster activism in all county parties. In cases where the Democrats in a county are currently too few to effectively organize as a central committee, several counties can have a combined central committee, perhaps with guidance from the IDP.

Grassroots groups and county parties can do legislative report cards and hold forums with legislators and local elected officials on local issues that matter to voters. A forum organized by Democrats should not be held hostage if an invited Republican refuses to show up. Whether in a cafe, a fire station, or a local park, a forum is an opportunity to listen and educate. Not all activities and events need to be clearly related to party politics—it can be powerful to discuss and organize around issues that matter in a community. Efforts to develop informed voters can help to combat the right-wing messaging machine.

Another area of strong consensus among interviewees was that we need to do year-round organizing in Iowa instead of organizing only during the election cycle. Year-round organizing can build the party by supporting candidates for local school board or city council elections. It can help county parties and grassroots groups organize activities like voter registration drives and door knocking to contact voters outside of an election cycle.

Ongoing organization and party building are important because they help develop volunteers and other resources within each county and district. Those volunteers won't be there when candidates need them in an election cycle unless we are working to identify and develop them over time. We need to give people reasons to engage, give them concrete tasks to do, and reward them. People need things to do on the local level, whether it's organizing a forum, writing a letter to the editor, leading a community service project, or running a voter registration drive. Older voters and voters without adequate broadband access should be engaged in the process, even if it means extra effort to find the right match between abilities and tasks.

We discussed tools for party building, including making the VAN more accessible, learning from candidates post-election, and using relational organizing to make authentic connections and build on existing relationships. One interviewee said the state party should not drive messaging, but should build infrastructure, hiring year-round organizers and establishing mentoring relationships between county chairs. The IDP, many felt, should be a resource and an organizing influence in every county.

Other activities for local party building include organizing voter registration drives, hosting forums on issues and problems in a community, and hosting meet-and-greet events with local officials. County parties could also call voters to discuss issues or to do wellness checks. Local parties could participate in local parades and festivals. They should find ways to show up as Democrats at as many community events as possible to talk to people about what's on their minds.

We heard different things about the relationship between our first in the nation status and party building. Some felt the Iowa caucus cycle has been beneficial; others felt we have seen few benefits for party building and elections outcomes in recent years. One interviewee noted that we have lots of volunteers during the caucus season who are less active in the general election, raising the question of whether we

are doing enough to keep them involved and active between cycles.

## **Recommendations: Section 2. Party Building**

1. The IDP should work with every county to develop an organizational plan. County parties can opt to work together to enhance each other's efforts, or merge two or three counties into one organization.
2. Grassroots groups can organize forums and events to educate voters and find ways to bring people with common interests together.
3. Paid year-round organizers are needed to support year-round party building activities. The IDP should commit to raising funds for paid organizers.
4. Democrats should recognize that many different types of activities can contribute to party building.
5. Democrats should, in addition to encouraging collaboration among county party chairs, build coalitions with other community groups such as LULAC, labor unions, Black Lives Matter, etc.
6. Democrats should find ways to identify and engage volunteers no matter their ability. Volunteers should be given concrete tasks and be rewarded for effort.
7. Don't let concerns about our first in the nation caucus status get in the way of rebuilding the party. At the same time, be careful that we don't give up on organizing in all counties if we do lose that status.

## **Section 3. How Do We Reach Our Voters?**

### **Phone Banking**

Democrats relied heavily on phone banking in this past cycle, so this is an opportunity to reassess how effective phoning is for reaching voters. First of all, candidates and activists alike were frustrated by the low contact rate. One candidate said that for 1,000 calls they would talk to only 150 people. One activist group said their contact rate was only five percent. Phoning was a lot of work for very little gain. Phone banks seem to have been more effective for recruiting volunteers than for reaching out to voters. Phoning efforts to voters were hampered by bad call lists, so that volunteers felt they were turning out voters for the other side.

Were there factors that raised the effectiveness of phoning? Use of an autodialer seems to have helped, and sharing an autodialer with another candidate was a good strategy to save on costs. We had not realized that a candidate could pre-record messages on an autodialer, select one, and let the machine leave the message. Activists who wrote their own scripts to fit the specific candidate or target audience felt those calls were more effective than when they used standard scripts which were unspecific and overly wordy. Several candidates mentioned taking a mixed approach to their own phoning. If a person couldn't be reached, they left a message or sent a text. One candidate wrote a postcard if they couldn't reach a target. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach a voter, some activists thought that we should stop calling and find a different way to reach the voter.

Too many different candidates and activist groups appear to be phoning the same targets, and our interviewees worried about voters' phone fatigue. That is not a new problem, but there should be a way to avoid dialing the same numbers over and over and not reaching a voter, or reaching a voter multiple times. Volunteers who sign up to phone should not be required to go through extensive training if they are experienced, or were already trained on the exact same project. People mentioned autodialing systems that were changed multiple times, requiring volunteers to learn a new system.

Increasingly, older phone bankers are discouraged from volunteering because they either can't or don't want to use the technology. That is a mistake. Some of the most effective volunteers are elderly or internet-challenged, but know their territory and are good at talking to people. Phoning will not go away, but would be most effective as part of a relational organizing plan.

## **VAN Issues**

VAN issues are related to phoning issues, because of course your contact rate is only as good as the information available to you in the VAN. Interviewees mentioned that phone numbers aren't deleted in the VAN, so that for a single individual, a phone banker might dial through 3-5 bad numbers. One interviewee said their 2018 campaign diligently updated the data in the VAN over the course of an intense, high voter-contact campaign. That person believes that the version of VAN that was used in 2020 in that district did not reflect that improved data. People also wondered whether information gathered by the presidential campaigns and entered before the caucuses was in the VAN in the 2020 cycle.

This is an area where our knowledge of data and how information makes it into the VAN is limited. It seems clear that a different approach is needed to improve the data in the VAN. Since it takes time to improve the quality of the data in the VAN, this has to be a year-round effort. The question we ask is whether information painstakingly gathered by volunteers is included in the VAN and made available to the next person who attempts to contact a given voter.

The VAN seemed useful in one district for GOTV of Democrats, but much less useful for reaching out to no party and Republican voters. Very little contact information was available for those other voters. Another problem area is that the VAN is expensive. The VAN should be made available to candidates earlier in the cycle, and at little or no cost, and it should be made available to all candidates, even those who primary other Democrats. There was discussion of a cheaper version of the VAN that some state parties make available to candidates and activist groups. Ideally, the campaigns and activist groups enhance the entire system when they enter data.

Ultimately, when making changes to what data we put in the VAN, careful consideration needs to be made for how we intend to use the VAN. If the VAN is to be used for local people to contact friends and neighbors, and gradually expand the web of contacts to include more people (the relational model), that is different from wanting it for a top-down style campaign organization to make up-to-the-minute decisions on which voter group to target.

## **Door Knocking**

Most interviewees said that door knocking is essential to our ability to reach voters. Some thought that knocking on doors would have been effective in 2020, while others agreed that many voters would have objected to such an approach. The takeaway for future, pandemic-free campaigns is that face-to-face contact with voters is very important. Also, campaigns should be encouraged to assess their own territory

and decide on the best door knocking strategy. Some activist groups have taken an interest in deep canvassing, an option that requires significant volunteer training, but which may yield more robust results.

The larger issue is that we should be engaging with voters, an attitude that leads to showing up in many different ways: parades, meetings, and anywhere we can make contact. One candidate thought that volunteers knocking on doors were useful primarily for expanding name recognition, since for persuasion, people really want to talk to the candidate. They thought that if persuasion was needed, the candidates themselves needed to knock on the door. Long time activists know that good conversations on the doors are also useful for information gathering, which helps to shape a localized strategy and updates the VAN for later GOTV efforts.

### **Old Fashioned Ways to Get Your Message Out**

Some people thought that we should use more door hangers, and when we do, more candidates' names should be listed on them. Some state parties distribute "slates," with a list of candidates that a particular voter is encouraged to vote for. This should be part of an effort to encourage voting in down-ticket races.

Postcards were written and sent in the 2020 cycle. One candidate hand wrote and printed a message, and hand signed each postcard. They said people replied to that postcard, or mentioned getting a postcard (activist groups also sent postcards into that district). That seems to have been effective in that race. Several people mentioned that repetitive fliers with the same look and message did not seem effective. They felt that Truman Fund and Senate Majority Fund messaging was overly standardized and ineffective, and that was reflected in cowboy cards and fliers that were mailed to voters. Many candidates wish they had asserted themselves more, and gotten a more personalized message out on campaign fliers.

Some candidates in rural areas felt strongly that radio advertising was helpful, and would have liked to have done more of it. One candidate asked for and got a regular radio show at a local station, for free. Letter writing campaigns for local papers seem effective, as is earned media, although one candidate mentioned that an important local paper refused to print their press releases.

Some candidates thought that TV ads were very important in their district, while others questioned their effectiveness. Local candidates felt their messages were drowned out by the constant din of national and statewide ads. That was a particular problem in 2020, and each candidate should be an active part of strategy building for both the decision to place ads, and their content. Candidates mentioned that they appreciated help in producing a TV ad, since most people don't have that expertise.

For GOTV, two people (in different districts) mentioned that the Republicans are using old-fashioned phone trees.

### **Digital Tools and Social Media**

Zoom is here to stay, and 2020 gave us lots of training on how to use it. Some people found Zoom to be most useful for recruiting and engaging volunteers. Many districts in Iowa are huge, even for an Iowa House seat, and Zoom is a tool for organizing across a territory. Zoom appears to be less effective for reaching voters, although one candidate did some house parties where people invited their friends and neighbors to a meeting with the candidate. In 2022 we hope real house parties will be back, along with coffee shop meetings.

People mentioned social media platforms they thought were effective, and which one they mentioned varied, most likely depending on what platform they were already using. Candidates mentioned wishing

better help was available for using social media to get their message out. A resource person, part of an expanded communications team or a highly trained volunteer, could help a candidate make the most of what they already know how to use, and what platforms local volunteers are willing to embrace. The ideal way to help candidates and activists make better use of social media is not obvious to us, but doing so is essential.

Twitter was mentioned as effective for fundraising, and Twitter threads can be useful for disseminating specific information, such as on voting. Instagram allows the user to ask a polling question such as "Are you registered to vote?" and will tell record who responded so that follow up is possible. Instagram allows people to share on My Story. In some areas, an unusual number of people engage with political content via Facebook, and the events feature can be a good way to get the word out. One activist group used prizes to get people to post their message on social media and tag their friends. As mentioned, all of these tools are only as effective as the skill level of candidates and volunteers. If the pandemic has taught us anything, however, it's that people can learn new technical skills.

Candidates who lose their races and candidates from past campaigns often have developed a following on social media, and are valuable resources for current candidates. Those people can also help to counter the right-wing noise machine on a year round basis. Think of them and other prominent activists as influencers. People who seem prominent on social media currently are JD Scholten, Amber Gustafson, Ruby Bodeker, and Christina Blackcloud. We should work to expand that group of people.

Activists mentioned that Republican messaging seemed standardized: a Facebook post seamlessly picks up on themes from Fox News, Republican TV ads, and other parts of the right-wing media ecosystem. We might not have that capability at the moment, but can make smart use of local activists, volunteers, and candidates. If every one of our supporters is viewed as a potentially valuable influencer, we could build out authentic messaging capability.

### **Recommendations: Section 3. How Do We Reach Our Voters?**

1. Make phonebanking more effective. Ensure there is better data in the VAN, write better scripts, and find ways to follow up with voters who have been contacted and those who have not.
2. Improving the VAN should be a priority. Update data more frequently, design the VAN to be used by different groups for different purposes, e.g. relational organizing in communities, persuasive lists, GOTV.
3. The VAN should be less expensive to users.
4. Post Covid, we must go back to meeting voters face to face, whether that is knocking doors or going wherever they may be found and talking to them.
5. Design doorhangers that list all candidates on the ballot.
6. Candidates have strong opinions on the best way to reach voters in their district, and should be listened to when developing media strategy.
7. Prioritize use of social media among candidates and volunteers, and provide them with assistance, both technical and creative.

8. Find ways to involve local volunteers who may not have strong tech skills or access to adequate and stable broadband. Be willing to do data entry if necessary.
9. Invest more in radio advertising, year round. Also, encourage candidates, office holders, and activists to do regular interviews on local radio.

## Section 4. Organizing in Iowa

### Relational Organizing

There are different ways of understanding relational organizing. Candidates in rural areas expressed how everything is relational where they live. The person who checks out your groceries is the niece of your third grade teacher. Relationships tend to define people's lives, but that does not mean that they feel empowered to use those relationships for organizing purposes. One candidate expressed frustration, especially acute in 2020, that people might agree with your views, and vote for you, but don't feel empowered to do any more than that.

How do we empower our supporters to organize within their communities? This appears to be the central question in relational organizing. One element might be training—people don't know how to go about organizing. Another element might be solidarity—the feeling that you are not alone and are doing things with a group. Another element in some areas might be having a space where connections and training can take place. If one looks at the history of rural organizing, meeting halls were often part of the picture. Rural organizers talk about wanting a headquarters, and in 2020 one rural county Democratic Party raised funds to open their own headquarters. Such space may fill an important need in some areas.

The ultimate goal is for people to feel empowered to talk to friends, relatives, and neighbors about what they want for their community, and how that translates into political action. Additionally, local groups can be recruited to help elect our candidates.

In urban as well as rural areas, Democratic supporters need to be taught how to reach out to their various contacts, and one activist mentioned thinking in terms of what organizations they belong to, such as athletic teams. There are apps available for people to enter information on their contacts, some of which reportedly are more useful than others. Most people seemed less interested in specific technology than in our attitude as political organizers—what type of organization are we trying to build?

Suggestions have been made that Democrats could form organizations based on Iowa Senate or House districts, using the Indivisible model. Redistricting complicates such an effort, but it should be possible to form groups and then realign as necessary, once we have the new maps. Another type of relational organization is the Potluck Insurgency model—simply a group of friends who get together for some food and some political organizing talk. Democratic organizations of that type have sprung up in Polk and Johnson Counties; it would be interesting to see what that might look like in other areas, although the impetus needs to be local.

How would a campaign operate differently under a relational model? Candidates mentioned that calls from outside the district were often not effective. If someone in Johnson County has cousins in other areas, that's another story. A candidate might hold a series of house parties where a host invites neighbors and friends. The goal might be for one or two of the people in attendance to subsequently organize their own house party.

Relational organizing is a style of organizing that we could all stand to learn more about, and any number of tools and techniques might apply. More than tools, however, it's an attitude change that looks to empower people on an ongoing basis, not just hit them up for votes or a volunteer shift.

## **Data Driven Campaigns and Polling**

We heard concerns that Democrats don't have good polling, and we run campaigns without enough information. One aspect of this is that polling in recent cycles has not been as accurate. Polling is also expensive, as are the focus groups that could inform messaging.

Certainly voting data can help inform campaign decisions. One person wants to see a precinct-by-precinct analysis of the 2020 election that would show where there are lower numbers of registered voters relative to eligible voters, and where there was relatively low turnout. Such information could be used to target precincts effectively. One candidate thought that a really good analysis of who turned out to vote, and how many of them were first time voters, will tell us a lot—otherwise we are making assumptions that might not be true. If a Democrat wins, we assume their message was effective, and if a Republican wins, we assume their message was effective. The argument goes that data should inform any assumptions we make, especially if we use those data in decision making.

Our interviewees were interested in receiving more information, but issued a caveat on how that information should be used. If precinct analysis tells you to run a voter registration campaign in precinct X, a local organizer might advise you not to register people to vote in that precinct in June—leases are up in July, and many people move. Many pleas were made to listen to volunteers on the ground, and move away from strict metrics. Locals may conclude that a voter registration drive should not be attempted in locked buildings at all, but in the places downtown where people congregate. Or try a different approach, such as creating incentives for campus groups to register their members, as Hawk the Vote did at the University of Iowa.

Other interviewees pointed out that our canvassing goals have changed over time. Now that we have a shorter window for voting by mail, more time could be spent on canvassing to identify likely supporters, and we would be less likely to turn out voters for the other side during GOTV.

## **Organizers and Candidates as Organizers**

There were discussions about whether home-grown organizers were more effective than out-of-state organizers. Experienced people reported that the best of the best come from both categories. Probably more important is that the organizer is located in the target territory, and that their attitude toward organizing be flexible, reflecting a willingness to adapt to conditions on the ground. Putting resources into developing local talent might be a good option.

An approach from Virginia in 2017 was mentioned—candidates in nontargeted races were thought of as organizers, and they were allotted resources. In exchange for helping candidates at the top of the ticket, the candidate might get free access to the VAN, or money for their campaign. This might not work for every candidate, but in many cases it seems like a win-win. Who better to understand how to organize locally and find the best way to reach voters?

Candidates have said that they are praised for their many fine qualities when being recruited, but sometimes not trusted and not listened to when it comes to the campaign. A candidate-as-organizer model would only work if the candidate is a true partner in organizing their district. Similarly, local

volunteers can bring their knowledge to bear on helping Democrats to succeed. Top-down campaigns cannot benefit from this strategy.

### **Recommendations: Section 4. Organizing in Iowa**

1. Provide training and tools for relational organizing, but also adopt a relational organizing attitude—that empowering people to organize their own communities is a way to build our party.
2. Improve data (e.g. polling used to target winnable races, precinct level analysis of voters), but use the data to inform conversations with local volunteers, rather than impose strategies on them.
3. Renew our focus on canvassing to identify our voters so that our GOTV is more effective.
4. Organizers could come from anywhere, but we should invest wherever possible in identifying and developing local organizers. All organizers should understand their territory, and will do a better job if their adaptability is enabled.
5. Commit to some level of support and funding for all Statehouse candidates, whether deemed to be in winnable districts or not. Think of candidates in nontargeted races as organizers for the party and for our statewide candidates.

## **Section 5. Support Systems for Democratic Candidates**

### **Recruiting the Right Candidates**

Our interviewees discussed what makes an ideal candidate. It's important to have a candidate who has an authentic reason to run, because voters can see through someone who just wants the position. A candidate should want to contact voters and ask for their vote. Innovative candidates are interesting, but if they refuse to engage in retail politics they won't win elections. One person who was vetting candidates walked into a hardware store in a town where a candidate was running and asked if anyone had heard of him; the positive reaction was a strong recommendation for that candidate.

Many interviewees mentioned that a candidate has to be willing to raise money. They must begin by raising money in the district as a way of proving to funding sources from outside the district that they have local support. Local fundraising is difficult, and candidates could use training and assistance in this area. Money begets money: if candidates prove they can raise money, other groups are more likely to contribute.

One exceptionally adept candidate discussed the benefits of candidate training programs such as the Wellstone Project and Ready to Run. These programs teach candidates what to expect, as well as training them in other key campaign skills, such as how to draw from personal experience to connect with voters.

This brings us to candidate recruitment. Several people emphasized that finding the right candidate for the district is key, while others thought that we had been doing a pretty good job in this area. The search for the ideal candidate may not be the most fundamental of our challenges. One important point is to allow diversity of viewpoints among candidates, especially if a different viewpoint is a good match for that candidate's district.

## **Truman Fund/Senate Majority Fund (TF/SMF)**

The Truman Fund (TF) and the Senate Majority fund (SMF) are branches of the Iowa Democratic Party, but because they raise their own funds, they are given autonomy over how those funds are spent. Currently, Todd Prichard, the Iowa House minority leader, heads up the Truman Fund, and the Senate Majority fund is headed up by Zach Wahls, the Senate minority leader. These organizations raise money, help recruit candidates, decide which races to target, and allocate resources accordingly. They recruit organizers who are assigned to help manage campaigns across the state, although hiring decisions are made by the candidates, at least in some cases.

The most useful function that most candidates cited were the consultants who were available to them via the TF or SMF. They got help on messaging, producing a TV ad, preparing mailings, polling, and so on. Many comments were positive, as candidates appreciated regular contact with experts in those areas. The help was useful when consultants or specialized organizers were advising the campaign on a specific issue, but much less useful if the campaign was handed messages and strategy and strongly advised to follow them. As mentioned below under the IDP section, the role of consultants should be more transparent.

Most people we interviewed felt that the idea of having the TF and the SMF target resources to certain races was necessary. If funds were divided equally across all races, with no targeting, few of our candidates would succeed. Many candidates appreciated that as groups and individuals outside the state came in and looked for candidates to support, the TF/SMF pointed them toward promising candidates. Centralized sources of information, experts, and strategizing are essential.

In 2020 however, a number of candidates felt that centralized messaging went too far. A decision was made to focus on health care and education, and almost identical mailers (as one example) were prepared and sent out all over the state. Some candidates had strong opinions and were respected when they wanted to hone a more individualized message, while others felt steamrolled into running on issues that were not their strongest suit, or issues that they thought were not appropriate for their district. One candidate felt they made a bad decision when TF pollsters recommended an ad with a particular theme, and wished they had followed their instincts and nixed the ad in a close race.

One candidate made the point that when TF and SMF organizers are shared between candidates, the candidates are often in different parts of the state. If the TF and the SMF got together when hiring organizers to be out in the field, an organizer could be shared by a Senate candidate and a House candidate who cover the same territory. Some even suggested that the TF and the SMF should be one organization.

There were problems with some of the organizers in 2020, but partly that was due to Covid restrictions. The general principle going forward is that an organizer should be located in the relevant district, and have an interest in learning what works best in the district. Organizers' time is allotted based on data, such as polling data, and crunching of data found in the VAN, but people pointed out to us that polling has become less effective, and the VAN also has a lot of bad data in it. These limitations can be mitigated if more attention is paid to the situation on the ground in a particular district. Organizer turnover was mentioned—that a candidate devotes time to establishing a good working relationship, and the organizer is moved and a new one brought in.

Some of the candidates we spoke with were not targeted, and felt ignored by the TF and SMF. They can tend to feel isolated in hostile territory, fighting the good fight. The suggestion was made that nontargeted candidates are valuable to the Iowa Democratic Party for the assistance they provide in

winning statewide races, and for keeping Democratic messaging and organizing alive in Republican districts. They help to tie up Republican resources. It is possible that a separate program for nontargeted candidates could direct resources to them.

In general, there should be less centralized decision making. One candidate wanted to place ads in local newspapers, and could not get the TF team to make a decision on whether that was a good idea. Out of frustration they went ahead with the ads, and said that people at the TF “freaked out.” Some candidates lamented spending time wrangling with TF people over messaging and strategy when they could have been doing other things. Other candidates found the working relationship went more smoothly. Clearly, an attitude change is necessary—are the candidates there to implement TF or SMF strategy, or should the candidate implement a strategy that works in their district, with assistance from the TF and SMF? Who is in the driver’s seat?

### **The Coordinated Campaign, a.k.a. Battleground Iowa**

Every two years, a version of the coordinated campaign is created in order to fold national and statewide campaigns into the infrastructure of the Iowa Democratic Party. The name of the project changes almost every time, and this year the name was Battleground Iowa. People commented that the average volunteer, let alone the average voter, does not understand the structure of the IDP, the coordinated campaign, the Truman Fund, the Senate Majority Fund, the district central committees, county party organizations, etc. Efforts should be made to simplify the structure, or explain it to people better. Even our interviewees confused the various organizational pieces.

Another interesting fact we learned is that the largest funder of the coordinated campaign in any given year calls the shots when it comes to how the project is organized and run. This helps explain why the implementation is usually top down in nature, especially in 2020. Every two years, vows are taken to do better and listen more to problems from the past, and those vows are sincere. The next election comes around, and a different, often national, group of strategists more or less reproduces the top-down decision making and implementation.

This history helps explain why the coordinated campaign is the beast that everyone loves to hate. Last year’s problems were very real. Candidates said that high pressure techniques were used to lure volunteers away; then they were used to do relatively ineffective phone banking. Volunteer morale was low, and flake rates for phoning events were high (although the pandemic played a role, as people grew weary of virtual-only events). Scripts were long and wordy, and too generic. Scripts also failed to mention the names of any candidates other than Biden and Greenfield—the failure to even mention Congressional candidates especially hurt Rita Hart, who lost a close race with a high number of undervoted ballots. Statehouse candidates would have liked a mention, also, when calls were made into their districts.

It was explained to us that a script that asks about down-ticket races can become too long, and volunteers then complain about having to do such a long script. There may not be any way around that, and it’s not as if the scripts in 2020 were elegantly brief and clearly articulated Democratic messages. A ground-up reassessment needs to be made of what the phone banking hopes to accomplish, and people with communications training should be involved in writing and editing scripts.

Some of these complaints go back to the 2018 cycle, but candidates said that the coordinated campaign tried to take over during the final week of the campaign, and send all of the volunteers to the doors that the coordinated campaign decided needed to be knocked for GOTV. More than one campaign that we know of had spent months working the territory thoroughly, entered all the data, and knew which people

needed to be contacted in the final week. None of that information was used, and a different strategy was insisted upon. People mentioned feeling they were sent to the wrong doors—doing GOTV among people unlikely to vote for our candidates.

In some districts locals do not think it's a good idea to reach out to No Party voters, and in other districts it's essential. The almost universal disregard for local opinion on who to target is astonishing. The data driven style of campaigning tends to value metrics (how many calls made, etc.) over quality of communication, and over local ideas about the most effective means to contact voters.

In the 2020 cycle, there were some lit drops, in addition to the phone banking, but local candidates, even after appeals at high levels, could not convince the coordinated campaign to carry their literature to the doors. In other areas, literature that was supposed to be dropped never was, although miscommunications of that sort were probably more common due to the pandemic. One candidate thought the coordinated campaign did not understand rural organizing very well, and would not work with that candidate's volunteers to effectively cover a given area. Another candidate stopped taking phone calls from the coordinated campaign.

The coordinated campaign was not flexible in 2020, and did not help candidates up and down the ticket find ways to reach voters, beyond phone banking. On their own, one county party raised money and opened a headquarters, and numerous candidates found ways to do safe, outdoor meetings and rallies. Activist groups thought that voter registration should not be neglected and found safe ways to run tables. Volunteers and candidates engaged in activities which were reasonable to them, but had to buck Battleground Iowa, which prohibited in-person activities. Such a rigid attitude is not appropriate going forward.

Something must be done beyond the biennial vows to do better. A change to year-round organizing might help, and a commitment to relational organizing would be a positive thing, beyond purchase of an app and then implementation of the app in a halfhearted manner. We were told that the trends are away from large numbers of underpaid organizers and toward fewer experienced people who use digital tools to better utilize local volunteers and party structures. Such a change might help, as long as it doesn't make decision making even more top down than it already is. More effective would be to do away with the coordinated campaign altogether. A new model that puts experienced volunteers and local candidates and officials in charge of conducting campaigns and GOTV is absolutely necessary.

The structure of the coordinated campaign in the past has been based on whoever provides the most funding to help elect Democrats. In order to make a significant change, the relationship with funding sources has to change. If a strong party organization articulates clearly what type of structure Democrats need in order to win, they can insist that funds be directed to support that vision. All of us can step up and work to explain what we need to do and how we intend to do it—and then ask for buy-in from stakeholders.

## **The Iowa Democratic Party**

The Iowa Democratic Party (the IDP) can be thought of as a staff in Des Moines, but also as the structure of district level and county level Democratic organizations. The staff in Des Moines, from our perspective, focuses primarily on fundraising, and on finding statewide candidates who can lift the entire party. The IDP in Des Moines needs to reassess the structure of the organization and its specific goals in order to know what the fundraising is for.

The relationship between paid political consultants and the IDP is not clear to anybody. Consultants seem to have a large influence on messaging and on campaign strategy. Fliers look similar from race to race across the state, and in recent years from one election to another. Candidates are encouraged to promote safe, generic images in TV ads, as well. To sharpen our messaging, it might help to tap into some fresh resources.

The broader issue is whether it's a good idea to have consultants driving campaign strategy and messaging. Yet candidates need sources of expertise, and good campaigns tend to work with consultants. Communications and digital organizing are areas mentioned where candidates could use much more help. Local parties could be offered services and training to help build up their organizations. The mindset should shift toward training local people to do more.

A clearinghouse of information on consultants and services could be made available to campaigns, rather than having that choice centralized. Most efforts should be centered around enhancing what we can do as candidates, volunteers, and members of activist organizations.

Some ideas emerged from our interviews for broadening the scope of the IDP. More than one person mentioned hiring a full time faith outreach organizer. Churches and other religious groups are important in rural and urban communities, as are Black churches in cities like Waterloo, and some of them are willing to get involved in politics. Religious organizations are more likely to get involved in an issue than help candidates, but any involvement would be helpful.

Interviewees were uncomfortable with the IDP and DNC's influence over the selection of candidates, especially statewide and federal-level candidates. With better political infrastructure and a pipeline of excellent candidates, the choices for the top of the ticket might become more evident, and not as overdetermined by "the powers that be."

The good news is that we have some Democratic infrastructure in most counties, which can't be said in some neighboring states. We have something to build on as we find the best way to support county chairs, or help counties band together to build a strong organization. We also run candidates in almost all of our legislative races. We can build on that strength by supporting and using our candidates more effectively.

## **Recommendations: Section 5. Support Systems for Democratic Candidates**

1. Recruit candidates who are well matched to their district, but make sure they want to do the basic work of contacting voters, listening to them, and raising the necessary money.
2. Ensure all candidates, not just targeted candidates, are provided better training in all aspects of a campaign—managing staff and volunteers, fundraising, presenting in public forums, etc.
3. Work to find a better balance between centralized and localized organization and messaging. Good candidates know the district and can help Democrats win if we listen to them.
4. When organizers are assigned to targeted candidates by the Truman Fund and Senate Majority Fund, find a way to consolidate an organizer's territory; that is, have an organizer share a Senate candidate and a House candidate in the same territory. Avoid assigning an organizer to two different kinds of districts in different parts of the state.

5. Rethink the structure of the Truman Fund vs. the Senate Majority Fund, and consider having those organizations work together.
6. Consider broadening the scope and increasing funding of the IDP, and commit to year-round organizing in order to develop resources prior to each two-year election cycle. Consider hiring a statewide organizer to coordinate these efforts.
7. Ditch the coordinated campaign. The IDP can provide robust resources to support GOTV and other organizing efforts at the county level, or in some cases at the legislative district level.
8. Neither the DNC nor the IDP should select statewide or federal-level candidates.

## **Section 6. Fundraising**

A common theme in our interviews was that money was not an issue in 2020, though it was for many candidates in 2018 and may be again in 2022. In 2020, a number of groups outside Iowa helped fund campaigns: Tech Solidarity, Future Now, Every District, Swing Left, and One Vote. Unions also helped with funding or made in-kind contributions (i.e., paying for a candidate's billboard, sending mailers). County parties and grassroots groups helped fund campaigns as did candidates' personal fundraising efforts.

Several interviewees commented on the efficacy of candidates raising money outside their own districts, whether from grassroots groups in Iowa like Flip It Iowa, Potluck Insurgency, and the Linn Phoenix Club, or from groups outside the state. Interviewees noted that candidates in red areas sometimes turned to blue districts for funding support. That said, we were told that it is essential for candidates to build support in their own districts by identifying local donors. One candidate suggested that outside grassroots groups could target one race, thereby developing relationships that might lead to collaboration on in-district fundraisers and ongoing volunteer recruitment.

Another discussion focused on the state party's role in funding candidates, and whether candidates should be recruited and supported in all 100 House districts and 25 Senate Districts in each election cycle. Currently it is the practice for the Truman Fund (TF) and the Senate Majority Fund (SMF) to identify candidates in what they consider to be winnable districts and to support those candidates with funding and other resources. Interviewees argued that because money is not available to fund 125 House and Senate races in each cycle, the TF and SMF should continue to target selected races. However, as discussed in the section on party building, the party can benefit from having as many candidates as possible run across the state.

A corollary is that we need better polling in legislative districts as a tool to decide which races should be targeted by the Truman Fund and Senate Majority Fund.

### **Recommendations: Section 6. Fundraising**

1. Candidates should ensure there is a strong effort made within their district to identify local donors.
2. Grassroots groups from outside a candidate's district can help a candidate develop their local fundraising strategy and help raise funds.

3. Commit to some level of support and funding for all Statehouse candidates, whether deemed to be in winnable districts or not. Think of candidates in nontargeted districts as organizers for the party and for our statewide candidates.
4. The Truman Fund and Senate Majority Fund should figure out how to improve polling used to identify targeted races.

## Conclusion and the Path Forward

November 3, 2020 was a kick in the teeth for Iowa Democrats. We lost in Iowa and we lost badly. What should we do about it, other than feel disheartened? Potluck Insurgency undertook this project not just to put out a report—we are determined to make it actionable.

After revisiting our body of interviews and considering its recurring themes, both explicit and implicit, our conclusions are as follows:

- **Go local.** County parties and grassroots organizations must get active and stay active on the local level. Serving as a precinct captain for a county party central committee must be more than just showing up to a monthly meeting—it has to mean getting out and registering voters, organizing people, showing up as Democrats at local events (not just Dem events), engaging in discussions, and showing the flag.
- **Listen to our candidates — let them lead.** We have good candidates who know their districts. As a party, we must amplify their messaging and support their authenticity by using templates and themes that are flexible, not prescriptive. Broad themes are fine—cookie cutter messages, cowboy cards, and ads are not. Play to people's strengths.
- **Reframe our messaging.** We must reframe our messaging so we are not stuck responding to Republican taunts and lies but are pushing out our own clear, concise, consistent messages. Part of that is getting out ahead on issues and framing them as we see fit. Part is reclaiming language that Republicans have appropriated, such as *freedom*, *liberty* and *patriotism*. Part of it is also having clear responses ready to deploy to combat the two most virulent Republican talking points: That we are gun grabbers and baby killers. To accomplish this we need to work with communications experts—many of us may have those experts living right in our own communities.
- **Ditch the coordinated campaign.** Every two years, we hear the same litany—this time, it will be different. But it's not different. It's not working and it is especially not working for our Statehouse candidates. (The people who work on them are great—it's the concept that is not.) We'll never have a snowball's chance in hell of taking back the Statehouse if we don't identify and get the right people out to vote. Yes, investing in GOTV is still a must, but we must be smart and make much better use of our resources and the knowledge gained over the course of each campaign.
- **Fix the VAN or start over.** The information in the VAN is in poor shape, to be charitable. Either we invest time and money in cleaning it up, including getting rid of the bad phone numbers and adding in contact information where it is missing, or we invest in a new system. We could offer incentives—VAN for free for a certain amount of clean-up, for example. Until and unless we take

decisive action here, we will be at a disadvantage when it comes to voter contact.

- **Year-round organizing.** This is where the IDP can take the lead with paid organizers who can help get county parties organized and organizing—including those in tough, red territory. If that means organizing regionally—several counties working together in some areas to pool resources—that is what we do. The IDP can start by hiring a permanent state-wide organizing director.
- **Focus on communications.** We need really good communications people as part of the state-wide teams. If you have them locally, use them, by all means. But this is an area of expertise that the state party can double down on and help candidates. And if communications needs are being met by consultants, there must be contact between these resources and county parties and county-level activist groups.
- **Value every candidate.** Those running in very red districts are doing some of the bravest, hardest work. They contribute to party building, they are ambassadors for candidates further up the ticket, they help us cut into margins, and they force Republicans to use resources. We must value them. If that means giving them access to the VAN for free or at a highly discounted rate, then do it. If that means providing them with other resources, then we do that, too.
- **Women support women.** We have seen time and again that most (not all, but most) of the grassroots groups are women-led and women-driven. The Potluck team that put together this report is made up of four women. Our interviewees consisted of 21 women and 13 men. Women have creative ideas and know their communities. They are outstanding at relational organizing. We need to empower them, support them and help them soar.
- **EMILY:** Early Money Is Like Yeast. Help people raise the first thousand; give them the tools so they can be effective fundraisers. Groups like Flip It Iowa can teach candidates how to organize fundraisers. Once they prove they can raise money close to home, it is easier for them to draw in more money. Money can never again be allowed to be an issue—for the most part, it was not in 2020. That is a positive takeaway from 2020.
- **Be proud of our values:** We have values—we care about people, we respect their differences, we care about their future, just as we care about our state. Never forget that or apologize for it. We need to make sure Iowans know that government is a force for good in their lives.

## **Appendix: Action Items for the IDP, Truman Fund and Senate Majority Fund, County Parties, Grassroots Groups and Activists, and Candidates**

The recommendations presented in this appendix are based on the same material found in the main body of the report. Here we've pulled out recommendations specifically for each political entity regarding rebuilding the party and winning elections in Iowa.

### **Iowa Democratic Party**

#### **Messaging**

1. Democrats should engage in year-round messaging to combat the pervasive—and persuasive—right-wing messaging pouring into our communities. A Communications advisor from the IDP might help develop year-round messaging.
2. Democrats should be more aggressive with their counter-messaging and work harder to hold Republicans accountable for their lies and distortions. Reframing is a specialized communications skill. A Communications advisor from the IDP can help develop effective counter-messaging.
3. Strive for clarity and simplicity in messaging.
4. Find ways, including the use of digital and social media, to deliver messaging where people will see and hear it (billboards, bumper stickers).
5. The IDP should focus on messages that are effective for Iowa. Messages that dominate political discourse at the national level may not reflect what voters in Iowa care about.
6. The IDP should focus on brand-related messaging, but there should be less top-down control of messaging at the local level.

## **Party Building**

1. The IDP should help each county develop an organizational plan, and help them determine whether it is most effective to maintain a county central committee or whether to combine central committees across two or three counties.
2. Consider whether pairing relationships might support party building in other ways—i.e., mentoring relationships, suggesting ways for counties to work together on voter registration drives or other activities.
3. Paid year-round organizers are needed to support year-round party building. The IDP should raise funds to pay for year-round organizers.
4. The IDP should make party-building a priority equivalent to retaining first in the nation status in the Presidential caucuses.

## **Organizing in Iowa**

1. The IDP should provide training and tools for relational organizing, but also adopt a relational organizing attitude—empowering people to organize their own communities is the way to build our party.
2. Improve data (e.g. polling used to target winnable races, precinct level analysis of voters), and use the data to inform conversations with county parties, and local activists and volunteers.
3. Organizers could come from anywhere, but we should invest wherever possible in identifying and developing local organizers. Ensure a good fit between the organizer and the assigned territory.
4. Commit to some level of support and funding for all statehouse candidates, whether deemed to be in winnable districts or not. Having candidates on the ground across the state will help bring more people into the party's organization.

## **Support Systems for Candidates in Iowa**

1. Ensure all candidates, not just targeted candidates, are provided better training in all aspects of a campaign—managing staff and volunteers, fundraising, presenting in public forums, etc.
2. Find a better balance between centralized and localized organization and messaging. Good candidates know the district and can help Democrats win if we listen to them.
3. Consider broadening the scope and increasing funding of the IDP, and commit to year-round organizing in order to develop resources prior to each two-year election cycle.
4. Ditch the coordinated campaign. The IDP can provide robust resources to support GOTV and other organizing efforts in order to develop resources prior to each two-year campaign cycle. Consider hiring a statewide organizer to coordinate these efforts.
5. If the IDP chooses to continue with a coordinated campaign, then it must determine how the coordinated campaign can better support down-ballot candidates, even in presidential election cycles. And it must figure out how candidates and the coordinated campaign can share volunteers rather than compete for them.
6. Neither the DNC nor the IDP should select statewide candidates.

## **Fundraising**

1. Commit to some level of funding for all statehouse candidates, whether deemed to be in winnable districts or not. All candidates can contribute to building the Democratic party in the state and help support statewide candidates.

## **Truman Fund/Senate Majority Fund/Coordinated Campaign**

### **Messaging**

1. Strive for less centralized messaging and less control over candidates' messaging. Work with candidates to help them develop messaging that will work on the ground in their districts.
2. Remain open to recommendations from candidates about messaging opportunities and media outlets that will be most effective in their communities.
3. Focus on messages that are important in Iowa. Messages that dominate political discourse at the national level may not reflect what Iowa voters care about.

### **Party Building**

1. Re-develop the VAN so that it can be used for a variety of purposes, including relational organizing, by county parties and grassroots groups. Offer training to these groups on how to improve and use the data.

## **Reaching Voters**

1. Determine how to make phonebanking more effective, whether it's better data in the VAN, better scripts, finding ways to follow up with voters who have been contacted and those who have not.
2. Improving the VAN must be a priority. Update data more frequently, design the VAN to be used by different groups for different purposes, e.g. relational organizing in communities, persuasive lists, GOTV.
3. The VAN should be less expensive to users.
4. Never deny the VAN to any candidate, even if a primary challenger, maybe with improvement incentives.
5. Post Covid, we should go back to meeting voters face to face, whether that is knocking doors or going wherever they are and talking to them.
6. Design doorhangers that list all candidates on the ballot.
7. Candidates have strong opinions on the best way to reach voters in their district, and should be listened to when developing media strategy. This may mean investing more, for example, in radio advertising and encouraging candidates and activists to do regular radio interviews.
8. Prioritize use of social media among candidates and volunteers, and provide them with critical assistance, both technical and creative.
9. Find ways to involve local volunteers who may not have strong tech skills or access to adequate and stable broadband. Be willing to do data entry.

## **Organizing in Iowa**

1. Improve data (e.g. polling used to target winnable races, precinct level analysis of voters), and use the data to inform conversations with local volunteers, rather than imposing strategies on them.
2. Provide training and tools for relational organizing, but also adopt a relational organizing attitude—that empowering people to organize in their own communities is a way to build the party.
3. Continue to use canvassing to identify our voters for more effective GOTV.
4. Good organizers can come from anywhere, but we should invest wherever possible in identifying and developing local organizers. All organizers should understand their territory, and they will do a better job if the attitude coming from the top is not rigid.
5. Commit to some level of support and funding for all statehouse candidates, whether deemed to be in winnable districts or not. Candidates in nontargeted districts can become organizers for the larger Party and for our statewide candidates.

## **Support Systems for Candidates in Iowa**

1. Recruit candidates who are well matched to their district, and make sure they want to do the basic work of contacting voters and listening to them.
2. Ensure all candidates, not just targeted candidates, are provided training in all aspects of a campaign—managing staff and volunteers, fundraising, presenting in public forums, etc.
3. Find a better balance between centralized and localized organization and messaging. Good candidates know the district and can help Democrats win if we listen to them.
4. When organizers are assigned to targeted candidates by the Truman Fund and Senate Majority Fund, find a way to consolidate an organizer’s territory; that is, have an organizer share a Senate candidate and a House candidate in the same territory. Avoid assigning an organizer to two different kinds of districts in different parts of the state.
5. Rethink the structure of the Truman Fund vs. the Senate Majority Fund, and consider having those organizations work together.
6. Ditch the coordinated campaign and figure out how the party can instead provide robust resources to support GOTV and other organizing efforts at the district and county level.
7. If the coordinated campaign is continued, determine how it can better support down-ballot candidates, even in presidential election cycles, and figure out how candidates and the coordinated campaign can share volunteers rather than compete for them.

## Fundraising

1. The Truman Fund and Senate Majority Fund should figure out how to improve polling used to identify targeted candidates in order to derive the greatest benefit from funding those candidates.

## County Parties

### Messaging

1. Contribute to messaging at the local level to help combat right-wing messaging coming into the district. Develop ways to counter these messages and build a better understanding of what Democrats stand for using means appropriate to the county: letters to the editor, billboards, radio spots, etc. Strive for local media coverage by inviting press to events.
2. Develop a plan for getting members of the central committee out to meet people in the community. Consider creating a Community Action Chair or Community Outreach Chair. Many parties already participate in local festivals and parades—this effort can be expanded to include other opportunities to talk to voters, e.g., table at Farmers Markets, sponsor community service projects like Habitat builds, food drives, highway pickup, etc., and then do a press release about the project that includes the Democratic Party logo.
3. Engage others in the community on non-partisan issues, when appropriate, not solely on partisan policy.

### Party Building

1. Ensure that all precincts are represented on the county's central committee.
2. Find ways to encourage attendance and participation in central committee meetings (hold raffles, ensure that meetings take no more than 90 minutes, provide childcare, etc.).
3. Ensure that the same few people are not doing all the talking or all the work of the committee. Give people concrete tasks and reward them for their efforts.
4. Organize activities in addition to central committee meetings that will encourage people to get involved. Find ways to engage people outside of the central committee structure. In other words, try to help Democrats in the county "find a home"—a place where they can come to talk to people with similar ideas and values.

## **Organizing in Iowa**

1. Build relationships with the community. Organize community service events. While retaining your identity as Democrats, team up with other local groups to achieve something for the community.
2. Ensure the county party is visible in the community and that it is a place where all Democrats are welcome.

## **Support Systems for Candidates in Iowa**

1. Support candidates and the Democratic party in Iowa by committing to year-round events and activities.
2. Engage local supporters to help build capacity for volunteers and other resources that will be needed during an election cycle.

## **Fundraising**

1. Raise funds that can be donated to local candidates and to those in the district, or that can be turned over to other funding entities in the Iowa Democratic Party.

## **Grassroots Groups**

Many of the recommendations for county parties apply to grassroots groups, so we recommend taking a close look at those recommendations. However, here are additional recommendations that apply more specifically to grassroots groups.

## **Party Building**

1. Organize forums and events to educate voters and find ways to bring people with common interests together.
2. Engage in activities that help people find their voices and build confidence in their ability to speak out on issues.

## **Organizing in Iowa**

1. Seek training in relational organizing and envision your group as a powerhouse for relational organizing.
2. Find ways to engage people in the community in events and activities that help them build confidence as Democrats.
3. Build coalitions with other groups that have a similar focus. Work together to organize and message around issues that affect your community. E.g., in rural communities, maintaining rural hospitals is a key issue as is the impact of companies like Dollar General which drive out local businesses.
4. Establish working relationships with the county party and with other grassroots groups. Promote each other's activities and keep lines of communication open.

## **Support Systems for Candidates in Iowa**

1. Support candidates and the Democratic party in Iowa by committing to year-round activities and events.
2. Engage local activists and supporters to help develop capacity for volunteers and other resources that will be needed by candidates during an election cycle.

## **Fundraising**

1. Raise funds that can be donated to local candidates and to those in the district, or that can be turned over to other funding entities in the Iowa Democratic Party.

## **Candidates**

### **Messaging**

1. Work with the Truman Fund or Senate Majority Fund to strike a balance between standardized messaging and messaging that you think is appropriate for your district.
2. Find effective ways to do counter-messaging and work hard to hold Republicans accountable for their lies and distortions. Reframing can be an effective way to counter negative messaging—seek advice from a Comms expert on how to do effective reframing.
3. In your own messaging, use personal experiences to connect to voters and to help them disengage from conspiracy theories and negative right wing messaging.
4. Ensure you are getting out at every opportunity to listen to voters. If you know what they care about, your messaging will be more likely to focus on what is important to voters in your district. Messages that dominate political discourse at the national level—or even at the state level—may

not be what your voters care about.

5. Talk to people about what you want to do to help them.
6. Strive for clarity and simplicity in your messaging.

## **Party Building**

1. Envision your campaign as a way to develop the party by empowering people who care about issues to organize and speak out.
2. Ensure that your campaign is welcoming to all volunteers and find a way to use people with different skill sets. Give them concrete tasks and reward them. Try to ensure they have a positive experience, even if the campaign does not win, so they will remain engaged with the Democratic party. Talk to them about what they can do to stay active after the campaign is over.

## **Reaching Voters**

1. Post Covid, we should go back to meeting voters face to face, whether that is knocking doors or going wherever they may be found and talking to them. Candidates should get out in the community to meet and talk to voters at every available opportunity.
2. Become an expert on the best way to reach voters in your district, and share your expertise with the TF/SMF/Coordinated campaign.
3. Prioritize use of social media for your campaign, and provide staff and volunteers with critical assistance, both technical and creative.
4. Find ways to involve local volunteers who may not have strong tech skills or access to adequate and stable broadband. Be willing to do data entry.

## **Organizing in Iowa**

1. Seek training in relational organizing and build relational organizing capacity for your campaign.
2. Use outreach such as meet-and-greets, canvassing, phonebanking, and other contacts with voters to build relationships that will encourage them not only to vote for you but to get involved in Democrats' events and activities.

## **Support Systems for Candidates in Iowa**

1. Take advantage of training and other resources provided by the IDP/Truman Fund/Senate Majority Fund, and provide feedback to improve these resources for others.
2. Reach out and offer support to other candidates in your district (and outside your district), even if you have lost a race.

## **Fundraising**

1. Identify local donors and be sure your campaign undertakes a strong fundraising effort within the district, even though groups from outside the district are helping to fund your campaign.
2. Consult previous candidates in your district about their donors and reach out to those donors.