

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs
Political Party Program, Croatia

Cycle Two
Reporting back to your voters
Using Newsletters

By Karen Gainer and Stephen Farry¹

Elections are not won or lost in the four weeks leading up to an election, but in the work that a party does between elections. For a party to be successful it is important that the party is campaigning between elections on local issues that matter to people. Branch offices must learn how to identify issues, take action on those issues and report back to people as to what happened. Simply put, a successful branch office should learn how to position themselves as active members of the community and develop techniques on how to be seen as part of the problem solving process at the local level. In this way the branch offices will understand the local issues and in turn voters will see that their interests reflected in the activities of the branch office.

In Cycle One, branch offices developed citizen questionnaires and took them door to door. In this cycle we will talk about how to take the next step. What do you do with the results of your door to door survey?

What follows is a checklist of actions that your branch office may take after your team has conducted a questionnaire.

1. **Record-Keeping:** Create voter files on all doors knocked upon;
2. **New Members:** Identify all interested persons and potential new members and involve them in the activities of the branch office;
3. **Report back:** Publish a branch office newsletter to voters on results of the questionnaire;
4. **Action:** Review all issues identified with your questionnaire to determine what action your branch office can take. -Always remember to think strategically.

¹Karen Gainer is the Director of NDI Political Party Programs, Croatia and Stephen Farry, is a Councillor for North Down, Northern Ireland, and Party Organizer for the Alliance Party.

1. Record-Keeping

From your citizen questionnaires, you will have collected information about your voters. This information is a key building block in your branch office organization. It should be stored in a coherent fashion which can be easily accessed. Names of voters talked to at the doors should be recorded either on a computer or a card database. In addition to the names of voters your data file should also include: address, age, occupation, party support, previous parties supported (if any), party they feel next closest to, issues of concern, party membership, membership in NGO's, Trade Unions etc. The voter file you create can be used during an election campaign to send specially targeted information to voters who you have identified as being interested in certain issues. It will identify those voters who support your party, those who do not support your party and those who are undecided. Accordingly it is an essential tool to assist your party to target resources during an election campaign.

2. Members

People who express an interest in joining the party should be contacted immediately, certainly within a few days. Further, party information should be immediately sent out to them and a senior local official should call personally. New members must be made to feel welcomed and integrated into party activities as soon as possible. However, people should not be forced into doing something that they are not comfortable with. It is always important to remember that people can become volunteers or financial donors without necessarily becoming members; and members can merely join or give money without becoming active volunteers.

3. Newsletters (see below)

4. Taking Action

Your survey will have identified public opinions on a range of local issues. Remember that although the results are not strictly scientific, they will give your party some evidence of local opinion and provide a basis to identify a local issue that your party can take action on. There are a number of methods that can be used to develop your work:

- i. **Media.** You can write press releases on each of the issues explored in the survey. Your press release should include some of the statistics revealed, and the actions to be undertaken as a result of them.
- ii. **Petitions.** You may want to focus on one or two issues identified. Signatures can be collected either going door-to-door, and/or by including a petition coupon on a newsletter. The final petition can be presented to the relevant decision-maker(s), preferably in front of the local press (with photographer). A pyramid approach can be adopted to collecting petitions. Petition forms can be sent out

to those people who have signed the petition, asking them to collect further names, further forms can then be sent to the next people signing, and so on.

Reporting Back: The Use of Newsletters

Direct communication with your voters is the best way to keep in touch with them and develop a loyalty in the polling station. A newsletter is a very useful method for communicating with the electorate. Newsletters prepared and delivered regularly in your district are a simple and relatively inexpensive way to ensure your message that your party cares about the community is consistently and regularly communicated.

The newsletter must be based on news about the local area and your party's campaign to improve the area. The newsletter must also seek to involve the local residents of the area by always seeking their input and opinions.

Newsletters should not look like election propaganda. It should not contain the typical "headshot" of the local party politician nor should it read like a party policy statement. Your audience is wider than party activists. You want to cultivate an image of campaigning for local issues year round.

The newsletter should have a local focus. If it deals with local news even people who may not be sympathetic to your party may find it of interest. The hope is as they read your newsletter on a regular basis, it will persuade them to vote for your party because of your party's demonstrated commitment to the local community.

The key of course is regular distribution of the newsletter. Ideally in a large urban area, party activists should plan to deliver at least six newsletters a year. In smaller areas, four newsletters per year- one with each change in season is the absolute minimum.

The newsletter can be as simple as a double-sided sheet of paper. It can be designed by a computer, using either a word-processing program or a desktop publishing system, or alternatively using the more basic cut and paste method. The newsletter can be reproduced either through a printer, photocopier or duplicator.

Newsletters can be used in addition, to complement the material that will be issued during an election campaign. Local organizations should not go to much expense in producing them; black and white design is sufficient.

What should your newsletter contain?

- information about local news;
- information on your party's local campaign-what local issues are you working on or have you identified through local questionnaires;
- what action is the party taking in response to those local issues.

Information and Action—these are the key elements to a successful newsletter. People will read your newsletter if it is interesting and has information which may not be available elsewhere.

What about party policy? Save it for the election campaign. The message you want to convey is that your party is interested in being an active member of the community, that you are committed to taking **ACTION** on local issues to better serve the community.

There are a few simple rules to bear in mind when designing them.

Content & Design

1. Select a neutral title for your newsletter that you can use for each issue. The party name should be on the masthead in addition to the title. Examples such as "Focus"; "In Touch"; etc.
2. Make sure that the party's contact address and telephone number is clearly included in the newsletter, including the times when there will be someone answering the telephone. One individual, either the elected member or another team member should be identified as the newsletter's editor.
3. The main emphasis should go on local stories. If possible, national issues should be expressed in terms of local issues. The more local the story, the better the chance it will be read.
4. The sources for stories can be the results of your surveys, casework problems, and stories in local or national newspapers, official documents or general local knowledge.
5. The names of prominent local individuals, in particular existing office-holders or future candidates should be included in the stories. Also use the party name freely in the body of each story.
6. The stories should be written in a short, punchy, journalistic style, i.e. short sentences, dealing always with who, what, where, when and how.
7. Your newsletter should include between five to eight stories.
8. You should focus more on presenting the facts than giving party political positions. The latter need not be avoided, but party policy should not be the central focus of any story.
9. Use photographs, cartoons and/or graphics and frequent headlines to break up the text. (Many desktop publishing programs come with graphic icons provided.)

10. Include a reply sheet at the bottom of the back page. We call this a 'grumble sheet' where people can write to you about any issues they are concerned with. It is important that the newsletter encourage voters to "talk back" to your party. Include space for the name and address of the respondent, an address or telephone for them to contact.
11. Other options for this reply sheet. Include boxes to tick, seeking further information, or perhaps to ask to join your party. They can be used as a petition if the voter can tick a box supporting a campaign your party is campaigning on. Remember to leave plenty of space for them to write whatever they want.
12. Use bold or italics or different size of fonts for emphasis. Avoid using capitals. Don't use any smaller than 12-point type. Have a prominent masthead which identifies your party.
13. The Newsletter's purpose is to give the impression of a hard-working and caring local political organization, which tackles the issues, and sometimes (depending on circumstances) delivers results.

Local organizations should also pay some attention to building up a delivery network. This entails assigning specific delivery routes to particular individuals.

Tabloid Newspaper: The Next Step

When the use of a double-sided news sheet has been mastered, local parties could consider issuing a tabloid newspaper, printed on newsprint. It is obviously a more ambitious undertaking, requiring more expenditure and a more reliable delivery network.

This tool takes on the look of a typical local newspaper. However, the title of the newspaper should not include your party's name. Use a title that is not used in your immediate area. Voters must be lured into thinking that they are reading a freely delivered newspaper. Only when they read the stories in depth, and discover that they all portray your party and its individuals in a favorable light.

Many of the rules for newsletters apply. Emphasis should go on the use of large headlines, and photographs. Stories should be short, punchy and journalistic. They should be no longer than about 200 words.