

Political Organizing on the Environment

Deb Callahan

President, League of Conservation Voters

March 25, 2004

I want to give a message to those of you who have thought about dedicating your lives to this work and have a personal dream of making a difference in the world: I stand before you today to tell you that you can. Believe in yourself, and you can accomplish things that you really dream of doing. It's important today that we believe that we have the personal power to make a difference in the world. That's why I'm here today — to talk to you about the environment and campaigns and politics. They offer us an amazing way to reach out through the electoral process and really try to achieve change.

You're probably very familiar with the history of environmental politics. But I'd just like to take a moment and step back. We all know that in the 1970s the environment was an emerging area. When Richard Nixon was president, there were great Republicans leading the Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality. There was bipartisan leadership in Congress, which accomplished great things like the passage of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act and the protection of great public lands areas. In the early days, environmentalists had some very simple ways of trying to support those elected officials who were doing good things.

The League of Conservation Voters basically did two things and continues to pursue those two strategies to this day. First, we work in campaigns and elections to elect good environmentalists to office and to un-elect people who are never going to be persuaded to vote for the environment. The second thing we do is work to hold elected members of Congress and federal officials accountable for their actions on the environment.

We're a federally focused organization. One thing that we put out every year – and we have for thirty-four years – is the National Environmental Scorecard. Every year, every member of Congress gets a grade on their environmental voting record. That is an important part of government accountability. It enables citizens to know how their elected officials are doing in Washington. For a typical citizen, it's very difficult to know how your elected official is voting on the wide array of issues included in "the environment." Our organization provides that information to citizens by giving each elected official a simple number from zero to one hundred percent every year.

In addition to our scorecards, we became involved in campaigns and elections. We started a political action committee, and we wrote PAC checks – which are just checks up to five thousand dollars – and we endorsed candidates. We also paid for people to go to work for those candidates' campaigns, in order to ensure that someone representing the environmental community was in the office every day working to elect that candidate. We really had a great grassroots spirit about elections in the early days of the environmental movement – that was our great strength. As the environmental movement grew over the years, we were able to build a great body of environmental law, which has been supported by both Republicans and Democrats until fairly recently.

In the 1990s, our organization started to do "remote control campaigning" to reach out to voters and educate them about candidates' environmental records. We started buying our election work. We started paying for television spots. We started paying for radio. We started paying for direct mail to be sent to voters. That was the way the campaigns were run, and we were doing the best we could to stay up with the electoral arms race. However, in 2000 and 2002, we witnessed the beginning of a real change in the way campaigns are run. We took some pretty bad losses, and sat down after the last election and talked to voters and people who had participated in our campaigns. We learned that voters are tuning out the TV spots. We learned that people are feeling very disconnected from the political process and the democratic process.

The other thing that we saw in the elections is a very closely divided country. In 2000, ten states were won by three and a half percent or less. Six states were won by one percent or less. New Mexico was even closer

than Florida in the presidential election in the year 2000. These close races instructed us that a few hundred or a few thousand votes would have turned the presidential election. This contradicts the rule of thumb in electoral politics that your mail and TV must reach about eight hundred thousand people if you're running in a Congressional race and millions of people if you're running for a statewide Senate seat.

What these numbers tell us is that the country is closely divided. We have equal numbers of people on the right and the left and fewer people in the middle. Our country is becoming more and more partisan. We expect to see this trend result in very, very close elections in 2004 and possibly into the next few sets of elections. So, the fact that a) we are seeing a diminishing return on our paid campaigns and b) political campaigns are being won in many key places by very, very narrow margins tells me that it might be time to go back to the grassroots — back to the future, back to what we did in the 1970s when we were just starting to get involved in campaigns and elections.

FOUR KINDS OF POWER IN POLITICS

What we've done is revisit the kinds of things we can do in an election. There are essentially four kinds of power in politics.

- There's the power of money. That's something we hear a lot about. And frankly, environmentalists will never have as much money as the corporate special interests. So, we're not going to win based on money in politics.
- Second, there's the power of incumbency. An incumbent has a great deal of power in the electoral process. But I don't happen to be an elected official, and actually there are very few environmentalists who run for office.
- The third kind of power in politics is the power of ideas — and that's something we are rich in as an environmental community. Frankly, we have, I believe, the right ideas. Science tells us that. The world around us tells us that. Economists, when they do honest, full accounting, tell us that.
- And the fourth kind of power in politics is people. And, again, that's what we're rich in. There are about eleven million unique

members of environmental organizations in this country today. That's national, state, and local organizations, as best we can tell. As a comparison, there are roughly thirteen million members of the AFL-CIO. Now, do you consider the environmental community to be nearly as powerful in the political game as organized labor and the AFL-CIO? No.

I believe this occurs for two reasons. First, we don't think of ourselves that way and, second, we aren't organized that way.

In this election cycle, it's time to reframe the way we think of ourselves, and it's time to get organized – to get political in the context of campaigns and elections. Therefore, our organization is making the decision to throw 80 percent of our money into grassroots operations, rather than into buying TV ads. We have targeted four states that are among the closest swing states in the country: Florida, New Mexico, Wisconsin and Oregon. Those happen to also be four of the states that have some of the strongest environmental citizens in the country. They also happen to be states where Ralph Nader is a factor.

I'll talk about Florida for just a second. While Bush won Florida by 537 votes, Ralph Nader received 97,000 votes. So, you can't say that Ralph Nader did not have an impact on the outcome in Florida.

We are going to invest between half a million and three quarters of a million dollars in each one of those states for grassroots organizing. We are planning on recruiting twenty-five thousand volunteers from around the country and getting them to work in one of those four states. On May 26th, we're starting our door-to-door canvasses in key areas of these four states, and we're going to run three waves of canvasses. We are going to start with a student canvass through the summer in these four states. In the fall, we will have a paid canvass, and then during the last month of the election we will recruit local people.

And during that election period from May 26th to November 3rd, we intend to knock on a million and a half doors in four states, which means a half a million doors, three times. And we're also going to be doing a lot of mail and a lot of events and a lot of free media. So this is going to be very exciting.

We're doing something different to figure out whom we should be talking to in these campaigns. Historically, what we've done is look at people who are members of environmental organizations as our constituency. But we've learned that such an approach is not necessarily best. The people we tend to approach may have very different interests, but they have something in common: they are joiners. They are the kind of people who write twenty-five dollar checks to be a member of the Sierra Club or the Audubon Society or the League of Conservation Voters. By focusing on these people, you're getting a certain slice of America. Frankly, that slice of America looks like this room – mostly white, middle-class, upper middle-class, college-educated. Those are joiners. And we're missing a lot of America if we're only talking to environmental members.

So what we've learned is that people who look like me aren't necessarily our strongest constituency. For example, when I worked for the Russ Feingold senatorial campaign in Wisconsin, we ran a poll to determine our target swing audience. You'd think in Wisconsin those targets would look like me. But guess what?

In Wisconsin, the swing audience that was most influenced by local environmental issues was Milwaukee's African-American and Latino communities. There is a lot of lead paint and air pollution in those communities, and people were very aware of quality of life issues.

You see the same phenomenon around the country. For example, one in four kids in Harlem today has asthma. You go to Harlem and you talk about air quality, and you really have an issue that has punch. In Washington, D.C., we've recently learned that the levels of lead in the drinking water exceed the federal standards and the city government waited a year to tell its citizens. That's an election issue for the African-American community in Washington, D.C.

What I want to do in this election is to get beyond our core constituency and talk to the other parts of America who care deeply about these issues. So how are we doing that? We're engaged in a very interesting voter profiles project. We are breaking states down into regions and doing very detailed polling. For example, we treat Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico as the southwest region. In this region, we have already performed a five thousand sample poll, which is over the top by two. We polled such an extraordinary number of people because we are trying to build a profile of what an environmental voter looks like. We asked five thousand people about their attitudes toward certain environmental issues. Our pollsters used the data to sort people into ten different categories. At the very top, you have the true-blue greens, and then you take a step down to the pea-greens, and then you go on down until you find the dark-browns. What we're going to do in this election is to talk to each layer of people differently. We are going to focus on the people in the layers below the true-blue greens, who may think about environmental issues when they vote. It's possible to reach these people if you choose the right issue.

It is important to bring these people into our conversation because we want to persuade them to vote for environmental candidates and we also hope that this election broadens our environmental constituency.

Once we have these ten categories of people, we will purchase commercially available lists of people who subscribe to *Outside* magazine or drive a Prius or own a Safeway check card. Although we may hate all this information that society is gathering on us today, the information is available and we're going to use it because the other side uses it, because it's legal, and because we have to win this election. Once we use this information to create profiles, we are going to cross them with the voter file. That way, we will know how often these people vote and whether they need to be registered. It will enable us to treat different voters differently. Based on this information, LCV will target about one hundred twenty-five thousand people across our four swing states. This is a very specific, very strategic campaign that we

will use throughout this election, and I think it's going to do a lot of good things for us.

In addition to pursuing this targeted, grassroots effort, the environmental community is working very closely with other communities in this election. Over the past ten years, we have been truly insular in who we've worked with. This recent trend deviates from the historical patterns of the environmental movement. For instance, in the 1970s, the United Steel Workers was one of organizations that founded The League of Conservation Voters. We used to work much more frequently with the oil and chemical and atomic workers on worker safety issues. We're hoping to restore these relationships in response to the new election procedures brought about through the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill. This legislation has changed the laws in such a way that the national political parties can't raise the soft money that previously supported their get-out-the-vote activities. Since the parties cannot run these coordinated campaigns, the constituency groups have a larger responsibility. We are working with the AFL-CIO and Planned Parenthood and the NAACP and many other diverse organizations to ensure a strong get-out-the-vote effort.

We are collaborating so we know what the other groups are doing, when their press conferences are going to be, and what their messages are. We are focusing on the language we use to make sure that we don't alienate another group's constituency. For example, a group of environmentalists and labor union members just held two roundtables in Minnesota for the Kerry campaign. We were live on television and totally unscripted. During this conversation, it became clear that people in the labor movement are really worried about jobs. They understand that developing new energy technologies can create new jobs and new businesses in our country. Environmentalists clearly have a strong agenda that supports these alternative energy technologies, and we started to talk about wind power. One environmentalist described the potential for wind power in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota, and he mentioned that it would avoid the need to build six more power plants. The AFL-CIO representative explained that the environmentalist's argument implied that the promotion of wind power would eliminate potential jobs in six power plants. The environmentalist learned to rephrase his argument to emphasize the new businesses and new jobs that will be

created due to the development of new energy sources. This exchange taught us that the environmental and labor communities tend to talk in two different ways about the same agenda item. It is critical to frame the conversation in a way that brings the communities together.

I will mention one other new activity that the League of Conservation Voters is pursuing in this election. We are going to be performing a lot of message work. Historically, polling on the environment has shown that three environmental issues may serve as election issues. These are the “backyard” issues of clean air, clean water, and toxic waste cleanup. However, our data shows that we may have a different kind of environmental debate in this election. I believe that the environment is an election issue, and it is right now being debated. I’m going to tell you right now how to listen to the dialogue so you understand.

You need to think about the environment as a category, not an issue. Lead in drinking water is an issue. Houston air pollution is an issue. Endangered species is an issue. These individual issues poll much more highly than “environment” as a category, and that is even before the issue is personalized to an individual community.

JOHN KERRY AS THE ENVIRONMENTAL CANDIDATE

And now let’s talk about John Kerry. He is someone who understands and really believes this stuff. He is someone my organization has endorsed. He is someone who has one of the strongest lifetime environmental voting records that we have seen in federal government today. At the time we endorsed him – about a month and a half ago – he had a ninety-six percent lifetime LCV rating. Most of the negative marks he received were due to the fact that he missed a vote because he was somewhere else.

Kerry has a nearly perfect environmental voting score. By comparison, Al Gore had a sixty-four percent lifetime LCV score. It's a magnitude different and it's a very important thing for people to understand.

The measure for me of a presidential candidate's commitment is: "Do you talk about my issue and do you talk about it in front of audiences that are friendly as well as audiences that are hostile?" First of all, John Kerry has stood up all over the country and talked about these issues. The one that really stands out in my mind is when he attended the Michigan Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner. That is the big statewide Democratic fundraising dinner that costs two hundred and fifty bucks to get in. All the muckety-mucks are there. In Michigan, one of the biggest Democratic powers is the United Auto Workers, who have not been our best friends on fuel efficiency standards and climate change. John Kerry got up at that dinner and told them how we need to strengthen fuel efficiency standards. He said that we need to reach – as quickly as we possibly can – thirty-six miles per gallon and we need to close the SUV loophole. People's jaws just dropped. But it was a "truth to power" moment, which means a heck of a lot.

I've been with John Kerry on the campaign trail, and I've heard his stump speech, and it's very consistent. He's talking about the environment, but he's completely throwing out the rulebook. Instead of talking about what I would have told him to talk about – clean air, clean water, and toxic waste cleanup – he's tying these issues to the prominent issues of the day that are on the minds of Americans. He says five things, and I bet they're going to resonate.

- First – we don't want to send our sons and daughters over to wars in the Middle East because of our reliance on foreign oil here in the U.S., so we need to have new alternative technologies and efficient energy technologies in this country today. He says that in every speech.
- The second thing he says: we need more jobs in this country today because this current administration has lost a record number of jobs. One way the Kerry administration would increase new jobs

is by stimulating alternative energy technologies that we can market to other countries.

- Third, he talks about how this administration walked away from the table at Kyoto. Bush walked away from the international global warming treaty, and he uses that as an example of the American withdrawal from the rest of the world.
- The fourth thing he talks about is corporate special interests. He invariably talks about the rollbacks of environmental policies to appease corporate contributors.
- The fifth thing he talks about is drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which has become symbolic of saving public lands.

What I'm seeing is that this environmental dialogue is rolling out in a new way. I like it a lot because John Kerry is weaving these issues into the fabric of the other issues that society cares deeply about. Politically, it's a very smart way to reconnect the vast body of Americans to the environmental agenda. It's a way to help people understand that the local and global environmental agendas resonate in their everyday lives.

I'd like to raise one final issue before I open it up to Q&A. A three-way poll that was done last week shows Bush at 46 percent, Kerry at 41 percent, and Nader at 4 percent. Polls bump up and down a little bit, and another one that came out last week actually shows Nader at seven. Our pollster tells us that Nader draws nearly one hundred percent from Kerry. From an environmental perspective, my organization has endorsed John Kerry because he has the strongest environmental record of anybody who is running in this field. We will be making the case to environmentalists around the country that a vote for Nader is nothing but a vote for Bush. Although Ralph Nader only got 2.74 percent of the vote in 2000, he absolutely changed the face of that election.

In closing, I want to try and convince all of you that as individuals it is critical that you register and that you vote. It is critical that you pay attention and you are informed voters as environmentalists. As someone who runs an organization supporting Kerry, I believe it's absolutely critical that I weigh in on the debate. I will be advocating strongly on behalf of my candidate, whom I firmly believe to be the strongest environmental leader we've ever seen.

In June, when my organization put out a report card on the Bush White House, we gave Bush an F on the environment. That was the first F in our thirty-four year history. John Kerry has a ninety-six percent lifetime LCV score.

We have a chance here to un-elect the worst environmental president in the history of our country and to elect the strongest environmental president we will have ever seen in this country. Personally, I think we need someone who has that grasp of environmental politics and environmental policies to become president because our environmental laws over the last three and a half years have been under such assault. We need somebody who embraces these issues and knows how to rebuild and improve the policies and regulations that have been torn down. I'm very excited about that.

We have cards on the back table that say "Some things were never meant to be recycled," and they have George Bush's face in the middle. This is also our sign-up card for our Environmental Victory Project, which is the volunteer project that I was talking about. We'll not only be asking people to go to key states, but we are also going to have an internet program. So if you can't pick up and go to Florida, New Mexico, Wisconsin or Oregon, we would love to have you sign up for our list-serv, get information through our weekly reports, and find a way to volunteer.

Q & A

Q: You mentioned Kerry's discourse on environmental issues. Do you think he derived that strategy from his polling or from his advisors?

A: There is one option that you left out — it was an idea he actually had for himself! What a concept — they think for themselves!

First of all, we have not polled to test his message. My polls over the years have shown that clean air, clean water, toxic waste cleanup, and maybe local public lands issues are consistently the issues that the public seems to vote on. So I am observing that he's doing something entirely different. I think Kerry is doing this from instinct. I love that because it tells me that this is something that he believes, and that's why I have the confidence that he's going to stick with it.

You can compare this to Al Gore, who is a strong environmentalist. I was his National Field Director in 1988, the first time he ran for President. I traveled with him all over the country. As a campaign person, he drove me crazy, he talked about climate change so much. You'd stand him up in New Hampshire in front of a room of senior citizens at a retirement home and you'd think he was going to talk about health care and social security – but he talked about climate change. In comparison, he was very restrained in 2000. I personally believe that he would have won the election – he would have won Florida – if he had talked about the environment. Our numbers show that.

Another interesting thing our polls reveal is that Democrats have a huge advantage against the Republicans in response to the question: “Which party do you trust the most on the environment?” Given the Bush record, John Kerry has a lot of raw material to work with. There can't be a much greater distinction.

Q: Can you compare the power of the labor movement and the power of the environmental movement? What is the optimal organizational structure for collaboration among the different groups?

A: That's a great question. I compare the AFL-CIO and the environmental movement based on sheer numbers of members. That said, the labor movement is very different. For environmentalists, membership in the Sierra Club or The Nature Conservancy is not our bread and butter. But for people who belong to unions, it's about their paycheck and their health care benefits. So, the level of commitment within labor unions is much higher. Environmentalists often have an ideological tie, whereas unions have a much more personal connection. Our people write a lot more letters to Congress and testify – these are some of the most civic-minded people you'll ever meet! I think our base is actually much more engaged in the democratic process in some ways.