

FLORIDA ECOSYSTEM OVERVIEW

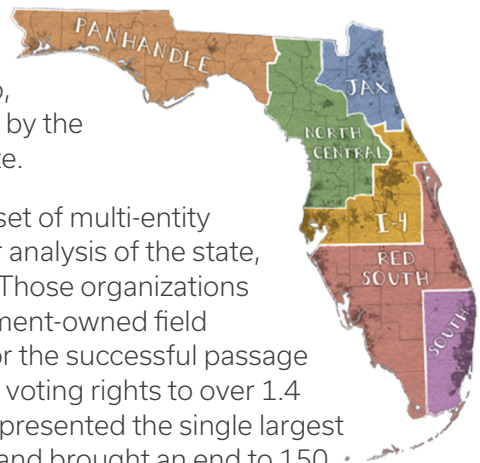
POWER, INFRASTRUCTURE & POSSIBILITY

Context and Need

Roughly 22 million people live in Florida, an increase of seven million people since 2000 when the state decided the US Presidential election by a few hundred votes. Unlike other Southern states where population gain is equivalent to a Rising American Electorate of voters that are flipping the state from red to blue, Florida has remained a difficult state for progressives to win statewide elections. This is in part because population growth is not just driven by growth in people of color but also by retirees from the Midwest and other regions and the complexity of Florida's Latino voters – who are not a monolithic voting bloc.

Florida also has a set of conditions – including ten media markets, five distinct geographic regions¹, a weakened labor movement because of Right To Work laws passed decades ago, assaults on voting rights, and consistent long-term investments by the Right – that make Florida both expensive and difficult to organize.

While some write off Florida as unwinnable or too expensive, a set of multi-entity progressive organizations has been developing a deeper power analysis of the state, building a long-term strategy to win elections and policy fights. Those organizations built an alignment table that has successfully launched a movement-owned field vendor, developed new media infrastructure, and helped anchor the successful passage of Amendment 4, a grassroots citizen's initiative which restored voting rights to over 1.4 million Floridians with past felony convictions. Amendment 4 represented the single largest expansion of voting rights in the United States in half a century and brought an end to 150 years of a Jim Crow-era law in Florida.



Florida offers insights into the power that is possible when deep alignment is cultivated, and how ongoing efforts to generate independent resources can fund political strategy.

Innovation: Florida Deep Alignment and Rigorous Power Analysis

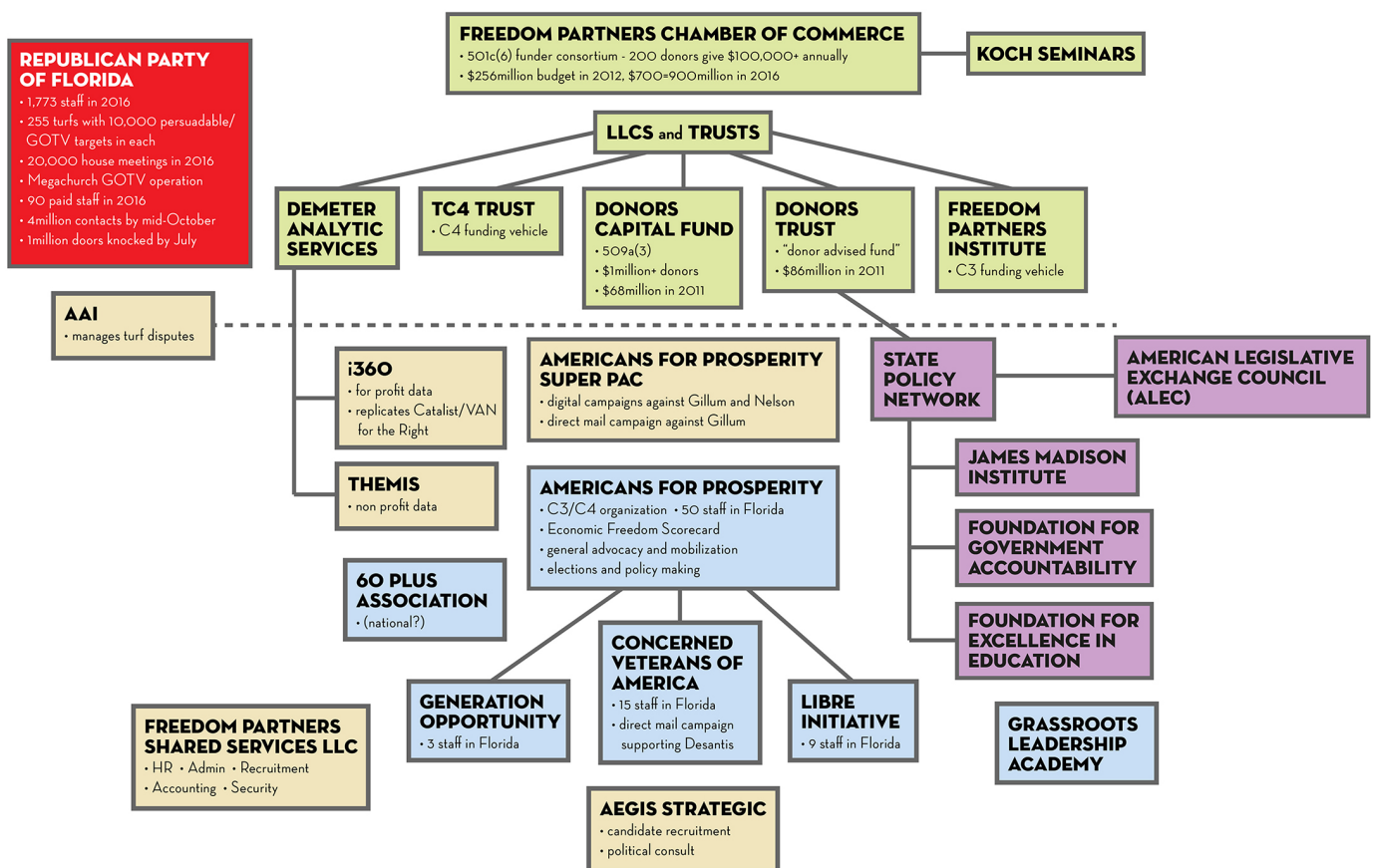
In 2014, a set of organizations came together, not with the intent of forming a coalition around a particular campaign or strategy, but to build long-term alignment around a shared analysis of the state, to cultivate shared capacities, to align civic engagement and political programs, and to develop a shared organizing strategy capable of obtaining statewide progressive governance. In 2016, the Florida Statewide Alignment Table (SWAG) was formed, consisting of SEIU, New Florida Majority, Florida Immigrant Rights Coalition, Organize Florida, Faith in Florida, Dream Defenders, and Jobs with Justice.

About This Report. This case study was a joint-project of Independent Resource Generation HUB, a project of the Amalgamated Foundation, New Left Accelerator (NLA), and The Capacity Shop, NLA's sister 501(c)(3). It is the first in a series of case studies whose purpose is to examine and chronicle innovation in state-based infrastructure and economic experiments that make bold power-building work possible.



This process was neither quick nor easy, and involved outside funding to support a facilitation process (with groups such as the Grassroots Policy Project and the Management Center) and occasional advice from organizers in other states who were undertaking similar efforts. The process itself evolved over a few years. Particularly challenging was building the trust necessary for organizations to be transparent about budgets, fundraising, and positioning in a competitive nonprofit industrial complex context.

What also set this effort apart was a recognition that Florida has been the testing ground for right wing ideology and advancement. Florida was the first state to pass Right To Work laws and is home to the Libre Initiative which is focused on organizing Latinos. Organizers then and now mapped out the kind of infrastructure they were contesting with: a wide variety of LLCs, trusts, charitable entities, capital funds, firms, and an integrated leadership pipeline. Below is a map of the right wing infrastructure in Florida.²



Many states have state power configurations, but Florida's is unique in its depth, their joint creation of a LLC, and deeply aligned theory of change. In addition, the two largest organizing groups in the state, Organize Florida and New Florida Majority, formally merged in 2021 to become Florida Rising. These organizations are moving together in a formation that is unusual and worth replicating.

Key Lessons Learned from Florida's Organizational Alignment

Process for Deeper Alignment

The process for deeper alignment in states must be driven by in-state leaders, but can be supported by outside funding specifically for facilitation and planning. Alignment fails when it is driven by funder interest or the promise of funding, though funders can play a catalytic role by investing in a process like the one developed in Florida. It is also worth noting the value of having high-level staff from the outside help construct and support the process.

Structural Understanding of Opposition

Florida's power analysis of the Right is focused on infrastructure, not momentary campaigns, legislative fights, or candidates. Their approach to understanding the opposition is structural and forward-looking, rather than rooted in short-term fights.

Unraveling False Competition for Resources

Leaders unraveled the false sense of competition for foundation resources, pointing to transparency around money as one of the most difficult issues to overcome. Leaders shifted their mindset away from competing with one another to jointly taking responsibility for the ecosystem.

Balancing Vision with Reality

Florida has a vision for a complex infrastructure that equals their opponents, but also recognize that their state has a set of challenging geographic, demographic, and economic conditions that must be overcome.

INNOVATION: HARD KNOCKS LLC

History and Legal Structure

Hard Knocks LLC was created in 2018 as a corporate entity (C-corporation) with individual owners who played leadership roles in movement organizations. As a field vendor, Hard Knocks provides canvassing, community engagement, and electoral services. Hard Knocks focuses primarily on Get Out The Vote efforts and door-to-door persuasion campaigns. In 2022, the entity was changed to a S-corporation for tax purposes.

In 2018, Hard Knocks employed 1,811 full- and part-time field staff who worked on door-to-door voter canvassing efforts. They knocked on 1.9 million doors for Win Justice and the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, helping to win 63 percent approval for a ballot initiative that overturned a 150-year voting ban for people with felony convictions.

In 2020, Hard Knocks employed 4,678 individuals and ran programs that knocked on nearly 2 million doors for the Florida general election, as well as 850,000 doors for the US Senate runoff election in Georgia. During non-election years, core staff ranges from five to ten people, depending on projects.

Unlike a nonprofit, the corporate structure of Hard Knocks allows it to take contracts from nonpartisan nonprofits, partisan organizations, and for-profit companies. Profits are corporate dollars, the most legally unrestricted dollars in the post-Citizens United world, and thus can be reinvested in political and organizing work.

Challenges that Hard Knocks Seeks to Solve

Lack of Control of the Means of Production of Politics

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in Florida politics with little to show for it. National field vendors and operatives receive lucrative contracts to drop in, develop programs that are not rooted in the communities they serve, underperform, and depart following the election is over leaving little to nothing behind to sustain organizing work.³

Lack of Movement-Owned Data

Whichever organization collects data often owns the data. Leaders wanted a movement aligned field vendor to ensure greater control of data following the election – but also as an opportunity to collect additional important data around issues about which people care, such as gauging willingness to attend a meeting.

Inability to Strategically Engage in Political Power Building Work

Nonprofit groups lack the freedom to engage in a full spectrum of activities that help to build power for their communities, including political activity and working to elect progressive candidates.

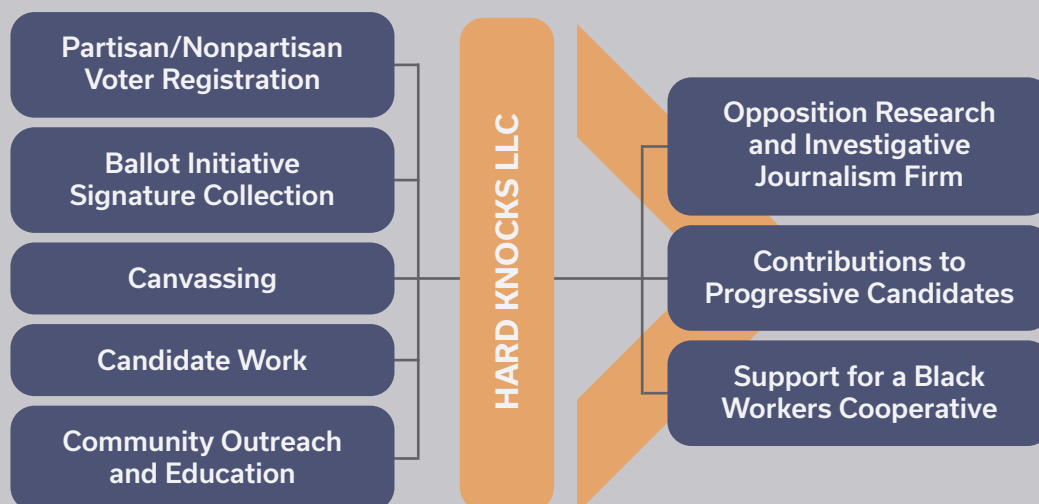
Organizers needed electoral field capacity that could be used for candidate campaigns – especially when their own members decided to run for office.

Lack of Independent Revenue For Sustained Power Building Work

Florida faced an acute need for independent and unrestricted revenue that could sustain a broader range of power building strategies year-round. This required sources of funding separate from 501(c)(3) foundation grants. In addition, the boom-and-bust cycle of electoral funding was hampering organizers' ability to sustain their work throughout the course of the year, leading to loss of valuable capacity and momentum at the end of each election cycle.

How Money Moves

Below is an overview of how capital currently flows through Hard Knocks LLC. The leaders of the organization are considering options and recently changed their legal structure to a S-corporation.



Benefits of the Innovation

Corporate Structure Allows for a Full Range of Charitable and Political Power Building Activities

Hard Knocks completes partisan and nonpartisan voter registration, canvassing, signature collection for ballot initiatives, candidate work, and community outreach and education – effectively serving all sectors of movement work.

Hard Knocks Generates Unrestricted Revenue to Sustain Year-Round Power Building Work

The income generated by Hard Knocks supports power building and political work. Hard Knocks recently created a media firm that will focus on investigative journalism and opposition research.

Revenue, Data, and Means of Production of Politics Remain In-State and In Service of Organizing

Hard Knocks keeps data in state and shares it with those who gathered the data in the first place.

Key Considerations for the Field Vendor Model

Staffing a Business Start-Up is Not the Same as Staffing a Nonprofit

Start-ups need staff that have specific business related experience. This can sometimes be developed on the charitable side and moved over, but more frequently it means hiring from the outside. There is inherent risk that those staff will bring a set of bad habits and corporate culture that may not be values-aligned. Developing staff that is aligned in an entity that is both for-profit and focused on power building is difficult. Time must be taken to manage the expectations of people brought into these ventures.

Field Alignment on Governance of Corporate Entities is Critical

The governance of corporate entities is different from governance in nonprofits. Movement leaders must take time to align on how the corporation will be governed and how income will be spent.

A Field Vendor Model Requires Scale to be Profitable

Like many businesses, field vendors require scale to be profitable. Small contracts can lose money at times, given the sophistication and high cost of legal compliance, and operating across geographies requires significant start-up costs. Movement leaders must have important – and honest – conversations about scale, profit/loss, and the value that non-income producing contracts bring to the organization.

This is Not a Community Organization: it is a Business

While the purpose of having a field vendor is to benefit the movement, it is a business that provides a service, has hard deliverables, and must make smart decisions around costs per voter registration card, signatures collected, or doors knocked. Blending business skills with movement know-how is critical – and may require recruiting from other sectors of the economy in order to be successful.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/politics/florida-political-geography/>
- 2 Provided by Eric Brakkenn
- 3 *Who Controls the Means of Production of Politics? 2018*