

State Room Arizona 005: Darla Gonzalez | Grassroots: Driving Arizona's Future

Podcast Transcription | Article-Style Transcript

Episode Link: <https://youtu.be/nNe5Zi4oIKA>

Full Article-Style Transcript

Introduction: Why Grassroots Matters

Scot Mussi: Hi, welcome to the State Room, a podcast dedicated to discussing key issues and events that will define the future of our state. I'm your host, Scot Mussi. In today's episode of the State Room, we're going to be talking about one of the most essential components of any political movement, grassroots activism. It is one of the most overlooked and underappreciated aspects of the political process. And until very recently, at least here in Arizona, has been a domain dominated by the left. Thankfully, that's no longer the case. Conservative grassroots engagement in Arizona is at an all-time high with tens of thousands of average Arizonans and citizens now informed, engaged, and activated in the political process. To talk to us today about this incredible growth in the grassroots movement here in Arizona.

I've invited Darla Gonzalez to the program today. Darla, you've been active in the grassroots or at least the conservative movement here in Arizona for a decade and now have been running the grassroots program and been the grassroots director at the Free Enterprise Club since 2020. So, Darla, thank you for coming on.

Darla Gonzalez: Thanks for having me.

Scot Mussi: Yeah, been looking forward to talking to you about this because I think when it comes to grassroots, the importance of grassroots, it is not just overlooked but often is just ignored by many people in the political world, especially in the political bubble. They kind of just see it as something that is an add-on. They don't see it as an essential component. They often think grassroots is paying to send out some text messages or emails and as you and I both know that's not actual real grassroots that's not what it actually means and the value it brings to the political process. So, before we dive in and talk about what, we have worked to build or what you've worked to build in the grassroots, the grassroots activism at the Free Enterprise Club. You were involved in the political process for a few years.

What would you say the grassroots environment, at least on the conservative side of the aisle, looked like in Arizona prior to 2020?

Grassroots Before 2020

Darla Gonzalez: Well, I would say it was mostly vacant. I don't think there was a lot of real action happening. It seemed like people would get excited, they go and do something like get out the vote, and then they'd be forgotten until the next election cycle. And so, nobody really cultivated any large group to actually learn in that in between time between elections. And so, that it would be an up and down. There'd be like a very little grassroots and then there'd be no grassroots and then maybe a little more. It's just up and down. There was no concerted effort to help. What you just what you just identified

Scot Mussi: what you just identified it was one of my biggest frustrations is that on the on the conservative side it seemed like grassroots was seen as a cyclical endeavor. One that would only pop up during campaigns and then disappear or be again utilized for maybe a key issue to you know generate some noise at the Capitol at the legislature and then go away. Whereas you would look at

the left and they have a organization and some of it's back because they have groups that are that are sustained and been around for decades. Unions are probably one of the best examples. But outside of that, this consortium of all these different organizations where it was 365 days a year they're operational, they're engaged, they're involved. And as you described it, prior to 2020, that was not the case on the conservative side of the aisle.

Darla Gonzalez: No. And then what would happen is you just hit this flat spot. You wouldn't know what to do. And volunteers are fickle. They like to keep busy. They want to keep informed. And so if you're not keeping them informed, you're not valuing them. They'll start to feel used. They'll go somewhere else. And I never really saw any sustainable grassroots happening here and or an organization that was really fostering that kind of environment of community like you're talking about where they become a family working together towards a bigger cause, not just an election, not just passing a bill or a single issue thing, but a bigger cause which is freedom in Arizona.

Building a Grassroots Program from Zero

Scot Mussi: And I know that in our efforts trying to get good things, good policy passed at the legislature, we would go down advocate for a bill or oppose a bill and you would see where the liberal groups, all the lefty groups, they would get hundreds and hundreds of people to sign in on legislation against it. And you would have Democrats on the committee going, "Oh, look at this.

All these people are signed in against the bill." bill and you would look at our side and we didn't have anybody signed it for good pro-freedom legislation and that's why I remember when we first sat down this again this was probably right before COVID we had talked about this I remember I was talking with a few others that we need to we need to bring somebody on we got to fix this problem and so we met I think it was at a at a coffee shop I think it was Panera so we just give a shameless plug to Panera we just sat down to talk about how what can we do to solve this problem how can we just start getting people engaged on an ongoing basis? And so we set a goal and we got it going. So talk a little bit about that. Like where did how did we go from zero, which is what we have, we had zero activists.

How do we go from that to where we are now where we have a much more thriving grassroots ecosystem at the Free Enterprise Club?

Darla Gonzalez: Yeah, I think that going into the 2020 election, there was some energy from people who wanted to do something, but they didn't know what to do. I felt like a lot of people I talked to that even the districts really didn't have anything for them to do. So, when we centered around the Request to Speak system and talking about how our conservative lawmakers needed help down at the Capitol because the left was dominating getting their opinions heard with the Request to Speak system. That gave us a really low-hanging fruit first thing for them to do. They could easily log in from home and give their thumbs up and thumbs down on bills as long as someone was leading them. And since our policy team was down there every day anyway, it made it easy because we could get our direction from our policy team. This is the bill.

We want a thumbs up, we want a thumbs down. People felt like they were part of the process instead of sitting on the sideline screaming at the TV or feeling frustrated or powerless. They don't know what to do. Most people want to volunteer, but they don't know how to volunteer. And so you need you need someone to lead them and help them. And then and then we needed to show them the fruit of their labor. And so what happened is once we started building that, we started training people. We started our Friday calls. And our Friday calls really started because they were taking all these actions with Request to Speak, but they didn't know what happened. What was the rest of the story? So that's when Greg and Amy came on Fridays and started telling them what happened. You logged in these areas. This is what happened.

Showed videos of the discussions and then set everybody up for the next week. And that call now is in its sixth year. And I think keeping people apprised of what's happening in Arizona on a regular

basis and then even taking deep dives on those issues so that they feel informed and not powerless to when they go to their legislative meeting double-talked by their legislator but actually know something about the issue. I think it empowered them and they like that and we just keep empowering them and I think that's why it went from zero to over 16,000 people now who have taken an action communicating with their lawmaker. It's just it's a consistent message that we give consistent feedback. We keep our Friday calls on hot topics bringing in people informing them. There just isn't anybody else that's doing that. Mhm.

Scot Mussi: You might have a legislator do it, but it's just for people in their district and it's really just about the bills that they're covering, not necessarily things that affect all Arizonans. Do you remember when we first met, do you remember the original goal that I had set?

Darla Gonzalez: Yes. It was like 75 people.

Scot Mussi: You said, "If we have 75 people weighing in on the Request to Speak system, I think we can move the needle." And no kidding. I mean I would have been at the time I would have been ecstatic for that because conceptually it was hard to understand how we were going to get people regularly engaged and involved because again is it was hard to find other models other than on the left to kind of look at that. And so just getting 75 and getting anybody involved but you have real people contacting your lawmakers. It makes a difference. They hear that. And so but you were just incredibly successful at it. You went you didn't just get 75. I mean within a few months you had several hundred Yeah. That you had signed up and I remember at that time we were still just using a spreadsheet.

We had just a spreadsheet that we were filling out and putting the names into it which you know was very became very complicated and labor intensive and to the point we had to obviously get more sophisticated about it but it was amazing to watch that happen and I think it's what you described where you just kept keeping engaged and informed and then it just it just grew from there.

Darla Gonzalez: Well, it was a team effort because you had our policy team down at the Capitol every day. It could keep things really fluid and active. We can keep them informed. Like daytoday and I think they wanted that. They really wanted to know what was going on. They it people were at a place where they didn't know what to believe, what to believe, what to read, what was correct, what wasn't. They weren't even sure their lawmakers were being straightforward with them. And so we gave them the truth and we gave it to them on a regular basis. And then we obviously really valued them and people who feel valued will stay around. And so that we had I think a thousand people within 6 months signed up and then 2020 the election hit and then it just blew up after that because people were so frustrated. It's like send me in coach.

So we already had kind of their framework there and we just kept doing what was working. So I think really what we're really good at is communicating between the policy team and the grassroots on those quick action things that are happening at the Capitol and people really liked knowing what was going on and since we're we're representing them not special interests they could trust us and we were consistent. So that trust just built and then they shared that with their friends and family and neighbors and started inviting us to different places to talk about the Request to Speak system and giving their opinion to lawmakers.

Why the Movement Grew

Scot Mussi: Are you still surprised sometimes by how many people have just become more active and involved in the movement? I mean, and this is not even just our organization. Thankfully, there are other groups as well that over the last several years have grown out their own grassroots networks, which is fantastic to see. We want more the merrier. We want as many people activated and go, are you surprised or is this kind of what you've always in your gut thought could happen if it was just pursued and implemented?

Darla Gonzalez: I don't think I'm surprised because I'm like your typical normal person that was on the outside prior to politics trying to figure out what's going on too. I think like they do and so all you need is somebody to pull you in and someone you can trust. So if you bring the right information and the right low-hanging fruit I call it low-hanging fruit because people are still working. So you give them something that can they can make a difference in five minutes that's low-hanging fruit to me if you can just log in and give your thumbs up on this bill and that bill it takes less than five minutes. We had a video to prove it from start to finish. One minute 18 seconds, right? Anybody can give one minute or five minutes. And then instead of being frustrated, you know, you're a part of the solution.

And so I think I've always kind of known that people want to be included in this, but they don't know how. And so I think the framework and how we set things up and our software and our policy team and the fact that we don't really have bureaucracy in our club. So it's easy to move quickly within us. I think we created the right groundwork for them to grow. And I'm very excited that other organizations are doing that. We are the Free Enterprise Club, so we should like other competition. That's good because guess who wins? Arizona wins. Arizona wins. Every Request to Speak, every person that signed up, every organization that signs up a person to give their opinion on bills, that's good for Arizona as long as it's on our side. As long as it's on our side, but you know, that's a good thing. We want to support that.

We want all of our organizations, our coalition partners to win. If they if they hit their objectives and they meet their missions and we've contributed to that, Arizona wins. And that's really the higher purpose of all this is keeping Arizona free and red and conservative and keeping tyranny out and crazy policies out and so we're just better together like that.

Impact of an Informed Grassroots

Scot Mussi: So what do you think has been some of the biggest impact that the now the conservative grassroots movement now that it's more developed matured here in Arizona? What do you think has been some of the biggest impacts it's had here in Arizona?

Darla Gonzalez: I think for one, we have I think it's developed better legislators because the grassroots know what's going on. They cannot go back to their district meetings and tell them a story that isn't true because we're bringing them true stories. So, I think they feel empowered.

I think their frustration is less they can no longer do one thing at the legislature then go back to their district and you know do something and tell them something completely different whereas they maybe do something that doesn't align with the values of their voters and then go back to the district and say well you know I'm doing the most super conservative things you'll ever see right and nobody knows the difference but now they do and I think that the fact that there are people that know that we're watching and we're informing that there are thousands of people that are paying attention. I think people are more careful of who's running for office. They're they're going to know that when they go back to their district that there's an informed grassroots there.

So, I think the grassroots is happier because they feel like they're part of the process. They're not on the sidelines feeling powerless to what's happening. So, they feel equipped to actually have conversations. We're training them with all of our classes and things that we do.

Training and Demystifying the Process

Scot Mussi: Can you talk a little bit about that? Like the training because that's something that I'm I'm passionate about well too because I want to make sure that people feel educated. They feel confident enough to engage in the process because it can seem daunting. It can seem overwhelming. It could be intimidating to just a regular person. And they think that their lawmaker is at this, you know, that is there's a hierarchy here and that they don't know how to they can't engage with them on a on a level playing field.

Darla Gonzalez: That's so true and that's why we try to demystify that whole process and we have the capital trips down during the legislative session so that our activists and grassroots can actually see and witness the committee hearings and see that the lawmakers are not a they're not higher than you. They're not, they might be smarter than you on some subjects, but not necessarily. They can't know everything. And I think that it gives them like a little inkling of, oh, maybe I can run for office, too. And I don't mean that to be derogatory to our legislators, although the left proves it all the time in their committee hearings that pretty much anyone could be a lawmaker because the left is the Democrats in our legislature are not the greatest in the way they speak and the way they vote and their bills. I hope I can say that on air.

But I think that our training, our citizen lobbyist training, our leadership, our liberty leadership training, our Arizona Constitution trainings, our U.S. Constitution, all of our trainings and even the ones on the specific issues like school choice or fiscal responsibility or pick a water we just had last Friday. Those all empower people to know more. Actually, sometimes you don't know what you don't know. So, you know a little bit and now you know what to go look up to know a lot more if that makes sense. And then that makes them feel more on an equal playing field with their lawmakers.

Surprises from Building the Movement

Scot Mussi: What has surprised you the most or what are some of the biggest things that surprised you the most related to building out a grassroots movement?

Darla Gonzalez: Gosh, surprised me the most? I think the incredible continued support that we have on our Friday call. It's I never would have imagined when we start that call 6 years ago that it would still be going and year round, not just during the legislative session. Loyal citizens of Arizona that are dedicated to 3:00 p.m. On Friday to get up to date on the legislature and any issue we put before them, even if it's not one they've ever heard of. They're just amazing. The people that come to our summit and repeatedly come back to all of our classes. Like we set up a class, it's full every time. They're hungry for knowledge. I love that. I'd like to say I'm not surprised by that, but I know they're working people. The conversations that we have and the teaching is not light work. Some of it's very heavy.

You know, when you start getting into transportation policy and energy policy and fiscal policy, it's taxes, budgets. It's not the easiest of conversations to have if that's not your world. And they have to really lean in and ask questions. And you have to be vulnerable when you ask questions. And I love that they do that. They do it. And they come back over and over and over. They've taken more than 30,000 actions this legislative session alone.

Scot Mussi: That is shocking to me. 30,000?

Darla Gonzalez: 30,000 30,000 between emails sent to the lawmakers and requests to speak. That blows my mind away, too. Like they're just that they're always emailing and saying, "Give me more bills. Give me more bills." You know, send me in, coach. Give me more. They never get tired. And I love that. I love that they're they're excited to save Arizona.

Scot Mussi: They I hope they feel like they're our family. That I feel like that. There it feels like it feels like we've built trust and that's always been something that's been gratifying to me watching this movement get built out. Just from an organizational perspective knowing that you can go out and have that relationship with thousands of people throughout the state and they know that they can come to us for information. They can come to us with maybe problems that are happening in their own community. That's actually one of the things that surprises me the most a lot of times is we get notified about various things that are happening around the state that we would have never known about if it wasn't for the grassroots network that we that we have now here in Arizona.

Darla Gonzalez: That's so true. Every day emails asking about propositions or things that happening in their city or municipal or even a bill that's outside of our wheelhouse. They know that if we know something about it, we're going to share it. And also, there's been groups that have wanted to put bills together that are completely outside of our wheelhouse, but they know that we're not going to turn our back on them. We're going to help them in any way that we can, either with the language or getting them hooked up with someone, a legislator who that is their wheelhouse. We're always going to answer their questions. We're very transparent. And my cell phone number is at the bottom of every email. And that's thousands and thousands of emails. And you know what? They don't even abuse that. So, that's sort of a surprise, too.

Like, literally, I could have my phone blow up all day long, legitimately. But

Keeping Grassroots Engaged

Scot Mussi: And how do you keep people from falling to the wayside or dropping off, becoming disengaged? How do you make sure that the grassroots network stays hungry?

Darla Gonzalez: Well, we have the government keeps us busy. So, we do have a lot of issues that constantly pop up that we want to inform them on and that keeps them busy. I there are some people that have been around from the beginning. If I don't see them on a Friday call, I will reach out and let them know that they're missed. So, there's personal connections with people that it's important. But I think we just Hobbs keeps us busy. Fontes keeps us busy. Kris Mayes keeps us busy there. There's a the crazy stuff that happens at the legislature keeps us busy. And then there's stuff that we want to do. So, it just seems like there's always something that's interesting and we always want to make sure that we're not trying to create a demand, but we're trying to meet a demand.

That's the other thing that's really important in grassroots is a lot of people, they'll go, "Oh, I think this is important." And so, they'll go, "I'm going to have a class on this." And like two people show up because nobody else thinks that's important. So you have to be able to read the market signals of your grassroots like what's important to them when you and you have to be able to risk failure to succeed too. You sometimes our Biblical Citizenship classes that was a total experiment. We thought oh great it'll be 10 of us. Well there was 70 people that signed up and then another 150 and then another hundred. So sometimes you have to just take a risk but the market signals were there.

So if you're a grassroots leader, you want to pay attention to what they want, what they're asking for, what are the questions, what are they what are the questions on the Friday call, you can get an idea from them what interests them and then meet those needs.

Scot Mussi: Those signals you talked about abs. I mean, that's something else that surprised me that you'll end up identifying issues that regular people, regular voters just sit are agitated about or concerned about that is being completely missed by the political bubble down at the Capitol. And I think that's something that's a benefit. And then just talking about that engagement. Seems to me that if you just don't have that consistent engagement that you're going to you're going to start losing your ability to keep people participating. They'll fall off or they'll find something else to do.

Darla Gonzalez: Our grassroots is relational. Our organization is relational. It's not transactional. That's what politics is out there. It's transactional. That's these groups that, oh, we need somebody. Let's call them in and then we forget about them for the next year. We don't do that. We've never done that. It's it's like inform if we're not working on a specific issue of lobbying a bill or trying to challenge a initiative or petition, we are training. Like we there's so much to learn. And we can't just use people and then and then go find them when we need them again. It's like give to them, give to them, give to them. What we give to them is the truth over and over. Or we give them the truth. We I don't even like to ask for anything. I know I have to ask for things once in a while, but I really just want to serve them.

And I feel like our club serves these people. They're our heroes.

Scaling Statewide

Scot Mussi: How do you manage the whole state? I mean, you've got all these different areas, but what have we done to build that out? I know that we've tried to make sure that we're staying engaged with all these different districts, but one of the things that I'm proud that you've been able to do was to identify regional leads and other people leaders around the state that wanted to step up to the plate. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Darla Gonzalez: Yeah, it became very clear when we had like a thousand plus people and were continuing to grow that we needed to find a way to duplicate ourselves in all parts of the state. And so we it was very it wasn't difficult to find people who wanted to step up and represent us in the different areas in Arizona. And so we do have 23 or 24 regional leaders across the state. And April she her whole mission is to keep them informed, keep them in the loop, appreciate them, give them everything that they need, train, train, train. And we're able to scale ourselves out with our regional volunteer leaders who have business cards and have badges and polo shirts. Heck, I don't even have a polo shirt. Do you have a polo shirt? But they do. They have, you know, swag and we they're they're gold and they know it.

And I and we're always looking for people in areas that want to kind of step in for us in those areas when we it allows us to scale out and get information out more often. But that started after probably a year is when we realized the only way we're going to be able to reach all these people and give them the attention that they need is to have people there that represented us.

Scot Mussi: Yeah. And I think it's important for you to mention that as well too. That was a year ahead. None of this happened overnight. It was we started with a simple plan and it was add something, add something, add something. And every time, every year it feels like okay, we can add something different or we see a market signal. Okay, we can look at doing that. Not everything works, but it's not something that you can just overnight say, "Oh, you're going to have this huge reach." There's no way you can buy your way out of that problem. You have to go and this takes time to build.

Darla Gonzalez: You have to be smart with your business, too. You know, you can't just throw out a bunch of money if you only have like 75 people following you. But I think when once we really hit the 5,000 mark, that was crazy. And we were counting every Friday. Okay, we have 4,860. I actually have someone on the Friday call that every Friday wants to know exactly how many people we're f he's keep he's been keeping track for six years and then we got to the 10,000 mark and then we just got to 15,000 and it's it's just that is a little crazy to think about and I couldn't even tell you other than probably the surges were after elections either through I call it inspirational dissatisfaction action. They were either inspired because they were dissatisfied or just like this last election 2024, they were happy and they kept they didn't disengage.

But most people won't disengage if you keep them busy. And we have the legislative session every year and there's always something for them to do during a legislative session. We always have bills for them thanks to Amy and Greg. We always have bills. They do a great job explaining them, putting them in to relatable terms so that people when they're giving their opinion, it's easy. In fact, that's why they we have a list for our overachievers. There's a link in our email that says for you overachievers, click here. In fact, I had a few emails back this year that said, "We need more bills. Didn't you used to give more bills?" Well, no. We're still giving about the same number of bills, but what's happened is they've gotten better at it.

They've gotten more time and they want to do more and so we'll come up with something, you know, we'll keep them busy and we'll keep loving on them and we'll keep feeding them.

Looking Toward 2026

Scot Mussi: You mentioned the elections. Looking ahead to 2026, what do you see the grassroots being able to do to make a difference heading into the upcoming election season?

Darla Gonzalez: Full-on engagement. They're they're they're hungry. They want a new governor. They want a new secretary of state. They want a new attorney general. I think they're we have a real confident grassroots. They're plugged in. I think that we're going to have success. I'm very optimistic. Once the legislative session ends, we'll be talking ballot propositions and be training on that. Ballot arguments. We'll go through all that. They that we have a whole segment of people who just like to write ballot arguments. So that's I think that's the other thing about a grassroots. Not everybody's good at the same thing. You've got to figure out something for everybody to do depending on their skill sets and the time that they have. And we're really good at that. Ballot arguments, we keep track when people send us a copy of what they wrote their lawmaker.

I put that in a box that potential ballot argument person because not only did they write an eloquent, you know, letter to their lawmaker, they like that and they wanted me to see it. So ballot arguments are a huge thing. We'll activate those folks in June. I think we'll be training and then by the end of the summer, we'll be out there training all of our regional leaders and all of our grassroots about all the propositions so that they can be influencers in their local communities and with their families. And then, you know, we have the people who are engaged with the candidates with and so we're pretty sure that will be good, too.

How to Get Involved

Scot Mussi: So, anybody watching today that's not a current, you know, signed up to be participating in the with the Free Enterprise Club or grassroots network, how do they do it? How do they sign up if they want to get involved?

Darla Gonzalez: Well, they can sign up going to azfree.org/join or they can just email me directly at darla@azfree.org. Really easy. We'll sign you up. We'll get you on our Friday calls. We automatically sign you up for credentials for the Request to Speak system and send you the video and the instructions that it takes one minute to get.

Scot Mussi: Are they going to get bombarded with emails and solicitations or anything like that?

Darla Gonzalez: No. We promise not to do that. We have a limit of how many emails that we'll send out, but we will keep you informed and we will make sure you have all the links that you need to get your opinion to your lawmakers and to know what upcoming training events are and coalition events and anything that we think that would be interesting to them. We'll keep them up to date weekly on that.

Closing

Scot Mussi: Darla, thank you for joining us today in the State Room.

Darla Gonzalez: Thanks for having me.

Scot Mussi: And thank you to everybody that watched us today, joining us here at The State Room, where we discuss key issues and events that make sure to keep Arizona free. Thank you for watching.