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## Working Across Organizational Lines: Grassroots and Grasstops Tensions and Possibilities

Corrie Grosse

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [cgrosse@csbsju.edu](mailto:cgrosse@csbsju.edu)

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**Working Across Organizational Lines:  
Grassroots and Grasstops Tensions and Possibilities<sup>1</sup>**

**Corrie Grosse**

**College of St. Benedict & St. John's University**

*The climate justice movement is increasingly stressing the importance of building broad-based coalitions for addressing climate change. Two important elements in these coalitions are grassroots and grasstops organizations. The former bring creativity and flexibility to coalitions whereas the latter bring resources, staff, and specialized expertise. Drawing on 106 in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Idaho and California, this chapter from the book *Working Across Lines: Resisting Extreme Energy Extraction* (University of California Press, 2022) analyzes how grassroots and grasstops organizations work to build effective coalitions. Contributing to emergent theory on social movement coalitions, I argue that organizational form, particularly nonprofit's responsibilities to fulfill mission statements and secure funding, as well as strategic, tactical, and motivational divergences, challenge activists' efforts to build coalitions between these elements of the movement. To bridge these divides, activists stress the importance of welcoming new ideas, giving attribution, and centering, rather than marginalizing uncompromising demands for radical systems-changing actions. Relationships of trust, which activists construct through "relational organizing," facilitate these methods for creating a united front in the climate justice movement. In a context where climate science demands urgent and large-scale social change to avert catastrophic temperature rise, understanding the challenges that anti-extraction coalition builders face, and the ways they strive to overcome these challenges, advances social movements' capacity for securing socially and environmentally just societies.*

*Keywords:* climate justice, grassroots, coalitions, social movements, extraction

**Introduction**

"The kind of change you're talking about—anything feasible within the current political system—really won't do us any good."

– Tim DeChristopher, grassroots activist (quoted in Stephenson, 2015, p. 199)

If the utility needs to think that they are going to build a gas plant in ten years in order to [shutter their coal plant], I'm not gonna like jump up and down and light my hair on fire, because I know I'm going to have like ten more bites at the apple to shut down that gas plant—but what I need today is the commitment to close coal.

– Ben Otto, Idaho Conservation League Energy Associate, Boise, Idaho, Interview

Movements for social change have long debated the utility of working within existing systems. They have struggled over whether to work for reform or revolution. Activists discuss this question within the groups that I worked with. One central characteristic that illuminates the divide over this question is that of organizational form—the type of organization an activist belongs to. In this chapter, I examine tensions between grassroots and grasstops organizations.

Grasstops organizations, as I use the term, are nonprofit organizations that are structured in hierarchical ways in which a few people make decisions and direct volunteers to follow mission statements. They typically focus much energy on fundraising to support staff and, in some cases,

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have dues-paying members. In my research, activists who work for grasstops organizations are much more pragmatic<sup>2</sup>, in the sense of doing what is practical within existing systems, than grassroots activists. As employees of longstanding organizations with donors, mission statements, and legacies, they tend to be more invested in status quo organizing. They “accept the climate science, but fail to calibrate their response to the challenge this poses” (Rosewarne, Goodman, & Pearse, 2014, p. 5). This type of organizing stresses how much there is to lose, emphasizes incremental legal and regulatory change, and depends on having a seat at the table with decision makers and industry. It is wedded to the current system, capitalism, and does not typically look beyond this system to imagine a post-capitalist world.

The grassroots volunteer activists within these same communities tend not to feel adequately supported by these larger, better-resourced organizations—a common experience of environmental justice activists (Cable, Mix, & Hastings, 2005). In fact, they often feel excluded and isolated. More of them are working to imagine and enact what Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse (2014) call a “realistic politics of climate change, one that meets the challenge of climate science in ways that cannot be dismissed” (p. 6). These authors argue that a realistic politics of climate change is one that works outside conventional politics, questions the status quo, and prioritizes system change. Though activists who work in this way are perceived as radical, Rosewarne, Goodman and Pearse point out that they, in fact, “pragmatically apprehend the challenge and seek to produce responses that have a realistic chance of delivering climate stability” (p. 5). This surprising divide, even among people who all consider themselves environmentalists or activists, resonates with Smith’s thesis: “Just as we must not presume that we cannot work with unlikely allies, we must not presume that we should always work with people who are perceived to be our likely allies” (2008, p. 200).

This chapter analyzes the relationship between grassroots and grasstops organizations that I see as acting within, to varying degrees, the climate justice movement in Santa Barbara and Idaho. The climate justice movement works to achieve the twin goals of social justice and a livable world, recognizing that one cannot be achieved without the other. It is more explicitly justice oriented than the environmental movement and more globally oriented—because of the global scale of climate change—than the environmental justice movement. What people view as possible, the level of trust required to work together, and how people perceive different messages and strategies are some of the primary tensions between these grassroots and grasstops sectors of the movement. Members of grasstops organizations tend to take actions *because* they are feasible within the current policies system. Ben Otto, in the opening excerpt, for example, does what he thinks is politically feasible—accepting plans for a natural gas power plant in order to close a coal plant. This is much different from climate justice campaigns to keep *all* fossil fuels in the ground. Actions like Ben’s are actions that DeChristopher and other grassroots activists see as “not doing us any good.” While there are examples of grassroots and grasstops working together, from the perspectives of activists in both sectors, these collaborations can prove more draining than beneficial. If the movement is to talk and work across lines, the dividing lines between grassroots and grasstops must be more permeable. A broad-based and powerful movement requires nothing less.

My writing in this chapter, as in the rest of the book, is informed by my standpoint as a grassroots activist. Much of the motivation for this research, and the social capital that made it possible, is

based in my relationships with grassroots activists and organizations. Combined with my biography, these relationships make me an optimist about people's capacity to work together and someone who believes that achieving climate justice requires a radically different form of social organization. I do not see my vision of "success" within capitalism. In line with Rosewarne et al. (2014), I do not think capitalism is "pragmatic" in light of climate science. I also, however, recognize that legislative and political wins today, within established systems, can decrease pollution, protect communities, and award reparations to those who are suffering. I know from experience that personal environmental and social justice actions can serve as springboards for individuals to join and make efforts for systematic change. These daily actions can be small wins and progress to nourish the soul along a difficult and bleak road of system change. In sum, I acknowledge that individuals have overlapping and contradictory layers of change-making beliefs and think most people who join or work for a grassroots or grasstops organization have good intentions. Activists' dreams, choices, and reasoning are more complex than the binary characterization grassroots/grasstops suggests. I make this distinction to highlight points of divergence. Understanding these points as roots of tension, will, I hope, enable activists on both sides to transform these tensions from break points between their organizations, to bridges.

### **Context**

The communities where I conducted research varied widely in terms of prevalence and strength of nonprofit, or grasstops, organizations. Before diving into the analysis, I therefore provide a snapshot of the nonprofit organizations with which interviewees worked and consider how this study relates to recent work on grassroots/grasstops divides.

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, Santa Barbara County had 809 nonprofits and 68 environmental nonprofits in 2013. There were 20.12 organizations per 10,000 persons and 1.69 environmental organizations per 10,000 persons. The *city* of Santa Barbara had 42 of those environmental nonprofits in 2013, 4.56 per 10,000 persons. This demonstrates just how concentrated environmentalism is in southern Santa Barbara County. When looking at all nonprofits, organizations dedicated to any issue, the number for the city of Santa Barbara jumps to 473 organizations, 51.30 per 10,000 persons, with per capita expenses of \$23,781—highlighting the wealth dedicated to philanthropy in the community. In 2000, 39.60 percent of households with people over twenty-five years old had college degrees.

Idaho field sites varied tremendously in nonprofit concentration. The city of Boise, which houses the offices of the largest environmental groups in the state, had 36 environmental organizations, 1.94 organizations per 10,000 persons, in 2013. They had \$106 per capita expenses. Payette County, where all natural gas production was occurring as of 2017, just one hour west of Boise, had zero environmental organizations. In the City of Fruitland, where forced pooling within Payette County is concentrated, only 8.23 percent of households with people over twenty-five have a college degree (in 2000). In contrast, the city of Sandpoint, Idaho, where oil trains bottleneck on their way to the West Coast, had 4 environmental organizations, which comes out to 5.79 per 10,000 persons. Their expenses were \$80 per capita. When considering all nonprofit organizations, the city of Sandpoint has 46! This means there are 66.54 organizations per 10,000 persons with per capita expenses of \$9,250. The percent of households over twenty-five years old with a college degree was 23.38 in 2000. This, as in Santa Barbara, illustrates a high level of social and financial

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capital in the area, and according to interviewees, is tied to both cities' quality as a destination for retirees. These are the contexts of the grassroots/grasstops tensions that I examine in this chapter. Eleven California interviewees and thirteen Idaho interviewees had worked or currently worked as paid staff for a nonprofit or political organization. In Idaho, these organizations included the Idaho Sierra Club, Idaho Conservation League, Snake River Alliance, Conservation Voters for Idaho, Advocates for the West, Lake Pend Oreille Water Keeper, Model Forest Policy Program, Friends of the Clearwater, and Friends of the Earth. In California, these organizations included the Environmental Defense Center, Community Environmental Council, Democratic Party of Santa Barbara, California Student Sustainability Coalition, Central Coast United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), Center on Race Poverty and the Environment, and Food and Water Watch.

In both settings, I interviewed current, past, and future employees of what community members considered the “big greens” or “old guard enviros”—what I call grasstops organizations throughout this chapter. The vast majority of interviewees, however, were volunteer members of grassroots organizations. Though these organizations were sometimes nonprofits, I differentiate them from grasstops organizations because they tend to be younger, typically do not have dues-paying members, and have fluid leadership structures. For these reasons, they are less concerned, or not at all concerned, with convincing boards, raising money, and following mission statements—all aspects of nonprofits that interviewees critiqued. Many of these interviewees were involved in multiple organizations and sometimes sat on the boards of the big green groups.

Like Cable, Mix, and Hastings (2005), I highlight the perspectives of grassroots activists in grassroots/grasstops coalitions. Unlike these authors, I hold out hope for the possibility of collaboration between what they call “professional environmentalists” and the grassroots. I find that despite their differences and critiques of each other's strategies and tactics, members of each organization type recognize the importance of working together, working across lines of grassroots and grasstops. Cable, Mix, and Hastings (2005) focus on the environmental justice movement, arguing that class and race differences account for tensions between grassroots environmental justice activists and professional environmentalists. While most activists in my research do not fit squarely into what these authors consider the environmental justice movement, or the anti-toxics movement, neither are they “professional environmentalists.” That interviewees do not fit into these three categories of the environmental movement that Cable, Mix and Hastings (2005) describe raises questions about how the environmental movement has changed in the last ten years.

My research illustrates how climate change and the increase in and geographical dispersal of extreme energy extraction have altered the terrain of the movement. As Klein (2014) argues, a dispersed mobilization of unlikely collaborators, what she calls “blockadia,” has emerged. Therefore, the stark inequalities in race and class that Cable, Mix, and Hastings (2005) identify as blocks to grassroots and big green collaboration are changing in some areas. Sacrifice zones are more likely than ever to be located near educated, middle-class, and white communities—the homes of many environmental professionals. For the most part, my research analyzes grassroots/grasstops collaborations among people with similar race and class locations. Race and class therefore inform, but do not explain, the tensions they experience.<sup>3</sup> Even without racial and class divides, there can be tensions between the grassroots and grasstops.

The analysis in this chapter contains two sections. The first outlines the core divide among these sectors of the movement—the value they place on pragmatism. The second describes ways people try to overcome this divide.

### **Pragmatism**

Like so many ideas in the realm of resistance to extreme energy extraction that I write about, such as political labels (see chapter 3 and 4) and success (see later in this chapter), activists contest the meaning of pragmatism.

### ***Organizational Form***

The organizational form within which activists work informs their understanding of what is practical, and what is not. Organizations with paid staff are constrained by the need to fundraise. This need puts them in direct competition with other organizations in the community. To differentiate themselves in the hopes of winning over supporters, they create narrow mission statements and then, because of the organizational weight that depends on securing funding and the approval of the board, feel compelled to follow those missions. Therefore, these grassroots organizations operate in silos. Becca Claassen had experience with a variety of organizational forms and coalitions. She co-founded 350 Santa Barbara as a horizontal grassroots group, then partnered with Santa Barbara's old guard environmental organizations and the Santa Barbara Democratic Party, and finally, worked for Food and Water Watch, a national organization. She summarized the tensions that result from organizational forms:

There's something called the nonprofit industrial complex [...] this phenomenon where you have nonprofits who are obligated to do fundraising in order to fund their work. [...] [T]o prove to donors that they are being successful, they often have to have very incremental small goals, narrow missions—and [they] don't like to stray from that. [...] It creates this disadvantage for people who want to create change. A, [nonprofits] can't get political unless they have a C4 component<sup>4</sup>, which very few nonprofits do. And then B, it kind of puts them at odds with other organizations, like highly competitive.

In the context of Santa Barbara, where so many nonprofits were competing for the same donor base, it was difficult to break out of these conventions. In her next sentence, Becca estimated the number of nonprofits in Santa Barbara at twelve hundred. While inflated, this number demonstrates how salient competition is in Becca's assessment of the organizing climate.

According to interviewee Ben Otto, energy associate at the Idaho Conservation League (ICL), a challenge for this member- and dues-dependent organizational form is that fewer and fewer young adults are "joining" organizations. Ben saw this as one explanation for the older demographics of ICL's members. As Ben explained,

So the classic environmental group membership is people fifty, sixty, seventy years old. [...] They kind of let us do our own thing and if they like one issue, they are gonna become members of the whole organization and support everything. And they will [...] write a letter to the editor, that kind of thing. And that's good [...] but how do we attract younger folks who [...] are not joiners of a group writ large? In my impression, they tend to be more motivated by individual issues. [...] They're not going to be a member of the organization

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giving us thirty bucks a month, but if we find an issue they are really fired up about, then they'll [...] get super involved, and be very sophisticated about it, turn out their friends. [...] But it's a very different kind of care and feeding of your membership depending on where they are in age.

Thus, understanding how to attract people through issues, rather than through a mission or member identity, is particularly important if organizations are to gain long-term support from younger generations. Grassroots activist Borg Hendrickson echoed Ben's assessment. She thought motivating people by focusing on the issues, rather than on organizations, is key for effective organizing. To accomplish her goals, she had formed a loose network, rather than an organization.

Being a paid staff member like Ben, however, can create distance between volunteers and oneself, challenging staff's ability to connect with volunteers. Becca Claassen, who had always motivated people by being a model organizer who did everything and said yes to everything, found that in her new role, when I interviewed her, as paid staff who supervises volunteers, she could no longer say yes to everything. This limited her ability to motivate others through example. Borg Hendrickson's reflections on effective communications supported this point about distance. Borg felt that formal organizations—she organized as an individual member of a network involving big greens and grassroots groups—were more constrained in their communication. They have “this little format to it [and] have to have board approval for everything.” As a grassroots activist, she was personal in her communication to supporters, and in return, people took the initiative to share important information with her. “My communications with people are me talking to you, so I think, that's part of why people felt so free to just ‘Borg! look at this!’—felt so free to just contact us one-on-one, with a quick phone call or email. I think because there's probably something about my emails that isn't quite the same as an organization's emails.”

There was also a sense that the staff role could detract from the joy of organizing, both for the staff person and volunteers. Emily Williams worked for the California Sustainability Coalition but decided that she ultimately wanted to do organizing on the side, rather than as a paid position. She did not like the power dynamics of paid organizing. Echoing Becca Claassen, she disliked that there was the “nonprofit industrial complex,” where campaigns could be used as a selling point to funders. She also felt there was a “weird” power dynamic of being one of the few paid people working alongside volunteers. Ultimately, she concluded that there was a place for paid organizers, but that they should be “supporting or maintaining, but perhaps not leading, the fight.” Kyle Fischler thought that making organizing a career would contribute to loss of “some of the draw and enjoyment you get out of it.”

As a volunteer, Miranda O'Mahoney highlighted how working with paid organizers could detract from the joy of organizing because volunteers could become less invested and could be assigned tasks that did not inspire them. After being an activist in multiple student groups, Miranda had worked long hours as a volunteer on the Measure P campaign under supervision by paid staff. She felt tired after the Measure P campaign, where she had little responsibility beyond assigned tasks. She explained, “I don't think that we really reached them [the majority of Santa Barbara residents] very well, um, I don't know how we would have either, but *that's up to the paid organizers to think about* [small laugh]” (my emphasis). In this statement, she illustrates how she gave up some ownership of the campaign since there were paid organizers. As she went on to describe going

door to door, it was clear that her description lacked luster when compared to her descriptions of the creative events she participated in with student groups. I asked Miranda if she had noticed a difference in organizing experiences with paid campaigners and grassroots organizers and explained how in the earlier grassroots-led phase of the Measure P campaign, which Miranda had not participated in, the campaign was more horizontal. “Before we [the Measure P campaign] had paid organizers,” I said, “we [students] all felt important and valued, like we could be leaders in however capacity we wanted to be.” Miranda “did not feel like that.” I described my own alienation from the Measure P campaign after it became hierarchical, and how I preferred grassroots volunteering because “when everybody’s a volunteer, everyone gives what they can, and that’s really awesome that they are giving anything.” This resonated with Miranda, who replied, “That’s kind of what I was trying to get at, like with everybody giving what they can [...] *if you are doing what you are best at, and you are giving that, and you love it, then it’s like the best situation*” (my emphasis). Hierarchical campaigns with preestablished strategies can forestall possibilities for volunteers doing what they love.

Being a paid staff member also comes with a level of comfort that some grassroots activists yearn for and others critique for affecting one’s capacity to be radical. On the comfort side, interviewees mentioned that they could not justify spending too much time organizing, “since it’s not currently a paid gig,” as Kyle Fischler explained. Helen Yost, who lived in a van full of Wild Idaho Rising Tide campaign materials during this research, yet had pursued a PhD, illustrated both views. She had wanted to earn a living from being an organizer. Yet, since Friends of the Clearwater fired her, she had dedicated herself to the grassroots group Wild Idaho Rising Tide, whose supporters occasionally donated enough money to pay for an office. Helen had become very critical of comfort:

You sort of just got to throw reason out the window because reason has more or less been co-opted by government and industry, and you just sort of have to follow your heart and say, “Well [...] I don’t know how I’m going to pay the rent. [...] I don’t know if I will ever be able to talk people into doing hard-core activism.” [...] You just say, “Fuck it, I’m going to do this, and I don’t really care about anything beyond that”—which is also very freeing because I just sort of say fuck money, fuck a home, fuck prestige, what people think about me, any kind of normalcy.

Helen rejected most elements of comfort that comprise the average American and environmental professional lifestyle. As she explained, “I like to call America the place where you can have whatever you want but nothing that you need because everything you need is being destroyed by what everybody wants.” She was highly suspicious of the reasoning behind grassroots tactics and wished she could inspire more people to engage in direct action. As she said, why do anything reasonable if reason was coopted by government and industry?

This rejection of comfort resonated with Cass Davis’s journey as an activist. Unlike Helen, Cass came from a working-class family in an Idaho sacrifice zone—the Silver Valley. In the 1970s in the Silver Valley, Bunker Hill lead smelter and zinc plant decided to pay fines rather than fix their pollution control system, which had been damaged in a fire. In the years following the fire, local children’s lead levels averaged fifty micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood; the Center for Disease Control considers five micrograms high enough to warrant concern (Christian, 2016).



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Cass struggled with disabilities that he linked to lead poisoning and so did not have a steady job. He connected the comfort of having a paid environmental job to tame tactical choices: “I would like to say, if I had been able to [...] finish college and get multiple degrees that I would still be crazy enough to break laws in order to disrupt what was happening [climate change], but maybe I wouldn’t. Who knows? Maybe if I was comfortable making \$40,000, \$50,000 a year, doing great things for environmental groups [...] I would be happy as hell and kind of trying to hide from that whole extinction trip and just being comfortable.” Helen and Cass were the two interviewees who most embodied an anti-capitalist lifestyle. Making money from being an activist, then, was antithetical to their philosophies on life. While their contrast to someone who works as a “professional environmentalist” is extreme, it highlights some of the central divergences between professional and grassroots activists. The biggest one is trust in the status quo, which determines what activists view as pragmatic. Scholars have found more distrust of government and the corporate class among anti-toxics activists—typically grassroots—than among professional environmentalists (Brown & Mikkelsen, 1990; Cable & Cable, 1995; Krauss, 1989).

Grasstops activists, who make a living from organizing, are more attached to the status quo because it gives them stability. They are wedded to a form of democracy that relies on certain types of policy models and regulatory frames that allow some change, but do not ultimately threaten their jobs or retirement. This is not to say that grassroots activists are not also concerned with stability and restricted by it. Jeannie McHale explained that it was hard to “have the level of activity that begins to match the level of injustice.” Unlike Helen, whom Jeannie saw “going full tilt,” Jeannie, a professor, felt “held hostage by the very quality of life that the things that we protest make possible.” She was not willing to make the sacrifices that Helen made. Unlike grasstops activists, however, navigating status quo political and legal infrastructures as a primary method of enacting environmental change was not the entirety of Jeannie’s job. Not being embedded in and dependent on these structures made it easier to imagine alternatives.

One caveat to this is that groups that have been historically marginalized, like the Nez Perce Tribe, depend on resources from the government, from the status quo. Paulette Smith, who works for the Tribe, explained how “it’s really hard for the Nez Perce Tribe to stand up and say, ‘we oppose this, or we oppose that’ without stepping on somebody’s toes that has just given us hundreds of thousands of dollars to do this project.” Paulette understood what is at stake then, when the Tribe, as an organization, is hesitant to take a stance. Money derived from the very system that has systematically targeted the Nez Perce and their way of life is critical to services that people depend on. This is where Paulette felt that grassroots groups could make a difference: “we [grassroots] can speak for the people that can’t, and that’s our leaders; that’s our lawyers.” On the other hand, however, there was a line where standing up for justice was necessary. When some members of the Tribe questioned protesting against the megaloads because they thought it was against the law (see chapter 7 for an account of the protest), Paulette took a stance. “As a Native,” Paulette explained, blocking the highway was

not against the law. What they [oil companies] are doing to us is against the law, and always will be. And that goes down to my core, to the pit of my heart, that’s the difference between that sort of law, non-Native law, and our law. [...] Treaties were always broken, promises aren’t promises, we all know that. And so it’s walking a fine line to see who within our community, who within our tribal people will jump on board, because they fear retaliation,

that's the reality of it. They think that they will be impacted in a negative way and I don't blame them, but at this point in time in my life, I don't care.

Paulette's excerpt illustrates how injustice is embedded in the systems that grasstops, or tribal governments, work within. Her account points to the need to reveal these injustices and stand against them, while also supporting people and organizations whose social position makes resistance outside of these systems difficult or dangerous.

In sum, among grassroots activists and some professional organizers, there was a sense that formal organizations and nonprofit status created many constraints. It made groups less flexible and their interaction with volunteers more impersonal, hierarchical, and instrumental. Rather than moving from issue to issue and inspiring people along the way, grasstops organizations had to consider how issues fit their mission statements and, in Kelsey's view, had to maintain levels of control over campaigns that were not conducive to creating genuine collaborations. They had to think about building membership *in order* to raise money. For these reasons, in part, Kelsey was leaving her job as executive director of a nonprofit in Idaho. In leaving her organization, she hoped to be more able to let "go of attachments to what [an event] is going to be."

Kelsey's perspective on the importance of letting go of control over events developed while organizing the 2015 Idaho Climate Rally. During this effort, Kelsey realized, "If I want everybody to help, help me with my project, it can't be my project, like they have to want to help me and do it because it feels good for them, not because I am making them." Relinquishing control over an event went against the structure of nonprofits. Kelsey explained, "I don't think that really resonates well for organizations that are managing a huge budget, and managing staff, and fulfilling their mission, and giving grants deliverables. [...] There has to be more control over the message and over the people."

Another restricting feature of working for a nonprofit was that it inhibited freedom of expression. Kelsey said that nonprofit staff, and especially executive directors of nonprofits, were always concerned about how others would view their opinion: "You say a sentence and you have to think about, 'What might the legislature say about that? Or, if I was quoted in the paper making that sentence, what would the consequences be? Would I say that to my major donors?' You're just so worried about saying the perfect thing that you hold back and I don't think that's what the world needs right now." Kelsey's critique of grasstops organizations wanting to control everything resonated with grassroots activists. That she had learned, while in the role of nonprofit staff, that this was not an effective way to collaborate with people is a hopeful sign of people's capacity to change their strategies. Yet Kelsey did not feel she could collaborate with people in the way she desired while working for an organization—that is why she was starting a new career. The organizational form of grasstops makes it difficult for even the most well-intentioned staffers to change the organization's approach.

### ***Strategic Divergence: "Giving Up the Farm"***

Understandings of pragmatism are also rooted in groups' strategies, tactics, and motivations—the means they employ and ends they seek. More often than not, the grassroots organizations in my research sought an end to fossil fuel projects. Ending specific projects was part of a larger strategy of keeping fossil fuels in the ground to avert catastrophic climate change. Other goals like

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accountability and integrity or climate justice, though different, would amount to the same outcome if achieved. Grassroots goals tend to be more focused on global or widespread issues than those of grasstops.

Many of the grasstops organizations focused on the local, and in particular, the local environment. *Protecting* that environment was a common theme, setting these organizations' agendas as defensive, rather than offensive, from the beginning.<sup>5</sup> Environment tended to be interpreted in a restrictive manner, as the nonhuman environment.

A focus on protection and preservation is linked to maintaining the status quo. A failure to define which status quo should be protected can make this mission seem counterintuitive. The Idaho Conservation League's vision, developed in 1973, can be interpreted as being particularly dedicated to the status quo: "Keep Idaho *Idaho*." For whom? Taken out of context of the environmental mission of the organization, this vision is particularly problematic. Idaho in the 1970s, the context of the organization's founding, was home to the white supremacist group Aryan Nation, prison riots over living conditions, and the displacement of thousands of people following the collapse of the Teton Dam. In environmental terms, the 70s were the era of the lead poisoning of children in the Silver Valley and the continued development of Idaho's nuclear industry, which, since the 1950s, had injected radioactive waste into the Snake River Plain aquifer (USGS, 2008). In 1980, the Nez Perce had to protest to demand their tribal treaty rights to fish salmon on Rapid River (see Johnson, 2005). Keeping Idaho *Idaho*, then, necessitates clarification about what should and should not stay as part of Idaho. It is an ironic vision for a group, that, like others, grassroots activists often critique for being too invested in the status quo of organizing and regulatory infrastructures.

Grasstops organizations' theories of change—their theories of how the world changes—typically prioritize legal and regulatory change, which tends to be slow and incremental, a politics that grassroots see as inadequate to climate science (see also Rosewarne et al., 2014). Legal and regulatory means of change require that groups have "a seat at the table" with decision makers and industry groups. This, in turn, requires that groups maintain credibility with politicians. Investment in this theory of change informs professional environmentalists' views of outspoken grassroots activists as people "lighting their hair on fire." It can lead professional environmentalists to become over-invested in regulation and lose sight of radical vision. The results can be disastrous. As Montrie (2003) documents in the case of Appalachia, grasstops' devotion to regulation, and their ability to convince the grassroots to back this strategy, rather than one of abolition, led to policy that failed to mitigate the environmental effects of coal strip mining, and paved the way for the mountain-top removal mining technique.

In Santa Barbara, Becca saw regulation leading to a sense of false security among the grasstops and politicians. "It's like, not only does [asking for regulation] make the people who are asking for actual justice seem marginal and extreme, it divides us. It gives elected officials in power ... the easy way out." To underline her point, Becca recounted a story about a woman she met while trying to build organizing relationships in her community—Becca was an adept relational organizer. At a League of Women Voter's meeting where they were discussing the risks of fracking, Becca advocated for a ban, arguing that fracking cannot be done safely. An elderly woman countered her view, saying, "Well, no, if you look at offshore drilling, there were those of

us who were saying we needed to push for a ban you know forty years ago, but [...] we realized that we could just achieve regulations, and now offshore drilling is happening safely all around the world.” Becca was horrified that the woman was “patting herself on the back” about this. The BP oil spill had just wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast, which Becca saw as evidence that offshore drilling could not happen safely. In Becca’s view, there was a big difference between achieving regulations and achieving a livable planet.

Furthermore, Becca explained, regulations can give the industry more credibility and legitimacy. Even though Santa Barbara County was “the most regulated on paper” with regard to oil extraction, an oil industry insider had told her that oil companies had gotten away with more “environmental atrocities” in Santa Barbara than in other communities. Becca cautioned: “We constantly have to be thinking, what are we asking for, and is it actually going to get us closer to the ultimate win? Or, is it just going to [...] be an incremental step that we can feel good about and actually get the industry [...] their foot, further in the door and be a false sense of security for the public?” Forty years ago, in the era of the elderly woman whom Becca encountered, many of the environmental organizations in Santa Barbara formed in response to the 1969 oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel. Regulation was the eventual outcome of public outcry over the spill. It was not, however, what the public originally wanted, as Molotch (1970) argues. Post-spill, Santa Barbarans had faith in the accountability of the political system, emboldened by elected leaders’ proposals for drilling bans. Molotch concluded his analysis at the time with hope that some Santa Barbarans “had come to view power in America more intellectually, more analytically, more sociologically—more radically—than they did before” (p. 142). The bans that Santa Barbarans hoped for never came to fruition. From the perspectives of the more radical Santa Barbara interviewees, the Santa Barbara environmental community instead became regulators—regulators in need of a good shake-up, a topic I discuss in the following pages.

A final key point from Becca’s analysis is that of regulatory capture, “the process through which regulated monopolies end up manipulating the state agencies that are supposed to control them” (Dal Bó, 2006, p. 203). In her view, establishing regulations goes in the wrong direction because it creates a governmental apparatus with employees that depend on oil production, as she argued was the case in Santa Barbara.

Santa Barbara’s Energy division, with twelve staff in 2016, was indeed dependent on industry. The County of Santa Barbara (2013) issued a brochure seeking an Energy and Minerals Division manager explaining that, “the division is funded *entirely* through permitting revenues from oil, gas, and mining projects. Increased oil and gas production activity in our County is likely given current trends and *will result in the division expanding* to manage that growth” (my emphasis). Growth of oil is good from an organizational view because it assures the continuation of the division.

Near the time when I interviewed Becca in 2016, Los Angeles was also expanding its oil and gas regulatory apparatus. The city appointed an oil administrator after not having had one for a long time. They created an office of Petroleum and Natural Gas Administration and Safety for the administrator to oversee. While Becca recognized that Los Angeles “hadn’t had the oversight they needed,” she felt like installing an administrator, rather than, for example, seeking to transition to renewable energy, was a “step in the wrong direction.” It was creating more social and political

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infrastructure to support oil in a context where activists advocated dismantling fossil fuel infrastructure.

Idaho's Oil and Gas Conservation Commission is another example of regulatory capture. One of the Commission's goals for 2017–2018 was to develop policies that “foster, encourage and promote the development, production and conservation of oil and gas resources” (Idaho Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, 2016). The agency's definition of “conservation” has been used to justify the need for unitization of land. Unitization, or “forced pooling,” works to enlarge the area of gas that is extracted “to prevent waste.” Forced pooling is a method whereby an oil and gas company can ask a state to force a certain percentage of mineral rights owners in a certain area or “pool” to lease their mineral rights, against their will, if a certain percentage of other mineral rights owners have agreed. In Idaho, this threshold for integration is 55 percent. This means owners of 45 percent of minerals have no choice over whether they want extraction to occur beneath their homes. People who do not own minerals have no say at any point. The bottom line, which resonates with the general grassroots distrust of government, is that regulators who allow policies like forced pooling are not people that grassroots activists want to work with.

This distrust of government directly contrasts with most nonprofit approaches. Linda Krop, chief counsel for the Environmental Defense Center in Santa Barbara, typically met with agency staff and counsel before beginning ballot measure campaigns. While agency staff cannot take a side on a measure, Linda explained that they can identify elements of the measure that they find unclear or of concern, which allows ballot measure proponents to address these before beginning their campaign. To Linda and other activists' dismay, the County played a large role in damaging the Measure P campaign when it published a report by County staff with incorrect information. Linda explained: “It really hurt us, because it wasn't just the oil companies against the environmentalists or the community. It was the oil industry supported by the County disagreeing with us.” In Linda's view, better preparation and working with the government might have produced a different outcome. Activists like Becca, however, have less optimistic views about winning regulators' support. As John Foran, who participated as a volunteer in the Measure P effort, said in reply to Linda's assessment: “Maybe the County should have got it right.” Indeed, the assumption that inclusion into the legal system will enable justice has been one of the greatest shortcomings of the environmental justice movement and scholarship (Pellow, 2016, p. 384).

These critiques do not mean that professional environmentalists have bad intentions. Critics of grasstops often temper their words with recognition of nonprofits' good work. As grassroots activist Gary Paudler said, “I'm pretty disdainful of those established organizations. They've certainly done some good stuff, but [...]” Many professional environmentalists were inspired to pursue their careers by a desire to make the world a better place—something that also motivates grassroots activists. And some professional environmentalists retain a radical vision, are deeply invested in justice, and wish that grassroots would, to use a grassroots term, “assume good intentions.” If grassroots assumed the good intentions of professional environmentalists and their organizations, they might be more open to understanding that they employ particular strategies for a reason.

Ben Otto exemplified this stance. A self-described optimist, Ben understood and was committed to environmental and climate justice, preferred that natural gas extraction did not happen in Idaho,

and valued the work of grassroots activists. He wanted them to understand the strategy of professional environmentalists and recognize that it is needed too. Ben explained that his job was about developing relationships with state agencies and utilities and that these relationships informed his communication strategies: “I may be coming across using words that seem more reasonable, or that I’m giving up the farm, or [...] conceding a lot of stuff.” He wanted the grassroots to know, however, that he was not “selling out” or “trying to get a job at the utility.” Rather, he was engaged in a strategy that he felt contributed to grassroots’ capacity to achieve their own goals. “Even if your partner [...] seems to be playing the inside game, it’s for a reason and there’s a strategy, and you need to have both of the things happening in order to get these wins. I have huge respect for the grassroots that show up and say we need to close every single coal plant this year. That’s really important, but that’s not really going to happen.” Ben’s plea to the grassroots aligns with calls by activists to employ diverse strategies and tactics—to “use all the tools in the toolbox,” as Brett Haverstick advised. Embracing diverse tactics has helped social movement coalitions succeed (Beamish & Luebbers, 2009). In reference to his efforts to close coal plants, Ben explained: “That’s something that a diverse conservation community needs to get better at understanding—that shared goal [of closing a coal plant] and being comfortable with slightly different tactics and strategies to get there. Because that’s how we’ll be successful, is the broad coalition.” That Ben felt he needed to explain this to the grassroots, however, reveals a disconnect in communication between the two wings of the movement. Rather than working together behind the scenes and then deploying various strategies or marshalling “dual power,” which the climate justice movement has done in settings like Richmond, California (see LeQuesne, 2019), Ben’s account assumes these strategies are developed and deployed without much conversation across organizational types.

Ben’s perspective ultimately comes back to working to achieve what is practical. As he said, the hardline grassroots call to keep coal in the ground is “not really going to happen.” While he acknowledged the danger of working with agencies and how this collaboration might be interpreted as “conceding” or “selling out,” his work to build relationships with them depended on the assumption that they can be moved to work in the interest of the people. Many grassroots activists have lost all hope in state agencies. A barrier is created when both sides feel the other’s whole approach is “not going to happen,” whether because agencies are too corrupt or because demands are too radical. Having conversations and tempering language to encourage, rather than discount, different visions and demands, or to understand clearly how those demands come together, is key to avoiding the misinterpretations of strategy that Ben described.

### ***Tactical Divergence***

These divergent approaches or strategies have divergent tactics. In simple terms, the more reformist approach asks nicely and works to persuade, whereas the more radical approach attempts to make demands. Both camps are playing a game. They each have strategies and different interpretations of how to win.

The professional approach of working with decision makers requires having a seat at the table and offering plans that will be accepted. In contrast, many grassroots activists’ actions start with the assumption that oil and gas companies are fundamentally nefarious and have the ear of regulators. Alma Hasse, for instance, often worked to understand and counter what she called “the oil and gas playbook.” Part of that playbook is to make activists seem extreme, to appear as people with their

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hair on fire to regulators, the media, and especially to fellow community members and organizations. The playbook utilizes a strategy of divide and conquer, which is common in extraction zones (see Bell, 2016).

The very policies surrounding extraction also incite divisions. Courtney Washburn, executive director of Conservation Voters for Idaho, lamented how regulations for natural gas were developing in Idaho: “It is setting neighbors up to fight with neighbors for years to come because of personal property rights and planning and zoning issues that just went largely unaddressed.” Having strong relationships between and among community members is one way to counter this—something that, as discussed previously, can be challenged by the distance between paid and volunteer activists.

Helen Yost worked to counter industry’s playbook by ensuring activism was unpredictable and caught the fossil fuel industry by surprise. She saw her strategy as playing “hard core psychological warfare,” explaining: “The only way you are going to get them [Big Oil] if you are a rebel, is using all kinds of unknown—to the standard procedure or to the people in control—asymmetrical warfare techniques. You just make it up as you go, you get unpredictable, you get people popping up in God knows where out of the bushes or wherever and it scares the crap out of them [Big Oil], and that’s as it should be.” Activists in Helen’s group, Wild Idaho Rising Tide, and in the network Fighting Goliath “popped up” by monitoring megaloads all over Idaho and Montana. Activists would follow the loads, video their movements, and record their traffic delays. Based on the success of the megaload campaign in Idaho and the rapid success of the signature-gathering campaign for Measure P in Santa Barbara (see chapter 7), an element of surprise serves activists well. Borg Hendrickson described how she and her husband Lin—core members of the Fighting Goliath network that defeated the megaloads—caught Big Oil by surprise in their rural Idaho town: “A lot of what one has to do along the way is be novel and creative and imaginative. [...] You have to do what they [Big Oil] don’t expect.” Lin and Borg, therefore, turned out about one-sixth of their small town—100 out of 650 people—to an informational session for Exxon/Imperial Oil, hosted by the Idaho Transportation Department. Ahead of time, they found out what messages Exxon/Imperial was going to communicate. “When we got to the meeting,” Borg recounted, “We had the truth about every single one of them [the oil company’s points], something they didn’t expect. [...] And they had dubbed this as an information session, not an exchange—we brought our own microphone and speaker [...] that, they didn’t expect. [...] There were a lot of things that we did that were really novel and creative, so that they had no idea how we were gonna hit them at any point in time. And we always hit them with the truth.”

Activists and organizations have little ability to create surprises during regulatory procedures. Regulators, however, often did create surprises. During my fieldwork in southwest Idaho, the Idaho Department of Lands scheduled surprise meetings on very short notice multiple times. This made activism feel like running to put out fires. Sherry Gordon explained, “We just keep [...] taking the opportunities [...] that are thrown at us [laughs]. I don’t mean going out and getting opportunities, like selecting one [laughs], no, you just grapple with the one that got thrown at you.” The megaloads, however, are one example of a surprise regulatory approach by activists, who, according to Natalie Havlina, put together a successful legal challenge in record time. Thus, activists had mixed success getting ahead of the next step in the fossil fuel industry’s playbook.

Grassroots activists extended the playbook analogy to nonprofits as well. Gary Macfarlane worked for Friends of the Clearwater, a group that had only two staff at the time of our interview. Because of this, it shared more similarities with grassroots organizations than large nonprofits. Gary described Friends of the Clearwater as more “feisty” than most big green groups. With the big greens, Gary said, “there’s an effort to cut back room deals with supposedly all interests represented at the table. [...] I think it’s a very anti-democratic effort wrapped up in a nice package called collaboration and working together. [...] We’re not part of that process, and we have been very critical of that.”

Being fed up with the standard procedures of this playbook, what Gary Paudler called “environmental passivism,” inspired activists to form new groups. Groups like 350 Santa Barbara and 350 Idaho attracted activists because they filled a perceived need for a different kind of organization. Max Golding, 350 Santa Barbara’s cofounder, began his climate justice activism when he bought himself a birthday ticket to the Tar Sands Blockade action against the Keystone XL Pipeline in Houston, Texas. While there, he attended trainings on direct action. This experience was the impetus for Max to cofound 350 Santa Barbara in early 2013. He recounted, “Suddenly the gears are ticking in my head, and I was like this is stuff that I could take back to Santa Barbara. There isn’t really anything fiery in Santa Barbara. There’s just this nonprofit, you know, water bottle and shit kind of mentality.” Recycling or not using plastic water bottles is something grassroots activists saw as a first step—personal environmental behavior. They considered it a tame tactic, and most thought that it was not “doing us any good”—that people should focus on political and system change. Thus, to use it to describe nonprofits reveals Max’s disagreement with their tactics and strategies. Cass Davis would agree with Max. Cass did not recycle, something that irked many of his environmentalist friends. His response was, “If you took the time that you took to make sure your recycling bins were in order and going to the recycling center and used that time to cause conflict against the capitalist structure, you’d be doing a lot more.”

Gretchen C., the leader of 350 Idaho, recounted a similar reason for being attracted to 350.org: “[350’s] form of activism is a little bit more like civil disobedience, a little bit more in-your-face compared to a lot of the groups in town [Boise] which are more [...] on the passive side.” Gretchen explained that most groups in Boise, Idaho were unlikely to protest, because their “whole point” as organizations was to get members, or to convince the local utility, Idaho Power, to “maybe” think about projects like community solar. “Rather than force a demand,” Gretchen said, “it’s more like: ‘Let’s make friends with them and try to diplomatically work things out; even if they slam the door in our face, we will still go back with a smile.’” Gretchen hoped that 350 would provide “that side of activism” that the other groups did not have.

Commitment to active protest, creativity, making demands, and public participation defined grassroots tactical decisions. In grassroots organizers’ views, these actions were the most effective ways to counteract the collusion of government and the fossil fuel industry—what most identified as the root of the problems they faced.

### ***Motivational Divergence: Fear of Losing***

Motivations, alongside strategies and tactics, are a final area of divergence that informs decisions about strategy. A fear of losing undergirds the motivations and cautionary approaches taken by grassroots activists. Fear of loss is also tied to length of involvement in the environmental



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movement. Interviewees who were most fearful of loss had a history of securing victories and suffering defeat in the organizations with which they worked. This suffering, perhaps, informed their hesitancy to take actions that they thought would result in loss, or even worse, a roll back in previous wins.

Dave Davis, age sixty-seven, was former executive director of the Community Environmental Council and someone who had a long history of involvement in Santa Barbara's civic life. His perspective illuminated this fear of loss position. Dave and other leaders in Santa Barbara's environmental and political community had a number of reservations about grassroots activists' idea to try to qualify an anti-fracking ballot for the mid-term election in 2014. Once grassroots activists decided to gather signatures, in spite of Dave's and others' reservations, Dave knew that his organization "had to be on the right side" of the issue. He had to figure out how to convince his board to support the campaign. The Community Environmental Council board did not want to support the measure. They thought the measure would fail and that the failure would reinforce power in North Santa Barbara County, where the fossil fuel industry is located. They feared that failure would contribute to oil-friendly conservatives taking a majority of seats on the County Board of Supervisors. Ultimately, Dave said, the board thought, "*We have more to lose than we have to gain*" (my emphasis). Dave's work to convince the board resulted in a split vote of 7–5 to support the initiative. A couple of board members became key donors to the campaign.

Despite this, the underlying sense that there was more to lose than gain was a strong current in Dave's account of Measure P, which did lose (see chapter seven). In 2016, when I interviewed him, Dave was wary of negative repercussions that could still be on the horizon and pointed to two outcomes so far. In 2015, a Democrat supported by oil companies challenged incumbent county supervisor Janet Wolf, also a Democrat, known for her environmental leadership. Wolf won re-election by ten percentage points. But then, according to Dave, Big Oil used what it had learned in that campaign to successfully appoint a pro-oil candidate to the Goleta City Council, making it majority conservative. Each city in the region has a seat on community development organizations, so this added to conservative power at the regional level. Dave feared a takeover of the Board of Supervisors as well, saying that if oil ever controlled the Board of Supervisors, "everything we have done for greenhouse gases to oil restrictions, they are just going to undo those suckers." In Daraka Larimore-Hall's words, Measure P "poked the hornet's nest." Poking this nest made Big Oil more bent on securing its power. And Dave thought losing to Big Oil was more likely after the Measure P failure, which oil companies could point to as evidence of public support for oil in Santa Barbara County.

Dave connected his fears to broader trends as well. He thought environmental protections would be stripped if the White House and Senate ever were controlled by Republicans: "*In the 45 years I've been doing this stuff, you work really hard to get things enacted, but once they go away, they're gone for a generation. [...] it is beyond hard to get them back. [...] That's what would keep me up at night—both locally and nationally—if we lose what we got, let alone be able to step out and do something more progressive on fossil fuels*" (my emphasis). With a long history of progressive organizing, Dave's fear about losing was grounded in a fear of losing not abstract successes—successes that a young person like myself might grow up with as the status quo—but *his* successes. He or others he knew had earned these successes through hard work. Needless to say, Dave likely suffered from lack of sleep in the aftermath of the 2016 election of Donald Trump

as president of the United States. President Trump and the Republican majority Congress did exactly what Dave feared; they rolled back numerous environmental regulations and restarted stalled oil pipelines.

This fear of loss by key community members had negative consequences for the psyches of grassroots organizers in Santa Barbara, who began to feel as if they would set back the whole movement if Measure P lost. This worry elevated the stress of the campaign tremendously, exacerbating the hostile environment created by oil companies funneling \$6.2 million into the county to oppose the measure. Becca, a grassroots originator of the campaign, explained that her decision to go along with changes in some of the campaign's tactics—changes that disillusioned core grassroots originators of the campaign, Becca and myself included—was motivated, in part, by the fear she felt from big greens. Becca explained, “They just created a lot of fear in me. [...] It was like if we lost, it was going to set the whole environmental movement back, it was going to destroy the county, all of these things that aren't necessarily true and depend entirely on whether we decide to keep going or not.” Her words illustrate her belief in grassroots power and her dedication to movement building, which can happen regardless of legal or political wins, as in the case of Measure P.

Becca believed that whether a movement is set back by a defeat depends on whether participants continue moving forward—something she and her grassroots colleagues were doing. Looking back, Becca said she would have prepared herself for something she called “concerntrolling,” which she described as:

There are people that are with you. [...] They say they are with you, and they care about the issue, but they just don't like how you are doing it, or when you are doing it ... and they end up getting really negative. [...] I felt it on both sides. It was like the oil industry was really ramping up their campaign against us and then even they—call it the old guard in Santa Barbara—was being pretty antagonistic and far less than supportive of our effort, behind closed doors.

In the early stages of Measure P, seasoned activists in the community “concerntrrolled” through efforts to decide how and when the campaign operated. In the later stages, the Democratic Party did control the campaign and displaced horizontal organizing based on a team captain structure with hierarchical organizing (see chapter 7). Concerntrolling and Democratic Party takeover were the opposite of Kelsey's strategy advocating that grassroots groups let go of control to enhance broad-based ownership of the movement.

In some ways, then, Measure P originators' decision to partner with the Democratic Party strategy was a response to fear. It was also a response to fear generated by a particular definition of “success,” which focused narrowly on passing the measure. For many grassroots activists, however, the success of any one campaign is not limited to changing laws. Building a movement, inspiring new activists, and sustaining momentum are integral dimensions to grassroots' definitions of success. As Becca said, success depends on “whether we decide to keep going or not.” She expanded on this point:

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I was aware that there was a possibility that we would lose, but I thought that that was just the starting place. I didn't think that a failure on the ballot was going to be a failure for everyone. I, and a lot of the people I was talking to, felt like we needed to start where we start, and that way, we identify other people who care about this—identify opinion shapers who were willing to go public, spokespeople who were facing the problem directly in their backyards—and all that has happened. I mean, we've got a huge list of people and connections all over the county.

The Measure P campaign inspired many people and built a movement, but it sacrificed some of its focus on this goal to try to secure a policy win, and in doing so, may have made it more difficult to secure both. As Becca explained, if the grassroots had maintained their horizontal strategy, “we would have done a lot better than we did, even if we didn't win.” For Becca, better refers to inspiring people to join the movement—“building power.”

Since 2014, however, there are many signs that Measure P did not have the negative ramifications that the big greens feared. On the local level, it likely enhanced support and political will for progressive policies. In 2015 and 2016, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors approved the state's most stringent carbon emissions levels for oil projects, funded a feasibility study for community choice aggregation, and rejected an oil project with stricter environmental protections than a similar project the same board approved just three years before. Despite challenge by an oil-supported candidate, former environmental attorney Joan Hartmann won the contentious Third District supervisor seat in 2016, maintaining a progressive majority. On a broad level, the anti-fracking movement has grown stronger since Measure P's defeat. Monterey County became the first oil-producing county in California to ban fracking. Its measure also banned *all* future conventional drilling. Just a month after Measure P's failure, New York state banned fracking in 2014. These wins illustrate the grassroots view that energy mobilized and inspired through community and movement building does not dissipate with a defeat. It remains, grows, and spreads as people travel and communicate across blockadia. Tsing (2004) calls these traveling sets of tactics, plans, and inspirations “activist packages.” Helen Yost described this phenomenon in relation to the megaload struggle, which went on for several years before it succeeded in stopping the megaloads: “We were just little guys in the streets, and you know what comes next? There are a lot of little towns and other little guys watching this whole thing happen, and they are going to rise up too because they were pretty freaking inspired.”

Grassroots activists then, viewed losing in a different way. Many saw the struggle, rather than the loss, as the defining feature of their work. Their decision to act and risk loss was informed by a commitment to doing what was right, not necessarily what was politically or legislatively feasible. In Natalie Havlina's words, “you don't always win, but you fight because it is the right thing to do.” Cass Davis, who was particularly bleak about human capacity to survive climate crisis, shared a similar perspective: “I know the battle in sight is not winnable, I've always kept in mind: ‘You don't fight fascism to win, you fight it because it is fascism.’ There is no winning, just anytime fascism raises its head up, it's repressing, it's horrible, and so you fight against it.”<sup>6</sup> These perspectives are based on a more radical understanding of success than most nonprofit definitions.

In contrast, because environmental groups have very little power compared to the gas company in Idaho, Ben Otto of Idaho Conservation League advised that environmental groups learn “how to

lose well [...] the same idea as kind of losing the battle and winning the war.” He felt that even if natural gas production occurred—a loss for environmentalists—ensuring that it was done as safely as possible would ultimately be a win. Many of the regulations that Ben envisioned as part of a “win,” however, never materialized. Even if they had materialized, grassroots activists would likely have viewed them as incremental steps, nowhere near the level of change needed to avert climate catastrophe.

Before moving on to grassroots ideas for bridging this gulf between sectors of the movement, I highlight a point of contrast in grassroots’ relationship to losing. Ben’s concern with losing “gracefully” was different than Dave’s fear of losing it all. Context informs this contrast. In Idaho, groups like Ben’s had long been working in a hostile political climate with no hope of changing that climate. Idaho has had a Republican legislature and governor since 1995. In December 2016, of the 110 people in the legislature, only 17 were Democrats. Because of this, it is understandable that Idaho grassroots worked to maintain their seat at the table and play the game: it was the only game available for working toward the types of change and successes that their organizations prioritize.

Groups in Santa Barbara, on the other hand, had a long history of securing regulations. While the state and community provided a far more favorable political climate for environmentalists than Idaho, there were periodic wins for conservatives in the state and county—just enough to add a sense of precarity to the liberal status quo. Wins that occurred under favorable circumstances could change if the political context changed. In contrast, any win secured in Idaho was secured within a hostile environment. Policies that pass tend to be palatable to conservative Idaho politicians and therefore are unlikely to be jeopardized by future conservative administrations. These two contexts contributed to whether activists feared losing or planned how to lose gracefully.

### **Creating a Unified Front**

The divergences in understandings of pragmatism, evident in divergent strategies, tactics, and motivations, produced tensions because most interviewees wanted to work together. They recognized the importance of a unified front—of having all progressive groups put aside their disagreements to work together. As Helen Yost explained, “there aren’t enough hours in the day to talk about what is wrong with the other guys [other organizations] and still do what’s right with yours.” *How* to achieve unity, however, is an open question. Understanding where each individual or organization is coming from—how their organizational form and experiences shape their decisions—is a place to start. First, however, in line with the thesis of this book, people have to be able to come together and talk, which depends on relationships of trust. Interviewees highlighted specific practices that make this difficult and ways to change these practices.

### ***Don’t Stifle New Ideas***

Grassroots activists felt stifled by grassroots. There was a sense that these organizations wanted to control the situation and were against “upstarts,” new ideas, and different tactics—particularly when these came from young people. In response, grassroots activists advocated openness to new suggestions, new energy, and new approaches.

Kelsey, whose experience planning the first Idaho Climate Rally helped her realize that effective collaboration required nonprofit organizers let go of control over campaigns, suggested that

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nonprofits work to support new groups and new ideas, rather than shut them down. There needed to be a balance between established organizations' experiences and allies on one hand and new groups' enthusiasm and potential for success on the other.

When activists first came together to plan the 2015 Idaho Climate Rally, big green groups in Boise thought that the other groups would "jump on board" with their plan for getting Idaho to close coal plants. Grassroots activists reacted with questions about how the big greens developed the idea, and their own proposals. As Kelsey explained, the grassroots' view was, "'We are not going to sign onto a plan that we didn't help develop.' So it wasn't even that they thought our plan was bad, it was more they didn't help make it, and they wanted more information before agreeing that it was a good plan. And that's legit," Kelsey explained. For Kelsey, this disagreement revealed a divide between the more established groups who "are more skeptical, maybe more jaded" and newly formed groups. Some of the new groups wanted to push the city of Boise to have 100 percent renewable energy or to cut off its relationship with Idaho Power and have its own power generation. Older groups, who had worked with the city for decades, were skeptical that this would be successful and also wanted to preserve the relatively good relationship they had with the city.

Kelsey wished that the big greens would recognize that "we don't want to stamp out the enthusiasm of somebody who wants to try again. Like we are quick to say, 'Oh that won't work and here's why, or we have already tried that, and they said no.' Why would we want to stop somebody else from trying again? Like maybe they will be able to do it." For her, an important question for the nonprofit community was learning how to acknowledge different approaches and support them, no matter what similar campaigns had yielded in the past:

Everyone has their own opinion based on what they learned and so how can we teach each other what we learned and not dampen anybody's enthusiasm? As [someone] younger [age 34 ...] than a lot of environmental activists, I hate when like my idea is stamped out. [...] I'm kind of like, "Screw you, you couldn't make it work, that doesn't mean that I can't." [...] So we wanted to make sure that we weren't doing that—[so] a new group forms, and their idea is to get Boise off Idaho Power; like, go for it. Let's help them figure out how that might work as opposed to telling them, "Oh you should stop; that's a bad idea."

This type of mentality—open to new methods, supportive of new enthusiasm, and optimistic—was the mentality that grassroots interviewees longed to see among grasstops groups. It is markedly different from how grasstops responded to the grassroots organizers of Measure P.

The big green groups working on the Idaho Climate Rally recognized that, at the beginning stage in their relationship with the grassroots groups, having a unified policy position was not necessary. It also was not a prerequisite for working together. "We decided," Kelsey said, "that instead of using our planning meetings for us to persuade them that our plan was right, we would use our planning meetings to plan this event where we all would be able to say what we wanted and then we would continue to work together in the future." These groups agreed to disagree about their long-term strategies in the interest of working together on a shared campaign in which they could learn more about each other, their ideas, and hopefully build relationships that would enable future collaboration. This is a good example of what activists view as an effective way to support each

other across different organizational forms. It is the classic method for justice-oriented community organizing—where people come together and develop plans and dreams together, in collaboration.

***Left Flank: From Margin to Center***<sup>7</sup>

Working together also requires respecting, valuing, and supporting others. Unfortunately, the divergence in visions of what success means leads both sides to discount the other's approach. While I, and most other grassroots activists, are sympathetic to the draw people feel to work on solutions that seem possible in the current political climate, climate science demonstrates that the solutions developed in this realm so far are too little too late (Holdren, 2014; IPCC, 2014)—in this sense, they are not pragmatic (Rosewarne et al., 2014). Having any chance of staying *around* two degrees Celsius global average temperature rise requires radical change. Tim DeChristopher's opening quote to this chapter summarizes grassroots' sentiments well. DeChristopher, a grassroots activist, spent twenty-one months in jail for outbidding oil companies in an oil and gas auction in 2008. He does not believe the solutions advocated by the NGO-led climate movement will work, explaining "There are very few things that make me more hopeless than a movement based on useful fictions" (Tim DeChristopher quoted in Stephenson, 2015, p. 190). The primary fiction that big greens operate on is a belief in working with power holders to regulate environmental damage, in essence to establish tolerance levels. Grassroots activists, on the other hand, demanded no more damage.

***None, Not How Much***

Jane Fritz and Becca, activists from different eras and in different states, thought it was absurd that the respected and well-resourced nonprofit groups in their communities were negotiating over *how much* pollution would be allowed. Sociologist Ulrich Beck points out that this conversation about risk thresholds is not about protection, but, rather, an acquiescence to a level of acceptable poisoning (Beck, 1992, p. 65). Experts have the privilege of setting that level, not people who are directly affected by the poison. Grassroots activists shared this view, seeing this situation as fundamentally unjust for people and the environment. Jane and Becca, whose stories I recount in the following paragraphs, held fast to their stance that there should be *no* risk. In their view, environmental groups should not be in the business of deciding *how much* risk is acceptable—this was antithetical to their purpose.

For Becca, the issue was mitigation of oil extraction emissions for the Santa Maria Energy Project. Becca's group, 350 Santa Barbara, felt that their push to reject the project completely, when other environmental groups were pushing for regulation, contributed to stricter emissions policies. That big greens were only seeking mitigation, "meaning oil companies would have to pay some cents for every ton of CO<sub>2</sub> beyond ten thousand tons per year," was horrifying to Becca.

For Jane, the issue was herbicides in Lake Pend Oreille, a place to which she was deeply connected. She recalled:

When you have four of the top environmentalists in town sitting down and deciding how many thousand acres they are going to treat with 2,4-D, I am sitting there going, "are you guys crazy? You don't give them a number!" [...] And the county was so clever. [...] : "Oh well we'll form a task force and bring them [the environmentalists] to the table." Well, when they are at the table, they want to cooperate, they don't want conflict, most people

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don't want conflict. So as a result, they [the county] got everything they wanted [laughs]. And it was the environmentalists who gave it to 'em. And I just said, "That's it, I'm out of here, I can't deal with you people!"<sup>8</sup>

Jane's feelings were: "You are poisoning my mother!" Jane had been an activist in Sandpoint, Idaho since the early 1980s. She had seen the community go from one where 350 people would show up to protest at public meetings to one where environmental groups held happy hours at the local brewery for their members. She did not necessarily think that hosting meetings at a brewery was bad, but she felt like the movement was weaker and more complacent than in the past. She lamented the fact that the younger folks running the movement had little interest in learning from older activists like her.

Becca, Jane, and the groups they worked with represented what grasstops thought of as the "left flank." There was an understanding on both sides that radical demands made the other demands look more reasonable. The left flank shifts the window of polite conversation a bit to the left, enabling change on some levels. In the fossil fuel divestment movement, for example, Bergman (2018) finds a "radical flank effect" where activists framing the fossil fuel industry as a public enemy enabled shifts in mainstream discourse around stranded assets and carbon bubbles (the idea that investments in carbon will become stranded, or unprofitable, as policies to alleviate climate crisis are enacted). While the mainstream can achieve change by positioning itself in contrast to the radical or left flank, from the perspective of grassroots activists, this dynamic is a problem. The problem with the left flank is that it is left. In other words, it is a marginalized fringe position that gives centrists the ability to say that it is unrealistic, radical, and idealistic and that their own position—which can often involve negotiating over an "acceptable level of poisoning"—looks like the realistic, reasonable, and pragmatic action. Furthermore, mainstream notions of what is reasonable change over time. Becca explained this in reference to the abolition of slavery:

We have to build power, and you don't do it by bullying people or advocating for incremental steps that don't inspire masses of people. [...] Did the antislavery movement ask for regulations on slavery? Sure, there were some people who were probably pushing for regulations, but no, the powerful movement came when white people started advocating for abolition of slavery, the outright end of slavery. [...] I don't know why environmentalists don't understand that—that we have to stand up and start asking for what we actually need together.

Objectively, accepting any level of poisoning is not reasonable or pragmatic. It is also unjust. This norm—the rejection of the precautionary principle—is at the root of environmental degradation and climate change. That accepting levels of poison is so routine within the legal and political infrastructures that grasstops target demonstrates just how much control corporations have under capitalism. This compliance is a perfect example of what LeQuesne (2019) calls "petro-hegemony," the fossil fuel industry's power to shape material conditions and ideology through control over culture, the state, and the economy. When I asked one interviewee about their organization's stance on drilling, they wanted to remain anonymous and replied, "Well, we would prefer for them not to drill, but that's not what we are going to say publicly because then you just get chased out of the room." Big green groups' acceptance of negotiating over regulation and poisoning as the norm maintains the gulf between the grasstops and the left flank.

### ***Centering the Left***

The left flank is also problematic because it isolates grassroots activists. Becca's feeling of being bullied by nonprofits had made organizing significantly more stressful for her. Helen Yost felt exhausted from being the left flank. She wanted more freedom to "just let things play the way they play and not follow some sort of standard procedure playbook" of big greens. "Even better to not be scorned because you don't follow that rule book," Helen said. Isolating the left flank is part of oil and gas's playbook. Alma explained this connection:

I've been labeled a fear monger, anti-oil and gas, [...] but it seems like the oil and gas industry, they have to do that. They have to apply these labels to you to marginalize and demonize you so that people don't listen to you. [...] The message that I hope [...] you're getting for your book *Corrie*, is that we should always speak the truth, because [...] the truth is our biggest friend, you know; you don't have to embellish. [...] Truth, the data, is squarely on our side.

By making demands for action that are in line with science seem unreasonable—again, the memorable characterization of grassroots activists as "lighting their hair on fire"—petro-hegemony leads the public and the big greens to discount grassroots demands. Grassroots activists wanted respect and consideration, both for their ideas, and as individuals.

Bringing the left flank from the margin to the center means reorienting the status quo to center radical, rather than mainstream, perspectives. As Bella Abzug, founder of Women's Environmental Development Organization, has said, "Women do not want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream: they want the stream to be clear and healthy" (quoted in Dankelman, 2010, p. 15). This type of goal means shifting the entire paradigm to the left. The status quo must change toward justice, rather than radical perspectives being absorbed or accommodated by the status quo. Grassroots activists wanted to change the organizing paradigm, not adapt to a status quo they see as unjust and ineffective.

Also foundational for creating a new center based on perspectives from the margins is recognizing that activists need everyone to change everything—a slogan of the climate justice movement. Big green staff who are not trying to change everything may have more difficulty empathizing with this principle. Yet, nonprofits' dependence on membership and the acknowledgment—by most nonprofit staff—that they are more successful with the grassroots behind them, should attune them to the importance of inclusivity. Likewise, taking the science that informs their understanding of the environment seriously would point to a need for more radical positions.

Grassroots activists can struggle with putting this principle of inclusivity into practice as well. Those who work in geographically or politically isolating environments may recognize the need to have everyone on board, yet be so accustomed to working alone that they alienate others they try to collaborate with. And, as youth activists have demonstrated, working beyond established social networks is a challenge for most activists. Concrete practices that can help everyone feel valued include relational organizing and giving attribution. Activists wanted to have trusting and rewarding relationships with each other and members of different groups. They all recognized that trust was an essential component of working together.



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***Giving Attribution***

Giving proper attribution was a good way to build trust. People always admired an activist who demonstrated humility while crediting others or the group. In Shelley Brock's words, "leav[ing] egos at the door" was important. On the other hand, personal and organizational relationships could deteriorate when one party took credit for collaborative work. The big greens wanted credit for their role in regulatory change. The grassroots wanted credit for turning people out to hearings, which demonstrated the public support necessary for transforming big greens' work into wins. The organizational form of big greens, however, challenges activists' capacity to credit each other and leave their egos behind. Big green staffs' careers are built on their activism. In addition, these groups depend on differentiating themselves from others to securing funding. A key question is, as Ben Otto explained, "How do you tell a story of how different groups did different parts of achieving the same policy outcome and be able to talk about it in a way that is respectful of acknowledging each, to the funders?" Ben recognized this as an area of organizing that "needs a lot of work."

Alongside welcoming new ideas, creating a unified climate justice front requires reorienting actions around a vision that is based in justice. Reshaping actions and visions that everyone wants to be a part of depends on collaboration. Valuing each other through giving attribution, relational organizing, and joining with, rather than isolating, the left flank are ways activists on both sides of the grassroots/grasstops divide can begin this work.

**Conclusion**

One would think that environmentally focused groups, organizations, and individuals would have an easier time working across lines than the climate skeptics and liberals who come together to fight natural gas in Idaho (see chapter 3 and 4). Yet, from my analysis of the interviews, this assumption is incorrect. Caring about the environment is merely a different starting point for the process of learning how to work together, like the starting point of being concerned about property, integrity, and accountability, or being a college student learning about climate justice.

During my time organizing and talking with activists, the grassroots/grasstops divide came up again and again. Like the talking across lines happening in southwest Idaho, it was not something I had anticipated. In Santa Barbara, the divide was something I experienced during the Measure P campaign. At first, the campaign was ours—grassroots. It was as horizontal, empowering, and invigorating as 350 Santa Barbara had ever been—everything that drew me to join the group in 2013. But when our initiative made it onto the ballot, the big greens stepped in and we, the grassroots, felt pushed out of leadership. Our feelings at the time and since then, the perspectives of interviewees, all corroborated the need for a different kind of working together.

In Idaho, I heard about this divide from all sides. I heard it from the radical and often on-her-own Helen Yost, whose dedication to climate justice is less known beyond her community than it should be, largely because of historical challenges working with other groups. I heard it from the tiny nonprofit Friends of the Clearwater, which is more grassroots than grasstops. I heard it from a former attorney for a big green and a former executive director. I heard it from CAIA out on their own in Payette County wondering why no groups in Boise would help them. And finally, I heard it from the big greens themselves. While their views were heterogeneous, most, like Ben Otto,

were sincere in their desire to work together to achieve climate justice. They felt some of the same lack of support from grassroots that the grassroots reported about the grasstops.

Bridging this divide would tremendously strengthen the climate justice movement. New ideas, energy, and hope from climate justice activists, Indigenous knowledge, and experience from frontline communities, plus decades of resources and infrastructures of environmental organizations—the environmental movement—would be a formidable force for the fossil fuel industry to contend with. I argue that a commitment to pragmatism—defined as what is possible within capitalism—on the part of big greens is the root of the divide that keeps these wings of the movement separated. Pragmatism is embedded in the organizational form of established and large nonprofits. It constrains their vision of what is possible—shaping their strategies, tactics, and motivations. The status quo that interviewees experience marginalizes anything outside of what current politics and corporate power deem reasonable. It is a status quo that scoffs at radical visions of a just future, that sees emotions of alarm and anger as illogical—as someone lighting their hair on fire. Destabilizing this status quo, especially when all the science demonstrates that radical change and extreme urgency and love for one another is what we desperately need (see Stephenson 2015), should be the work of all people interested in climate justice.

To achieve this goal, people organizing in grasstops or grassroots groups can welcome new ideas and new activists. They can seek to support people with the most radical visions—the visions necessary to inspire real change. Rather than marginalizing those visions and leveraging them to make other changes more politically feasible, activists should go join with the left flank. Together, with steadfast demands for what is needed and a commitment to building relationships of trust that support and congratulate each other, the power of each individual and group will be more coordinated. The movement will have the capacity to, as Helen would say, pop out of the bushes and “scare the crap out of Big Oil.” At this stage in the climate crisis, this is more pragmatic than the one-step-at-a-time “make nice with government and industry,” to use David Monsees’s words, that characterizes much of the work of big greens.

To understand what movement divergences and efforts for creating a unified front look like on the ground, chapter 7 explores two concluded resistance struggles: the fight against the megaloads and the mobilization for Measure P.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press from *Working Across Lines: Resisting Extreme Energy Extraction* (2022).

<sup>2</sup> Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse (2014) argue that the climate crisis has upended notions of radicalism and pragmatism. In their view, pragmatism as usual “has become an impossible demand” because it leads to climate crisis (5).

<sup>3</sup> For analysis of collaboration among grassroots activists who do have different racial, ethnic, and Indigenous identities, see chapter 8.

<sup>4</sup> C4 refers to the nonprofit tax designation 501(c)(4). This is a designation for nonprofits that can engage in political and legislative activities. Its downside is that donations made to a 501(c)(4)s are not tax deductible for the donor. A 501(c)(3) organization, in contrast, can receive tax deductible donations, but can only engage in charitable work—activities like education and defending civil rights. Being able to deduct donations from federal taxes is attractive for large donors.

<sup>5</sup> The Community Environmental Council in Santa Barbara is an exception to this, seeking “to move the Santa Barbara region away from dependence on fossil fuels in one generation.”

<sup>6</sup> “You don’t fight fascism because you’re going to win. You fight fascism because it is fascist” is an anarchist meme by Jean-Paul Sartre (1992).

<sup>7</sup> Bell hooks’s book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) inspired this section’s heading.

<sup>8</sup> The International Agency for Research on Cancer (2015) declared 2,4-D a possible human carcinogen in 2015. It is a known endocrine disrupter. See the National Resource Defense Council’s article “2,4-D: The Most Dangerous Pesticide You’ve Never Heard of” (Sedbrook 2016) for a detailed account of the pesticide.