

# A Plan to Enhance Progressive Coordination and Media Access

Donald A. Smith  
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**Executive summary:** *There is great need for progressives in the Seattle area to better coordinate their political activities and, in particular, to amplify their media voices. The ability of progressives to influence lawmakers and public opinion is disproportionately small compared to the large number of progressive organizations and supporters. The influence of progressive ideals is also small relative to the justness of those ideals. The challenge is to achieve coordination without stifling dissent and individual initiative – in other words, without stepping on toes.*

*To address this need in the Seattle area, we have two concrete proposals:*

*(1) Progressives should convene one or more meetings wherein stakeholders discuss their goals and decide how to further coordinate their efforts.*

*(2) Progressive leaders should combine their multiple, small media voices into a louder, more unified voice by adopting a shared website that will serve as a portal (gateway) to content provided by member groups. Administration and editing of this website will be a shared responsibility. No single person or group will "own" this shared resource. Shared ownership encourages wide participation and discourages power-grabbing by overly self-interested individuals and groups.*

*Longer term, we envision additional areas where progressives can coordinate: content submission to traditional media, development of alternative media, and co-support on coalition actions.*

*Progressives typically oppose the excesses of private ownership and support public schools, public transportation, publicly financed elections, community media, and national health insurance. So it makes sense that they should support a community-owned progressive website. Such a website could be the basis for an alternative, online media. Progressivism implies that multiple groups and individuals will combine their voices and efforts and agree to a shared vision that will benefit everyone. If progressives can't act progressively (by agreeing to share political power), their cause is doomed.*

## **Background**

Numerous progressive organizations are active in the Puget Sound area: MoveOn, NARAL, Planned Parenthood, ACLU, Sierra Club, Democracy for America, Progressive Democrats of America, Democracy for Washington, Women in Black, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, World Can't Wait, Veterans for Peace, Evergreen Peace and Justice Community, Washington Community Action Network (<http://washingtoncan.org>) and

Progressive Majority. In addition, there are the more traditional Democratic groups such as union locals, local legislative district party organizations, and professional campaign organizations, as well as homegrown political/civic organizations such as the Lake Hills Liberals (<http://www.lakehillsliberals.org>). Then there are online progressive websites such as <http://www.washblog.com>, <http://horsesass.org>, Washington Public Campaigns (<http://washclean.org>), Northwest Progressive Institute (<http://www.nwprogressive.org>), <http://fusewashington.org/>, <http://www.synapticstew.com>, <http://www.democracyforwashington.com>, and Working for Change (<http://www.workingassetsblog.com>). (For a more more complete list of liberal sites, see <http://www.lakehillsliberals.org/resource/50LiberalOrganizations.htm> .) Finally, there are progressive traditional media, such as Real Change, Eat the State, the Stranger, AM 1090 (Air America), KBCS (91.3 FM, <http://kbc.fm/site/PageServer>) and a scattering of liberal columnists working for Seattle PI and other newspapers.

The various groups have different emphases, tactics, leaders, websites, email lists, and funding sources. Each concentrates on its pet interests and is unwilling to delay gratification by entering into a strategic alliance with other groups. It's a struggle to get committed members, because there are so many competing groups and their effectiveness is unclear. But, in fact, there is great overlap in their goals. Most progressives support environmentalism, women's rights, gun control, fair taxation, civil rights, separation of church-and-state, health care reform (including national health insurance), an end to the war, election reform (verified voting), campaign finance reform, and well-funded public education.

Moreover, there are probably tens of thousands of progressive citizens who are eager to work to support issues and candidates but who feel powerless to effect change. As any progressive activist knows, only a handful of members are truly active. Rallies, demonstrations, and vigils are of questionable usefulness. But these people want to be empowered.

Coordinating the various progressive groups will be difficult -- like herding cats (or lions). Each group has its own turf to defend and its own power structure. Each website owner wants to be the "umbrella" site. Each group wants to be the leading group. Democrats are notorious for being disorganized and for fighting among themselves.

The Republicans, in contrast, were able to unite behind a (terrible) leader, George W. Bush, despite their variegated coalition of libertarians, social conservatives, neconservatives, and corrupt capitalists. The various groups towed the line and swallowed their substantial differences for the sake of the greater cause. Moreover, the Republicans have a disciplined, well-funded party organization that is effective at getting people to vote, distributing talking points, and getting its message heard in the media. The organization is backed up by well-funded think tanks, right wing radio stations, and an entire television network (Fox).

Progressives particularly need to coordinate in the area of media access. This is for two reasons. First, progressives need to communicate better with each other. Second, progressives need to get their message out to the general public. The essential problem with politics in America in the last decade or so is that the GOP has controlled both the framing of media discussions and too many media outlets. That's why media reform should be a top priority issue for progressives. *Without fair and open media, all other issues (e.g., the war, taxes, social justice, environment, fair elections, and women's rights) will languish.* For

instance, if the middle class could be educated about the effects of regressive tax cuts, they'd be less likely to vote for right wing candidates and initiatives who promise lower taxes. And if the public were aware of the real reasons for the war in Iraq, they'd have defeated the GOP in 2004.

We believe that better coordination among progressive groups would result in more effective politicking, would engender a louder and more coherent media voice, and would increase the likelihood of electing progressive candidates to office.

Some people claim that the Internet, with its radically democratic and uncensored messaging, offers promise of the eventual triumph of the light of progressive truths over the dark forces of conservative falsehood. But unless progressive voices coordinate their messages, the truth is likely to be lost in a babel of competing voices.

Effective political action requires a mixture of top-down coordination and bottom-up flexibility, initiative, and ownership. Too much top-down coordination and you get dictatorship and unmotivated, burnt-out activists; too much bottom-up initiative and you get chaos, redundancy, and inefficiency.

The challenge is to achieve coordination without imposing undemocratic top-down control that would stifle dissent. In other words, how can progressives manage dissent?

### ***How about the Democratic Party?***

Of course, there's a battle-tested infrastructure already in place for coordinating political activism and for coming to decisions. It's called the Democratic Party. But people feel that it's too stodgy and unresponsive. The Democrats in Congress have compromised again and again with Bush and even condemned MoveOn.org for its anti-Petraeus ad that appeared in the New York Times. I'm a Democratic PCO, and I tend to agree that the Party is part of the Establishment, it resists change, and sometimes it does dumb things.

Still, there are lots of progressive Dems. Many Democratic Legislative District organizations in WA State have endorsed impeachment. Dennis Kucinich is a Democrat that lots of progressives could unite behind. Any one of the Democratic presidential candidates is vastly more desirable than any of the Republican candidates. The worst thing that could happen would be for a divided Left to result in the election of Giuliani, the way Nader helped Bush steal victory from Gore in 2000. So, more progressives should be active in local Democratic organizations; it entails unpleasant, tedious work, but it's the way politics works in America.

I can certainly appreciate progressives' impatience with both the Democratic Party. They've tried to work with the GOP in a spirit of bipartisanship. But they've failed to end the war, failed to override the SCHIP veto, and failed to reverse the GOP's regressive tax, energy, environmental, and social politics. The Dems have merely earned themselves even lower approval ratings than Bush. They need to attack the beast directly, by supporting impeachment. The question is: is it better to reform the existing organizations from within or is it better to start a new, oppositional infrastructure?

There's a strong temptation to work outside the system, in opposition, because you can

then be your own boss. ("Let's have a club!") The established organizations are so large and unresponsive. There are layers of decision makers, and sometimes you disagree with the result. Also, working for a large organization entails responsibilities that are often boring and tedious (knocking on doors, fundraising, making phone calls, attending boring meetings).

But third-party organizations, like the Green Party or even local grassroots groups, have their own structures and internal politics too. I've been involved in several grassroots groups. The internal politics are vicious. There's little agreement about policy or tactics. Often the groups self-destruct. Coordinating progressives is like herding cats -- trite but true.

If progressives work outside of any organization, then that just divides the Left and disempowers all progressives.

Ideally, there'd be a way for progressives to be empowered nationally, locally, and individually. These goals are difficult to achieve, since national empowerment often implies silencing of local and individual dissent.

This proposal doesn't directly address these large issues. Instead it concentrates on a small, achievable goal: getting local progressives to coordinate their web presence.

In any case, while I will continue to work within the Democratic Party -- hoping to push it Leftward -- I also strongly support working with smaller, more nimble groups. Many of the best ideas and most honest analyses arise from groups outside the Democratic Party. So, when I say "progressive coordination", I mean "coordination in an infrastructure parallel to and to the Left of the Democratic Party."

## ***Related initiatives***

A great success story for progressive coordination are Colorado's <http://progressnow.org> and [Colorado Progressive Coalition](#). Their many [accomplishments](#) are shining examples of what coordination can achieve. The reason for success in Colorado was desperation: conservatives had been highly successful at taking over government, and the crisis forced progressives to coordinate. The situation in Washington State is not dire, so progressives haven't been forced to act smart.

In 2004 Gideo Rosenblatt of ONE/Northwest wrote a proposal for coordinating activism within the environmental movement of the Pacific Northwest:  
<http://www.onenw.org/toolkit/movement-as-network>.

## ***The proposals***

(1) Progressives will convene one or more summit meetings to discuss coordination. After brief speeches, progressive leaders and activists can engage in a moderated panel discussion, followed by questions and answers.

(2) A non-partisan, neutral, "inter-denominational" progressive website will be created to provide a single source of news and direction. The various progressive groups will contribute content to the website. Management and editing of the website will be a shared task, perhaps using the model of a board of directors supervising an executive manager.

Coalition partners would not lose their separate identities. The availability of a shared website will encourage broad participation and prevent the power-grabbing and bruised egos that occur when private owners try to monopolize media control.

A desirable goal of the summit meeting would be to organize such a website ("The Progressive Gateway"), perhaps utilizing existing websites such as WashBlog, <http://horsesass.org/>, <http://fusewashington.org/>, or <http://nwprogressive.org/>.

The third and fourth proposals are a bit more ambitious.

(3) Progressives will utilize their concentrated power to contact local media outlets (newspapers, radio, TV) and arrange regular or occasional columns/features of high quality material written and co-produced by coalition members. The presence of opinionated, high quality material would attract readers and earn respect. The media outlets may require that our material appear alongside material submitted by conservatives. Longer term, progressives will develop a viable alternative media.

(4) Coalition members will agree to cooperate on each others' events and initiatives, by writing letters, making phone calls, appearing at meetings and rallies, raising funds, etc.

If conservatives can coordinate, why can't progressives? National health insurance, Social Security, community radio stations, union coalitions, and multi-national corporations all effectively utilize shared ownership. Shared ownership can work. For a coalition of progressives, it makes sense.

## **Notes**

This proposal is both ambitious and incremental. It's ambitious because progressives may be constitutionally averse to cooperating (irony of ironies! -- isn't progressivism all about cooperating and working for the common good?). It's incremental because the point of the shared website is *not* that progressives will agree on everything and coordinate all their efforts. The point is just that progressives will begin talking to each other and concentrating their information flow. Literally, the point is to bring progressives onto the same (web) page. At the first stage, progressives need only cooperate to the extent that they agree to sit at the same virtual table and listen to each other speak. Once progressives are all on the same page, there is hope that they can begin the real task of coordinating their message to the public and their influence on policy makers.

The challenge is to balance bottom-up and top-down information flow. (Think of the analogy between a market-driven economy and an economy controlled by the state. Neither unbridled capitalism nor dictatorial state control is practical or ethical.) Coordination implies that multiple groups and individuals will combine their efforts and voices and agree to a shared vision.

The shared ownership model of the website is crucial for preventing in-fighting. But even with this proposal, there will be winners and losers. It's likely that an existing website will be

chosen as the shared progressive portal, and the only way this proposal will succeed is if a critical mass of supporters emerges so that the momentum is irresistible and the losers are forced to join in. (That critical mass is probably not difficult to achieve, especially if money is available to back up the decision.) Also, not everyone can get their views published. Still, it's important that the directors who are the legal owners of the website set rules to ensure that various voices are heard and that no single individual or group monopolizes the reins of power. Such rules will make it easier for people to go along with the decision.

It may be difficult or impossible to get the *national* organizers of progressive groups (e.g., MoveOn, Sierra Club, and NARAL) to grant official support for this proposal. Such support is desirable but not necessary.

Don Smith (206-819-5965)  
[ThinkerFeeler@yahoo.com](mailto:ThinkerFeeler@yahoo.com)

Three guest editorials that are relevant:

[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/333117\\_moveon26.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/333117_moveon26.html) (on the MoveOn controversy)

[http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/opinion/2004031885\\_satrd24.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/opinion/2004031885_satrd24.html) (on media reform)

[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/337917\\_firstperson05.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/337917_firstperson05.html) (on impeachment)