

Civic Engagement and Mobilization with the Sierra Club

Final Paper: Civic Engagement, Identity, and Group Mobilization

PAF 112: Identity, Service, and American Democracy

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Introduction

Clean crisp air, and spectacular views of mountain peaks nestled with clean clear lakes stretched in front of you. These are the kind of views that spurred the Sierra Club into existence. The Sierra Club was founded in California in 1892 with the singular goal of preserving the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. (History and Archives) It has since evolved into a multifaceted organization that offers membership opportunities for those who want to engage in nature across the world, as well as volunteer and political engagement for those who want to get involved. They have built a sustainable group that is able to change and evolve. Intersectionality is a cause and a concept that has become a part of the current zeitgeist, and it is something the Sierra Club is embracing. Adaptation and intersectionality are key traits for any group that hopes to last beyond a single issue, a single campaign, a single event.

Identity and History

Concern and love for the environment bring together a wide variety of identities within the Sierra Club. From nature enthusiasts to climate change activists and those seeking social justice, people come to the Sierra Club from all walks of life. The Sierra Club was started as a conservation project for the Sierra Nevada mountains in California, but quickly grew into a group that would advance climate issues to ensure that everyone has access to a healthy climate. (About Us) One of the Sierra Club's founders was John Muir, a man well known for his environmental advocacy and unfortunately also his racism. This is something the Sierra Club has struggled with in recent years, and in 2020 they have stepped forward and confronted their past. The executive director called out Muir's racist comments in a post on the club's website in July, and made promises to diversify the staff as well as investing in both environmental and racial justice work. (Brune) Muir's views had an inherent racial bias to them, picturing a wilderness only possible if the indigenous peoples had not inhabited the land before colonizers came to this country. The organization also catered to middle- and upper-class white people,

and specifically excluded people of color. (Fears and Mufson) This history, and the recent reckoning have shaped the identity within the group. Inclusivity has become a touchstone within the organization.

Social Capital

The Sierra Club creates and encourages social capital through several avenues. Engagement with Sierra Club is adapting to our current pandemic experience ranging from chats in Zoom calls to campaign volunteering, from leadership trainings and programs to club membership. Sierra Club builds relationships in communities across the United States as well as the territory of Puerto Rico. (Take Action) Community engagement and interacting with the natural landscape is as big a part of their mission, as the political engagement to help save and preserve that natural landscape. Sierra Club has also committed to engagement in social justice platforms as well as inclusive organizing principles. They have led campaigns in social justice in recent years, as well as highlighting it in their trainings and leadership programs. They are also in the process of reaching out to other organizations to find out how they can best support indigenous communities in their fight to save their land.

Civic, Political, and/or Social Engagement

Engagement in the time of Coronavirus is a new and evolving experience. Where before so many of the engagement opportunities available within the organization for those wishing to be apart of the Sierra Club were in person, now most of the opportunities are available over Zoom. There are meetings for local chapters, meetings for national engagement, meetings for specific campaigns, and meetings for the Sierra Student Coalition. There are also membership opportunities, including interaction through social media, Zoom meet ups, and the Sierra magazine subscription. These meetings help to connect new members, or those looking to get involved with a new aspect of the organization, to connect with the leaders of current campaigns. There are opportunities to connect with the local chapter, or to get involved with a national campaign. Sierra Club also evolved to include a chapter in Puerto Rico in 2005 as every landscape is unique and has it's own challenges.

Mobilization

The Sierra Club mobilizes millions of people across the country. (About Us) They mobilize members to donate and raise funds. They mobilize volunteers to run campaigns from getting out the vote, to encouraging local governments to commit to 100% clean energy. Sprig is an annual week-long leadership program held every Summer, where the Sierra Club helps to train young people how to organize and lead for environmental and social justice. Climate Justice League is a bi-annual week-long leadership program held every Spring and Autumn that teaches young people about climate justice, organizing and advocacy as well as how to stay motivated in the face of enormous opposition. (Sierra Student Coalition) The Sierra Club's mobilization and ability to adapt is reminiscent of the Women's Christian Temperance Movement. (Koppell) Sierra Club started as a small local group that has been able to grow into a large national movement that has continued to evolve from one issue to the next bringing intersectionality to more fully achieve their goals of "clean air, clean water and a healthy environment" for all. (About Us)

American Democracy

In the 1830's Alexis de Tocqueville made observations about how the American culture lead to the formation of groups and committees to solve problems that would typically be handled by the government or aristocracy in Europe. (Koppell) We see this need to form groups both within the government, as every segment of our government is then broken down into smaller and smaller groups to address specific topics, as well as outside of the government. We also see this in the structure of large lobbying and activist groups such as the Sierra Club. They have broken down into several groups to address both local and national issues, as well as a chapter in Puerto Rico to address the challenges that are specific to the island. (Take Action) This creation of smaller groups allows the Sierra Club to be more adaptable as it strives for more inclusive organizing as well as allowing the group to tackle a broader base of projects.

Summary

Adaptability can be a struggle for large organizations, but in mobilizing its members in smaller groups the Sierra Club has found a way to allow a large organization to make change and grow. They as an organization have also been committed to training young people how to be leaders and activists for almost 30 years. (Sierra Student Coalition) This gives them the opportunity to train the next generation of activists, and in turn to learn from the younger generation. Young people are great mobilizers of change. They tend to be more adaptable, less stuck in their ways and opinions. They tend to be more intersectional in their views. This fresh viewpoint, and the encouragement of it, is a great tool that has and will continue to allow the Sierra Club to be sustainable.

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