

A Plan That Works Well:
A Political Blueprint
for Arab American Empowerment

Edited with a Forward
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Forward

The Plan Worked Well

The Arab American Institute (AAI) was launched on March 1, 1985 and from the beginning we staked out a very unique and single-minded objective. As we stated in our opening manifesto we wanted to build a **power generator** of, by, and for Arab Americans.

At the time, achieving this objective appeared to be a herculean task. Looking back, 1984 had been a time of both great opportunity and equally great humiliation for us. On the positive side, Arab Americans played a significant role in the campaign of Jesse Jackson and an Arab American was selected to place Jackson's name in nomination at the Democratic National Convention, a historical first for our people. On the Republican side, a Palestinian American was appointed to head Ethnic Voters for Reagan-Bush and eventually was nominated and served in a major position within the administration.

But this had come among great frustrations. That was the year that the Mondale-Ferraro campaign returned financial contributions from prominent Arab Americans in Illinois and mayoral candidate, Wilson Goode, did the same thing in Philadelphia.

Clearly something had to be done. As we knew back then, Arab Americans had years of political success. On the national level, Arab Americans had been elected to the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Of equal importance, Arab Americans were serving as governors, in numerous state and local positions, and as party officials throughout the country.

But, as was noted in our 1985 opening statement entitled "A Plan That Works," "our unique problem remains that we do our politics as we do everything else, on a highly individual basis." This, we recognized, led to a critical problem that we faced as an ethnic group: "While we have many political success stories, we have not been able to build those individual successes into a national, ethnically conscious, effective network to prepare our children and grandchildren for a career in government and politics."

What was needed, in short was "an instrument to translate all of our individual political victories into a national movement to generate even more success." The rationale for AAI and its work was born of this necessity and was thus stated:

"We need a plan, one that builds an Arab American national political movement by linking together hundreds of local success stories. We need to build a genuine Arab American political infrastructure. We need to recruit candidates for a variety of public offices, work to support them, have them feel they are part of a national organism, and let us all feel that a victory for sheriff or mayor is part of something larger – a movement that is changing U.S. history."

And the plan was specific, calling for the formation of local Arab American political clubs; a national clearinghouse of information to recruit, train, aid, and support volunteers; a network of support services; and clear, definable goals.

We have been involved since March 1985. We have established the power generator. We have traveled, we have consulted on campaigns and day-to-day local party matters; we have worked with Arab American efforts to organize and support campaigns from city council to the President of the United States. We have taught from our own experiences and we have learned from yours.

And now the generator has a life of its own (Like the little bunny in the battery commercial: “Still goin;”).

What we present in the following pages was actually written by hundreds of seasoned Arab American political activists. It is our guide to political work, a compendium of basics for you to read and, more importantly, pass on to the next generation.

Introduction

The Arab American Institute: The Principles That Guide Our Work

Since 1985, several principles have guided us in the establishment of a power generator for Arab Americans. Before we offer you some practical guidance toward becoming involved in the political process, it is useful at this point for us to review these principles as a rationale for both our work and yours.

1. Positioning Our Community in the Process

In all of our work we have sought to position our community in the political process -- that is, to move ourselves from the margins of politics into the center and to move our work from “ad hoc” to institutional.

On the local level our work has been party-specific – building clubs and securing roles in the local parties or seeking structural relationships and access to city and state government.

By focusing on club building, voter registration, establishing Get-Out-the-Vote mechanisms and direct ties with local parties and city government; and by identifying, attracting and building a network of Arab Americans already in the political process – we have sought to establish specific mechanism and relationships we can build on for the future.

On the National level, our work has been focused on developing ties for Arab Americans, not only within the national parties, but within broader political action coalitions that could move our issue concerns and our community into the mainstream of politics. Our work on this level has been both electoral and extra-electoral.

2. All Politics Are Local

In all of our work, we adhere to the political maxim that all politics are local.

National power is built by establishing and securing local power bases – and national victories, once won, in order to be protected, must be translated into local strength.

Winning delegates to a national convention is one thing – and we have done that and even exceeded our goals – but being able to return to those communities where we won a delegate and establish permanent clubs and political vehicles are what will secure the victory and protect it for the future.

So in every instance we return to the fact that the key to all of our community's successes in the future will be the extent to which we:

- build local party clubs;
- gain access to the local, county and state party apparatus, making our relationship with the political mainstream permanent and institutional;
- increase voter registration;
- organize GOTV mechanisms we can use in the future.

In this way we use each election to further our goal of creating an independent political power base for Arab-Americans – which we can use as leverage with the system and with candidates in the future.

3. Making a Difference and Seeing Politics As Process

In all of our work we have sought to give special attention to those circumstances where we could make a difference.

Because our numbers are small (but concentrated in a few important areas) and because we can't compete nationally with some other groups – we have sought to avoid involvement in races or situations where we could not have a measurable impact. Instead, we have organized ourselves and focused our energies and resources where we could make a noticeable difference and win.

In 1986, for example, we avoided big money Senate races and focused instead on specific local contests where we established respect for the Arab American effort.

And in other instances, throughout the country, we did our best in those areas where we were able to organize a concentrated and focused effort and win:

- low turn-out elections;
- party caucuses;
- low-level uncontested local party elections.

4. Bringing Issues into Electoral Work

We have learned that by organizing and focusing our issue concerns in the electoral political arena, also can have the greatest impact.

We have brought our issues into the center of the American political debate, where the media attention is greatest and political stakes the highest.

Through our work in Washington and our network throughout the U.S., we have successfully brought our issues – and won some significant victories – at state conventions and even to the national conventions. As a result, we have:

- broadened and deepened our grassroots coalition base;
- greatly accelerated the debate on Palestinian rights and conditions in Lebanon;
- presented a grave challenge to opponents and, to a degree, leveled the playing field in key areas;
- made possible greater future access for ourselves and our issues in the political mainstream.

In a very real sense, we took the time in 1985 to establish these principles and layout a realistic plan.

And the plan is working well.

I. How to Get Involved in Politics

I. Getting Started

Once you have made the commitment to become involved in political party or campaign work, it is equally important that you choose to do it well – that is, you recognize your own time and talents and know best how to maximize both.

Barbara Shailor, a campaign consultant from Washington, D.C., has written a very useful guide to getting started in political work that includes vital information and steps you need to take even before your campaign efforts begin. According to Shailor, you need to recognize the following:

1. Political action is largely community action

Before you can be effective at any level of political activity, you must know your community and its problems.

You'll want to know:

- * The government you are seeking to improve;
- * The officials who handle the various functions of that government
- * The people – where they live, how they live, how they earn their livelihood
- * The groups which people form – clubs, associations, and organizations – and who their leaders are;
- * The geography of politics – your Congressional District, state legislative precincts, county election districts, wards, precincts, etc.

2. Know your local government

It's not too hard to find out about your local government – how it's run, and who are the important elected and appointed officials.

All you really have to do is ask.

Most officials are only too glad to talk about their work and their problems. After all, they want to be re-elected or re-appointed.

In addition:

- * Many offices of local government have literature which explains their work in detail
- * Various citizen groups publish excellent pamphlets on the organization and function of local government;
- * Newspapers contain a lot of useful information about your community.

All this printed material, from whatever source, belongs in your political files.

3. Visit City Hall

But don't rely on reading matter alone.

Nothing can replace the personal "feel" – the first-hand impression you get by visiting your city hall or county building.

So:

- * Sit in on meetings of your local government bodies;
- * Talk personally with councilmen or aldermen;
- * Talk with the heads of local departments;
- * Learn about the problems they face, and how they deal with them;
- * Encourage others to do the same.

Some people prefer to go in groups, so you might want to organize such an activity. This can be particularly useful if the debate is on an issue of direct interest to your group.

Knowing your community is a must and in politics, information is as important a weapon as money and charisma.

4. Know your political geography

The best way to learn the political geography of your area – precinct, ward, or Congressional District – is to get a map. Your county board of elections can supply a street map with election districts and precincts marked in.

Next, try to get all the vital statistics you can.

Begin with a detailed precinct-by-precinct breakdown of the results of the last several elections. (Your best sources of information will be your local newspaper and the board of elections).

Then, get all the other statistical information you can about your community, including

- * The voting habits in various sections;
- * The minority and ethnic groups, and whether or not they are concentrated in a particular section;
- * The predominant occupations, incomes, and interests of the people in various sections.

Much of this information is available in newspaper files or the public library. Your county or local planning department should have a lot of the census data for your community, or you may write to the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D.C., for the census tracts for your community.

If you study and compare precinct-by-precinct returns, ideas about people's attitudes, and your area's political problems, it can be a fascinating study, one that will explain a lot about why things are the way they are in your community, and help you campaign more effectively.

5. Seek out your allies and build a network

If there is one thing that is as important as your knowledge, it is your ability to identify a network of friends and colleagues who you can mobilize. This network can be composed of both people who agree with you, those who are concerned about the issues, personal friends and family.

Through all of this is your recognition that politics is a game of numbers – numbers knowledge, numbers of people and numbers of money. Each of these three elements is equally important to being effective politically in your community.

6. Help the party

Start on the basic level. Find out who your party chairperson is in your county and make a visit. (Or, you may even want to get more basic by visiting your ward, precinct, town or city chair). Get to know him/her and state that you want to help the party. There isn't a party chairman around that doesn't want to help.

Don't come in with a resume and a lot of skills. Just be there. That's the important first start. You've got to volunteer, work with the party and build relationships, not only with the chairman but also with the other leaders of the party.

Ask to become a committeeperson. Your local party is structured from the state level on down. On the local level, you have committee men and women who represent precincts, wards, towns, all within the county. They are the arms and legs of the political party. They're the people who keep the party in touch with what is going on in the neighborhoods. And they are the people who are mobilized by the party on election day to get out the vote.

Very importantly, when the party chair decides to make an appointment or when it comes to selecting candidates, committeemen are the people who, at the least, are consulted, and at the most, comprise the body of people from whom appointments and candidates are selected. They are extremely important people – and this is a good entry level position for your political activity.

7. Help candidates

Offer to help candidates. Sell fundraising tickets if you can. Share important information with the candidates. Share the lists you have. Be available. But in the process of all this, build relationships. Get to know people and let them get to know you as a person who really works really hard and as a person they like. This is not a manipulative process. Politics is very much a process of developing relationships and being available.

8. Position yourself within the party

Build your own personal network so that you can position yourself within the party. Do this so that if you become a committee member, it will become known at an important point in time that you've got your own friends and your own constituency and supporters, and that you have people who will work with you, and for you.

While you're building the Arab American Democratic or Republican club, remember that you belong to businesses and to professions, that you have friends you went to high school and college with, and that your network of friends and supporters is much larger than the Arab American community.

You have got to be able to document that network and continuously build those relationships. Build that personal network and do not limit your constituency to Arab Americans.

If you have a club, invite your local party leaders and other local officials to address the club. Establish a dialogue between you and your friends and the party leaders. But most importantly, build that relationship.

II. Starting a Club

II. Starting a Club

From the outset, AAI has promoted and expedited the formation of political clubs of Arab Americans. The clubs have been viewed as the fuel for the power generator we have successfully built.

The Arab American political clubs have a four-fold purpose:

- ✧ To assist Arab Americans in getting involved in the political party of their choice;
- ✧ To represent Arab American interests with the party leadership and to insure that members are represented equitably in matters concerning candidate selection, patronage, party leadership, and committee posts;
- ✧ To create a network for Arab Americans to enhance development of an Arab American power base;
- ✧ To foster a greater unity and visibility for Arab American political efforts.

The clubs are a means for Arab Americans to share contacts and information and to make the local parties recognize our strength and abilities. Below are some guidelines for how you can make your club work in your community.

Your first step upon chartering your club should be to identify your town, city and/or county party leaders. This is as easy as calling directory assistance for the local number for the Democratic or Republican Party headquarters. Tell them about the club and its desire to be active within the party. Your interest should not be stated in the abstract, but should be precise and to the points.

Over the years, we have learned at AAI that some Arab American leaders are more comfortable in forming non-partisan clubs to keep their options open. This is especially a good idea in communities where there are open primaries and non-partisan local elections.

However, in communities where there are two strong and competitive parties, it is wise to have partisan clubs.

Once your club is formed you are ready to go to work. If it's a campaign, contact the campaign manager and offer to:

1. Prepare a list of your membership, complete with your residence and work phone numbers, residence and precinct numbers, hours able to volunteer, and special talents or services each can render. Ask for the name of the campaign's volunteer coordinator, if there is one, and set up a meeting.

2 Assign each non-working club member one day per month to devote to volunteer activity of the campaign's designation; assign an evening per month for working club members. This means:

- Preparing a chart from now until election day;
- Assigning consecutive days and evenings, so that your club is as close to being "always on duty at the campaign" as possible;
- Notifying members in advance, once their dates are assigned;
- Providing a chart to the campaign volunteer coordinator early on.

3. Clean up any lists the campaign expects to rely on or use. This can be an ongoing project. Lists are vital for mailings, telephone canvassing, or solicitation for contributions. They need to be constantly updated since people move, die, or go out of business. "Cleaning up" lists is an important service because it must be done, saves the party a lot of time, and can save a lot of money; perhaps 50-60 cents per mailing. This means:

- Asking the campaign if they have any lists that need to be updated;
- Determining from the campaign if they need additional notes about the names on the list, information which may be obtained by phone calls and volunteers.

4. Be responsible for getting out an entire mass mailing. This can be a tremendous help to a campaign in terms of time and cost. It is a unique service and one that will help your club be remembered. This means:

- Contacting the campaign to determine the schedule of major mass mailings. Try to get exact dates when a piece of mail should be printed and a date when it must be delivered.
- Estimating the number of club members required to do the task.

In all of this, also remember that your teenage and college age children (and, of course, their friends) can be a very useful resource.

5. Host an event for the candidate. This could be a brunch, luncheon, or dinner – or it can be a reception or simple coffee-clatch in someone's living room. This means:

- Working with a scheduler from the campaign to select the right date(s)
- Knowing how to "sell" your event to the scheduler by showing him/her that it will be time well spent. For example, if you can say that there will

be new faces for the candidate to meet or the possibility of raising money, you will be more likely to get the candidate to attend.

6. Set a specific and substantial financial goal for the club and pledge that amount to the campaign. This means:

- Organizing events at which money can be raised or by any number of other means: pledges from individuals, mailings, etc.

7. Buy something tangible for the candidate.

- Perhaps the club can buy the buttons or bumper stickers, or pay the postage on a mailing, as an in-kind contribution to the campaign.

8. Write letters to the newspaper or prepare editorials or radio and TV on behalf of the candidate.

9. Supply the Campaign with good speakers or writers.

10. Provide a pool of workers on Election Day to assist in getting out the vote, handing out palm cards at the polls and driving voters to polls.

III. How to Choose a Campaign Worth Supporting

III. How to Choose a Campaign To Become Involved In

You may be faced with a number of campaigns that are worth your time and involvement, as well as your club's time and involvement. You cannot allow yourself to become swallowed up by the demands of too many candidates – you simply have to recognize the limits of your own and your club's energy, resources, and experience. You will have to make decisions, both locally and nationally, that allow you to best meet your needs.

The basic rule is to focus on those races that promise to do the most good. And you must wisely establish realistic expectations and goals.

Here are some useful guidelines and questions for you and your club to ask about whether or not and when and when not to become involved:

1. What resources do you have available to you at this time?
2. Does investment in this particular race help you build local power and concretely improve your role in the process?
3. Is this the race which will enable you to use your resources in a manner that will make a difference?
4. Does this race enable you to broaden the policy debate?
5. Does this race fit your long-term goals of political participation and empowerment?

In other words, is this a race that uses you or is it a race that you can use to your best advantage?

And when you ask the questions listed above, remember that there are degrees of involvement. You may want to select one campaign for maximum use of your resources, while opting to become involved in others that allow a low energy/high visibility means of involvement.

IV. Identifying and Getting Out the Vote

IV. Identifying and Getting Out the Vote

There are two distinct parts to any campaign. The first is everything before election day. The second is election day itself. Having an effective campaign means ensuring that your organization is geared up for both.

Identifying Support for the Candidate

A campaign needs a good field organization to be able to identify candidate support that can then be mobilized on election day itself in the GOTV (i.e. Get-Out-the-Vote) operation. The principal means of doing this identification of support is by either a door-to-door or telephone canvass.

Here are some useful techniques to help you organize a successful canvass:

1. Purpose of the Canvass

- To identify favorable and unfavorable supporters, so that the favorable supporters can be urged to vote, and so that the volunteers and contributors can be recruited among them.
- To locate undecided voters so that special strategies to persuade them to be favorable can be undertaken.

2. Materials

A script, campaign literature, walking lists of registered voters, precinct map, and pen.

Example of a Script

Hi, my name is _____ and I'm a supporter of _____, a candidate for _____. He/she has been involved in community activities (explain the candidate in one or two sentences). May I tell _____ that he/she can count on your support?

If the response is YES, then mark 1 next to the contact's name. If they say they are leaning, then mark 2. If undecided, mark 3. And if opposed or uninterested, then mark 4.

If the person is 1, then ask if they would like to volunteer, and record their response.

3. Things to Keep In Mind:

- Canvassing is generally done on a weekend with a group of volunteers going door-to-door in pairs.

- No experience is necessary to do a canvass.
- You do not have to be an expert on the candidate and where he/she stands on the issues. If someone does ask a question you can't answer, take their name and someone from the campaign will contact them.
- In the interest of safety and time, do not enter anyone's home or apartment.
- Postal regulations prohibit placing campaign literature in mailboxes. Literature should be left in or near entrances if the voter is not at home.
- Be courteous. To the voter, a volunteer is the campaign.
- Wear comfortable shoes.

4. **Phonebanking**

If the canvass is done by phone, then the same script and code can be used.

Things to Keep in Mind for a Successful Phone Canvass:

- Phonebanking is generally done with a group of volunteers in a location that has many phone lines.
- You are not expected to know a lot about the candidate – if someone you call asks questions you can't answer, someone will be there to help you with the call.
- Don't debate or argue on the phone.
- Do not speak for the candidate on issues unless you have been instructed to do so.
- Put a smile in your voice. It comes across on the phone.
- Let the phone ring 6 times before hanging up. If the phone is busy, set the call aside and try later.
- Thank your voter for their time.
- A mini-training before you begin calling will generally be done by the phonebank supervisor.

5. Literature Distribution

Purpose:

To publicize the candidate's name and candidacy by walking from house to house (in "targeted" areas) and leaving campaign literature.

Materials:

- Campaign literature
- Precinct map

Things to Keep In Mind:

- Literature drops are organized by the campaign and are generally done by a group of volunteers on weekends.
- An average precinct will take 2 people two or three hours to drop literature at every home.
- Be courteous – To the voting public, a volunteer is the campaign.
- In the interest of safety and time, do not enter anyone's home or apartment.
- Postal regulations prohibit placing campaign literature in mailboxes. Literature should be left in or near entrances.
- While dropping off literature, remember to use the sidewalk and do not walk on lawns.
- Wear comfortable shoes.

V. How to Help a Campaign

V. What You Can Do to Help a Campaign

A committed and enthusiastic volunteer who meets voters is second in influence only to the candidate her/himself. Such a volunteer far exceeds the influence of advertising and literature. Those who remember the New Hampshire Presidential Primary of 1968 know how critical the impact of the hundreds of college student volunteers was to the campaign of Senator Eugene McCarthy. It was the dedication of those volunteers that brought out thousands of voters, sent a powerful anti-Vietnam War message, established the credibility of the McCarthy campaign, and eventually persuaded President Lyndon Johnson not to run and Senator Robert Kennedy to run in that year.

The impact of volunteers may not always be that dramatic, but it is vital to any campaign. In many local elections, nearly every task is performed by volunteers.

Below is a list of the types of activities you and your club members should consider in a campaign.

- Canvassing (both door-to-door and telephone)
- Clipping newspaper articles
- Running errands
- Driving the candidate
- Putting up signs
- Getting out mailings
- Typing
- Organizing coffees for the candidate to raise money
- Making posters
- Preparing voter lists
- Delivering news releases
- Monitoring news programs
- Doing research, writing
- Doing art work
- Babysitting
- Addressing envelopes
- Leafletting
- Xeroxing
- Organizing fundraising events
- Recruiting additional volunteers
- Looking up telephone numbers
- Answering the telephone at headquarters

On election day itself, volunteers can:

- Distribute items at the polls
- Baby-sit for voters
- Prepare food for works

- Set up a victory party
- Serve as messengers
- Make telephone calls to get out the vote

Please note that not all of these activities involve heavy thought or planning skills for the volunteer. Each of the above, however, is essential to the smooth-running campaign and any volunteer who opts to do any of these is likely to be remembered as a dedicated activist. Besides, you are a busy person and use a lot of your mind and best talents at work or at home. These types of activities can actually be refreshing and easy for you – and still make you an important part of an effective campaign organization.

VI. Making Local Government Work for You

VI. Keep Your Eyes On the Prize: Making Local Governments Work for You

There is more at stake than winning your issue or electing your candidate. You also want to further position yourself and your club members to be more effective and recognized. Being a political insider is an important way to be heard and to influence decisions.

Here are some useful guidelines you need to consider as you become involved in the political process:

1. One of the access points into local/state government is through public service on boards and commissions. Where does the search start for a person interested in serving on a public board? Who actually makes the decisions on your city, county or state level? What are the criteria used for these appointments?
2. In certain large urban areas, Arab Americans have formed “liaison commissions” with city and county government to represent the concerns and resources of the Arab American community on a permanent basis. Are there other ethnic models on the local and state levels in your area that can guide you? What other structural options are available for groups of Arab Americans to meet on a regular basis with local officials?
3. Regardless of the size of the community in a given city or state, there are issues of concern that Arab Americans need to lobby for the attention or resources of state government. These range from social service, educational, economic or political needs. What are the most effective contacts to pursue in effective lobbying among both elected officials and the administration infrastructure? How can you best maintain a presence among state policy makers?
4. At times, issues which seem to be national and foreign policy in nature have repercussions on the local level. For example, both Michigan and Ohio have debated and voted on issues regarding Israeli bonds. Arab Americans have led the fight and found the right local language and issues to wage their campaigns. Where should such campaigns begin? What information needs to be gathered in order to start? Who at the state level makes these decisions?

Always keep in mind that you serve a broader purpose and that you can best meet your own personal goals and the needs of all Arab Americans by positioning yourself. A volunteer is more effective than a person who refuses to get involved. And an appointee or an elected official has a greater voice than a volunteer.

Politics allows you the opportunity to achieve both personal and broader goals.