Elections
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Paolo Domondon 2020

Contributors

Joyce Barafon, Tanmatra Bhanti, Atanasio Brito, Dennis Calvan, Simone Madalosso, Gabriela Polo, Arwandrija Rukma and Rocky Sanchez Tirona

Rare

Rare is the leading behavior change organization in conservation. Rare specializes in identifying proven locally-led solutions and work with partners and communities worldwide to bring these solutions to a regional and national scale.

FishForever

Fish Forever is Rare’s community-led solution to revitalize coastal marine habitats, such as coral reefs, mangroves and seagrasses, protect biodiversity, and secure the livelihoods of fisher households and their communities. It uses an innovative approach to address coastal overfishing—by empowering communities through clear rights, strong governance, local leadership, and participatory management—that protects essential fish habitat and regulates fishing activities.

Cover photograph: Jason Houston / Rare

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Background

Elections are the most well-established mechanisms that citizens have to exercise their voice and hold officeholders to account. In most democracies, citizens directly elect representatives to craft policy on their behalf. Policy at every level is about distributing resources and ranking priorities, and elections determine who will be making these important decisions. Elected officials are bound by a specific term, or a set length of time for someone to serve in an elected office. Elections are not isolated events but rather part of a continuous process or electoral cycle. Most countries hold elections at different levels of government from the local level to the subnational state or provincial level to the national or federal level. Each country has its own set of rules, or electoral system, that determines how elections and referendums are conducted and how their results are determined.

Objectives

Given the cyclical nature of elections, it is likely that the policymakers and political aides that Rare engages with will change over the life of a project due to political transition or staff turnover. This guidance will help your team prepare for political transitions, cultivate new and deepen existing relationships with decision-makers and better understand what forms of advocacy you can and cannot undertake during an election cycle.
Preparing for the Possibility of Political Change

The electoral cycle in most countries is firmly established with election dates usually announced well in advance. This allows our teams to prepare for the eventuality of a political transition which could result in our agenda either remaining a policy priority or becoming deprioritized as political platforms change and new policymakers are elected. As much as possible, it would be helpful to put all plans and agreements in writing to increase the chances of these to survive political change. It is also important to follow developments in the election closely and to engage in a preliminary analysis of each candidates’ platforms and positions as they relate to our work. Our teams can obtain this information by reading publicly available campaign information, meeting directly with candidates and campaign staff or by developing a non-biased questionnaire about the issues that impact our communities. Questionnaires must be distributed to all candidates and the results can only be shared internally within Rare.

Rare staff should plan on connecting with candidates’ teams in advance of the election and the campaign period to provide non-partisan information on Rare’s activities and agenda. Presenting Rare’s results and priorities to potential candidates is an important step. This in turn can help position us a potential new partner or to renew our existing working relationship with incumbents, depending on the outcome of the election. We can provide the following types of information to potential candidates:

- Informing potential candidates of how our programs have helped constituents and the overall value to the community.
- Sharing with them about matters of public policy that affect Rare’s stakeholders.
- Sending policy papers or research findings.
- Responding to requests for information from candidates on a nonpartisan and equal basis.
We may not, however, ask a candidate to pledge to support our position on an issue if elected, or to take specified actions either during the campaign or if elected. While we can publicize and advocate for our agenda during an election period, as indicated above, we cannot directly approach candidates and ask them to endorse our agenda. This has direct implications for our engagement with Rare’s Local Leader Pledge. We cannot encourage incumbent mayors running for re-election to sign the pledge during a designated election period. We can inform candidates of the nature of the pledge but must wait until after the election to present a formal request for signature or to hold a pledge signing ceremony for an incumbent Mayor seeking re-election.

Being Open to New Priorities

Newly-elected officials often have different priority issues and campaign promises they want to uphold. Sometimes, even those reelected into office will use the elections to change strategies and commitments. This may require us to refocus or reorient our work to align with new priorities without losing sight of our main goals in serving the small-scale fisheries sector. At times, this would mean highlighting a different component of our program without drastically changing the underlying core activities. For example, a newly-elected official may have campaigned on improving access to healthcare. We can then think of ways to align our current programs towards that agenda even indirectly. For example, by presenting fisher registration as a way to collect population and demographic data that will help improve access to healthcare.

But there will also be cases where this is not possible. We need to know when to push our agenda, and also to wait. Political transitions come with added stress and activity and being sensitive to urgent needs and demands, plus being aware that we may not be the right stakeholder to address these needs and demands at this particular time, would go a long way in building relationships with government agencies.

Cultivating Champions and Deepening Relationships with Government

In order to be effective in our government advocacy, we must be able to identify who has the power to help implement our agenda and how best to influence them. Importantly, this includes not just the candidates themselves but also the political aides who often direct the processes by which political decisions are made. Staffers prepare reports, conduct research, draft legislation, prepare negotiations and act as valued advisors and resources to elected officials. It is important to identify which aides work on which issues and their level of influence, and to cultivate working relationships with core staffers who may become important allies in promoting our agenda with policymakers.

Aside from political aides and staff that are coterminous with their principals, meaning that their term in office ends as their principal’s term is over, some government agencies also have career workers and bureaucrats that may remain in office during and beyond a political transition. It is also helpful to identify them, and build relationships with them and understand their role and influence over the policymaking and implementation process. As bearers of institutional memory in these agencies, newly-elected officials often consult with them too. For example, a low-level career staffer with high knowledge of the inner workings of city hall may not be able to ensure that their higher-ups buy in, but they can point you to the people you need to convince and provide strategies for connecting with them based on their expertise.

One way to build buy-in with newly-elected officials is by providing expertise and technical assistance, especially on issues of top priority to the new government. This can be especially valuable to first term officials who would benefit from Rare’s long-standing experience with government engagement to
identify appropriate legal and regulatory pathways for advancing sustainable resource management and governance. Rare teams should emphasize the advantages of our Global Mayors Network in connecting local officials to one another to share best practices, new ideas and lessons learned. Showcasing Rare’s global reach, we can draw on examples of successful implementation in other Rare geographies to highlight the impact of partnering with Rare.

When communicating with policymakers, storytelling can be a powerful tool for conveying a message of transformative change and can be more effective than just providing facts and figures. Work with your colleagues in communications to develop simple but effective narratives and share personal stories that emphasize the impact of our work on constituent communities. In a democracy, elected officials are likely to pay significant attention to public opinion and so teams should capitalize on Rare’s deep connections to communities to help facilitate dialogue between constituents and their elected officials.

**The Do’s and Don’ts of Advocacy During an Election Cycle**

As a non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) status in the United States, Rare is bound by specific rules governing the types of advocacy we can and cannot undertake during the electoral process. U.S. law prohibits us from engaging in any partisan political activities. This chart will help you determine what is legal and what is not. Please adhere to these guidelines in addition to the specific election laws in your country. Further detailed information is available in Rare’s Lobbying Guidelines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Make presentations to platform committees, campaign staff, candidates, media, and the general public on Rare’s issues and agenda</td>
<td>● Endorse or oppose a candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Conduct or participate in a nonpartisan candidate forum as long as all candidates are invited and have an equal opportunity to speak</td>
<td>● Coordinate activities with a candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Try to persuade candidates to agree with you on issues and to make their views on the issues known — but that is as far as you can go</td>
<td>● Directly approach candidates and ask them to endorse your organization’s agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Work on behalf of a nonpartisan ballot measure or nonpartisan voters education</td>
<td>● Sponsor joint fundraising events or solicitations with candidates or political group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Ask candidates to fill out questionnaires about issues. The questions must be unbiased and the results can only be distributed internally within Rare</td>
<td>● Contribute money, time, or facilities to a candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Staff can participate as individuals in political campaigns on their own time and NOT as representatives of the organization</td>
<td>● Send partisan political communications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Micro-Political Power Mapping Tool**

Elections often place the spotlight only on political candidates, and for good reason. But we need to remember that navigating the election cycle requires that we also determine and monitor where other stakeholders within government stand on the policy issues we care about. To help us do this, we can do Micro-Political Mapping where we can organize information about a particular political landscape and illustrate disaggregated insights and dynamics that could potentially impact the design and implementation of the policies we are pushing for.

In a Micro-Political Map, we disaggregate government agencies and other key stakeholders into competing factions and locate them on a matrix that depict (1) their support over a policy agenda; and (2) their power over that policy process. The map can then illustrate concentrations of support or lack thereof, and indicate how certain sectors will react to particular policies. We can have one map for each viable candidate in an election cycle and compare how these maps look like to help us prepare better regardless of election outcomes. Sometimes, we can relocate a faction or stakeholder elsewhere in the matrix simply because of who wins the elections, and not necessarily because of their principled stand on a policy agenda. We can also have several maps at multiple times throughout a policy process as dynamics change regularly, and comparing these maps across time would also be a useful exercise.

As in any political process, political mapping is characterized by hidden agendas, and power struggles among a myriad of different actors operating at different levels, sometimes even within the same unit of government. As the output of this exercise can be politically sensitive, it is best to always recognize the biases of those leading the exercise and the subjective nature of the activity. It is also best to be mindful of the speed at which political dynamics can change within any political context. Despite these risks, political mapping can be useful in surfacing assumptions within Rare and among our partners.

**Micro-Political Power Map Template**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of support on the policy issue</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
<th>Policy has gone too far</th>
<th>Full Support</th>
<th>Policy is insufficient</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power over the issue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence over the issue</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>The policy has gone too far</td>
<td>Core support</td>
<td>The policy is insufficient</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Ministry of Economy</td>
<td>Ministry of Finance</td>
<td>Parliament</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining unions</td>
<td>Mining municipalities</td>
<td>International donors</td>
<td>International NGOs</td>
<td>Mining labor</td>
<td>Rural workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Status quo/change division**

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