



Membership VS Supportership:

TOWARDS A MODERN ENGAGEMENT MODEL

On behalf of the Gosling Foundation, Nature Canada, and the
Sustainability Network

By Matt Price

May 20 2020

Introduction

“We’ve got less members all the time because they are aging and sadly passing away.”

- Jordan Ignatiuk, Nature Saskatchewan

Is the membership model dying? That’s not just an academic question for the many NGOs now grappling with fewer members, less money, and less volunteer participation - all the things that make their organizations “go.” It’s a question of whether these organizations thrive, and in some cases, survive.

Nature groups are particularly affected by this conversation because of their shared DNA, inherited from forerunners like the National Geographic Society. In 1888, membership there began as something quite exclusive: you had to be nominated by existing members and were probably well educated, rich, white, and male. Membership also then became bound together with special access to a magazine and other benefits. This is a practice that many nature groups adopted and one that persists in a lesser way today.

It’s not that today’s nature groups are unwelcoming to people of all kinds. It’s more that the structures and practices they use to manage those relationships may not have kept up with the times. The way in which people want to participate in society is changing, and this affects a range of organizations from companies, to media, to NGOs. For groups used to doing things a certain way, this change can show up as falling rates of people joining them unless they adapt and try new forms of engagement.

When we talk about the “membership model,” there isn’t actually one model, but rather several practices that groups use to structure participation that can vary across a spectrum. It’s probably inaccurate, then, to allege that the model is dying since the model itself can adapt. It’s more insightful to investigate whether any one group’s model is dying, and ultimately that will show up in the numbers - for example, are the number of donors and volunteers going up or down over time?

Some groups have chosen to make a break with the past by jettisoning the word “member” in favour of something like “supporter.” That can provide some internal clarity for organizational change. It can also manage expectations with participants themselves, particularly if being a member came with certain voting and decision-making rights they now no longer have.

What we call participants, though, is ultimately less important than how we treat them. Whether they are members or supporters, we need them to be active, donating time and money to achieve our mission. This paper argues that there are better or worse ways to do that in today’s world. It complements Nature Canada’s [Engagement Organizing report](#) and can be read together for greater impact.

We’ll explore the issues in part through the experiences of four nature organizations: the [Bruce Trail Conservancy](#), [Nature NB](#) (New Brunswick), [Nature Saskatchewan](#), and [Washington Trails Association](#). These organizations exist along a spectrum of making changes to the way they deal with membership.

Six Dimensions Of The Membership Model

While there is no one fixed membership model, here we will explore six dimensions that make up any membership model. Those six are:

1. **Entry** - How a person joins.
2. **Motivation** - Why a person joins.
3. **Governance** - How a group makes decisions and the role of members or supporters in that.
4. **Fundraising** - How a group raises money from its members or supporters.
5. **Engagement** - Who a group tailors activities to and how.
6. **Belonging** - How attached people feel to the group.

Each organization will make choices - or inherit them - about these six dimensions that will comprise its model, whether or not they choose to call participants “members” or something else. In this section we’ll create a hypothetical “Traditional” membership model in order to contrast a more modern supporter-driven model in a later section.

Entry

In the Traditional membership model, there is a clear barrier to entry, a standard to meet that separates those who are “in” and those who are “out.”

The National Geographic Society example (circa 1888) above had a high barrier, with prospective members nominated by existing members and vetted by others. Even today, some groups like the Freemasons still set high barriers to entry to maintain exclusivity.

For most membership groups, though, the barrier to entry is a simple fee - pay the amount and you are a member. Usually this is an annual amount, but there may also be an option to pay a higher fee for a lifetime membership. Nature Saskatchewan for example has a tiered membership fee for students, seniors, and families, as well as a lifetime membership option. ¹

Nature groups are also sometimes federations - that is, collections of local groups. When you pay your membership fee to the local group, you automatically become a member of the federation. The Bruce Trail Conservancy has nine local clubs, and when you join you can choose to join one or more of the local clubs. ²

The basic point here is with a clear threshold of entry, a group creates a category of people that it tailors its management around.

Motivation

People join organizations for a variety of reasons, and often for a few reasons at the same time. Such reasons might include identification with a cause or a desire for community.

In the Traditional membership model, though, an element of a *transaction* is usually a prominent feature. “For your membership fee, you will get access to...” is part of the pitch. For many nature groups, historically the transaction included a magazine and exclusive or reduced price access to events like nature outings. Joining the Bruce Trail Conservancy once came with free entry to parks. Groups may also give members calendars, trail maps, or “swag” like tote bags or t-shirts.



Photo Credit: Washington Trails Association

Nature NB is an example of an organization that used to provide a magazine to members, but moved away from this in the digital age. Today they still provide some minimal exclusivity to members such as giving them first crack at registering for its annual Festival of Nature. But the transaction is diminishing in importance: Director of Engagement Emma McIntyre says many of its traditional members are retirees with some free time looking to participate in something meaningful to them. ³ Again, people join for a variety of reasons.

Governance

Every organization requires a way of running itself - who makes the decisions and how, which can be called "governance." The Traditional membership model has an answer to this. Members constitute a voting block that elects officers who exercise decision-making authority as part of a Board of Directors. "That's one of the biggest things members can do is vote," says Jackie Randle with Bruce Trail Conservancy, particularly now that transactional membership benefits have diminished.

To be elected to the Board, a person usually needs to be a member. Such elections usually happen at the annual general meeting (AGM). Beyond the AGM, the executive will either split itself into functional committees, and/or also try to engage other members to serve on them, particularly if the organization doesn't have staff to do the work.

If a group is incorporated as a non profit society of some kind, these governance structures will probably be codified in bylaws filed with the relevant level of government. There may also be legal rules regarding things like minimum numbers of directors and residency requirements.

It's unlikely when a person signs up as a member that they were attracted to play these governance roles. Moreover, more than a few groups run their governance meetings with [Robert's Rules of Order](#) (created in 1876) - a good way to send a new recruit to sleep or running for the exit!

Fundraising

In the Traditional membership model, annual membership dues are the main source of revenue. This means that membership drives and membership renewals become quite literally the main business of the organization.

In this model, the level that the membership fee is set at becomes key. Too low, and revenues drop; but too high and potential new members may be scared off. Groups often have a tiered fee, giving discounts to students and seniors, and setting a price for entire families to join as a unit.

Relying on memberships for fundraising is clearly a challenge for those groups with declining membership. But, it's still working for some groups like the Bruce Trail Conservancy which has over 10,000 members and has taken steps to secure them, such as having automatic annual renewals instead of needing to chase members each year to renew. It also established an ambassador program where one member will recruit others.

Another dimension to fundraising in the membership model concerns some groups' experience with funding agencies who rely on paid membership numbers to assess grant applications. "One of the reasons we're hanging on to the membership model has a lot to do with funders wanting to know how many paid members you have," says Ellen Bouvier with Nature Saskatchewan.

Engagement

If members have been promised some kind of transactional relationship with an organization, securing benefits unavailable to non members, then engagement activities will be built around members more exclusively rather than the general public. The original Natural Geographic Society, for example, gave members exclusive access to lectures.

This is true if an event is open only to members. It's also true but to a lesser degree when groups offer tiered pricing for events, open to the general public at one fee but open to members at a lower fee.

This model of engagement can become a bit insular: by catering activities to members, groups lose the opportunity to recruit new people with their activities, hampering their renewal.

Belonging

The other five aspects contribute towards a sense of belonging. Once a member has crossed a clear boundary to be “in” and is catered to and given the opportunity to not only participate more exclusively than the general public but also a voice in running the organization, they may well feel that the group is in some way theirs.

Harvard academic Theda Skocpol dug deep into the U.S. voluntary associations of the 19th and early 20th centuries and found that there were so many group banners and badges that members carried or wore that there was an entire industry of manufacturers specializing in making them. ⁴ Membership was quite literally something you wore on your sleeve in public, and a part of your personal identity. The feeling of belonging was high.

Even today, Emma McIntyre of Nature NB says of their remaining memberships: “We still have our longtime members. It’s something they are very committed to.” But this also means that many group’s membership bases are ageing. “Many of our paid members are ageing and getting in the younger demographic is where we struggle,” said Ellen Bouvier from Nature Saskatchewan.

Social Trends & Challenges

The Traditional membership model evolved over a couple of centuries, based on conditions at the time. It has served many causes well, but as this century began there was a sense that a fundamental shift was underway that would begin to pose serious challenges.

In 2000 Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam released the book [Bowling Alone](#) that documented the decline in membership across a wide range of organizations, including service clubs, political parties, and even bowling leagues. That book also came out before the internet pushed into all aspects of our daily lives, perhaps accelerating the trend.

Other studies have confirmed Putman's central observation: membership in NGOs and political parties have been falling across North America and across the world. ⁵ The reasons for this are varied and debated, but the new reality is that we are collectively "joining" less.

Says Ellen Bouvier from Nature Saskatchewan: "Every time we do strategic planning there's been conversations about moving away from membership completely, because we're realizing it's not a joining society anymore."

That does not mean, however, that we are not still participating; more that the nature of that participation is changing. As one Canadian membership expert [puts it](#): "Membership organizations are experiencing a generational divide. Boomers join associations, young professionals join communities."

Several studies investigate how millennials - those born in the 80's and 90's - prefer to interact with organizations, and find they identify more with the cause than the institution,

and prefer to act together with a group rather than to 'belong' to it. 6 A UNICEF report found that across countries, younger people seek low-barrier participation also as a form of self-expression. 7

Two U.S. divinity students released a fascinating report called "[How We Gather](#)" that examined how millennials are affiliating given a decline in traditional church going. They examined organizations ranging from fitness clubs to arts communities and young professional organizations and found six themes in the ones successfully engaging millennials:

1. **Community:** They foster relationships that centre on service to others
2. **Personal Transformation:** They encourage participants to improve themselves
3. **Social Transformation:** They push for a better world
4. **Purpose Finding:** They help participants clarify and act on their mission in life
5. **Creativity:** They create space for imagination and play
6. **Accountability:** They hold themselves and others responsible for meeting goals

The internet has also sped up the process of people finding and affiliating with causes, with the downside that affiliations can disappear as quickly as they came. There is now a whole new generation of internet-driven organizations like LeadNow and Avaaz that no longer bother with asking people to "join," but rather count people as supporters if they do things in concert with the group, like signing petitions. The better groups follow up with requests for deeper affiliation - like donating or showing up to an event.

Traditional membership groups haven't ignored these trends. Most have embraced the internet and set up websites and social media channels. This has led to a situation where they have contact with people who aren't paid members and have shifted some time and money into maintaining those relationships too, sometimes converting non members into event goers, donors, and volunteers. This has created a hybrid model where groups are managing for both "members" and "supporters." In this way, the membership model is already evolving.



Photo Credit: Bruce Trail Conservancy

Towards a Modern Supporter Model

Given the trends, groups find themselves with an evolving model for participation that can be messy. In interviews for this report, people often used the words “wrestling,” “challenging,” and “struggling.” Unfortunately, there’s no one-size-fits-all fix to transitioning from one clear model to another. Each group will need to evaluate its circumstances.

Returning to the six characteristics that make up model variations can help groups analyse their choices. This section will explore how each of the six can shift in a more modern supporter model that could lead to better results for groups, both financial and in terms of overall participation. In summary table form, this is what those shifts could look like:

| | Traditional Membership Model | Modern Supporter Model |
|-------------|---|--|
| Entry | Fixed barrier to entry | Flexible pathways to entry |
| Motivation | Joining is partly transactional - get a benefit (eg. a nature magazine) | People join for the mission and for community |
| Governance | Membership comes with governance duties | Supporter input invited and acted on, but not obligatory |
| Fundraising | Annual member dues as main fundraising | Donors of all kinds constantly cultivated |
| Engagement | Engagement activities designed around members | Leverage supporters to engage wider public |
| Belonging | Stronger ties based on identity | Looser ties based on activity |

Let's explore the six characteristics one by one.

Entry

In the Traditional model, there is a clear point at which a person crosses over from being a non member to being a member, some threshold to be met whether that's a vote by existing members or a simple fee to be paid. Even if that fee is low, it is nevertheless a barrier to entry.

In a modern supporter model, the organization sets up pathways to entry rather than barriers to maximize the number of people it is in touch with. Once a person is on any of those pathways, they are then asked to travel further towards greater affiliation with the group.

Washington Trails Association used to have a fixed membership fee but shifted its model. Now, anyone who donates even a dollar is considered a member. They did this not only to open things up to a more diverse community, but also found the back-end processing of dues versus other donations was administratively burdensome. Says Kindra Ramos, Washington Trail Association's communications director: "We're a people-first organization, so keeping a sense of membership is important but we're trying to shift our thinking so that everyone who supports us is a member, there's not a clear opt in."

They also have a great low-barrier entry pathway by providing trail information. If anyone Googles a hike, the Washington Trails Association information will come up first in the search. From there there's an opportunity to engage people who comment on trip reports and draw them into the organization.

Nature NB uses social media a lot, inviting people to opt-into their e-newsletter that shares event opportunities and stories about its work. The e-newsletter links back to full-length stories on its website with links to a couple of different ways to get involved. Nature NB also has specific campaigns like petitions to decision makers on protected areas that are useful for identifying new people.

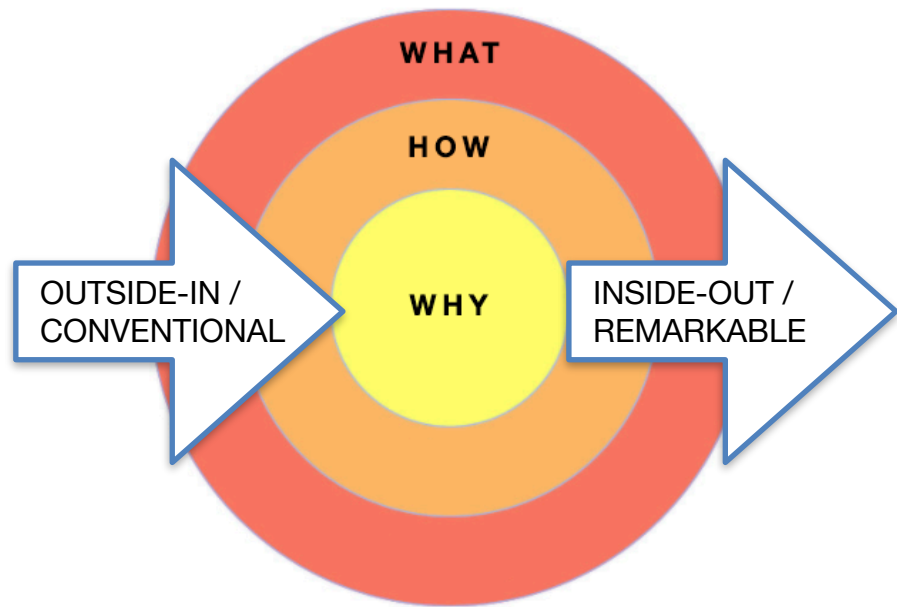
The Bruce Trail Conservancy is starting to track “unique supporters” who can be members, donors, volunteers, purchasers, e-news subscribers, and land owners - there are about twice as many of these as members. Says Jackie Randle: “If they just bought a guide book or t-shirt, we’re sending them communications to let them know of other options to get involved as well.” With hundreds of thousands using the trail each year, there is lots of opportunity for engagement.



Photo Credit: Nature NB

Motivation

Simon Sinek's TEDx talk has been viewed almost 50 million times, a remarkable feat particularly considering it wasn't even one of the main TED talks. In [How great leaders inspire action](#) he introduces us to what he calls the world's simplest idea, "the golden circle," which is actually three circles within one another, Why in the centre, then How, then What. He argues that most ordinary organizations communicate from the outside in, telling us first What they do, whereas the most successful organizations communicate from the inside out, starting with the Why.



Highlighting the Why is the same thing as highlighting a group’s mission or reason for being. Even National Geographic, a pioneer of the transactional approach to motivating membership, was [recently told](#) by fundraising researchers that donors attracted by incentives were more likely to fall away than donors attracted by the group’s philanthropy.

The UK Soil Association acted to improve its membership by honing its mission. It [workshopped](#) what it shares with the public - the results are below:

| UK Soil Association - Before | UK Soil Association - After |
|--|--|
| The Soil Association was formed in 1946 to pioneer a better world – one where we can live in health and in harmony with nature. Today we’re just as dedicated to making positive change happen. We’re farming and growing, buying, cooking and eating. We’re campaigning and researching. Together we’re transforming the way we eat, farm and care for the natural world. | Good food – let’s make it the easy choice for everyone, produced in a way that protects our natural world and allows every farm animal to feel the sun on its back. We’re a charity and organic certification body and we need your help. Join thousands of people, businesses, farmers and growers and be part of the good food revolution! |

You can see the shift away from the What and the How and a greater emphasis on the Why.. You can also see a shift from talking about themselves to putting the focus on supporters with a specific call to join.

As we saw in the trends section above, in addition to connecting with mission, people also want to connect with a community. As one a Canadian membership expert [writes](#): “Membership based organizations that thrive look beyond membership, and connect with members and non-members alike. They build a community that brings people together and provide them a reason to participate. And that community is what fosters the inner circle to grow and thrive.”

Kindra Ramos from Washington Trails Association reflects on that organization’s shift: “Now we are able to focus on our mission. It’s not about the membership card and the magazine, it’s about being part of the work, however people want to step up, and that makes you part of the community.”

Governance

The vast majority of people who affiliate with your organization do not want to actively participate in its governance, and maintaining a linkage between the two can be a barrier in two ways. First, it can make joining seem 'heavy' to a prospect, particularly in today's age where joining in general is less prevalent. Second it can limit a group's options as it seeks to design the best governance for itself.

Washington Trails Association, for example, does not link its Board and its membership. Board members are recruited based on the right skills and experience for the organization. Ideally they are members too, but there's no vote at an AGM to elect them.

Accountability can be lost in this shift, so groups need to establish that in other ways. One method is sometimes described as "Strong Vision, Big Ears," where an organization sets a clear overall goal for supporters to buy into, then asks for routine input. ⁹ That could include regular surveys and online voting for annual organizational priorities.

A good example of this can be found at Nature NB where they survey their supporters before making representations to the government. "If there's an election coming up we ask our people what are the issues that matter to you, and we'll take those issues forward to candidates. That's where they really show up," says Emma McIntyre.

Fundraising

Fundraising expert Harvey McKinnon counsels his clients away from the Traditional membership model. "Once a person pays their membership dues, they are more likely to think they've already done their part, so are less likely to donate," he says. He finds switching from a focus on members to a focus on monthly donors can add four to 20 times more value for an organization. ¹⁰ He once helped transition a significant Canadian environmental group from the Traditional membership model and increased their fundraising in doing so.

But this hasn't been the experience of the Bruce Trail Conservancy which has a healthy membership roll and finds that members do contribute in other ways. Says Jackie Randle: "Do people give us a membership fee and nothing else? Certainly. But do people give us a membership fee and leave us in their will or make an additional donation? Yes they do." It helps that the trail is such a tangible thing to raise money for, which is a lesson for other groups too - to make their work as visible and real as possible.

Seeing all your participants as "supporters" may break down silos that sometimes crop up, not just between members and non members, but also between volunteers and donors. There may be a reluctance to ask volunteers for money or donors to give time, but [research shows](#) most people overlap their volunteer efforts and financial support. Groups should be inviting supporters to actively participate as a way to get to know and get invested in the organization in order to make a more successful donation ask.

Engagement

When your organization focuses on flexible pathways to entry, your engagement needs to be also directed at potential entrants, and not just at people already involved. In fact, it's powerful to use those already involved to help draw in new people.

Washington Trails Association is making a concerted effort to engage different kinds of people than it has in its current membership base. For example, it's partnering with [Latino Outdoors](#) and LGBTQ groups on trail work parties to reach new circles of people. It also hosts shorter work parties closer to home to accommodate families with small kids. Overall, it does about 600 work parties a year and but also holds events in pubs, in person outdoor skills workshops for youth and community leaders and hosts lots of opportunity to come out in person and lots of appreciation for those who do. Its guiding philosophy is "meeting people where they are at."

Nature NB is working with the societal shift underway that sees different participation modes for older and younger people. Older participants tend to be more involved in long-term committed activities like land stewardship and building swallow nest boxes. Younger participants tend to be more interested in high-impact, one-off events like beach cleanups, planting milkweed, or sending letters to the government.

Nature Saskatchewan has opened up its Spring and Fall meets to non members. They still notice that participants skew older so are seeking to add activities that are more active to appeal to a younger demographic. They are also partnering with [SaskOutdoors](#) which tends to draw a more family-oriented crowd.

Emma McIntyre at Nature NB notes that bringing in new people through their engagement activities requires new practices. For example, she works with other staff to take registrations before events so that information can be recorded in their database automatically for future follow up to keep the interaction going.

Belonging

So far we've focused on what can be gained from moving from the Traditional membership model to a more modern supporter model, but there's also a question on what can be lost. High on that list is the sense of belonging that traditional members might feel.

Washington Trails Association has a special challenge with belonging, since many mistake them for a government agency and so feel less need to affiliate. They are breaking this misperception by being more assertive with their communications, being more explicit that they are a non profit and talking about their impact in the world.

Nevertheless, there is a trade-off between managing more exclusively for members versus managing more openly for supporters - the exclusivity is itself conducive to building a sense of belonging, and supporters will perhaps be recruited more easily, but this also means they can be lost more easily too.

It's really up to each organization to offer all participants an opportunity to build a sense of belonging through thoughtful engagement. This means connecting to people through common purpose, creating community, and consistently soliciting feedback and acting on it. It also helps to have fun together and to give consistent recognition to those making a contribution.

Conclusion

Groups facing real difficulties with their membership model can turn things around by walking through the six areas above and making some changes. Even groups who face fewer challenges can always ask themselves whether there are improvements to be made. There's never one model that works forever.

Overhauling your model can be hard. Emma McIntyre from Nature NB says: "One of our biggest challenges is change management. We have a clear picture of where we need to go and what needs to happen to get us there but it needs a lot of change across the organization and the way we've been doing things versus the way that would be a more supportive engagement strategy. So just asking people to change their habits is currently my biggest challenge."

And not everything we try out will succeed. Ellen Bouvier from Nature Saskatchewan relates a story: "We had a Board member who was really interested in engaging families so we did an event with family activities and said bring your kids - not a single child came!"

But as Thomas Edison famously said: "I have not failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work," with each of those times giving us more information. This is how innovation happens.

The way people participate is changing, and the groups that adapt along with it will be the ones that thrive in the years ahead. The good news for nature groups is that nature itself never goes out of style - indeed, as it gets scarcer, it becomes more valuable and people will want to be a part of it. A modern supporter model can structure that participation in ways that make your organization successful.

Matt Price has been active in the NGO sector for over 20 years across North America. He is the author of the book [Engagement Organizing: The Old Art and New Science of Winning Campaigns](#) with UBC Press.

The Gosling Foundation

The Gosling Foundation is a Canadian private, registered philanthropic foundation. It acts as an environmental venture fund, identifying and supporting strategic projects that enhance the capacity of organizations to protect and restore nature. The Gosling Foundation is driven by a passion to protect birds in particular and the natural environment more broadly.



Nature Canada is one of the oldest national nature conservation charities in Canada. For 80 years, Nature Canada has helped protect over 110 million acres of parks and wildlife areas in Canada and countless species. Today, Nature Canada represents a network of over 100,000 members and supporters and more than 800 nature organizations.



The Sustainability Network is Canada's leading hub for convening, advising, and mobilizing the environmental not-for-profit community, its leaders, and partners. Its mission is to strengthen environmental nonprofit leadership. It works with environmental non-profits to make them more effective and efficient.



Photo Credit: Nature Saskatchewan

1 Nature Saskatchewan examples and quotes are based on a telephone interview with Ellen Bouvier and Jordan Ignatiuk, Nature Saskatchewan, March 12, 2020.

2 Bruce Trail Conservancy examples and quotes based on telephone interview with Jackie Randle, Director of Organizational Resources.

3 Nature New Brunswick examples and quotes based on telephone interview with Emma McIntyre, Engagement Director, March 12, 2020.

4 Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), p. 77.

5 Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale & Taha Yasseri, *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 49.

6 “Millenials Support Causes, Not Institutions, Survey Finds,” *Philanthropy News Digest*, July 22, 2013, <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=what+are+millenials>

7 “Digital Civic Engagement By Young People,” UNICEF, February 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/706/file/UNICEF-Global-Insight-digital-civic-engagement-2020.pdf>

8 Washington Trails Association examples and quotes based on telephone interview with Kindra Ramos, Director of Communications and Outreach.

9 “Strong Vision, Big Ears” has been a guiding philosophy inside the organization MoveOn, as outlined by David Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2012, p 38.

10 Telephone interview with Harvey McKinnon, [Harvey McKinnon Associates](#), March 12, 2020.