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## Latest Research: Summary 4. Environmental Nonprofit Campaigns and State Competition: Influences on Climate Policy in California

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## Latest Research: Summary 4

# Environmental Nonprofit Campaigns and State Competition: Influences on Climate Policy in California

From Nina Hall and Ros Taplin, *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Vol. 21 (2010), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i27928192>.

### Context

In the last three decades, nonprofit organizations have tried to address climate change through specific climate campaigns that are aimed at influencing US government policy. Hall and Taplin (2010) dive into the relationship between nonprofits, levels of US government, and relevant policy.



In order to understand this relationship, they examine how six nonprofits in California were able to influence public opinion and climate-change policy in the state. These six nonprofits are the Sierra Club, the Union of Concerned Scientists, Greenpeace USA, the Bluewater Network, the Vote Solar Initiative, and the Apollo Alliance.

Through interviews with representatives from these nonprofits, Hall and Taplin learned more about their campaign activities, their perception of their campaigns' success in influencing policy,

and their general thoughts about the political context of the day.

### Key Takeaways

- These nonprofits were most successful when they campaigned with local and state governments, rather than with the federal government. In turn, these local and state governments implemented policies that later influenced the federal government. Nonprofits could focus on grassroots initiatives to push solutions forward.
- These nonprofits played an active role in lobbying for the California government's new climate policies. For example, their campaigns helped pass AB1493, a bill that sought to reduce vehicle emissions in the state. Without their active lobbying, AB1493 and other bills most likely would not have passed.
- These nonprofits were successful because they created coalitions with diverse organizations, including unions, for-profits, and other nonprofits. Despite their differences, these organizations helped the state government recognize the need for policy initiatives by simply working together.
- These nonprofits were most successful when they brought ideas and solutions to state governments, rather than just telling state governments that climate change is a problem.

### Application

Nonprofit professionals can be more intentional about coalition building, policy influence, and messaging.

#### *Coalition Building*

Nonprofits who seek out partnerships with other organizations can help drive public interest in their chosen topic. For instance, a unified voice for addressing climate change can provide the incentive for new government policies.

Organizations do not have to align on all values or objectives in order to form a coalition. Nonprofit professionals could seek out these opportunities.

### *Policy Influence*

While many social issues have a far-reaching impact, nonprofits could focus their efforts on grassroots initiatives—working with local and state officials, who can then go on to influence the federal government and other key actors. Nonprofits do not need to take on policy change by themselves.



Influencing local and state policy depends on several factors, not just how passionate nonprofit professionals are. For instance, nonprofits can have more success influencing policy when they have the right “traction.” In this sense, “traction” is the surrounding political and structural context, the policy’s long-term strategy, the nature of the problem, and the strength and competence of actors. For instance, Hall and Taplin note that the then-governor of California was open to progressive climate-change policies such as carbon pricing, and the state itself has a history of climate-centered legislation. These factors helped nonprofits in their efforts to address climate change.

### *Messaging*

When working with officials, nonprofits can focus on “urgency” messaging rather than “fear” messaging. “Urgency” messaging highlights the nature of the problem while offering potential

solutions or recommendations, whereas “fear” messaging focuses solely on the frightening aspects of climate change. Nonprofits could better encourage policy change if they focus on solutions and next steps rather than the social issue’s detrimental effects.

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