Annals of Politics

What MAGA Can Teach Democrats About Organizing—and Infighting

Republicans have become adept at creating broad coalitions in which supporting Trump is the only requirement. Democrats get tied up with litmus tests.

By Charles Duhigg

January 26, 2026

Scholars who study both parties agree that in recent decades Republicans have created broad coalitions, whereas Democrats have often been divided by litmus tests on abortion, gender identity, and other topics.Illustration by Ben Wiseman

Americans who came of age in the nineteen-eighties will remember the emergence of two organizations that aimed to convert people to a cause, revolutionize social norms, and build enduring grassroots movements—Dare and madd.

Dare, or the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program, was created in 1983 by the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles County school district. From the start, the program was a success. Its stated goal was "to equip elementary-school children with skills for resisting peer pressure to experiment with tobacco, drugs and alcohol." The initiative was embraced by police departments and politicians, and within just a few years the Dare curriculum had spread to more than three-quarters of the country's school districts. More than three million students participated annually, and many were taught that even one toke can end in homelessness and despair. The group received admiring press, and was funded by Congress and various philanthropies; the budget at Dare headquarters eventually approached twenty-five million dollars a year. Nancy Reagan and the White House praised the program, and it received support from major companies, from Kmart to Kentucky Fried Chicken.

madd's origins were far less auspicious; even to its founders it seemed like a long shot. In 1980, Cari Lightner, a thirteen-year-old girl who lived outside Sacramento, was killed by a drunk driver while walking to church. The man had previously been arrested four times for driving while drunk but had mostly avoided serious

punishment—a pattern that continued when he was found guilty of vehicular manslaughter for Lightner's death but given a sentence of only twenty-one months, with a portion spent in a halfway house. In response, Lightner's mother, Candy, quit her job in real estate to found Mothers Against Drunk Driving. On her own, she began lobbying legislators, telephoning journalists, and appearing on newscasts, pushing for tougher drunk-driving laws. Eventually, women in other cities—many of whom had also been affected by drunk driving—saw those newscasts and read those articles. They sent Lightner letters asking for permission to launch madd chapters in their towns. She often mailed such volunteers a few pages with advice on how to contact local judges, monitor court cases, and petition legislators. But she essentially gave them permission to use whatever attention-getting tactics they thought best.

On an organizational level, Dare and madd were quite different. Dare was overseen from a central headquarters, in L.A., where staff guided nearly every aspect of operations. As Dare spread across the nation, it became an oft-cited example of what scholars of social movements call "mobilizing"—the process of educating people about a cause and then prompting them to participate in public events. When, in 1988, President Ronald Reagan declared the first National Dare Day, and hundreds of school districts let children miss classes to attend boisterous anti-drug rallies, this was mobilizing at work.

madd, by contrast, wasn't particularly focussed on mobilizing. Each of its chapters was independent and largely ungoverned by headquarters; volunteers concentrated on local advocacy instead of on national activism. As a result, local madd leaders often supported sets of policy recommendations that diverged—or even conflicted—with the agendas of other chapters. Some MADD chapters pushed to prohibit alcohol sales at public events, objected to accepting funding from alcohol companies, and advocated for mandatory jail time; others argued that the group shouldn't be anti-drinking but, rather, anti-drunk-driving, that it should welcome donations from beverage companies, and that courts should have discretion over sentencing. Meanwhile, at the top of madd, there were serious managerial problems.

Lightner, who was known to staff members as the madd Queen, sometimes used the organization's funds to pay for personal expenses, including dry cleaning and babysitting. In 1985, after reports revealed that a telemarketing firm hired by madd had pocketed much of the donations to the group in fees, the California attorney general opened an investigation. A new executive director quit after seventeen months; then a new board pushed out Lightner, who responded by criticizing the organization in the press.

All this turmoil, however, had the knock-on effect of making madd excel at another important aspect of social movements—what's known as "organizing," helping members to become leaders on their own. The chaos at headquarters led to the empowerment of local chapter heads and allowed the social bonding that a movement needs to survive. Moreover, chapter members were free to experiment with different tactics. Mark Wolfson, a professor at the University of California, Riverside, who has studied the group, has likened it to a franchise business in which a new owner is given just a bit of instruction and is then expected to find a way to prosper. "madd kind of forced volunteers to step up," he told me. He explained that the group's members, many of them stay-at-home mothers with little professional experience, "suddenly had to figure out how to talk to politicians and go on TV and build a community and fund-raise and network—pretty heady stuff." Not every madd chapter thrived, but for those that did, Wolfson said, "it was an inadvertent leadership school on how to build organizations." Lightner turned out to be easy to replace, because there were dozens of other leaders ready to take over.

As the Johns Hopkins political scientist Hahrie Han likes to say, "Mobilizing is about getting people to do a thing, and organizing is about getting people to become the kind of people who do what needs to be done." For a social movement to create real change, it helps to be skilled at both mobilizing and organizing. But that doesn't mean that both skills are equally important. Dare was great at mobilizing—the organization collected huge donations, charmed legislators, and spurred hundreds of rallies—but it was largely ineffective at changing how people behaved. Multiple studies showed that some students even reported more drug use than

nonparticipants, in part because the curriculum made them curious about experimenting. And, by the early two-thousands, many of the schools that had once been enrolled in Dare had dropped it. The program proved to be more of a fad than a movement.

madd, meanwhile, became one of the most successful advocacy groups in the U.S. Today, it has chapters in every state. madd has helped pass more than a thousand state laws, including one in New York, known as Leandra's Law, that makes it an automatic felony to drive while intoxicated with someone age fifteen or younger in the car. madd was a pioneering advocate for victim-impact panels—namely, for allowing people affected by a crime to describe their experiences—which has become a common part of the criminal-justice system. The story of MADD suggests that organizing is more important than mobilizing.

One can look at the maga movement and the Democratic Party through a similar lens. Today's Democratic Party is great at mobilizing: it can propel people into the streets with big marches, raise billions of dollars for national candidates, and get liberals to bombard congressional offices with letters and phone calls. However, it's less talented at organizing—building the kinds of local infrastructure and disparate leaders that are needed to sustain a large and ideologically diverse coalition. maga, on the other hand, is great at organizing—after 2020, the movement launched the so-called Precinct Strategy, which encouraged thousands of people to run for leadership positions within their local Republican Party chapters, and to become poll workers. This is a reason Donald Trump is in the White House again—and liberal and conservative activists alike say that it will be hard for the Democrats to start consistently winning until they mimic some of Maga's strategies.

When frustrated Democratic activists are asked about the right-wing organizing that inspires their greatest envy, they often mention a group most Americans have never heard of unless they attend an evangelical church, belong to a gun club, or homeschool their kids. The Faith & Freedom Coalition, despite receiving almost no significant attention outside of right-wing media, has become one of the most powerful conservative groups in the nation—and an engine behind Trump's rise.

Reëxamining the American Dream in “The Last Carnival”

Faith & Freedom was launched in direct response to the electoral success of a liberal: Barack Obama. In 2008, after the Democrats’ sweeping victory of the White House and Congress, the longtime Republican operative Ralph Reed began studying exit polls to understand why so many conservatives who wouldn’t have dreamed of voting for Al Gore or John Kerry had supported Obama. Two decades earlier, Reed had been the executive director of the Christian Coalition, which had encouraged religious voters to turn out for conservative candidates. In 1994, the group helped deliver the House of Representatives to Republicans for the first time in forty years. In 2000, the coalition helped George W. Bush win the Presidency with around seventy per cent of the evangelical vote. By then, Reed, sensing more lucrative opportunities, had left the group to become a corporate public-affairs strategist.

After his departure, the Christian Coalition’s influence declined, but evangelicals continued to support Republicans. Then Obama emerged. As Reed examined canvassing records from the 2008 election, he found that Catholic voters, often stable Republicans, had supported Obama rather than the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, by a nine-point margin. Obama had also outperformed previous Democrats with evangelical voters. Even among voters who attended worship services more than once a week, a reliable Republican bloc, Obama had increased his support by eight points. To Reed, these numbers were terrifying. “If you’ve worked on campaigns as long as I have, you know when a slaughter’s coming,” Reed told me. “It was here.”

“Sorry, no ears perk up when I call out that name.”

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Open cartoon gallery

How had Obama done it? To Reed and other political professionals, the answer seemed rooted, in part, in Obama's willingness to ignore conventional wisdom about how campaigns ought to be run. Most Presidential races, once the primaries are over, rely on a large, professional staff to organize tens of thousands of volunteers. Although free labor can help a candidate win, volunteers are also seen as a source of risk, best restricted to such drudge work as phone banking or door knocking. Professionals worry that if volunteers are given too much freedom they're likely to go off script, muddy the message, or spark social-media controversies.

Obama's campaign, however, took the opposite approach. It recruited tens of thousands of volunteer leaders and basically told them to do what they thought best—in essence, to become franchises. These local leaders began experimenting with different messages and strategies, and then shared their results with one another. In Florida, a volunteer used her own money to rent an unofficial Obama campaign office while others built an "Obama booth," near a dog run, to register voters. In California, one particularly enthusiastic volunteer created an unofficial social-media account for Obama. (Webmasters eventually took it away.) After the official campaign built a website with instructions on how to create pro-Obama videos, more than four hundred thousand of them were uploaded to YouTube. This deliberately varied strategy vastly exceeded expectations; by many counts, it attracted more volunteers, who worked for more hours, than in any other campaign in U.S. history. In the 2008 and 2012 campaigns, a total of more than two million Obama supporters approached their neighbors and colleagues more than twenty-four million times, registering at least 1.8 million new voters and helping Obama and congressional Democrats secure victories.

As Reed saw it, Republicans had clearly been out-organized. In 2009, when he founded the Faith & Freedom Coalition, he adopted the franchise model that had propelled Obama (and madd). For instance, when Chad Schnitger, an organizer based in Riverside, California, asked Faith & Freedom's headquarters about starting

a local chapter, Reed's lieutenants provided him with their blessing, some literature, and a small financial donation. But he was essentially on his own: he would need to find his own funding, develop his own strategies, and build his own network.

Schnitger took advantage of this license and began contacting evangelical pastors and conservative nonprofits throughout Southern California. His pitch wasn't about elections. "It was that I understand organizing, and I'm a Christian," he told me. "Pastors want to be politically active—or, at least, to see their values having an impact in politics—but they're scared they'll get in trouble," because churches and nonprofits are generally prohibited by I.R.S. rules from engaging in partisan campaigning. (Those rules changed slightly last year.)

Schnitger began e-mailing pastors with advice about what they could safely say from the pulpit on topics including school-board elections and tax proposals. He also began publishing regular newsletters with updates on such matters as homeschooling laws. Many parishioners in evangelical churches already belonged to small Bible-study groups—a tactic used by megachurches to help members bond—and Schnitger asked church leaders to nominate volunteers to serve as Faith & Freedom liaisons. "My job is to build up the pastors and then encourage them to push leadership as far down as possible," Schnitger told me. "I do for them what Faith & Freedom does for me." When Schnitger ran out of churches to influence, he began approaching gun-club members and homeschooling associations. There wasn't always ideological overlap among these groups. The people at gun clubs weren't necessarily churchgoers; some homeschooling groups were wary of guns. "But it doesn't matter if they agree on everything," Schnitger said. "They just have to agree on who they're voting for."

Soon, Faith & Freedom had three hundred and fifty thousand members in California. Starting in 2020, after carefully studying the state's "ballot harvesting" laws, Schnitger concluded that he could place boxes inside hundreds of churches, eventually collecting thousands of ballots each election.

Nationwide, there are 3.1 million Faith & Freedom members, and in 2024 they encouraged neighbors to vote for Trump nearly eighty million times—an outreach

three times larger than Obama's record-setting effort. The group's headquarters distributes money, as well as write-ups about the results of local experiments, to the various chapters. But it's up to local volunteers to decide which tactics to adopt and which issues to champion, as long as they align with the group's basic conservative values.

If there's a formula to Faith & Freedom's success, Schnitger told me, "it's basically just being around—that's our whole secret. Instead of showing up at election time and asking for votes, we're here year-round, asking people what they need." Schnitger is selling community. "The election is just the by-product," he said.

This kind of organizing is hardly the only reason that Trump won. But scholars who study both parties agree that in recent decades Republicans have created broad ideological coalitions—something that Democrats, who tend to have litmus tests on abortion, social justice, and numerous other topics, have often not achieved. Conservatives have also built a media ecosystem that dwarfs Democratic messaging. Sarah Longwell, a longtime conservative strategist, opposes Trump's autocratic transformation of the Republican Party, but she told me that the maga movement has nevertheless "done a fantastic job of welcoming anyone who puts on the red hat. That's the only requirement—you just have to think Trump is great."

Other right-wing organizations have used similar tactics to great success. When a conservative activist on a college campus volunteers to create a chapter of Turning Point USA, a youth-oriented group founded by a Tea Party crusader, Bill Montgomery, and the Christian activist Charlie Kirk, they are often told to read a book called "Groundbreakers: How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America," to learn how to organize (but nothing else). These volunteers are then mostly left to find their own way. The results are sometimes controversial: to protest diversity initiatives, Turning Point franchises in South Carolina and New Mexico held Affirmative Action Bake Sales, in which an item's cost was based on the buyer's race. Yet such events are always pointedly open to all comers, including liberals.

Kirk often spouted toxic right-wing rhetoric, including anti-gay and Islamophobic views, as well as antisemitic conspiracy theories. And a national field director of Turning Point resigned after it was revealed that she had declared, “I HATE BLACK PEOPLE! Like fuck them all.” But Kirk, at so-called Prove Me Wrong campus rallies across the nation, made a point of engaging with anyone who wanted to debate. When a gay student approached the microphone at a large Turning Point rally at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Kirk said that he didn’t approve of the student’s “life style,” but he added that, if they could agree on, say, closing the border, then “we welcome you to the conservative movement.” At another event, he said to a liberal student who had been invited to speak, “You know how we heal our divides? By talking to people we disagree with.” In September, Kirk was assassinated in front of three thousand students at Utah Valley University while debating a liberal audience member about gun control.

Colby Kelley, a former Turning Point leader at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told me that the group’s ethos and loose organizational structure had pushed him to interact with all kinds of people he wouldn’t normally speak to, including socialists, anarchists, and attractive women. (He met his girlfriend at a Turning Point meeting.) “It kind of teaches you to talk to everyone, because you never know who you’re going to agree with,” he said. “Just because we argue doesn’t mean we have to dislike each other.” Of course, the liberals Kelley has engaged with may not have found these exchanges as satisfying as he did—some of his interlocutors may have been offended. But Kirk’s Prove Me Wrong aesthetic was never about making liberals comfortable or converting them into Trump voters. Rather, it was about reassuring conservatives, of all kinds, that they could find a place within Turning Point USA.

In 2017, the day after Trump’s Inauguration, the Women’s March brought as many as five million people around the nation into the streets. By most counts, it was the largest single-day mobilization in U.S. history at the time. The protest had come together with startling speed: roughly two months earlier, Teresa Shook, a member of Pantsuit Nation, a pro-Hillary Clinton group on Facebook, had posted her dismay

at Trump's victory and suggested a protest. Soon, there was an event page for what was at first called the Million Women March, with more than ten thousand R.S.V.P.s. A handful of liberal activists—many of them professional political organizers—ultimately decided that the effort needed central coördination, and so they began recruiting celebrities, seeking sponsorships, and issuing policy statements. They also began fund-raising, collecting more than two and a half million dollars, more than a quarter of which went to their own and others' salaries. As the effort became increasingly professionalized, its infrastructure began coming apart. Some activists objected to the event's name, given its similarity to previous marches, including the incendiary Million Man March of 1995, which had been led by Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam. The anti-Trump gathering was quickly rechristened the Women's March, but soon afterward national organizers began issuing rules that struck some members as exclusionary. For one thing, women's organizations that were anti-abortion were prohibited from participating. For another, participants who questioned some diversity-and-inclusion initiatives were not welcomed. Internal debates erupted about whether sex workers should be celebrated or seen as victims, and about the role of Jews in propagating racism. Shook distanced herself from the effort and called for the co-chairs to step down. These and other leaders bickered among themselves, accusing one another of racism and antisemitism. The turnout was impressive for the march itself. But, after, many of the groups created to put it on fell into factional infighting or drifted apart. In the past century, Democrats have usually counted on outside organizations such as churches and labor unions to provide the kind of year-round, localized infrastructure that a movement needs to survive. But, as unions and non-evangelical churches have shrunk, the left has turned to a different strategy. It's become largely focussed on creating spectacles, such as the No Kings protests, that can mobilize large numbers of people at breakneck speed to march, sign petitions, and contribute money. But much of the energy fizzles away once the protest or the election is over. Indeed, large gatherings and high-profile protests haven't generally been effective at sparking widespread change: a recent study from the National Bureau of

Economic Research, which looked at major U.S. social movements between 2017 and 2022, found that “protests generate substantial internet activity but have limited effects on political attitudes.” The researchers studied activism connected to the environment, gender equality, gun control, immigration, and other issues. Except for the myriad protests following the death of George Floyd, which may have slightly increased votes for Democrats, the researchers estimated “null effects of protests on public opinion and electoral behavior.”

According to Hahrie Han, the Johns Hopkins professor, part of the issue with modern progressive organizing is that “digital tools allow groups to scale really fast, but it also creates incentives to shortcut building infrastructure.” To take a far-off example, she said, during the Arab Spring, Twitter rallied people to topple dictators, “but the military was in power pretty soon afterward, because there wasn’t an infrastructure to sustain and channel that outrage.” Unlike at madd, where chapters were forced to build local communities and the dysfunction at headquarters allowed grassroots leaders to fill power vacuums, events like the Women’s March are usually national in focus, vacuums are filled by professional organizers, and strong local leaders seldom rise to top positions.

Even some of the most sophisticated left-leaning groups have stumbled. Following Trump’s victory in 2016, a group of former congressional staffers inspired by the pugnacity of Tea Party conservatives posted a rousing twenty-three-page online pamphlet titled “Indivisible: A Practical Guide for Resisting the Trump Agenda,” which encouraged such tactics as setting up Google News alerts for local congresspeople and spreading out at town halls to create the perception of broad support. The group also created a Google Doc to help activists across the country find one another. As with Dare, the initiative was quickly embraced by big donors and national leaders. In its first year, the group raised $2.6 million. Within two months, there were thousands of Indivisible chapters.

But, unlike the Tea Party, which at its founding was a chaotic jumble of anti-government viewpoints and competing leadership claims, Indivisible was tightly guided by its D.C. leaders and their dozens of employees. Tea Party activists often

took the initiative to run in local races for school boards or county commissions; Indivisible's headquarters focussed mostly on national issues and federal elections. The group's national office scored some successes: it organized demonstrations against Trump's Cabinet nominees and protested Republican attempts to repeal Obamacare. Yet there were structural problems. Initially, the group was a place for like-minded activists in numerous cities to convene, and various chapters started having success at backing local candidates. But organizational tensions emerged among Indivisible's headquarters—staffed by young political professionals who pushed for Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, and Elizabeth Warren's candidacy for President—and many state volunteers, who, a 2021 study found, were largely "older white women" who didn't necessarily agree with those stances and "worked very hard to boost Democrats they understood held more moderate views." The author of that study, Theda Skocpol, a political scientist at Harvard, told me that Indivisible represents "a tragic lost opportunity." Local grassroots Indivisible groups were "very impactful on people running for office and winning," she said, and they "operated pretty much on their own." But the group's top leaders, instead of building a sustainable and ideologically diverse membership, focussed on high-profile protests—and on maintaining ideological unity. At one point, the Indivisible headquarters discouraged chapters from endorsing candidates who were pro-life, or didn't support gender-affirming care, or questioned making it easier for people to register to vote.

In her study, Skocpol wrote that, "since 2017, national Indivisible leaders have raised tens of millions of dollars from major donors, but have not devolved significant resources away from Washington, D.C., to empower democratically accountable state and local leaders. Instead, Indivisible directors have invested most of their resources into running a large, professionally staffed, national advocacy organization." (Indivisible disputes Skocpol's assessment and sent me a statement saying that it has "enthusiastically campaigned for Democrats across the political spectrum.")

Skocpol went on, “If progressive-minded Americans want real change, most of the expertise, money and time we can muster should stop flowing into national advocacy bureaucracies engaged in symbolic maneuvers and purist politics.”

Ben Wikler chaired the Democratic Party of Wisconsin from 2019 to 2025. He recently told me that “Democrats should be learning from the Republicans about how to build small, socially interconnected communities.” Wisconsin had the tiniest swing toward Republicans among battleground states in 2024 because, Wikler believes, the state Party prioritized “neighborhood teams working year-round and socializing with their neighbors, to form real communities”—the same approach that governs Faith & Freedom. For liberals, he said, alternatives to church and the gun club include neighborhood organizations such as gardening groups and community centers. Whereas maga welcomes anyone wearing the red hat, Democrats often require people to use new terms on pronouns and race, and they can punish or exclude anyone who strays. “That doesn’t work,” Wikler said. “A movement needs people who feel safe with each other, who can hang out and talk about things besides politics. People who like each other. The Republicans are finding those people. The Democrats aren’t doing that enough.”

One problem, according to researchers, is that the left’s success in mobilizing large crowds may have caused leaders to misunderstand what spurs someone to become politically active in the first place. In the late nineties, the sociologist Ziad Munson began interviewing pro-life advocates, and he initially assumed that such people had been strongly opposed to abortion for years. “I was completely wrong,” he said. In fact, nearly a quarter of activists told him that they had been pro-choice when they attended their first pro-life event. A majority said that they had not had strong opinions about abortion. “But then something happened, like they moved to a new town or started going to a new church, or they got divorced and started joining singles groups, and the new people they met were pro-life,” Munson explained. “And so they found a community, and a sense of identity, and that’s when they became committed.”

Many leaders of local MADD chapters first sought the group out after their lives had been upended by a drunk driver, and they found that meeting other victims helped them process their anger and grief. Wolfson, the madd researcher, told me, “They were mainly women who had never thought of themselves as public figures, and now they’re talking to legislators and spending time with people who understand them and making new friends. At that point, you’re all in.” The organization accepted everyone, regardless of ideological background (and drinking habits). “All you needed to join was to care about this issue.”

“I finally get to use my diving watch!”

Cartoon by Nathan Cooper

Copy link to cartoon

Link copied

Shop

Open cartoon gallery

When researchers such as Munson look at today’s leftist movements, they often see the opposite approach. “The left has purity tests,” Munson said. “You have to prove you’re devoted to the cause. But that means that, once you join, you’re spending time with the kind of people you already know, because you already move in the same circles, and you’ve screened out people who might be ideologically ambivalent right now but might have become activists if you had welcomed them.” At pride marches in Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C., organizers have refused or ejected participants because they were carrying rainbow flags with a Star of David. At a Cincinnati anti-white-supremacy rally, a rabbi was prohibited from speaking because, organizers said, “allowing Zionists to participate undermines the original goal of the demonstration,” despite the rabbi’s vocal criticisms of the Israeli government. People have been excluded for other reasons: at Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Washington, an event called a Day of Absence, featuring discussions about racism, was cancelled after organizers asked white people to stay away from campus.

The sociologist Liz McKenna, of Harvard, told me that movements succeed best when people feel welcome. A movement becomes sustainable when members feel empowered and find friends. “The left loves big protests, but protesting is a tactic in search of a strategy,” she said. There must be some shared core values among a movement’s members, of course, but the requirement can’t be that *every* value is shared. “Making room for difference isn’t a nice-to-have thing—it’s table stakes,” she told me. “The rallies are by-products of the community, not the goal.” Most of all, even though anger can be useful, a movement also needs to provide some joy. “Trump rallies are fun,” McKenna noted. “The Turning Point campus debates are fun.” For a long time, she said, the left was less fun and more angry, “and so the right was out-organizing them at every turn.”

In 2015, in Alamance County, North Carolina—where a Confederate statue stands in front of the courthouse and Republicans have won every Presidential campaign since 1979—Dreama Caldwell, a thirty-eight-year-old executive director of a child-care center, was arrested after one of her employees accidentally left a child on a bus. The child was uninjured, but Caldwell was deemed criminally liable, even though she wasn’t present when the abandonment occurred. The county magistrate set her bail at forty thousand dollars, which she couldn’t afford, so she accepted a plea deal that allowed her to avoid a felony conviction but required a few days in jail.

Caldwell had a college degree and had been a professional her entire life. But now, as a convicted criminal, she couldn’t even get a job at a fast-food restaurant. When she saw a Facebook post mentioning that a new group was looking for people to organize rural communities, she signed up. An organizer told her that “they needed people to interview farmers and politicians,” Caldwell said. “And I was, like, ‘You want a Black woman, and a convict, to get white people in Alamance to open up? Good luck!’ ”

The group, Down Home North Carolina, had been created by Todd Zimmer after the state’s Republican legislators voted to refuse federal Medicaid funds. “That money would have helped people see doctors,” Zimmer told me. “But they wanted

to send a message about Democratic overspending." Zimmer holds fairly liberal views, at least on national issues. "But, in rural areas, people are thinking about their neighborhood school, and whether the hospitals will stay open, and how much groceries cost," he said. Most of North Carolina's left-leaning organizations were focussed on big cities such as nearby Durham, where Democrats outnumber Republicans four to one. Zimmer figured that, if he could build a coalition of voters—both progressives and right-wingers—who might not agree on national candidates but were aligned on local issues, they could become one of the most powerful blocs in the state. "You can't pass a bill in North Carolina without rural places," he said. "That's a fact. And so, if those places get organized, that's where the power is."

Zimmer's strategy was to send people like Caldwell into parking lots at Walmart and Dollar General to ask residents what might spark them to action. The interviewees didn't mention trans rights, Jeffrey Epstein, or other issues that were mainstays of cable news. Instead, they expressed worries about getting Narcan for relatives, where to bring vulnerable neighbors when summer temperatures spiked, and how to find affordable child care. Some complained about getting trapped in the same cash-bail system that had ensnared Caldwell. "And then we would ask them if they wanted to start a Down Home chapter in their city," Zimmer said. "We'd give them training and encouragement, but, beyond that, it was really up to them." The goal was to be akin to a church, "where everyone's welcome, and we talk about important things, but it's up to you to choose your path."

Caldwell and her colleagues began working on various campaigns, such as helping residents of the town of Oxford successfully lobby for the renovation of a derelict basketball court. Throughout North Carolina, Down Home offered locals advice on how to communicate with government officials and notes on how to speak at meetings. As Down Home spread, sometimes as many as two hundred members would show up at a county-commission meeting. When they took to the microphone, some of them would start talking about space aliens or chemtrails. "But that's O.K.," Zimmer said. "Because then they talk about wanting to see a new

stop sign, because their cousin—whom the commissioners probably went to school with—almost got run over last month."

Down Home now has fourteen chapters. The group has been credited with helping elect enough Democrats to the state House to prevent Republicans from amassing a veto-proof supermajority. In 2023, despite Republican control of the state legislature, North Carolina lawmakers voted to expand Medicaid in the state and passed a slew of other pro-rural bills supported by Down Home. Caldwell, who is now the organization's executive co-director, told me, "If you polled our members, you might find they're voting for very different people for President. But for the local soil-and-water board, or school board, we're pretty aligned. That's all we need."

In Minnesota, an organization named ISAIAH has built a coalition of Black churches, Islamic centers, child-care providers, East African immigrants, and college students. The goal is to "spend time together in common areas" and to "build power for a multiracial democracy, caring economy, and thriving planet" by forging alliances among groups that are otherwise unlikely to encounter one another. In 2023, even though the state legislature was
divided, ISAIAH successfully lobbied for one of the most generous paid family- and medical-leave bills in the nation. The group's recently departed executive director, Doran Schrantz, told me that one reason the group has thrived is that it doesn't limit participation to people who can pass litmus tests on such issues as abortion or L.G.B.T.Q. rights. Exclusionary tactics "are kryptonite," she told me. "We're focussed on bread-and-butter issues that people agree on, regardless of party."

In southern Indiana, a group named Hoosier Action has organized rural voters who pushed through legislation providing for the largest investment in mental health in the state's history. Kate Hess Pace, the group's executive director, told me that, when members meet with candidates, "it's really clear how disconnected the Democratic Party is from working-class people." The bluest cities are often the most expensive places to live, she said, and, "when our members tell stories about

overdose and addiction, the Dem candidates immediately go to policy solutions. It's like they're incapable of meeting people emotionally. It's the Republicans who consistently say, 'Oh, yeah, my brother's been in and out of rehab, I understand how much that hurts.' "

Down Home North Carolina, ISAIAH, and Hoosier Action have proved effective at increasing voter turnout for issues traditionally associated with the left. But donations from progressive groups have only rarely flowed their way. For the 2024 Presidential election, national Democrats spent $2.9 billion trying to elect Kamala Harris, in one of the most expensive campaigns in history. (Republicans spent $1.8 billion supporting Trump.) By contrast, Down Home North Carolina, ISAIAH, and Hoosier Action collectively raised just thirteen million dollars in 2024, much of it from local donors. Sarah Jaynes, the director of the Rural Democracy Initiative, a group that directs grants to local advocacy organizations, told me that "the Harris campaign and these big Senate races had more money than they could use—but the groups on the ground who know people, the trusted messengers, they're basically ignored."

The solution, activists such as Wikler and Zimmer believe, is to reprioritize where Democratic funds and attention are spent. The successful mayoral campaign of Zohran Mamdani, the Harvard researcher Liz McKenna notes, "was by all accounts joyful, hopeful, creative, and reflected a real sense of collective possibility. And that emotional culture translated into a major electoral upset." Nationally, however, there are few Democratic candidates running similar campaigns. And, when it comes to emotions, Trump seems to spark stronger feelings, on both the left and the right, than anyone else.

Ralph Reed reminded me that, for Faith & Freedom and many similar conservative organizations, there are no showy national rallies. And there's little strictness about ideological consistency. But during elections the group turns out millions of voters. When Reed looks at the left today, he said, "a lot of times it feels like they're trying to hook people with big parades and free Beyoncé concerts." That's not how you win, he went on. "You win by offering people a set of values that give them

meaning. Celebrities don't deliver that. Small groups of neighbors do. And, as long as we're building those groups, we're gonna win." ♦

Published in the print edition of the February 2, 2026, issue, with the headline "One Direction."