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Turn Grassroots Gold

Grassroots *[grass-roots] noun: The common or ordinary people, especially as contrasted with the leadership or elite of a political party, social organization, etc.; the rank and file.*[1]

In one of the worst mass shootings in modern U.S. history, Omar Mateen killed or injured more than one hundred people in a popular gay night club in Orlando, Florida, in a hateful terrorist act on June 12, 2016. Furor ignited when Donald Trump, then the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, tweeted hours after the tragedy, "Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism. . . ." Democrats reacted on Capitol Hill, shouting "Pass the Bill" over a stalled vote for a proposed "no-fly, no-buy" law to prevent suspected terrorists from purchasing guns. Some Democratic leaders walked off the floor as Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan called for a moment of silence in memory of the victims and then launched an unprecedented fourteen-hour Senate floor filibuster to force a vote on tighter gun laws for suspected terrorists. The NRA countered that radical Islamic terrorists would not be deterred by gun control laws, and its supporters protested any infringement on Second Amendment freedoms. Meanwhile, thousands of the surviving victims and family members and friends joined with LGBT rights activists and gun control advocates to hold candlelight vigils, mount protests, and stage "die-ins"—one outside NRA headquarters in Virginia. The

entire spectacle was covered 24/7 by cable news and other media, with many reporters reminding viewers the vast majority of Americans favor "common sense" gun measures.

And then, not much changed.

Drive about a hundred miles south of Washington, D.C., to Charlottesville, Virginia, to understand why. There, a more muted scene unfolded during that same summer month of June 2016: A few days after the mass shooting in Orlando, the Charlottesville City Council met and discussed a resolution asking state and federal lawmakers for stricter gun laws. The resolution passed 4 to 0. Despite the unanimous vote, the majority of local residents attending the meeting objected. "My hope for tonight is that the Charlottesville City Council, in all it's [sic] wisdom, decides to forget about this whole thing," said Albert Shank, an Army veteran and Charlottesville resident. "And they let us go on to continue to observe our rights, and obey the Second Amendment."[2] The council members didn't actually have any legal power over gun rights, and their vote was merely a "call to action" due to the Virginia state preemption laws, which prevented local jurisdictions from enacting gun laws that were stricter than what the state had already ruled.[3] The Charlottesville City Council—and every other local council in the state of Virginia—was rendered impotent on imposing any kind of further firearm restriction.

The situation in Charlottesville mirrors that of the vast majority of communities across the country. At the local level, even when the most seemingly innocuous resolution is up for consideration by city councils, NRA members and gun rights supporters mobilize to express their views and defend Second Amendment rights. They show up, they speak up, they vote—and dutifully persuade family members, neighbors, and friends to do the same. The NRA projects a visible, palpable presence at statehouses, council chambers, and courtrooms across the country whenever a piece of legislation or law related to guns is up for consideration. It's the dutiful activism of citizens like Albert Shank—and hundreds of thousands of others like him across the country—that shore up the phenomenal legislative and electoral victories of the NRA.

The NRA's grassroots organizing strategy is the *single most important reason* why the movement has been so successful in defending and expanding the rights of gun owners in the United States. Its grassroots

membership is far more important than the financial support the NRA receives from gun manufacturers, which historically have provided only a minor percentage of the budget.[4] And it's the fundamental reason why even the most unorthodox NRA policy proposals are enacted. The gun rights movement's grassroots army is the reason why, despite the waves of angry anti-gun protests, heartbreaking vigils, and pleading calls for reform that erupt after each tragic mass shooting—from Columbine to Sandy Hook, Orlando to Las Vegas—gun violence prevention groups still largely lose ground. On the surface, it's baffling, because the vast majority of Americans support "common sense" gun policies such as universal background checks, including Democrats and Republicans, gun owners as well as non-owners.[5] Given the widespread public support of measures like these, it would seem gun safety advocates should be winning handily. But except in a handful of progressive states, they don't. The main reason for their defeat nationally is that gun control advocates historically failed to match the scale and intensity of the NRA's grassroots-fueled movement.

Leading from the Grassroots

As we examined a range of social and environmental movements surging since the 1980s, it became irrefutably clear that those with strong and robust grassroots—measured by both size and intensity of the base—win. It is the single most important factor in the NRA's success since the group first politicized in the mid-1970s and then intensified its grassroots organizing efforts starting in the 1990s. And in almost every other winning modern societal change we studied, grassroots activism played the key role.

The war to secure marriage rights for same-sex couples was waged at local and state ballot boxes, coordinated in large part by Freedom to Marry campaign leaders who successfully galvanized memberships of major national LGBT groups like Lambda Legal, GLAD, and NCLR, and hundreds of state and local groups, forging coalitions to galvanize grassroots action. Likewise, the anti–drunk driving movement was almost entirely predicated on chapter-based strategies of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), RID, and others to mobilize survivors and victims' families and friends. The modern tobacco control movement was sparked by grassroots activists who rallied in the 1970s to pass the first community bans in Arizona and Minnesota.[6]

California soon followed suit, and with the 1976 launch of Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights (ANR) by a group of Berkeley-based advocates, ANR (formerly Californians for Nonsmokers' Rights) expanded the grassroots charge against the tobacco industry to protect non-smokers from secondhand smoke. The tobacco control movement accelerated again with the 1995 launch of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids (the Campaign). A national organization created to provide technical support and critically needed resources to state-based grassroots coalitions, the Campaign also mounted national media and public norm change campaigns and provided a powerful counterweight to the influential tobacco industry lobby at the federal level.

Even the global polio eradication movement credits its success in large part to Rotary International's grassroots membership, which puts more than a million boots on the ground through its thirty thousand chapters as Rotarians marshal the social and political will to fight polio in each country where the disease remains—eliminating it in 99.9 percent of the world to date.

Conversely, the causes that are faltering in the early 21st century can attribute their struggles in some part to weak or uneven grassroots efforts. One example is gun violence prevention. Prior to when Everytown for Gun Safety formed in 2014, for nearly forty years, two main groups had dominated the gun control agenda: the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. The Brady Campaign was founded in 1974 (named National Council to Control Handguns, and later re-named Handgun Control, Inc., from 1980 to 2000). The Brady Campaign quickly became the wealthiest and most politically important gun control group in America—"the de facto chief."[7] The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence represented a consortium of women's, civic, labor, and religious associations; both organizations advocated for national legislation to prohibit gun use and ownership among the general public. What was missing, however, was a robust sustained movement of individual activists and local groups pushing for gun control from the grassroots up. As Kristin Goss noted in *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America*, ". . . the gun control 'movement' was [oriented] toward elite politics at the national level, rather than mass political or social change at the grassroots. Their goal: push a comprehensive gun control bill through Congress."[8]

There were points, however, in modern gun control movement history when grassroots activists led the charge. These include, for instance, the years immediately following the Million Mom March Across America, when on Mother's Day in 2000, more than one million gun control supporters demonstrated on the National Mall and in city satellite marches across the country. They ushered in a wave of some of the strongest state gun violence prevention legislation to pass in recent decades. But when the Million Mom March folded into the Brady Campaign, and most chapters were re-branded as Brady/MMM chapters, momentum stalled nationally.

Locally, MOM activists and their supporters continued to work in local communities, campaigning for gun safety candidates and successfully fighting gun lobby initiatives in Congress such as Concealed Carry Reciprocity. Brady/MMM chapter members also promoted the ASK Campaign, a nationwide effort to educate parents about the risks associated with having guns in the home; the ASK Campaign has been federally recognized as the most effective national safe storage awareness program.[9]

The dichotomist trajectories of the gun rights versus the gun control movements were not inevitable. As we'll see in this chapter, among the successful movements we studied, deliberate choices were made by leaders to grow and embolden their grassroots base. And in the struggling movements, we observed choices being made to the contrary, whether deliberate or by default—sometimes prompted by excruciatingly challenging external circumstances. But the end result was the same: weakened or nonexistent grassroots. While many factors fall beyond the control of a movement, there is one thing every movement has within its purview: the care and feeding of its most ardent base of supporters. Perhaps the single most important decision movement leaders must make is whether to let their grassroots fade to brown or to turn their grassroots gold.

Turning Grassroots Gold

To understand the power of grassroots in driving winning movements, it's first important to understand what we mean by "grassroots." A movement's grassroots are its everyday people, the "rank and file," in contrast to the leaders or "elite." Most movements start out as grassroots phenomena, with small groups of concerned individuals

banding together to solve a problem and collectively advocating for change. A successful movement wins when its members are nurtured locally, and simultaneously encouraged and supported to channel their energy—whether fueled by anger, anguish, hope, or idealism—into targeted campaigns at local, state, and federal levels. When properly organized and mobilized, grassroots members make a whole movement greater than the sum of its parts.

"Grassroots" also evokes meanings that go beyond basic definitions. Grassroots activism conjures up images of extreme, even radical change tactics, whether in the civil rights vein of progressive organizing techniques governed by Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* or in the more recent ultra-conservative Tea Party Patriots mix of anti-government, libertarian, and populist activism. In this extremist light, disempowered and angry grassroots groups are pitted against powerful elected officials, corporate executives, and cultural elite. It's an "us versus them," "black versus white" mentality. But as noted in the Introduction to this book, we considered not only the classic social movement organizing frameworks to inform our study of modern movements, but also frames from other disciplines such as systems, complexity, and networks. From these vantage points, we looked at grassroots not just as armies of activists fighting against a common enemy, but as collectives of individuals who were part of *networks* and who gained as much from being deeply connected to each other *within* the movement as they did from outwardly attacking foes.

As networks, grassroots constituencies can be seen as important in their own right. They are not just a means to a movement's end goal, they *are* an end goal. As noted in *Forces for Good,* referencing Joel Podolny, ". . . the solution is to treat the network not as a tool for information or resources but as a community defined by a common set of values. . . . Ultimately, the community should be treated as an end in itself."[10] This comes into view when looking at grassroots elements of movements as part of larger *systems*. When we employ a systems lens, we can understand more clearly what differentiates the best movements from the rest.

Thinking in Systems

Consider a social or environmental movement as a type of "system." What do we mean by system? "A system is an interconnected set of

elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something," writes environmental scientist Donella Meadows.[11] Systems have a function (if a machine) or a purpose (if a social grouping), and they consist of multiple elements that are interconnected. Examples of systems, according to Meadows, include the human digestive track, a football team, global trading markets, and the solar system.

Systems have a number of unique properties. As social innovation scholar Frances Westley observes, they:

- Are made of interrelating, interdependent parts,
- Cannot be understood as a function of isolated components,
- Need to be understood not by focusing on what each part is doing, but on how each part is interacting with the rest, and
- Are subjective: What we call the parts and their relationship is fundamentally a matter of perspective and purpose, not intrinsic to the real thing.[12]

Based on these factors, what doesn't qualify as a system would be a group of things that don't add up to a whole greater than the sum of their parts, a pile of sand grains, for instance. Take away some of the parts, and it doesn't change purpose or function. But take away a piece of a human's digestive system, such as the kidneys, and the system would cease to function properly.

What's important to note about every well-functioning system is that it's the relationship *between* the parts that make it work. The parts themselves, of course, need to be in good working order, but alone, they are powerless to achieve the greater goal or purpose. But when properly linked together, they can create a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts.

Great movements have at their core strongly connected grassroots members. Leaders of movement organizations understand they need to invest in building member relationships—not just between the members and the organization or movement, but *among* the members *themselves*. They nurture intense, personal bonds that engender trust and mutual obligation. Building on those bonds, they then encourage activists to collectively take charge in their communities to advance the cause at the local level. The network also becomes an end in and of itself. This approach comes more naturally for some causes than others.

Take the NRA. Founded in 1871 as a nonprofit charitable organization, for the first one hundred years of its history the NRA was

essentially a membership organization dedicated to marksmanship training and education. Its founders were two Union veterans concerned by the lack of shooting skills among their troops, so they set out to "promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis."[13]

It wasn't until relatively late in NRA history, in the 1970s, when the group politicized and pivoted to focus on aggressively defending what it saw as constitutional protections in the Second Amendment for gun ownership.

Today, the NRA continues to nurture its membership even as it lobbies to influence legislation and elections. Members enjoy attending NRA-sponsored gun safety and marksmanship trainings; they visit gun shows and join hunting clubs. Members join to receive the NRA magazine and watch pro-gun content on NRA TV and social media. NRA outings are family affairs, featuring clam bakes and potlucks replete with music, children's games, and more. For instance, attendees of the Virginia-based Tidewater Friends of NRA annual event in 2017 were beckoned on the group's Facebook page to "come to this year's banquet and fight for freedom, family, and the future of the second ammendment [sic] while enjoying a night of auctions, raffles, games, and FUN! We average 1 firearm for every 10 people as prizes!"[14]

Members of the NRA are a *community*. They live near one another and hunt together; they often socialize, worship, and work together. So when it is time to show up at a town hall meeting—as Al Shank and his fellow gun rights supporters did in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the wake of the Orlando massacre—it's a no-brainer. NRA grassroots members are *all in*.

Forging Bonds Under Fire

For other movements, fostering a grassroots community of members is harder. Take MADD: as founder Candy Lightner bleakly admits, losing a child to a drunk driving crash "instantly makes you a member of a club you never wanted to join."[15] While MADD is most renowned for its fiery fights to change social norms around drinking and driving and for aggressively advocating for stronger laws to reduce and prevent drunk driving, from the beginning, the group was doing something that would prove vital to its long-term impact: supporting the victims of drunk driving crashes, including survivors and victim's friends and loved ones.

Support circles sponsored by local MADD chapters forge bonds of trust and mutual obligation among people at the most personal level. They provide bereaved and injured victims and their family members and friends what they need most in the immediate aftermath of a drunk driving–caused crash: one-on-one emotional support from counselors and connections with local support groups comprised of other victims and survivors facing similar experiences. MADD also provides advocacy support, information, and referrals to victims and survivors through its more than three thousand trained victim advocates located across the country, which MADD promotes on its Web site and via social media.[16] (See Figure 1.1.) Programs and services like these have ensured that MADD would have a formidable grassroots army of ready-made soldiers fired up to do battle for the cause. Founder Candy Lightner was smart to focus what resources she could muster on chapter support groups from the outset. For instance, when MADD received its tax-exempt status in 1981, the organization soon had raised $100,000 in private donations, and $60,000 from the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration specifically to support chapter development.[17]

MADD Victim Support Services

We help survivors survive by . . .

- Providing you and your loved ones with emotional support
- Guidance through the criminal and civil justice systems
- Accompanying victims and survivors to court
- Helping you prepare a victim impact statement
- Referring victims and survivors to appropriate resources for additional help
- Offering support groups in some areas
- Connecting you with other victims and survivors who've had similar experiences
- Providing you supportive materials on victimization topics
- We also have a private Facebook group exclusively for victims and survivors of drunk and drugged driving. This group offers the opportunity for victims and survivors to connect, share, and seek support

If you, or someone you love, has been the victim of a violent crime, you can contact a MADD Victim Advocate, 24 hours a day, at 1-877-MADD-HELP.

Figure 1.1 MADD Victim Support Services

Source: Excerpts from MADD Official Web Site[18]

We also saw examples in other winning movements of how well they treated and nurtured their grassroots—from LGBT proponents advocating for same-sex marriage equality to the tobacco control movement's grassroots base that blanketed the country through groups like Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights and the myriad state-based coalitions that the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids supported with technical assistance and advocacy tools. The state coalition work had been catalyzed by several big health charities, including the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and American Lung Association, whose members recognized that the diseases that killed or hurt them and their loved ones were preventable through not smoking.

Building networks among grassroots members is vitally important; movements that skip this step are not as well-equipped to achieve their policy and social change goals in the long run. Most movements require their members to take big risks—advocates are called to stand up to powerful people and institutions and often face criticism in their own communities, sometimes confronting their peers. What fortifies advocates in stressful situations like these are the bonds they have with each other—what Malcolm Gladwell refers to as "strong ties."

As Gladwell writes in *The New Yorker* "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," there is a big difference between "strong-tie" and "weak-tie" networks.[19] He examines the networks of activists who advanced the civil rights movement, specifically students who participated in non-violent civil disobedience campaigns such as sit-ins at Woolworths. He concludes it was because of their strong friendships and mutually felt obligations to one another that they held fast in the face of physical violence and emotional adversity. Gladwell could just as easily been writing about mothers angry about a child killed in a drunk driving crash or gun owners afraid their Second Amendment freedoms were threatened. The collective strength of grassroots members comes in part from the support they feel and receive from each other, as well as from their connection to a larger cause. It's important to disaggregate these two different, but equally vital, points of connection.

Organizing in Systems

Viewing movements through a systems lens allowed us to see how grassroots members of movements relate to *each other*, as well as to the

larger cause. It also helped us understand how the various constituent parts of a movement work collectively to achieve the larger purpose. It's not enough to connect members to each other and foster bonds of trust; grassroots advocates also need help coordinating their local actions to advance a larger common agenda. So we looked very closely at how the *grass-tops* leaders of social movement organizations interacted with the grassroots and at how they managed to channel all of that collective energy in productive ways. By studying the approaches of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Freedom to Marry, the NRA, and other influential organizations employing *networked* leadership strategies, we learned how they *turned their grassroots gold*.

Going for Gold: The NRA-ILA Grassroots Division

"If you want to understand why the National Rifle Association is successful, look at the structure of the association as being an inverted pyramid. At the top of the pyramid, the largest constituency and base of support is our membership. And the reason they're at the top is because they are the most important."

This is how Glen Caroline, director of the NRA-ILA Grassroots Programs and Campaign Field Operations Division, starts out a typical lecture to policy students.[20] "The reason we succeed is that we try to divest control from our headquarters and really empower our volunteers in their communities to be grassroots activists and grassroots leaders," said Caroline in an interview conducted at NRA headquarters in Fairfax, Virginia. The NRA doesn't just *talk* about the importance of grassroots. They *act* on it, giving grassroots activists the resources they need to succeed—from tangible assets like political connections, educational and training materials, to moral support and camaraderie.

The NRA's focus on the grassroots coalesced in the early 1990s, after Caroline started working in NRA-ILA in 1991. Caroline says that at that time, NRA-ILA had a "very loosely defined grassroots office" consisting of one staff member.[21] Part of his first job as an employee of the NRA-ILA's Research Division was to answer incoming calls and letters from people who had either complaints or suggestions. It struck Caroline and his colleagues that "somebody who is taking the time to contact NRA to complain, give suggestions, and ask questions is demonstrating the virtues of good volunteer." They were clearly

willing to take initiative and speak out. So responsibility for answering the incoming inquiries was shifted from the research division into a newly emerging grassroots division. Around 1993, the Grassroots Office transformed into a Grassroots Division, and the NRA began to formalize and build programs designed to "harness that energy and passion into a more focused goal."[22]

This shift proved to be the modest beginnings of what eventually would emerge as the most powerful drivers of the NRA's future legislative and electoral success. Through its grassroots, the NRA figured out how to transform the passion and enthusiasm of its supporters into direct influence on the outcomes of elections and legislation proposals.

The newly formed Grassroots Division was deliberately structured to respond to individual member concerns. For instance, the NRA installed a 1–800 toll-free hotline, which any member could call to lodge complaints or concerns. They designed it specifically in this way because, as Caroline explains, "We know we cannot monitor every single activity in every corner of every state. It would be presumptuous for me to think that, sitting out in that gigantic blue building we have off Route 66 in Fairfax, Virginia. We can't know everything."[23] Volunteers and supporters alert the NRA to situations that would go unnoticed and receive training and field support from the NRA. Through this training and support, the NRA-ILA puts its emphasis on grassroots and grassroots members out front. Instead of elite leaders dictating from on high down to the grassroots which actions to take, Headquarters envisions its role as largely *listening* and *responding* to constituent concerns, and then forging the network so local grassroots individuals can coalesce and take action.

It's a key lesson every consumer-facing business must learn—the customer comes first and the customer is always right. Most businesses have elaborate mechanisms for gathering customer feedback and data and for transparently responding to their suggestions and concerns. By staying "close to the customer," organizations like the NRA sharpen their ability to respond and adapt. At the extreme level, it's the way open-source, consumer-driven platforms like Wikipedia, Linux, and Mozilla are successful—their consumers are in charge. It's the difference between a traditional company like Encyclopedia Britannica with its handful of elite experts deciding on which content belongs on its limited pages, and Wikipedia, which allows virtually anyone

to contribute to building the knowledge base. It's not that Wikipedia allows just any content—there are paid editors involved who are empowered to monitor and control the forum to some degree—but it's mainly a bottom-up rather than a top-down enterprise.

Getting Out Grassroots Votes

Just as the Grassroots Division at NRA-ILA was supporting NRA members in the field around advocacy campaigns, in 1994 they were launching an Election Volunteer Coordinator Program, now known as Frontline Activist Leaders (FAL). The original goal was to identify NRA members in as many of the 435 U.S. Congressional Districts as possible to act in a liaison role between NRA members and gun owners and the campaigns of candidates the NRA supported. The effort was focused on building pockets of grassroots activists that could help with door knocking, phone calling, material distributions, and other get-out-to-vote efforts, explains Caroline. For the first few election cycles, they only ran the program during election years; by 1998 they converted to a year-round program, with more than two hundred volunteers and NRA coordinators working continuously to build and sustain grassroots activism through networks in their local communities, supporting other political and legislative actions.[24]

Putting It All Together

NRA Grassroots Division volunteers and field staff are the glue that binds the NRA membership together and harnesses their energy to impact legislation and elections. They are successful because they don't just give the grassroots attention when there's a bill up for consideration or a tight race for elected office; they maintain a visible and constant presence throughout the broader gun-enthusiast community. They visit gun shops, attend gun shows, and show up at gun hunting clubs. They appear at Friends of the NRA fundraisers—and not just the staff: NRA Executive VP Wayne LaPierre is a fixture at NRA events large and small. The NRA-ILA staff make a point of being present at many different community forums because "having a presence allows us to have a continuous dialogue with potential supporters and remind them that their activism is important," said Caroline. And all of this lavish

attention is undergirded by the range of products and services offered or sponsored by the NRA membership organization—the magazine, gun shows, shooting competitions, BBQs, and more. NRA staff and Frontline Activist Leaders are an integral part of a much broader community.

The NRA could have gone a very different way. With policy experts and well-connected lobbyists working from its headquarters located just outside the Washington, D.C., beltway, they could have chosen to focus on federal legislative priorities and primarily advancing a national agenda. But they didn't. They put their members at the "top of pyramid," because they realize their lobbyists are just the tip of the spear. Without the outspoken, vigorous activism of its core volunteers organizing across its nearly five million members, the NRA wouldn't be able to pass the legislative changes it wants.

Many Pathways to Gold

Each of the successful movements we studied had at its center a vigorous base of passionate, energetic, and well-organized grassroots support. However, the ways in which the grassroots movement evolved for each issue varied. Many factors impacted the scope and formation of grassroots efforts. These factors include the competitive landscape of the field—whether crowded or relatively unpopulated—as well as the structure of the organizations—whether they arose as associations, charitable nonprofits, advocacy or membership-based groups; whether they had c4 and PACs; and more. As noted before, the NRA had a natural grassroots base built into its membership when it politicized in the late 1970s, and while there were other gun rights groups, it was the clear national frontrunner. But in other fields and causes, the competitive landscape was quite different.

Consider the competitive fields and inter-organizational challenges facing these three very different, but equally successful, movements: drunk driving reduction, tobacco control, and same-sex marriage equality. Like the NRA for gun rights, MADD emerged as the clear national leader for the anti–drunk driving cause. There were, of course, other players in these causes: the NRA co-existed with other gun rights groups, which were often more conservative than the NRA and held extremist policy stances that made the NRA's positions appear relatively moderate by comparison at times. But the NRA has always been the largest and most influential player in gun rights. Likewise, MADD was the dominant national anti–drunk driving group. MADD had at

One Major Leader	Very Crowded Fields
Gun Rights	***Marriage Equality***
NRA	ACLU
	Anti-Defamation League
	Freedom to Marry
	GLAD and GLAAD
	Human Rights Campaign
	Lambda Legal
	NCLR
Anti–Drunk Driving	***Tobacco Control***
MADD	Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights
	American Cancer Society
	American Heart Association
	American Lung Association
	American Medical Association
	Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids
	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
	Truth Initiative

Figure 1.2 Select National Movement Landscapes

least one antecedent: RID, a regional group based in New York that had not gone fully national. And although other groups like SADD cropped up, none matched MADD in size or scope of influence. As a result, front-running organizations like NRA and MADD did not face significant direct national competition within their own fields.

By contrast, the landscape for same-sex marriage and tobacco control looked quite different. Multiple powerful national organizations co-existed, many with far-flung state and local affiliates, making the challenge of mobilizing and emboldening the grassroots a more complicated feat, as it was difficult to rally disparate activists who joined or supported different organizations, and therefore channeled their energy into sometimes competing agendas. In Chapter Four, "Reckon with Adversarial Allies," we explore intra-field dynamics in depth. But for the purposes of this chapter, Figure 1.2 is a depiction of how the national competitive landscapes appeared for each major movement we studied.

Going for Gold Via the Grassroots

Keeping these competitive landscapes in mind, let's now delve into how other movements employed winning grassroots approaches to drive their causes to victory. In the realm of public health, Mothers

Against Drunk Driving (MADD) provides an excellent example of how concentrated grassroots activism can turn the tide for any movement. It also offers a compelling story of how one social entrepreneur and activist, Candy Lightner, sparked a formidable movement by building from the grassroots up.

Lightner founded MADD in 1980 after her thirteen-year-old daughter, Cari, was killed by an intoxicated driver. The driver had been involved in multiple other driving arrests, and Lightner quickly learned from investigating officers that her daughter's killer was unlikely to serve any jail time.[25] Distraught about her daughter's tragic death, angry her killer would likely go unpunished, and frustrated he had not been prevented from driving in the first place, Lightner and a group of her friends decided to create an organization, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers ["Drivers" was later switched to "Driving"].

Within the year, Lightner had chartered dozens of chapters in California. By 1981 MADD had been incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization with chapters in more than six states, then grew to more than ninety chapters by the next year. By the time Lightner left the organization in 1985, MADD had more than 450 local chapters and two million members and donors.[26] The chapters spread like wildfire in part because of Lightner's passionate charismatic leadership and her broadened definition of drunk driving crash "victims" to include not only those people directly killed or injured, but their family, friends, colleagues, and larger social networks. MADD connected with the victims and their families, tapping into their most primal emotions—grief and anger and revenge and bitterness—and supported them and provided them with outlets to advocate for solutions.[27] (We explore in greater depth in Chapter Three, "Change Hearts *and* Policy" how successful movement leaders use emotional, visceral messages to change social norms around their issues, rather than just focus on advocating for policy solutions.)

MADD chapters also flourished because of the loosely federated structure of the organization. It had a central office in Texas (moved from California) and semi-autonomous local chapters, which were free to appoint their own leaders, raise their own money, and promote their own programs.[28] When a victim of a drunk driving crash or a family member of a victim called MADD and asked, "What can I do?" the answer was, "Start a MADD chapter." Lightner didn't open field

offices; she simply sent packets of information to victims and their families with guidelines on how to understand the motor vehicle code, monitor court cases, and interact with officials in law enforcement, the courts, and the legislature.

Lightner left the organization five years after founding it.[29] But MADD overcame the potentially debilitating loss of its visionary, charismatic founder, precisely because *the power of the organization was vested outside of headquarters and away from its founder*. MADD pushed power out to the chapters, which were free to act locally and advance the drunk driving cause in ways that worked in each community's unique political, legal, and social context. It turns out that MADD's decentralized structure was perfectly suited to encourage and enable the local leaders to assume leadership and maintain autonomy. Like the NRA-ILA, MADD had turned its grassroots gold.

Untangling Tobacco Control's Twisted Grassroots

The modern tobacco control movement faced a very different competitive landscape than the one MADD operated in: The tobacco wars were fought in fields that were crowded, cantankerous, and at times rife with conflict.

Tobacco control's grassroots were planted back in the 1970s, when the first local activist campaigns were firing up across the country. Influential leaders such as University of California professor Stanton Glantz and community organizer Julia Carol were "true believers" in the anti-smoking cause. Incensed by the tobacco companies' unapologetic lies about the harmful and addictive qualities of cigarettes, these activists helped drum up a vigorous non-smokers' rights movement, advocating in towns and counties for non-smoking ordinances. Their organization morphed into Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights (ANR) as they took their California-based local ordinance strategy national.[30] They also worked in alliance with other public health groups to create smoking bans in the airline industry in the 1980s.

The fact that the movement launched locally—from small communities outward—turned out to be an extremely effective inoculation against the powerful tobacco industry. Tobacco companies had elite relationships with state and national political leaders, cemented with generous campaign contributions and lobbying prowess. But

companies did not have a depth of reach at the local level. As Stanton Glantz recalls, "Tobacco companies realized that they were dominating in the state legislatures, but getting their lunches eaten at local level . . . they gave money, hired lobbyists, and could dominate [at the state level]. But at the community level, in smaller places, politicians care a lot more what their voting constituents think."

By rallying local activists to show up at even the smallest town council meeting and stand up for their health and rights as non-smokers, ANR was doing for tobacco control what the NRA was doing for gun rights with its rank-and-file members like Al Shank in Virginia advocating after the Orlando mass shooting—showing up, speaking out, and making elected officials aware they cared about the issue—and they would vote on it.

In 1995, when the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) jumped full force into the tobacco wars and provided seed funding for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids (the Campaign), it sought to fuel federal policy and regulatory change by creating a group that could directly counter the powerful tobacco lobby, represented by the Tobacco Institute. While working nationally, the Campaign also expanded the breadth and diversity of state-based advocacy campaigns, providing technical assistance to state-level coalitions and helping them push for reforms, such as passing state excise taxes, which were proven to reduce smoking. RWJF also had funded the *SmokeLess States*® initiative, which provided financial support to coalitions of state and local groups advocating for the state excise tax policies, among other changes. These resources provided much-needed fuel for local grassroots groups to succeed. Tobacco control movement leaders at the Campaign and RWJF understood the importance of caring for and feeding the grassroots.

This did not mean the path to victory was smooth or straight. Tensions flared between grassroots advocates like Glantz, based far outside of Washington, D.C., and national leaders like those leading the Campaign inside the beltway. Their clashing visions for the movement came to a head in 1997, when lawsuits were brought by several state attorneys general against major tobacco companies, and the Campaign's executive vice president and legal counsel, Matt Myers, was asked by the attorneys generals and White House officials to join in negotiations with the heads of major tobacco companies about a

potential settlement, the Global Settlement Agreement (GSA). Even though the Campaign had backing from formidable proponents like the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and American Medical Association, a perfect storm of political and intra-field events conspired to prevent the agreement from going forward. Grassroots advocates like Glantz and Carol were outraged. They torpedoed the GSA, concerned that loopholes and other concessions to the tobacco industry were fraught with danger. Some advocates publicly excoriated leaders of the Campaign for "dealing with the devil." (This fissure is further explored in Chapter Four, "Reckon with Adversarial Allies.") The following year, a revised Master Settlement Agreement was made, producing key wins for tobacco control. But it would be another decade before a federal law regulating tobacco under the FDA would pass and the balance of the tobacco control movement's agenda could be realized.

Smoking was curbed in the United States because of the vast, unruly network of individual activists, charitable nonprofits, lobbying groups, business and policy leaders fighting to advance the cause—and sometimes despite it. But it never would have advanced as far as it did without the grassroots efforts that first popped up in the 1970s and later were nurtured with technical assistance from the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and ANR, and bankrolled with RWJF's more than $500 million in financial support through *SmokeLess States*. It was a classic David versus Goliath matchup. Only in this case, it took thousands of grassroots "Davids" banding together to undercut the giant tobacco industry.

Building Grassroots Momentum for Same-Sex Marriage

In the fight for same-sex marriage rights, LGBT advocates faced a similarly competitive and crowded field. And although the success of the movement is credited in large part to Freedom to Marry, a national organization founded in 2003 by activist Evan Wolfson, the roots of the marriage equality movement ran much deeper—underlying a grassroots membership both broad and complex.

The ninety-four-year-old American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought the first marriage lawsuit on behalf of a same-sex couple in 1971. Legal defense groups like Lambda Legal Defense and Education

Fund, GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), ACLU, and others had been working for decades to advance LGBT issues in the courts. The largest LGBT membership organization, Human Rights Campaign (HRC), has connected more than 1.5 million members and notable celebrities with LGBT causes since 1980. Meanwhile, the National LGBTQ Task Force (the "Task Force" also formerly known as the "National Gay Task Force"), had been advocating since 1973 when it was founded in the wake of the Stonewall Riots—the first major grassroots protests supporting equal rights for gay people. This panoply of legal, policy advocacy, and membership groups was working vociferously to advance a range of causes that affected LGBT community members when Freedom to Marry entered the scene.

As the marriage equality cause started to gain traction, all of these disparate groups clamored for money, media attention, and power to advance their various agendas. In this crowded field, the proposal of pushing for full marriage rights was not popular—a relatively new concept, it was embraced only by some LGBT advocates. Meanwhile, the dominant groups were founded or had become engaged in LGBT causes at an earlier period of U.S. history, when homosexuality was still considered a mental illness; many states had anti-sodomy laws; and children were often sent away to mental institutions when their parents discovered they were gay.[31] As a result, organizations were working on a range of issues, from employment and housing discrimination to adoption and custody rights, and more. (By contrast, when MADD launched, the drunk driving issue was not yet widely perceived by the public as a dominant cause for concern.)

Because of the crowded field and the many disparate agendas, leaders in the fight for marriage equality were forced to find ways to join together in coalition and embrace a common strategy to promote marriage equality. They did this primarily by engaging and focusing on grassroots engagement at the state and local level (which we explore in more detail in Chapter Two, "Sharpen Your 10/10/10/20 = 50 Vision"). In order to be successful, they had to energize the memberships and grassroots supporters of various groups like HRC and ACLU, while widening the base to include new supporters who had never been active in LGBT issues before.

LGBT efforts in Massachusetts make an excellent case study: There, to drive a campaign for a constitutional amendment allowing

same-sex marriage, Freedom to Marry and other national and regional groups forged a coalition, MassEquality, in the late 1990s. Their first objective: Galvanize a grassroots base of support and organize it to advance legislative and electoral wins. The groups pooled resources to hire a campaign coordinator and brought in Marty Rouse, a seasoned political organizer who'd worked on Democratic election campaigns. HRC opened up its membership list, enabling the coalition to raise initial funds and start to expand the base. Rouse used some of the funds to recruit a team of field organizers and jumpstart the grassroots movement. By 2004, email was available as an organizing tool, which enabled many more people to easily contact their legislators, and one hundred people quickly metastasized into a network of 400,000.[32]

Rouse operated shrewdly offline, too. He organized postcard campaigns and targeted certain senators' neighborhoods to give greatest visibility. Rouse recalls, "People would say 'MassEquality is EVERYWHERE!' No, we weren't everywhere. But we were very strategic, we knew where [the senator] went for coffee every morning, so we would postcard there and get people talking so they would bump into him in the supermarket and say 'Hey, we heard about the marriage ballot initiative and we're for it.'"[33] By galvanizing a savvy and relentless grassroots campaign, which involved issue-organizing as well as electoral influence, MassEquality was eventually able to win over enough legislators to amend the Massachusetts Constitution to recognize same-sex marriage.

Marriage equality advocates parlayed their successful Massachusetts strategy to win next in several other states, including New York (which we explore in detail in the following chapter). They won in large part because they *turned their grassroots gold*.

Fading Grassroots

Just as we explored the important role grassroots activists played in *winning* movements, we also looked at movements that seemed stuck or were "in-progress" as of the 2010s. It became immediately clear that movements that failed to nurture their grassroots, either because they didn't recognize their importance or couldn't muster the resources to do so, were often on the losing side of battles.

Take the gun control movement. Its leaders had, until very recently, followed a different approach with regard to grassroots than

the NRA had. Until Everytown for Gun Safety coalesced in 2014 with the merger of Mayors Against Illegal Guns and Moms Demand Action and quickly grew within a few years to four million supporters,[34] no other major gun group came close to matching the breadth of the NRA's grassroots. At almost every turn, it appears gun control leaders historically made choices that had left local grassroots activists relatively under-resourced and on the fringe—at the very same period in history when the NRA was doing exactly the opposite.

The history of modern gun violence prevention is not entirely devoid of grassroots activism, however. A few notable exceptions in the movement do exist when grassroots activism appeared to match the level of intensity and volume of the NRA. These were the points at which modern gun control activists had won ground. One remarkable national grassroots effort was ignited by Donna Dees-Thomases, a working mother living in a New Jersey suburb who organized the Million Mom March Across America in 2000. The idea hatched after a tragic incident on August 10, 1999, when a white supremacist had opened fire with a semi-automatic weapon at the North Valley Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, California. A horrified Dees-Thomases wanted to take action and looked for ways to join the gun violence prevention movement (then commonly known as gun control). Finding no place to plug in, she decided to do something on her own. Drawing on her professional career in media and communications—she'd been working for *Late Night with David Letterman* as a publicist—she envisioned staging a "million mom march" on Washington. As she started searching for partners to help mount it, initially she was rebuffed by the established gun control groups of the time. One male representative of Handgun Control, Inc. (later re-named Brady) told Dees-Thomases there was no "movement" and doubted anyone would actually show up at a march on Mother's Day.[35] Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV) leaders Michael Beard and the Reverend Jim Atwood expressed support and provided help, despite limited resources.

Dees-Thomases eventually clinched a partnership with Bell Campaign, a nascent grassroots gun violence victims and survivors support network founded in California by burn trauma expert Andrew McGuire, executive director of the Trauma Foundation. Launched under the fiscal umbrella of the Trauma Foundation, what became

known as the Bell Campaign was modeled after MADD, and McGuire early on formed an advisory board comprised of nine gun violence advocates, including Tom Vanden Berk (whose teenaged son had been fatally shot), and Mary Leigh Blek, who had also co-founded another gun control group, Orange County Citizens Against Gun Violence. McGuire received an initial $4 million over three years from the Goldman Family Fund, and by the time Dees-Thomases contacted the Bell Campaign, McGuire's group had established more than eighty chapters across the United States.[36]

The Million Mom March and the Bell Campaign together mounted what became the Million Mom March Across America, ultimately galvanizing more than 750,000 protestors to march on the National Mall, recalls Dees-Thomases, along with tens of thousands of satellite marchers in other cities on Mother's Day in 2000. One of the largest marches on Washington, D.C., the Million Mom March to this day is the largest single day of protest against gun violence in U.S. history.[37] It ultimately succeeded with help from established gun violence prevention groups at both the state and national level.

In the wake of the Million Mom March (MMM) and with the influx of new activists, stricter gun laws were either enacted or strengthened at local and state levels as a result of the vigorous activism of MMM chapters and other like-minded organizations across the country. But momentum soon fizzled. After the big event on Mother's Day, the Bell Campaign changed its name to Million Mom March (MMM) after the Trauma Foundation helped establish MMM as a separate 501(c)4 organization.[38]

Plus, clashes among various leaders at the previously established gun control groups arose—all of whom were male, notes Dees-Thomases, who bristled when she recalled many of them dismissing her and the growing army of MMM activists as "just moms."[39] Soon, squabbles ensued among the established gun control group leaders over everything from who got "credit" for the enormous success of the march (which MMM founder Dees-Thomases and the Bell Campaign's McGuire had bootstrapped and independently funded) to who owned the donor list; financial control and leadership succession issues erupted into a perfect storm.[40] By early 2001, MMM was merged into the Brady Campaign.

On the surface, this appeared to be a win-win: Brady could offer fiscal sponsorship and policy expertise, and the MMM chapters would

drive grassroots activism. But a key funder pulled support when the merger with Brady was announced, and Brady soon suffered a crater-ing financial setback in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as the organization lost a significant chunk of funding as the nation's atten-tion turned to terrorism.[41] Under then-president Michael Barnes's leadership, the Brady Campaign managed to keep most of the remain-ing 236 MMM/Brady chapters afloat (some chapters opposed the merger, as did McGuire). But Brady did not deeply invest in them—or support the original MMM chapter model, which had been based on Mothers Against Drunk Driving's decentralized, locally driven chapter approach—at the level originally intended. "The MADD chapter model had at its foundation state council leadership," notes Dees-Thomases. "When the MADD chapter model was abandoned, the chapters began to diminish in size."[42]

Study in Contrasts

The difference between how the NRA handles its grassroots versus how Brady did couldn't be starker. While the NRA has put grassroots "at the top of the pyramid" since the 1990s, whereas Brady historically put them near the bottom. Brady had historically worked only with the "grass-tops" organizations and state-based groups until its merger with Million Mom March (MMM) in 2001 and the Brady/MMM Chapters were formed.

This was in part due to the fact that Brady was originally not con-ceived as a chapter-based organization. As former Brady Campaign grassroots division leader Brian Malte explains, when Brady merged with MMM, "the mentality was not 'everything we're going to do now is wrapped around [the chapters], [they] are an important piece of the organization.' But I guarantee that's not what the chapters thought. They thought, 'We *are* the organization.' So I had the difficult task of trying to get the chapters what they needed, yet knowing we're not solely a chapter-based organization."[43] (Malte served in various lead-ership roles at Brady for more than twenty years before leaving the organization in 2017.)

Today, more than ninety Brady/MMM chapters continue to oper-ate nationwide. The California chapters in particular have successfully advanced policies restricting gun use and ownership, and the state is

among a handful in the United States with relatively robust gun safety laws. At its peak, the Brady Campaign counted approximately half a million members. But it's proven no antidote to the five-million-strong membership the NRA claims forms its grassroots base.

Meanwhile, it took fifteen years after the Million Mom March and multiple mass shootings—including the tragic Sandy Hook School massacre—for a new, grassroots-driven gun safety organization to emerge. Everytown for Gun Safety formed in 2014, created with the merger of activist Shannon Watts's organization, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and Mayors Against Illegal Guns (MAIG), and was co-founded and funded by former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Bloomberg pledged $50 million in the new organization's first year, and with its number of supporters surging to four million by 2017, the newly formed Everytown for Gun Safety presents a considerable counterweight to the NRA.[44]

Ironically, when Shannon Watts launched with a Facebook page what became Moms Demand Action in the wake of the Sandy Hook School shooting, she did so because she couldn't find an obvious way to become involved. "I wanted to join the gun safety movement and looked for something like MADD. I went online, [but] there really wasn't a grassroots effort, at least not one that spoke to me."[45] So in a painful illustration of what's past is prologue, like Dees-Thomases more than a decade before, Watts set out to build a grassroots movement once again.

While it remains to be seen whether Everytown will be able to translate its growing ranks of moms, mayors, and other grassroots supporters of "common sense" gun control measures into national legislative and social norm change, there are promising early signs. Since the 2012 Sandy Hook School shooting, twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws to keep guns from domestic abusers, and eight states have extended gun-sale background checks. Everytown also clearly prioritizes the involvement of survivors in the movement through its national Survivor Network, as well as its broader network of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America volunteers, who are motivated and equipped to turn up in town hall meetings and on Capitol Hill and raise their voices alongside their equally vigorous gun rights opponents. So now, every time dozens of guys like Al Shank show up at a town council meeting in their neon orange hunting garb, an equal number of passionate women sporting bright

red Moms Demand Action T-shirts show up on the opposite side. Everytown appears to understand the vital importance of its grassroots base of energy and of not letting it fade.

"It's like catching lightning in a bottle," explains Shannon Watts. The trick is not to snuff it, but channel it into social change.

Golden Grassroots Systems

According to a teaching by the Sufi mystic Rumi: "You think because you understand 'one' you must also understand 'two,' because one and one make two. But you must also understand 'and.'"[46]

This chapter is all about the "*and*"—the stuff that connects people at the grassroots of a movement to each other and also tethers them to a common cause. Winning movements foster the "*and*." That's what turns grassroots gold. Conversely, less successful movements fail to focus on the "*and*"—their leaders skip the step of creating deep, visceral connections among the individuals who make up their movements, or they don't recognize the critical importance of building on momentum from the grassroots up. It's a pattern we observed time and again as we looked at some of the struggling movements of modern times. These include gun control and other causes, such as climate action and public education reform.

In the environmental arena, one key explanation for why recent attempts failed to curb U.S. carbon emissions through federal measures can be found in how environmental groups handled the grassroots. In her unsparing analysis, "Naming the Problem: What It Will Take to Counter Extremism and Engage Americans in the Fight Against Global Warming," Harvard University Professor Theda Skocpol examines why environmentalists ultimately did not convince the U.S. Senate to pass "cap and trade" legislation during the 2009–2010 fight for the Waxman-Markey American Clean Energy and Security Act.[47] She analyzed how leaders of the U.S. Climate Action Partnership (USCAP), a coalition of business chieftains and heads of major environmental groups, attempted to place a cap on carbon emissions and create an open market for energy producers to trade allowances under a cap. Since a cap and trade mechanism worked to cut the toxic emissions causing acid rain in the 1990s, it could work for carbon, too. Or so the thinking went.

It turns out it wasn't the policy solution that was faulty. What was wrong, concludes Skocpol, was the largely top-down leadership approach deployed by environmental reformers at that time, and their failure to engage effectively with and to embolden the grassroots. Whereas the opposition—driven by Tea Party–backed climate skeptics and a growing mass of angry, disenchanted, conservative grassroots activists—were actively and vigorously mobilizing to the contrary. Conservatives had taken the fight out to U.S. states and local jurisdictions, whereas environmentalists were mainly trying to persuade elites inside the Capitol beltway of their cause. This was a mistake.

"To counter fierce political opposition," advises Skocpol, "[environmental] reformers will have to build organizational networks across the country, and they will need to orchestrate sustained political efforts that stretch far beyond friendly Congressional offices, comfy board rooms, and posh retreats . . . insider politics cannot carry the day on its own, apart from a broader movement pressing politicians for change.[48]

For the causes struggling to gain ground in the 2010s, such as gun violence prevention and carbon reduction, movement setbacks can be attributed in large part to relatively weak or under-organized grassroots. In other cases, sometimes it's not that the grassroots were downplayed or disorganized; it's that the grassroots seem to be altogether *missing*. Case in point: recent efforts by reformers to close the U.S. educational equality gap. While Teach for America has set about galvanizing a new vanguard of education reform to realize founder Wendy Kopp's vision that "one day, all children will have access to an excellent education," today it seems more dream than reality. Teach for America has successfully inspired tens of thousands of young people to teach in under-resourced public schools and go on to start schools or to leave teaching and go on to advocate for education reform from positions of influence in government or the private sector. Meanwhile, the bottom-up, state-based charter school movement has unleashed a new cadre of publicly funded, independently run schools flowering largely in lower- and middle-income communities. But what's been missing, says TFA alum and community organizer Mark Fraley, is a true *grassroots* educational equity movement.

Fraley argues in "History Matters," an analysis of the key success factors across a range of historical movements including LGBT, civil rights, and women's rights, that there is currently no social change

"movement" for educational equity, only fragmented pieces of one. As a whole, the educational equity movement is "principally driven not by people whose families are directly affected by our education system's failures, but rather by a loose network of allies and advocates."[49]

Galvanizing a movement from the grassroots up requires mobilizing people who live at the grassroots—the rank and file, the everyday individuals with the *lived experience* of the problem at hand. These people are the most inseparable from the cause. They are the most viscerally connected to it. They have the most to lose if a movement fails, and the most to gain if it succeeds.

Whatever the cause, there is one fundamental strategy to win that supersedes all others: Figure out how to turn grassroots gold.

Notes

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