

Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing

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This chapter studies an organizing effort of the PICO National Network, which organizes in poor, working-class, and middle-class neighborhoods in the United States, mostly in urban areas.¹ PICO engages in “faith-based community organizing” to generate democratic pressure to advance the interests of its non-elite, highly multiracial participants (Gecan 2002; Wood & Warren 2002). The research reported here goes beyond other studies of grassroots organizing through its focus on efforts to influence policy-making on health care, public safety, education, immigrant rights, and housing at the *state and national levels*.

Efforts to build democratic movements in urban America have recently gained renewed scholarly attention (Boyte and Kari 1996; Delgado 1986; Gecan 2002; Hart 2001; Osterman 2003; Swarts 2001a; Warren 2001a; Wood 2002). These analyses have generally promoted a cautiously optimistic reading of the prospects for urban democratic reform. But they focus on local movements, and thus beg the question: when so much of the decision-making that determines the quality of life for the poor, working-class, and middle-class Americans occurs “over the heads” of local political leaders, how influential can locally-rooted social movements be? Are they relegated to fiddling on the margins of social policy – perhaps extracting minor concessions, but powerless to impact the decisions of economic elites who control global financial and informational flows, national political elites whose policies determine the

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availability of resources to meet urban needs, or the state-level elites who distribute those resources? Together, these state- and national-level decisions severely constrain local options; can community organizing effectively reshape those constraints?

Furthermore, as noted in the introductory chapter of this volume, changes in the national culture and political economy have reshaped the ecology of civic engagement in ways that present new challenges. Deindustrialization of the American economy, and the de-localization of many of the corporations that remain in cities, virtually require community organizing to project power into higher-level political arenas if they wish to have real impact. But meanwhile the political and cultural bases from which to build such civic power have themselves been eroded: on one hand by a new hyper-partisanship in Congress and national politics; and on the other hand by the decline of a *culture* of civic engagement in American life (Sirianni and Friedland 2001). Can community organizing efforts hope to simultaneously address the economic challenges facing low-income communities, political stagnation in the national capital, *and* the cultural challenges of sustaining long-term civic engagement?

This chapter begins to answer these questions by examining two prominent sites of higher-level power projection by faith-based community organizing (FBCO) groups. Examining first the ten year track record of the PICO California Project, I will argue that the evidence shows that such efforts can attain significant influence at the state level – even in the largest, arguably most politically complex state of the nation (California, with a population of 40 million and a vast and sophisticated media market). This retrospective analysis provides strong evidence of political impact and strategic capacity at the state level, but can tell us little about the actual dynamics underlying this strategic capacity, or how well that capacity might translate up to the

national level. For the latter, I examine the organizing process of PICO's currently emergent "New Voices" national campaign to reshape domestic policy in Congress, gradually launched during 2002-2005.

This analysis thus assesses the factors shaping the internal strategic structure and strategic capacity within two supra-local organizing efforts: at the state level via documentary evidence, interviews with key participants, and ethnographic data, seeking insight into the factors that have allowed the PICO California Project to generate significant influence; and at the national level via a more contemporaneous analysis drawing on a year and a half of participant-observation, interview, and archival data to assess the potential strategic strength of PICO New Voices.² The conclusion argues that, beyond the potential political gains of such work, its *culture-shaping* dimensions offer crucial tools for democratic leaders engaged in all kinds of "public work" (Boyte & Kari 1996). The conclusion also suggests the constraints imposed on such efforts by the current hyper-partisanship of national politics.

Context:

When launched (PICO California Project in 1996, New Voices in 2002), each of the organizing efforts analyzed here faced significant hurdles: First, though some of PICO's local community organizations had impressive track records, strong political roots, and significant local power, others were not nearly so strong. Second, these organizations had little prior experience in supra-local political arenas and little expertise on that level. Third, these organizations operate on budgets far short of what their opponents can mobilize – the typical local organization having an annual budget of only \$150,000 (in 2000 dollars) (Wood and Warren 2002). Fourth, the relatively friendly terrain – that is, friendly for claims-making in favor

of government programs and policies supporting urban residents of moderate means – of the political discourse descended from Roosevelt’s New Deal had clearly lost its hegemony, supplanted by a discourse in which such claims must struggle uphill to claim legitimacy.

Thus, on face value the decision to launch these supra-local campaigns from within the PICO network seems quixotic. Influencing these higher-level political arenas presented significant hurdles of funding, expertise, political sophistication, and scale that PICO had never faced before. Likewise, as a determinedly nonpartisan organization, PICO had little chance of tapping into the deep pockets of party-linked financiers that might otherwise be natural candidates for funding such efforts. Perhaps most significantly for the New Voices effort, the more obvious route toward national influence would be via a coalition linking similar efforts by other faith-based community organizing networks. Together, these networks (PICO, IAF, Gamaliel, DART, IVP, RCNO, and OLTC, plus a few independent efforts) represent more than 160 local organizations, including essentially all the major metropolitan areas and many other primary cities of the country.³ As of 1999, for which systematic national data exist, those organizations incorporated 4,000 member institutions (87% religious congregations, the rest mostly unions, public schools, and neighborhood associations) in 38 states, which together included approximately 2 million institutional members (Warren 2001b; Wood and Warren 2002). Since then, the field has grown significantly, perhaps by 20%, and now has a presence in all but a handful of states.⁴ The same studies, along with the chapters by Swarts and Burns in this volume, show how effective FBCO work can be at the local level. These organizations are capable of projecting significant local political influence; the following table shows one assessment of that capacity, the ability to mobilize large numbers of people into the public

arena:⁵

[Table 1 about here]

In most cities, an organization capable of mobilizing 500 or 1,000 people focused on specific policy proposals can wield significant influence in local politics – especially when that constituency is as racially and ethnically diverse as these are.⁶

If coordinated around a coherent issue initiative, a cross-network national campaign built on this power basis would appear to hold real potential for significant national influence. But such potential is simply off the table at present: Although PICO and some of the other networks continue to engage in local collaborative efforts with one another or with groups such as labor unions or the neighborhood organizing group ACORN, past attempts at larger-scale, cross-network collaboration have generated significant frustration and disillusionment. Only internally does there appear to exist the political trust necessary to undergird such an effort.

PICO's decision to launch supra-local work resulted from a simple political calculation: Although its federations often can wield real influence over local decisions, PICO found such influence increasingly inadequate to meeting the challenges facing their constituents in “working families.” In the context of municipal dependence on monetary flows controlled at the state and federal levels under the new federalism (and many unfunded federal mandates), local decision-making only kicks in *after* more substantial decisions are made; the decisions that these organizations previously could influence only occurred *within* vast constraints imposed by those higher-level decisions. Thus, attempting to influence state and federal decision-making became increasingly necessary if PICO leaders were to respond adequately to the challenges they faced.

These factors explain the decision to move up to higher level political arenas. But how

effective could PICO be there?

Political Impact of the PICO California Project:

In 1993, California faced tight fiscal constraints, and both the governor's office and state Assembly were controlled by the GOP – which, at least at first blush, represented an unlikely ally for work addressing urban social concerns (though, as we shall see, PICO has worked collaboratively with politicians of a wide variety of stripes, including many Republicans). Yet for the reasons cited above, gaining a voice in statewide policy seemed imperative. As I will argue, that PICO was ultimately able to do so successfully offers the best initial insight into the organization's strategic capacity. Furthermore, the organizational and strategic lessons learned in California have significantly shaped the national effort.

For my brief purposes here, two kinds of evidence will document the effort's success: specific victories gained at the state level, and comments from key informants in state government and political society regarding PICO's influence.

Public education, healthcare, and to a lesser degree housing policy have been the focus of PICO's statewide efforts. Initially, the organization used its pre-existing ties to Governor Pete Wilson (established by PICO's San Diego Organizing Project when Wilson was mayor there) and its ability to mobilize people from throughout California to influence educational policy: first at a 1995 assembly in San Jose, where some 1,500 people met the U.S. secretary of education and state superintendent of schools and demonstrated PICO's political credentials, gradually building up to a successful 1998 campaign to convince Wilson and the state legislature to provide \$50 million for after-school programs in poor districts around the state. The organization also played an important role in placing on the ballot the 1998 Proposition 1A to

provide \$9.2 billion for school repair and construction – which passed despite California’s powerful anti-revenue lobbies, with PICO mobilizing crucial support for its eventual passage. In 1999, building on a successful program forged by PICO’s local Sacramento affiliate, the statewide effort worked with legislators and the state education secretary to develop legislation for \$15 million for a parent/teacher home visitation project, extending it to 450 public schools statewide. This legislation has been renewed annually ever since, with PICO successfully fighting to protect it during budget-cutting years – particularly in 2002, when in the face of the worst budget crisis in California history PICO mobilized almost 4,000 residents to a statewide political action to preserve funding for vital programs in health care, education, and housing. The home visitation program has now received \$150 million and is widely hailed for fostering educational success by linking families more actively to schools and teachers. Finally, in 2004 Governor Arnold Schwarzeneger signed PICO-sponsored legislation for \$30 million in incentive money for local school districts to build smaller high schools, again building on the work of local affiliates.⁷

In 2000, the California Project turned its focus to health care policy (Wood 2002). Bringing 3,000 middle- and low-income residents from around the state – the most multiracial political gathering of this size in the state capital in years, which itself turned the heads of government staffers and politicians – the organization won passage of the Cedillo-Alarcon Clinic Investment Act of 2000, dedicating \$42 million to improving the infrastructure of health clinics in the state, which serve large numbers of the poor and working poor (in 2001, PICO helped gain \$10 in annual funding increases for these primary care clinics). The 2000 action also generated attention to health policy within the administration of Governor Gray Davis, whose political

platform had included virtually no agenda for health care. Initial success was limited, but important: the state dropped intrusive quarterly reporting requirements for MediCal (the state's version of Medicaid, the federal program for low-income healthcare), allowing some half million families to maintain their health coverage more consistently. Most substantially, after initial setbacks the California Project worked with the heads of both houses of the state legislature to obtain the state's commitment to expand health coverage to some 300,000 working-poor parents. Under sustained political pressure from PICO and its organizational allies (including the AARP, the California Medical Association, and the California Primary Care Association), the federal government agreed to waivers making more than \$400 million available for this program, and the state agreed to use its share of tobacco lawsuit settlements (over \$400 million per year) to support health care, committing \$200 million to match the federal funding. Though the latter funding was held up by the state's 2002 budget crisis, as this chapter goes to press (2006) the program remains alive and PICO is leading a ballot initiative to dramatically increase funding for the Healthy Families Program and related efforts.⁸

On housing policy, PICO has seen much more limited success. Nearly 3,000 statewide residents attended a 2001 meeting in San Francisco, at which State Treasurer Phil Angelides agreed to support affordable housing funding, and this effort led to a \$20 million increase California's tax credit for low-income housing. However, in the state's extraordinarily expensive housing market, this funding can hardly be considered a large win, and a 2004 bond initiative to which PICO's San Francisco affiliate dedicated significant organizational resources was defeated (narrowly missing the 60% vote needed for passage in California's "tax reform" environment).

This brief review of PICO's successes in the California public arena represent one way of

showing that this faith-based community organizing model has the strategic capacity to generate high-level influence. But equally important for long-term influence is how the organization is perceived by political insiders in the state. To assess this, Paul Speer and his colleagues interviewed key informants in California state government and elite political society regarding their perceptions of the PICO California Project (Speer 2002).⁹ Overall, the interviewees expressed a great deal of respect for the organization's professionalism and rootedness in "real communities and real people"; as one informant noted, the organization "has gained recognition in state politics because many representatives, lobbyists, and experts have begun to recognize the strong relationship the PICO California Project has with the home communities of its affiliates." Other statements that capture the tenor of these interviews include:

More than any other organization, the PICO California Project's leadership is comprised of representatives of a diverse cross section of the population of California. Perhaps most importantly, its leadership encompasses a unique population of the disenfranchised.

Grassroots groups are often unfocused and undisciplined in their work, often have trouble staying on message...The PICO California Project, however, does not share any of these weaknesses.

Key strengths of the effort seen by these interviewees included the perception that PICO is "disciplined, focused, and competent" (p. 25); has organizational infrastructure at both local and state levels; represents a diverse constituency; and frames socioeconomic issues from the moral high ground. Thus, in interpreting these interviews, Speer argued:

The Project is seen as effective because they...act on issues both locally and statewide...Another strength is the great legitimacy the organization has with local elected representatives... [Elite interviewees noted that members] were a diverse group, representing a number of ethnicities and age groups...and that PICO California Project does not have a financial interest in the resolution of any issues of concern to the organization. Rather, the group has a 'pure self interest in true social justice that is absolutely unique.' (pp. 25-26).

PICO's unique position in California politics was emphasized repeatedly by interviewees: "The organization's faith-based orientation made it quite unique in the power arena of the state capital... and lent a 'moral credibility' to PICO's issue work" (p. 37). Another informant noted that she had "never seen that kind of sophistication" in a grassroots organization (p. 39). Still others called PICO "a bomb exploding the business-as-usual style of politics" (p. 43); argued that its work has "resulted in progress [on health care] that would have never been made without the organization" (p. 40); and said "of all the grassroots organizing groups in California politics, none are as effective as the PICO California Project" (p. 35).

The primary weakness cited by these elite political informants concerned the inherent limitations of PICO's political culture of broad internal consultation on all significant decisions.

As one noted:

The organization is based on and directed by its leadership [i.e. not staff-driven]... When strategic decisions must be made, leadership is brought together to discuss plans and decide as a community which direction they will take. [Staff] cannot make those decisions... This decision-making structure makes it difficult for the organization to be flexible and respond to rapid changes in political debate and strategy.

Notwithstanding this weakness – to which we shall return – the overall picture that emerges in Speer's analysis is that:

The organization also enjoys real and powerful connections with legislators and representatives at the State Capitol. The organization is able to call upon these connections to put strong pressure on local representatives to address the concerns

of the organization's leadership. This kind of political connection has not been developed by any other grassroots organization working in the State [and the organization is seen as] very savvy about the political process... understood the nuances of negotiation, which was highly effective during her work with the Governor. (p. 26)

Thus, PICO appears to have made a significant impact on the policy process in California, bringing previously marginalized voices into that process to an extent unmatched in these political insiders' experience; as one summarized the organization's political access: "[PICO] has a great deal of power and entree, certainly to a greater extent than most organizations...Even in critical times when there is a huge crush of demands...PICO can still get in the door and still get respected. That's rare for someone who doesn't have \$100,000 to donate" (p. 43).

Finally, note that – despite fears of some participants at the start of the effort – projecting state-level power does not appear to have undermined PICO's local organizing: In the context of building statewide influence, PICO in California expanded from ten local affiliate organizations in 1993 to 20 such affiliates in 2005, representing over 350 congregations (which PICO claims gives it a presence in over half of the state's legislative districts and representation of some 400,000 families affiliated with sponsoring congregations) (Speer 2002). Indeed, it arguably *strengthened* local organizing by creating resource flows into which affiliates could tap by influencing city and county decision-making (particularly as local governments drew on tobacco settlement money to fund health care for working-class residents, and on state affordable housing money generated through the PICO-supported bond measure to fund local housing initiatives).

PICO California Project Executive Director Jim Keddy, working with organizers and

leaders from throughout the state, was the architect of the work throughout the period. His assessment of what PICO California Project has accomplished is somewhat more sober. In the 1998-2001 period, he notes “We were able to shift pretty significant resources toward our priorities, during a time when the state had money...After stock market crash [of 2001], we got into a situation of playing defense, trying to protect programs that serve working class families.” Keddy went on to note that PICO underwent a great deal of strategic learning in the latter period, regarding the nature of the taxation system, how the state spends money, and how to run statewide initiatives (which are crucial in California) – and that in many ways PICO was successful, in the sense that California has not had the huge cuts in social spending faced by working people in many states. But he noted, “we want to get out of playing defense, and really play offense again.” By 2006, that was happening: PICO was working on a major statewide ballot initiative to expand and fund health coverage for children in California (Schrag 2006).¹⁰

The trajectory of the PICO California Project thus highlights the challenges presented by projecting power into supra-local political arenas, but also demonstrates PICO’s ability to do so. Perhaps, then, even projecting national power might be more promising than it appears. Might PICO’s thirty years of experience organizing in local communities and ten years organizing at the statewide level in California (and more recently in Louisiana, New Jersey, and Colorado) provide a basis for projecting power nationally? New Voices is PICO’s effort to answer that question. Though it is too early to know whether that national effort will succeed or fail, we can examine the factors that might plausibly contribute to a successful national organizing strategy. Before empirically considering the emergent New Voices campaign, I offer some analytic categories to help us do so.

Understanding Success and Failure: Strategy, organization, and social networks

Political strategy is notoriously recalcitrant to generalizable analysis, in that it is always highly emergent and context dependent. But recent studies of social movements have begun to offer real insight into the internal factors that drive some efforts toward success and others toward failure. Not satisfied with either purely structuralist or purely rationalist accounts of movement success – which emphasized resource mobilization and selective incentives respectively – this recent work pays greater attention to internal cultural, political, and strategic dynamics within such movements (Jasper 1996; Polletta 2001). Gamson’s pioneering work (Gamson 1975) launched the “strategy” facet of this effort, generating an academic firestorm of controversy over the best way of measuring movement strategy and success (Gamson 1980; Gamson 1989; Goldstone 1980a; Goldstone 1980b). Ultimately, the best evidence and interpretation (Frey 1992) suggests that Gamson largely got it right; three facets of this re-analysis of movement strategy will be especially important here: First, movements whose goal is the *displacement* of elites systematically fail; to have reasonable hope of success within the American polity, movement strategists must frame their goals in ways that do not require elite displacement in order to succeed. Reform (perhaps radical reform, but reform nonetheless), negotiation, and compromise are the watchwords of success in institutional politics. Second, factionalism also leads to failure; to succeed, movement leaders must avoid the kinds of organizational problems that lead to such factionalism. Third, for reform movements that do avoid factionalist disputes, the greatest predictor of success is a movement’s existence during a time of broad crisis: that is, concessions to movement demands tend to occur during times of system crisis (presumably as an elite strategy to preserve their legitimacy during crises), so

movements that simply last long enough to be around during a time of crisis are more likely to succeed. Movement longevity thus increases the chances of success.

But what leads to movement longevity? Frey et al suggest close attention to internal movement dynamics: “Internal politics remain critical to the success of excluded groups” (p. 384). Previous work examining the internal political culture of community organizing argues that the crucial dynamics of internal politics are processes of cultural interpretation and meaning construction – and suggest that PICO has mastered those dynamics rather successfully, at least in its stronger local projects (Hart 2001; Swarts 2001b; Wood 1999; Wood 2002). Thus, the FBCO movement examined here clearly has mastered these initial challenges: PICO (and FBCO organizations generally) pursue reformist goals, generally avoid internal factionalism, and have built organizations enduring for years or decades. This chapter therefore only briefly alludes to these minimal conditions of success and instead focuses on the strategic and cultural factors that undergird success.

Thus the strength of looking at a contemporary movement just emerging into the national political arena: there we can see at work the dynamics of movement politics, cultural interpretation, organizational strategy, and meaning construction – the very stuff of “internal politics” understood broadly, including but not limited to goal framing and the fight against factionalism. Two recent analyses of movement structure and strategy will help us understand the key factors that contribute to movement success – we can think of these as the internal strategic structure and the strategic capacity of a movement.

Internal strategic structure:

Michael Chwe’s agent-based modeling of the influence of network structures and

participants' strategic situations suggests that we must think simultaneously about structure and strategy in analyzing movements for collective action (Chwe, 1999). First, it matters whether the members of a network being mobilized generally carry a low or high a threshold for collective action. For our purposes, "collective action" means active participation in PICO's national New Voices effort, including its associated political action. "Threshold" here means whether a particular individual will participate if she perceives a relatively small number of fellow activists prepared to participate (low threshold); or will do so *only* if she perceives a large number of others prepared to participate (high threshold). Chwe's model shows that the "strategic situation" – the mix of high versus low thresholds in the network being mobilized – matters greatly for what kind of organization is necessary to effectively sustain the effort: *If* participation thresholds are high, the organizing effort must construct broad networks with significant numbers of "weak ties" linking subgroups. Only in that way will individuals be connected to enough others in the organizing effort so that they can "see" large numbers of other likely participants, and thus meet their high thresholds. *If* participation thresholds are generally low, the organizing effort need not focus on constructing such broad networks linking large numbers of individuals: tight-knit local groups built on mostly "strong ties" to one another are sufficient to undergird widespread mobilization into action. Thus (pp. 146-148) whether strong ties or weak ties are more crucial at a given moment in an organizing effort depends vitally on whether participants hold high or low thresholds for action at that particular time.

Chwe shows that scholars must take this into account to explain movement success. But note too that this insight captures part of the art of community organizing: professional organizers and primary leaders within the movement must at least intuitively know people's

thresholds, and craft their emerging network organizations accordingly. This need not be a product of abstract thinking and strategizing, indeed it is much more likely to be a product of intuitive “feel” and expert knowledge gained through the practice of organizing [see the work of Dreyfuss, cited in (Flyvbjerg 2001)]. Since such thresholds may well not be static but rather emergent (shifting with their political anger, motivation, and other factors), organizers and primary leaders must be assessing their internal strategic situation constantly (note that this represents a very different dimension of “strategy” than that discussed by Ganz, below).

As we will see, during the early stages of PICO’s initial mobilization around the national strategy, participants expressed significant concern that it might be impossible to succeed, that it was too difficult to project sufficient political power to affect national decision-making. We can think of this as a high-threshold situation: potential participants recognized the need to mobilize national political leverage in order to improve life in their communities, but would only invest themselves in doing so if they were convinced that enough others would do so – and “enough” here meant a lot of people. In this high-threshold context, the organizing effort had to construct lots of ties across various local organizing projects, states, and regions of the country – that is, had to invest organizational time in generating weak ties to complement the strong ties that its participants already carried from congregation-based organizing locally.

But equally important, Chwe shows that in almost all strategic situations, a *mix of weak and strong ties* within the movement is optimal. So again, building an effective national mobilizing structure involves balancing strong and weak ties: strong ties to reinforce solidarity within, commitment to, and the meaningfulness of participation; weak ties to overcome high thresholds to action by increasing members’ perception of sufficient probable participation by

others.

A final set of insights provided by this agent-based modeling approach bears directly on this analysis: collective action is much more “robust” – that is, much less subject to collapse and demobilization – when communication within the organizing effort is partially *reciprocal*. That is, the organizing effort is much more likely to collapse if communication flows only in one direction, so that participants cannot be confident that they know each others’ actual inclinations to participate. In contrast, reciprocal communication allows participants to monitor their strategic situations, and thus gain the confidence to act. Chwe suggests that such reciprocity occurs partly through the ongoing sharing of political feelings such as anger – this allows participants to gauge one another’s actual inclination to take action (see p. 151 ff., using the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations in Beijing as an example). But the *optimal* internal communicative situation in a movement involves a mixture of reciprocal communication (for the reasons above) and one-way communication (which facilitates flow of information from low-threshold to high-threshold members, thus increasing the likelihood of aggregating up and taking action). Thus, a successful supra-local organizing movement must foster extensive reciprocity of communication while also preserving situations in which communication is more structured from above. As we will see, these strategic conditions for success (the right balance of weak and strong ties and of one-way and reciprocal communication) imply specific aspects of organizational culture and organizational authority.

Strategic capacity:

Also crucial to movement success is strategy in a quite difference sense: the timing, tactics, and targets of the movement (Ganz 2000). As Ganz argues, the usual ways of assessing

movement strategy (through such concepts as political opportunity structure, leaders' charisma, and even "strategy" itself) help little in analyzing the creativity involved in developing effective strategy.¹¹ He focuses instead on "strategic capacity" – the ability of leaders to learn from political experience, gain access to crucial information from the political environment, and strongly maintain their own motivation. He argues that we can study the impact of strategic capacity on movement success far more effectively than we can study the impact of strategy itself. This is true *a fortiori* in studying the early stages of PICO's national effort: its strategy might be evaluated retrospectively, ten years from now, but strategic capacity provides better entree into assessing its current potential, promise, and challenges.

Ganz' argues that strategic capacity is the product of two sets of factors, grouped under "leadership" and "organization" (see Ganz 2000 for detailed argument):

Leadership: Strategic capacity is likely to be greater if the movement has leaders that mix strong and weak ties within and outside the movement (similar to Chwe's analysis, but here focused not on the internal ties among participants but on the external ties of key strategists); leaders whose past biographies make some political insiders and others political outsiders;¹² and leaders whose past political experiences give the movement ready access to diverse tactical repertoires, thus creating alternative political possibilities.

Organization: Strategic capacity is likely to be greater if the movement organization includes structures for deliberation that are regular, open, and authoritative; draws on resources (both money and people's talents) that come from multiple constituencies (including from the groups they are trying to mobilize); fosters "focal points for creative decision-making" (p. 1027, citing Lofland 1996); and provides structures of accountability that

keep leaders tied to the interests of salient constituencies and involve what Ganz terms democratic or entrepreneurial accountability rather than bureaucratic accountability (i.e. people gain authority and status via either political entrepreneurship or democratic election, rather than being chosen from above in the organization).

Ganz' overall explanatory framework, the "strategic process model" of movements, argues that qualities of leadership and organization drive the movement's strategic capacity, which shapes the creative linking of movement timing, tactics, and targets, which in turn shapes movement success.

Ganz' excellent empirical analysis of farm worker organizing in the 1960s shows that the United Farm Workers' organizational characteristics led to its "strategy unfolding in a community, statewide, and long-term arena" (p. 1024), which offered significant strategic advantages in comparison to the parallel AFL-CIO organizing effort among farm workers. This parallels the important historical pattern whereby the most successful civic associations have adopted a "federated" structure that parallels the local-state-federal structure of government in the United States (Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000).

Overall, the prior work reviewed above suggests that the strategic efficacy of collective movements depends on the interaction of four sets of specific factors: the organizational, leadership, network, and cultural factors summarized in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

To recapitulate: The newness of PICO's national organizing effort does not allow a retrospective assessment of movement strategy, but allows us to examine an equally important question: How do internal movement dynamics *generate* the strategic characteristics listed in

Table 2? Rather than assuming that movements gain strategically advantageous qualities as some kind of “found objects,” I ask how such qualities emerge *through the organizing process*.

Retrospective assessments are of little use in answering this question; we need instead to analyze the actual process of political organizing *in situ* as it unfolds in real time. I turn now to a brief ethnographic assessment of PICO’s strategic capacity as it is being built through national-level organizing.

Strategic Capacity in PICO New Voices: Organization, Leadership, Networks, and Culture

To launch the “New Voices” national campaign, PICO leaders and organizers had to deal with significant doubts within their own federations; to be successful, they will have to overcome significant strategic barriers. As PICO Associate Director Scott Reed, a key architect of the New Voices effort, suggested in an interview, “Our leaders increasingly understand the need for the federal level action, but are constrained by their own realities and by political realities in Washington DC in bringing it about.” How are participants confronting those barriers, and what do the emerging factors of organizational structure, leadership, network ties, and culture suggest about the resulting strategic capacity?

Note first that one of the most insightful scholars of grassroots political organizing in the United States is quite skeptical of the strategic capacity of the faith-based community organizing field in general (Ganz 2002). This is a sobering assessment, not to be dismissed. The breakthrough by some FBCO efforts to new levels of political influence *of itself* offers little assurance that such efforts have developed the kinds of strategic creativity, internal democratic accountability, or learning capacity that Ganz argues underlie successful strategy in the long term. But note, too, that Ganz’ interpretation emerges from his exposure to models of organizing

in particular networks and regions of the country. Ganz thus offers a healthy skepticism, but one that must itself be subjected to critical inquiry: does it apply to *all* faith-based community organizing efforts? Conversely, have particular efforts developed organizing cultures with strategic capacities that transcend the debilitating limitations that Ganz sees? PICO's New Voices initiative offers an ideal setting for beginning to answer these questions: an emergent organization facing new strategic opportunities that challenge its existing strategic repertoire.¹³

Before PICO would move toward national-level work, key players in the network had to embrace two things: a *need* to influence national policy, and the *possibility* of doing so successfully. In a different setting, these moves might have been made by authoritative leaders or dominant clique, and simply imposed from above; alternatively, they might have bubbled up from below in some long-term process of shared experience and political discernment. In PICO, neither of these scenarios played out. Rather, a handful of key strategists – not a formally-designated role, but rather those inclined to think about broad societal trends and PICO's overall strategic position – began thinking about the obstacles facing local federations as their leverage over social policy narrowed. This group coalesced around and is led by Reed.

Before those discussions proceeded beyond initial stages, however, the culture of PICO – in which local federations have long-established autonomy and decision-making authority – dictated a broadly consultative process.¹⁴ Within this organizational culture, any move to impose a national strategy from above would have delegitimized the whole effort. This was further reinforced by the experience of the PICO California Project: as Executive Director Jim Keddy recalled, “our statewide work would never have worked if we'd [just] relied on the organizers. It took off when the [volunteer] leaders really took control of it.” There *was* a top-down component

to the initiative in the sense that Reed and network director John Baumann made the decision (in the absence of outside funding for starting a national drive *ex nihilo*) to place the idea on the agenda of the annual meeting of PICO organizers and to provide initial funding for the effort. But they then went out to the roots of the organization for discussion and discernment: to the core lay leaders, clergy, and staff of local federations.

The first such convening took place in November 2002 in New Orleans; at that meeting, Reed and others presented their analysis of the reasons, opportunities, and difficulties confronting a national effort. This generated a wide-ranging discussion of the obstacles to success, the limitations of local federations, and yet the urgent need to change the dynamics of federal policy-making. The upshot of that meeting was support for initial work toward building a national campaign, but a strong sense that it would have to be organically linked to existing local efforts – complementary to them and *buttressing their local power*, not simply feeding off of them. This would become typical of how the national effort would proceed: rather than making a final and unconditional decision to move nationally, at each step of the way the architects of New Voices asked participants to discuss the effort and endorse moving forward with specific steps, testing the political waters both internally and externally.¹⁵ Such decision-making – fully *deliberative* but without the clear *authoritative structure* for which Ganz argues – has occurred at each subsequent stage of the campaign: at least every six months, groups of participants from PICO's almost 50 local federations come together to discuss their experience and formulate strategy.

In a sense, a particular kind of internal political culture within PICO plays the role that Ganz posits ought to be played by the structure of an organization. This alternative places a

significant strategic burden upon the political artisans who craft PICO's organizational culture – can the resulting political process meet the strategic challenges PICO faces? We turn now to analyze the cultural dynamics within the New Voices effort, with our eyes on political implications but also on the subtle cultural dynamics of this public work.

Cultural dynamics, structure, and strategic capacity:

The national strategy session in April 2004 demonstrates the key cultural and organizational dynamics of the effort. Some 150 lay leaders, clergy, and organizers came together in Washington, DC for three days of joint strategizing and meetings with congressional representatives and policy think-tanks. I here offer brief glimpses of the key dynamics that occurred there, related to the cultural, network-building, organizational, and leadership factors that shape strategic capacity.

On the first evening of the April 2004 national meeting, San Diego lay leader Gloria Cooper led the group in their self-introductions. The most common theme expressed: a sense of intimidation by the power represented by the nation's capital, and fear of confronting it. The focus of the evening was a "faith reflection" by Rev. Heyward Wiggins, the pastor of Faith Tabernacle, an African American Pentecostal church in Camden, New Jersey:

My Lord, we come together truly with no strength of our own, but only in your spirit... magnify yourself... allow your children to have their minds and hearts challenged and changed, to be empowered, to be hopeful, to understand the mission that lies ahead of us... My brothers and sisters... it is no longer enough to have lofty metaphorical phrases, you must *walk, act, and stand firm* to confirm your faith in God...

Note how a superficial “political” reading of Wiggins’ presentation might see this as only an effort to “motivate” his listeners. This is of course correct as far as it goes, but note too the deeper effort to *construct shared meaning* among participants by interpreting their current position in light of shared mission and scriptural commitments. This process continued as Wiggins drew on the scriptural account of the ancient Hebrew people hesitating in fear before crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land to invite participants to reflect on where they stood at this moment: Their fears paralleled the ancient Israelites’ fears and their intention to influence national politics placed them imaginatively “on the banks of the River Jordan” – desiring a promised land of national influence but intimidated by the prospect.

Note the dynamic here: all want collective action, but all are fearful of failing – a classic situation of strategic *monitoring*: who will step forward “into the water” first? In the powerful prophetic tradition of African American Christianity, Wiggins here invoked both Dr. Martin Luther King’s regular citation of God’s promise to “never, ever leave us alone,” and the original account of crossing the Jordan River: “So the priests are called to carry the ark across: it represents [God’s] power, honor, and glory. As the priests held it up, God called them to step in first, so the people will cross over.” He got a standing ovation at this point; my own notes from the event say simply, “folks are eating this up; he’s a terrific preacher.” Wiggins went on to argue this did *not* mean clergy being the primary leaders of the effort, but *did* mean that they not hold back fearfully; only in that way would lay leaders find the courage to be the primary leaders.

For our purposes, note the way that this reflection interprets these days devoted to national organizing as linked to the liberation of the ancient Jewish people, to the civil rights

struggle in America, and as a time of legitimate choice: people are fearful, but can choose to overcome this fear. Again, this *constructs shared meaning* among participants, anchored in the power of the preached word in this Pentecostal strand of Christianity. But, crucially, note how this choice was framed: Rev. Wiggins interpreted the intimidation and fear that participants were experiencing as akin to the people's fear at crossing the Jordan, and challenged them to overcome their fear and choose to move forward. This was a moment of *one-way communication* that created energy and enthusiasm for the New Voices project, thus helping push the group past their thresholds for collective action.

A second core element was introduced by Gloria Cooper as she identified the four goals of the meetings: “to discern together whether our local federations are ready to launch this national effort”; “to create relationships with each other, around the country”; “to develop relationships with our own federal officials”; and “to create the opportunity for us as PICO to change federal policy on those issues we all have in common.” These goals – at this stage, simply goals, not achievements – emphasized *reciprocal communication, deliberation*, and developing the kinds of *internal and external networks* characterized above as “*weak ties*”: links across geographical locations within PICO and to external government officials. Cooper then asked for brief reports on the issues and accomplishments of each local group, and in dialogue with participants from around the country drew out lessons that might inform New Voices demands for policy reform nationally. These interchanges represent *reciprocal communication* across different federations and levels of the PICO organization.

In the final core element of the evening, Scott Reed highlighted where the project had been and where it stood as these meetings began:

18 months ago, when we gathered in New Orleans, 50 groups asked this question: ‘Can we begin to work together, work with our federal representatives, to generate a voice that needs to be heard in this country?’ Now look at this map, with ribbons over the whole country [indicating links between 50 participating federations in 14 states]. We begin to inch a little further into the river, right pastor?... We’re seeking changes that are not going to be offered by the Democratic *or* Republican party. They will seek to *manage* the change... to bend it to their own interests...so how we engage Washington is important – we’ll try to learn from one another how to nurture those relationships [with Congress] in a way that translates into political capital on issues...

He went on to outline a proposal that had emerged from discussions prior to this gathering:¹⁶ We are *proposing* a strategy – we don’t impose our will on any project. We are suggesting that we find clarity on this proposal in the next two days. We want to create awareness in our federal officials of what’s happening in our neighborhoods, by having every project conduct a town hall meeting or public action in the Fall. Imagine for a minute: what if we have 50 PICO projects in coordinated meetings with our 90 congressional representatives? And remember 45% of those officials are Republican, a little more than half are Democrats – imagine them sitting in the same room, on the same day, all across the country. We’ll create an awareness of how [federal policy affects our communities]. We’ll create an opportunity not just to bring resources back home, but to say to Washington what needs to change.

Finally, Reed noted that over the next two days, “we’ll learn from each other about ways we can accomplish this, and how we can strengthen relationships with our [congressional] representatives in ways that help us move forward.” Reed’s approach here is best understood as cultivating the *internal politics* of the organizing effort: he fosters an internal conversation that preserves space for differing political viewpoints and levels of commitment to national action. Throughout this presentation, Reed engaged in a great deal of interchange with participants, asking how they were feeling about the effort or whether their colleagues “back home” were ready to link their work to national efforts; other moderators similarly “checked in” with participants regularly. These “check-ins” are best understood as a form of *monitoring of*

participants' action thresholds; they help key leaders assess whether or not others are moving toward action. More ambiguous is the *deliberative structure* at work here: throughout the meetings, deliberation occurs regularly and openly – and authoritatively in the limited sense that broad opposition to the national effort would presumably have prevented PICO from moving forward. But – perhaps because such opposition was a real possibility at these early stages of the effort – a yes-or-no vote was never held to decide definitely whether to proceed. The openness of PICO's process meant real deliberation occurred regularly, and as we shall see real creativity entered into that process in unexpected ways, but *authoritative deliberation* in Ganz' sense occurred only in less formal ways. In the conclusion below, we consider the implications of these complexities.

A similar tenor permeated the next day's meetings, framed by initial prayer and song and punctuated by occasional group humor, but underlain by a striking seriousness of intent regarding the reform of national policy-making. Participants broke up into small discussion groups, each with a particular focus such as “preparing to meet elected officials,” “developing talking points,” “developing and nurturing political relationships with elected officials,” and “moving issues at the local level and connecting this to federal level.” In the latter group, organizer Gina Martinez noted that “ideally, we want to integrate the national, state, and federated work all fully into our local work...I don't think we're there yet, but that's our goal.” Another organizer noted that “long term, this national work absolutely helps our local work, but short-term that's not always so clear... we need to be asking that all the time.” Drew added, “It also makes really clear the need to grow the organization – to find new congregations, get new leaders involved, raise the capacity of the organization to do higher level work.” A Lutheran

pastor talked about how the San Diego Organizing Project worked: “we identify an issue locally, start looking for what the higher-level connections might be, like federal policy or federal money that affects education.” He went on to note that the experience of the PICO California Project had given them “a model for doing this that people know.” A leader from the California Project noted the importance of new habits like “*always* asking what the higher-level connections might be, what opportunities might exist at the state or federal level.” A Florida participant emphasized the power that congressional relationships can bring to an organization by noting that “when we moved our issue work from being completely unsuccessful to when we finally won, the *only thing that changed* that was that we had developed relationships with our federal officials.” In this small group, participants also simply chatted about how excited they were – and, as one said, “nervous, but not scared any more” – to be moving toward impacting national policy.

The small group discussions and report-backs that followed them served to generate *focal points for creativity* within the organization, within which all participants could propose new ideas and strategies and offer lessons from local political work for broader consideration. Among the insights generated: how much more polarized and partisan federal-level politicians were, and how this forced the local PICO group to adapt its approach; the value of photo opportunities for building ties to collaborative politicians; the almost desperate need among Washington-based politicians for local allies back in their districts, and how to use that need strategically; and the need to educate politicians about how faith-based organizing differs from “politics as usual.” None of this appeared to be scripted, but rather emerged from local activists analyzing their own experience. It thus represents at least the beginning of a broadly participative *deliberative structure* within the organization. The small group interaction also extended *weak ties* across

federations and (more substantially) simply offered informal venues for extensive *reciprocal communication* about both strategy and emotion. Note, too, that one participant commented: “After our last time here, our congressperson told us that she knew that we had folks contacting other congresspeople around the country. That’s reorganizing power, when they know our connections.” This highlighted the advantages of PICO’s emerging national structure, what might be called a *proto-federated structure*, with strong local political capacity, a few statewide projects of varying capacities, and the beginnings of political capacity at the federal level. Note, however, that this is not a full federated structure in Skocpol and Ganz’ sense discussed above, with local chapters nested consistently within state structures and the latter linked to a centralized national office. Whether PICO moves that direction – and whether this is the “right” structure in the current context – remain to be seen.

Organizer Gordon Whitman summed up the conversation to this point:

We do good local and state organizing...We know what it means to put the mayor in front of ourselves and push, cut an issue [locally]... and sometimes at state level. At federal level, we’re not so clear on how to do it... we need to learn this. But [given the impact of federal policy on local communities], it’s as hard *not* to do it as it is to do it – we’ve been fighting with one arm behind our back, and are learning to untie it and bring it out into the fight...

The rest of the morning was spent reporting from research and local policy work regarding specific policy initiatives that might provide vehicles for New Voices to impact legislation in the five focus areas that had emerged out of PICO’s local work: affordable housing, immigrant rights, healthcare access, public schools, and public safety (framed as “hometown

security”). Participants then prepared for afternoon meetings with their congressional representatives.

New Jersey organizer Joe Fleming, another key architect of the national campaign, sent the group off by extending the earlier biblical metaphor:

Well, the first effect of putting your foot into the Jordan River is that you stir it up, muddy the waters a little. But it'll gradually get clearer... Decisions made here [in DC] either help or hurt our own communities. We want to look at what we've learned, look at next research steps as you meet with your federal officials... It's the sum of our relationships at the federal level that is going to determine how well we can have an impact at the federal level. It may not all be clear yet, but that's okay... it'll come clearer... Please come back here at 7:00 p.m., when we'll figure out our next steps and larger strategy...

The evening's discussion involved reports from the day's meetings with congressional representatives and aids, and thinking about how PICO would choose the policy areas on which to focus. Leaders suggested the right policy initiative ought to entail a “good opportunity,” defined as either “a bill already in Congress or enough relationship with a congressperson that we can introduce a bill”; something with a “moral dimension, something that resonates with our values,” a “sense of urgency” and “appeal in both parties”; an issue that “allows us to reach new partners”; something related to work that local PICO groups had already worked on; and “something we can win.” These were discussed and recorded as criteria for selecting issues.

Reed then elaborated:

Eventually, I think we will want to choose to move on something that gives expression to who we are, something that is bold and evocative... what we're calling our prophetic initiative, our prophetic voice... It's important that we be clear: We have a lot of work to do still, don't want you to leave with the impression that we're ready to select a national

issue – we’re not there yet. We’re going to be able to filter some possibilities through these lenses you’ve been talking about, move *toward* making a choice.

Throughout the day’s work, note the interplay of instrumental politics, the articulation of an ethical vision to drive the political work, and the construction of a shared culture of public work – and the refusal to let the language of “morality” be overly narrowed to exclude the socio-economic issues facing struggling communities. This kind of “cultural work” (Wood 2002; Hart 2001) moves well beyond the recently fashionable focus on “framing” (Lakoff 2002) political issues in moral language, which in practice too often amounts to further instrumentalizing people’s ethical commitments. Here, ethical commitment, politics, and cultural dynamics interpenetrate relatively seamlessly in concrete organizing for a better society.

Participants would gather the next day to prepare to take their experiences back to local organizations, through dynamics similar to those already reported here: more promotion of unity through ritual, prayer, and song; construction of shared meaning by using scriptural and democratic references to interpret their experience in dealing with federal power; one-on-one conversations about how participants were feeling about returning home; reporting on new ties (external and internal) established on this trip; and planning on how to forge new ties to congressional representatives in the months ahead. Thus, three days in Washington DC involved effort at several levels: *promoting unity* in the face of skepticism or misunderstanding “back home” regarding national-level work; cultivation of *internal and external networks* involving both *strong and weak ties*; reinforcing PICO’s emerging *proto-federated structure* by better integrating PICO’s work at the local, state, and federal levels; and fostering a *deliberative structure* in which authority functions in neither bureaucratic nor democratic mode. The cultural

dynamics lent themselves to *construction of shared meaning*, regular mutual assessment of *action thresholds*, and a combination of *reciprocal and one-way communication*.

Only the closing sequence must be mentioned here: Reed invited everyone to exchange phone numbers and call each other periodically, saying “We want to build some accountability not just in your local organization, but also across the whole country.” More importantly, another key architect of the national initiative, Joe Givens of New Orleans, invited all to participate in a ritual of solidarity: a joint reading of a statement entitled “The Prophetic Voice”. This had been drafted by clergy members active in PICO, as a kind of vision statement for the New Voices campaign. We will consider the backgrounds shortly of the key clergy shortly; here, the crucial point is the diversity of their perspectives: Black Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, white Protestant, and African American Baptist traditions were all represented, as were sharply divergent political viewpoints: from a progressive intellectual viewpoint drawing on the writings of social critic Cornel West to the views of a self-declared “Republican businessman from southern California” – and a variety of other perspectives.¹⁷

The PICO National Network and this particular national clergy gathering would continue to wrestle with this tension, as it reflects differences that coexist legitimately within the network and are regularly negotiated via participants’ shared commitment to “a fundamental commitment to the well-being of low- and middle-income people.”¹⁸

Two final influences on strategic capacity remain to be examined briefly:

Leadership Factors:

Recall Ganz’ argument that a pair of leadership factors are crucial to shaping a movement’s strategic capacity: the *biographies* of key leaders and the *repertoires of action* that they bring to the movement. The table below lists the key personnel (organizers, clergy, and lay leaders) who have been most central to the New Voices effort so far:¹⁹

[Table 3 about here]

Though interpreting this data is necessarily an approximate exercise, the following conclusions are plausible: First, there is impressive diversity of racial, geographic, and religious

background within the strategic core of the New Voices initiative, and significant gender diversity. This represents an important achievement, and may represent an important pool for strategic creativity: There is no evidence of a single demographic profile of core participants that threatens to narrowly constrain strategic capacity and perception, parallel to the factors that Ganz shows can undermine strategic creativity (*op cit.*). But note, too, that this promises strategic creativity only in a rather vague sense, in that the links from religious, geographic, racial, and gender background to political strategy are not obvious.

More sobering is the relatively narrow base of professional and organizational background represented within the New Voices strategic core: it is heavily weighted in favor of those whose primary organizational experience lies narrowly within church structures and the specific field of faith-based community organizing. As a result, PICO might in the future suffer from an overly narrow political repertoire or lack of access to national political insiders. While this is not surprising, and neither outcome inevitable, Ganz' analysis suggests that, left unaddressed, these factors might place important limitations on the efforts' strategic capacity.

Both of these strategic leadership challenges might be overcome, but doing so will require incorporating new members into the strategic core, cultivating new strategic allies among elite political players, building strong alliances with other organizations, or dramatic strategic creativity.

Resource flows:

Ganz argues that another organizational factor, resource flows, is critical in shaping strategic capacity. In particular, strategic creativity is less constrained when resources flow from multiple constituencies (i.e. are decentralized) than when an organization is dependent upon

centralized and hierarchical resource flows.

Resource flows within the PICO effort can be addressed quite briefly here. Two kinds of resources are crucial, and look quite different in New Voices. The flow of *people* into the effort is quite de-centralized: organizers, clergy, and leaders are involved to varying levels essentially from throughout PICO's geographic base; note, however, that the vast majority come from local faith communities, a narrow base in a non-geographic sense. The flow of *money* is highly centralized. Up to 2004, the effort was funded almost entirely from the internal resources of the national PICO office – approximately a half million dollars. More recently, some \$300,000 has been provided by national foundations including the Carnegie Corporation, Nathan Cummins Foundation, and the Hazen Foundation, plus related major funding from the Marguerite Casey Foundation.²⁰ All of this represents funding from relatively elite institutions, rather than the kind of constituency-generated money that Ganz argues reinforces internal accountability and strategic capacity.

If five years into the future, PICO has successfully raised major funding to sustain the effort, this early history will be correctly seen as well-invested seed money that launched faith-based community organizing into its first serious national-level effort. If, on the other hand, at that point the New Voices effort has folded (whether for lack of funding or other factors), substantial blame may lie in the effort's narrow resource base and the lack of diverse accountability associated with it (to outside organizations, to churches, to other constituents, and most crucially to the base). Or perhaps what Ganz called “resourcefulness” – the strategic creativity of motivated leadership – may outmaneuver resources on the complex terrain of national politics. But the New Voices effort could also starve for lack of resources before its

resourcefulness bears fruit. Thus, financing New Voices – whether from internal or external issues – remains a critical strategic challenge.

Conclusion:

PICO's efforts to project non-partisan political power into the state and national arenas are analyzed here as studies for assessing the strategic situation of efforts to project power from local organizing into higher-level political arenas. At the level of state politics, the PICO California Project shows that significant political influence is possible. But we should be clear: PICO's work has impacted but not revolutionized California politics, which will continue to respond to national, global, and local financial factors well beyond the reach of community organizing pressures. PICO has successfully advanced particular interests of working families, and helped many find a public voice. This is an impressive track record of public work, but the need for deeper democratic transformation remains, and is constrained by powerful economic and political forces.

At the national level, PICO's New Voices campaign appears to incorporate significant resources for generating strategic capacity, as well as significant liabilities. In the analytic terms utilized here, New Voices has successfully created deliberative structures that occur in regular and open formats, and include organizationally-created "focal points for creative decision-making" to foster strategic creativity. The rich diversity of racial backgrounds (and to a lesser extent religious background and gender) within the strategic core suggest little risk that the resulting deliberation will fall into the racial exclusivism, anti-institutionalism, or similar obstacles to political creativity that litter the landscape of democratic politics in America (Gitlin 1995). A potential counterweight to national strategic capacity, however, lies in the rather narrow

leader biographies, resource flows, and perhaps political repertoires within the New Voices campaign; this will have to be overcome with new alliances and new resource flows.

Similarly, relational ties at all levels within the internal structure of the network – often very strong ties within sponsoring congregations, somewhat weaker but still relatively strong ties across congregations within a local federation, and weak but intentionally cultivated ties across federations – represent a central font of strategic capacity. PICO's careful cultivation of this kind of social capital through its relational organizing model has born fruit in generating one of its greatest strategic assets. By forging an internal culture of democratic practices and public work, this effort challenges one of the key long-term disabilities that undermines democracy in America.

The quality of PICO's external ties is more mixed. The effort carries strong links within the religious arena; strong bipartisan links to local political leaders; mostly new and emerging bipartisan links to national political representatives; some nascent linkages to nationally-prominent public policy centers; weak ties to labor unions and other potential allies; and relatively slim links to key centers of power within the national political parties. In addition, PICO's presence in only 16 states may limit its ability to project national power. At this stage, the effort is too young to adequately assess these external networks.

The flow of authority and accountability within New Voices is complex. Though, as noted above, the deliberative structure is both regular and relatively open, how *authoritative* it is has been left intentionally ambiguous. PICO represents neither the kind of representative democracy that Ganz prefers nor the kind of bureaucratic structure that Ganz criticizes, in which power flows from above. Rather, New Voices incorporates a third category: *entrepreneurial*

authority, in which enterprising leaders who bring insight and creativity to bear on the tasks of organizing find it quite possible to rise within the PICO structure. Ganz cites entrepreneurial authority approvingly – indeed, it appears to be the key dynamic in the early, successful days of the UFW and its antecedents²¹ – but does not comment on it extensively. PICO’s version of entrepreneurial authority allows authority to flow relatively freely within the organizing structure, rather than being defined from above – though ultimately many strategic decisions are made by the strategic core. At present, this does not appear to this observer to be problematic; in the long term, however, it may not be possible to institutionalize entrepreneurial authority in a stable way, so that the organization may have to push toward more firmly structured democracy or suffer the costs of bureaucratic stasis.

Finally, the above account suggests that the cultural factors underlying strategic capacity are an area of particular strength within New Voices. The framing of reformist goals, the promotion of unity, the combination of reciprocal and one-way communication, the monitoring of participants’ thresholds for action, and cultural interpretation and the construction of shared meaning are all tasks at which PICO has become expert – drawing widely on the talents of organizers, clergy, and lay leaders. Along with the organization’s internal relational fiber, expert cultural work may represent PICO’s greatest resource for creative political strategy.

Together, these factors suggest that this emerging national effort holds real promise for strategic efficacy. As this chapter was being written, New Voices sponsored 16 assemblies attended by some 8,000 constituents, at which congressional representatives, senators, and other politicians were asked to pledge their commitment to a new way of doing federal business in PICO’s key issue areas.²² In a clear adaptation of the PICO California Project’s 2003 strategy,

these assemblies occurred “back home” in representatives’ congressional districts, where PICO’s local organizations can best generate popular pressure – a tactic for exerting national leverage that showcases PICO’s strategic capacity. Shortly after the November 2004 national elections, the network sponsored a clergy press conference at the U.S. Capitol that garnered extensive media coverage and highlighted PICO’s rather different understanding of “moral values” than the one widespread in that election.²³ Subsequently, New Voices engaged heavily in the work of channeling national political attention to rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

But powerful constraints rooted in the current political and economic context apply *a fortiori* to the New Voices national effort: massive federal deficits, deep anti-government and anti-tax currents in national culture, and the hyper-polarization of congressional and presidential political dynamics argue against any irenic reading of PICO’s national opportunities. To succeed, New Voices leaders will have to overcome these constraints. They strive to do so *not* simply as partisans on one side of current battles – though on any given issue their preferences may line up more with one side than the other – but through two fundamental strategies: By constructing a culture of sustained public engagement that directly challenges the anti-political tone of a national popular culture of escape from politics, and by striving to forge a centrist coalition around particular issues (currently, health care for uninsured working families) that can draw support from both parties and make policy headway despite partisan polarization. In confronting partisan polarization directly, PICO’s ambition risks failure. But the combination of creative cultural work and strong organizing capacity in local congressional districts may create sufficient strategic capacity to overcome those risks – if New Voices can broaden its strategic networks and resource base.

In closing, I would suggest three implications of this analysis: First, New Voices demonstrates that, with the right leadership and the careful cultivation of more deliberative and participative organizational structures, the established political capacity of faith-based community organizing can generate the kind of strategic capacity for which Ganz calls. Second, this analysis challenges faith-based organizing participants at all levels to reject any complacency with their current power and to forge organizations with deeper strategic capacity: our current national political incapacity simply demands this. Third, this analysis calls current and potential strategic partners of faith-based community organizing – funders, religious leaders, political organizers, policy experts, and scholars – to reinforce the most promising strategic developments within the field and to forge broader alliances more capable of tying national political life to a workable vision of a good society.

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Endnotes:

1. The name “PICO National Network” was officially adopted in 2004; previously, the organization was known as the Pacific Institute for Community Organization. PICO has been analyzed in several publications: Stephen Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Paul W Speer, "People Making Public Policy in California: The PICO California Project" (Knoxville, TN: Vanderbilt University, 2002); Heidi Swarts, "Setting the State's Agenda: Church-Based Community Organizations in American Urban Politics" in *States, Parties, and Social Movements: Protest and the Dynamics of Institutional Change* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
2. In addition, the intellectual and empirical context of this study draws on the author’s prior ethnographic research on faith-based community organizing as a broad national field much wider than PICO, and on PICO’s own local- and state-level work in California and elsewhere Mary Ann Flaherty and Richard L. Wood "Faith and Public Life" (New York: Ford Foundation and Interfaith Funders, 2002); Wood’s "Religion, Faith-Based Community Organizing, and the Struggle for Justice." in *Cambridge Handbook of Sociology*, edited by Michele Dillon (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Wood and Warren (2002).
3. These networks and regions of particular strength are the Industrial Areas Foundation (five regional groupings); the Gamaliel Foundation (Midwest); Direct Action, Research, and Training (Florida and Ohio); the InterValley Project (New England); RCNO (Southern California); and Organize! Leadership and Training Center (Massachusetts).
4. Though data comparable to the systematic 1999 data do not exist, a rough comparison can be made: the essentially exhaustive 1999 survey documented 133 local faith-based community organizing efforts nationwide. The field has clearly grown since then, with perhaps 160 or 180 organizations. The lower figure would represent a 20% increase – though note that we do not know if the newer organizations are as large as the more established organizations.
5. Data is from Table 8 in Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren (2002).
6. See Tables 4, 5, and 6 in Wood and Warren, *op cit*. For a broader assessment of the strategic position of the FBCO field, see Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood. 2001b. "Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field." (Jericho, NY: Interfaith Funders).
7. The strategy behind this legislation: use state funding to leverage far larger amounts of money in local school funding, in part by shifting the state’s matching formula from a 50/50 split with local districts building new schools, to 60% state funding if the high school will serve 500 or

fewer students. The legislation also included \$5 million to reconfigure large schools to produce smaller internal academies. In the effort, PICO relied on research showing that students – especially those from less privileged backgrounds – benefit academically and socially from smaller school settings.

8. PICO-California (current name for the former “PICO California Project”) is a leading force within the group sponsoring the November 2006 ballot initiative. Other members of the Coalition for a Healthy California include the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and several professional healthcare organizations.

9. Those interviewed included 14 key informants from state-level government and political society, half primarily linked to educational policy and half to health care policy. They included a former Attorney General, Secretary of Education, press secretary for a Cabinet official, two state senators, the Policy Director for the Speaker of the Assembly, and the CEO of a statewide community clinic association; staffpersons to the state Senate President Pro Tem, the Office of the Governor, and the state Senate Office of Health; and officers or lobbyists from the California Medical Association, the AARP, and the Union of Health Care Workers.

10. All quotes this paragraph: author interview with James Keddy (January 2005).

11. In developing this model, Ganz draws extensively on recent work on meaning, creativity, and cultural reception Theresa M. Amabile. 1996. "Creativity and Innovation in Organizations." Pp. 123-67 in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 10, edited by B.M. Staw and L.L. Cummings (Greenwich, CN: JAI); Jerome Bruner. 1990. *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press); Wendy Griswold. 1987. "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies." *American Journal of Sociology* 92:1077-117.

12. In this article, Ganz' evidence that the UFW leadership's mix of political insiders and outsiders gave it a strategic advantage in comparison to AWOC's heavy reliance on political insiders provides crucial insight. But one also wonders whether the UFW's weak ties to high-level political insiders at the national level contributed at later stages of the movement to the union's difficulty in consolidating its pathbreaking gains. We return to this matter later, in thinking about PICO's long-term prospects.

13. New Voices does not represent the only site in which faith-based community organizing may transcend the limits that Ganz sees. There appear to be initiatives in other networks and within PICO that are breaking out of the strategic incapacitation that Ganz sees. But that process is necessarily uneven, and Ganz' diagnosis rings true in a significant number of settings, including some that project impressive local power.

14. Much of Ganz' skepticism about the democratic promise of this form of organizing is premised on his understanding of the working of authority within these organizations. PICO's internal culture is quite different in this regard than the much more hierarchical model of

authority that Ganz has seen in other settings.

15. It is important not to be naive that this kind of process of ongoing consultation necessarily represents democratic decision-making: in my ethnographic experience in the broader field of community organizing, such decision-making can be quite democratic – but it also can be quite hierarchical, with staff driving the decisions through the power their role carries.

16. Italics mark Reed's verbal emphases. The key participants in these prior discussions, and in New Voices strategy formulation generally, were organizers Scott Reed, Joe Givens, Denise Collazo, Gordon Whitman, and Joe Fleming; leaders Gloria Cooper, Bea Bernstein, and Janelle Highfill; joined subsequently by several clergy and other lay leaders whose biographies are discussed below.

17. Note that this gathering represents impressive diversity from *within* the broad terrain of American Christianity, including its immigrant expressions. Though congregations from Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian, and other faith traditions sometimes participate in faith-based community organizing, Christian congregations predominate in this work generally and in New Voices. Regarding Cornel West: the speaker drew especially from his *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982). See also Mark David Wood, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000) and West's *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: BasicBooks, 1999).

18. Though beyond my purposes here, see the Kleidman's argument regarding negative consequences of non-ideological organizing (Kleidman 2004).

19. Note that the cut-off here is somewhat arbitrary, but these are the organizers, clergy, and laypeople most centrally involved in the key question here: strategic direction and organizational deliberation regarding New Voices. A broader listing of overall public leadership would reflect greater diversity among participants, particularly with regard to Latino leaders and clergy, and African American organizers.

20. December 2004 author interview with national fundraising coordinator Denise Collazo. She notes, "We've been building toward [serious national money], but it's hard to get start-up money. Funders want to fund particular issues, particular campaigns... more money will come once we get to the stage of having particular issue campaigns."

21. For example, Ganz notes that farm workers "selected themselves" into leadership roles within the UFW and its predecessors (Ganz, *op cit.*, p. 1029).

22. For examples, see coverage in the following newspapers: *San Diego Union-Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* (10/18/2004), and *Denver Post* (10/17/2004).

23. See coverage in the following newspapers on November 19, 2005: *Oakland Tribune*, *San*

Francisco Chronicle, New Orleans Times-Picayne, Orange County Register, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and North County (San Diego) Times.

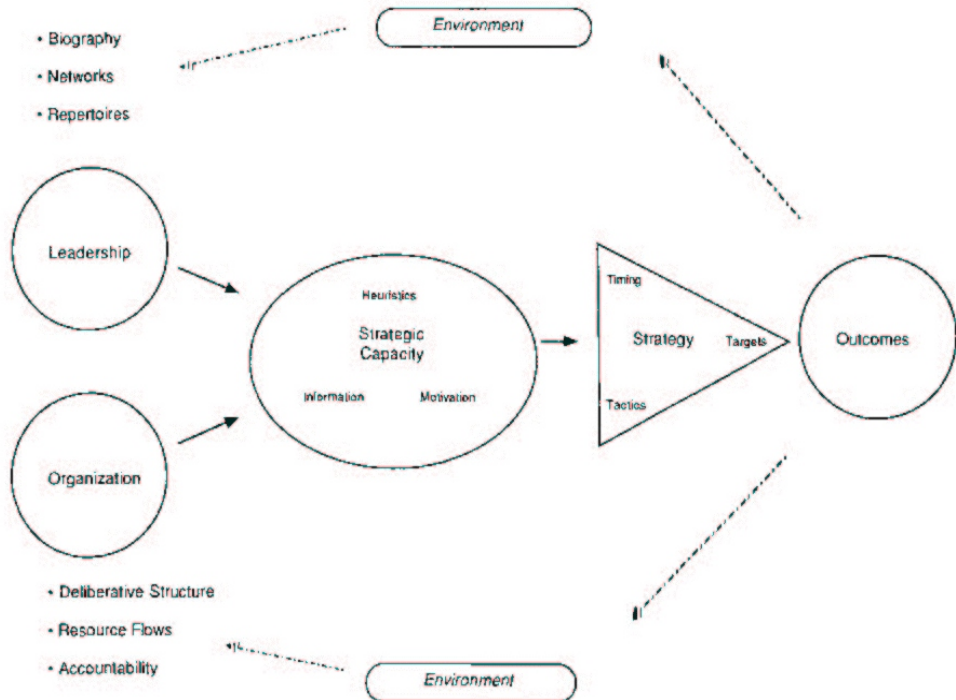


Figure 1: Origins of Strategic Capacity – from Ganz 2000

**Table 1: Projecting Power:
Highest attendance at political actions
sponsored by local organization**

<u>Maximum reported attendance at a local political action</u>	<u>Number of FBCO organizations (n = 100)</u>
1,000 or more (max=10,000; mean=1,807)	27 organizations
400-900	36 organizations
120-350	28 organizations
less than 100	9 organizations

Table 2: Strategic Capacity: Organizational, Leadership, Cultural, & Network Factors Contributing to Success

Organizational Factors:

Deliberative structure:	Regular, open, authoritative; “focal points for creativity”
Resource flows:	Money and people from multiple constituencies, including base
Accountability:	Entrepreneurial or democratic >> bureaucratic accountability
Organizational structure:	Federated (local-state-federal) organizational structure

Leadership Factors:

Leaders’ biographies:	Mix of insiders/outsiders
Repertoires:	Key leaders bring mix of political repertoires

Network Factors:

External networks:	Mix of strong and weak ties to diverse external institutions
Internal networks:	Mix of strong and weak ties among organizing participants; generally, weak ties >> strong ties if action thresholds high

Cultural Factors:

Goal framing:	Against displacement goals
Internal politics:	Promoting unity; effective undermining of factionalism
Internal communication:	Reciprocal communication extensive, including communication regarding participant “feeling.” Some one-way communication
Monitoring:	Regular assessment of participants’ action thresholds
Meaning construction	Cultural interpretation and construction of shared meaning of national organizing

Table 3: Biographic backgrounds of key strategists within PICO New Voices:

<u>Person</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Race/ethnic group</u>	<u>Religion</u>	<u>Professional experience/other</u>
<u>Organizers:</u> Scott Reed Joe Givens Joe Fleming Denise Collazo Gordon Whitman	CA LA NJ FL/CA MI/PA	White African American White Hispanic White	Lutheran Catholic Catholic Southern Baptist Jewish	All FBCO organizing Democratic party & FBCO Community org. & FBCO Harvard & FBCO Legal aid attorney, political organizing & FBCO
<u>Clergy:</u> Heyward Wiggins Roy Dixon George Cummings Kendall Baker Amelia Adams Norm Rhotert Harold Mayberry Tip Tipton	NJ CA CA CA LA MO LA/CA FL	African American African American African American White African American White African American White	Evangelical Pentecostal Baptist United Church of Christ Pentecostal Catholic African Meth. Episcopal Presbyterian	Pastor, working class employee Businessman, Republican, pastor Professor, pastor, social critic Pastor & writer Pastor, working class employee Pastor, 40 years FBCO Pastor Pastor
<u>Lay Leaders:</u> Janelle Highfill Beatris Bernstein Susan Molina Gloria Cooper Paula Arceneaux Bob Rosterfort	CO CA CO CA LA MO	White Hispanic, 2 nd gen. immigrant Hispanic African American African American White	Presbyterian Catholic Catholic Pentecostal Catholic Catholic	FBCO, professional clerical work & longtime FBCO Public schools & FBCO Activist & longtime FBCO city employee manager