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PROGRESS IN THE BLUEGRASS: AN ANALYSIS OF
GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING IN KENTUCKY POST 1970

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

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May 2022

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2022

ABSTRACT

While historians and other scholars have explored grassroots organizing in Kentucky, most historiography on this topic is limited to the 1930s through 1970s and focused on coal, labor, and the Civil Rights Movement. This paper fills a gap within the historiography by extending the discussion of grassroots organizing in Kentucky past the 1970s. Through the examination of organizational documents, membership newsletters, and oral histories, this paper explores the transformation of Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC) from 1981 to 2020. KFTC began as a small Eastern Kentucky organization focused predominantly on fair taxing practices in coal companies. Through efforts to diversify both their platform and membership, KFTC grew to become a statewide organization with the capacity to impact Charles Booker's 2020 U.S. Senate race.

This analysis offers ample insights into internal state dynamics, in contrast to the well-documented rampant misunderstanding of the state by those outside of it. As historians such as Elizabeth Catts have showcased, the tendency of political commentators and scholars to narrow in on nationwide election results has led to an incomplete understanding of politics in Kentucky. When the political history of Kentucky is centered around voting and election results, the work done on-the-ground by Kentuckians is often ignored. This leads to Charles Booker appearing to be a single, lucky instance of potential progress in Kentucky rather than a candidate who benefited

from decades of grassroots organizing by groups like KFTC. This paper argues for the historical analysis of Kentucky politics to expand past voting records due to the history of political disengagement, specifically in Eastern Kentucky, stemming from decades of corruption within government and companies.

I dedicate this thesis to Kentucky organizers. Thank you for your resiliency,
determination, and commitment to our state.

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, Charles Booker lost the Kentucky U.S. Senate Democratic primary race by less than three percent¹ despite raising approximately 50 million dollars less than the ultimate Democratic nominee, Amy McGrath,² and entering the race five months later.³ When Booker announced his run for U.S. Senate in January 2020,⁴ voters met his campaign with uncertainty, specifically those out of state. While establishment groups including the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee did not believe in Booker's chance at winning the primary, the belief in Booker from on-the-ground organizers in Kentucky was a different story.⁵

Kentuckians For The Commonwealth's New Power PAC endorsed Charles Booker for U.S. Senate on February 25, 2020 after a stringent process that consisted of a candidate questionnaire, candidate interview, recommendation from KFTC's Steering Committee, and vote from their Executive Committee.⁶ Cassia Herron, KFTC's

¹ "Live Results: 2020 Kentucky Senate Primaries," *Washington Post*,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/election-results/kentucky-senate-primary-live-results/>

² Amy McGrath's campaign raised roughly 55.3 million dollars compared to Charles Booker's 5.1 million dollars during the primary race. See Federal Election Commission, <https://www.fec.gov/introduction-campaign-finance/how-to-research-public-records/candidates/>

³ Phillip M. Bailey, Lucas Aulbach, and Joseph Gerth, "Amy McGrath says she will take on Mitch McConnell in 2020 US Senate race," *Louisville Courier Journal*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/2019/07/09/amy-mcgrath-to-run-against-senate-majority-leader-mitch-mcconnell-2020-election/1676100001/>

⁴ Daniel Desrochers, "Booker announces bid to unseat McConnell." *Lexington Herald-Leader*, January 6, 2020.

⁵ <https://www.newspapers.com/image/638298273/?terms=%22charles%20booker%22&match=1>

⁶ "KFTC's New Power PAC endorses Charles Booker in Democratic primary for U.S. Senate", Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, February 27, 2020, <https://archive.kftc.org/press/releases/kftc%E2%80%99s-new-power-pac-endorses-charles-booker-democratic-primary-us-senate>

chairperson, stated in a press release that Charles Booker received their endorsement because he was the “strongest choice for Kentuckians who want an improved life for all of us – regardless of the color of our skin, size of our bank account or which neighborhood or holler we call home.”⁷ KFTC’s endorsement would not just be an email and press release, but would include running phone banks, sending texts, and placing literature on doors to encourage support for Booker in the June primary election. Although those familiar with recent efforts of KFTC would not find this endorsement surprising, when KFTC (originally standing for the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition) was founded in 1981 in Harlan County, Kentucky, their central focus was establishing fair taxing legislation for people in Eastern Kentucky whose land and health had been exploited and harmed by coal and lumber companies. At their founding, KFTC’s platform did not include endorsing candidates or becoming directly involved with voter empowerment work. However, the organization's shifts in terms of platform and strategies surrounding methods of tackling corruption across the state, along with their growing membership from 1981 to 2020, allowed them to play a central role in the 2020 U.S. Senate primary.

This analysis of the growth and successes of a statewide grassroots organization in Kentucky offers ample insights into internal state dynamics, in contrast to the well-documented rampant misunderstanding of the state by those outside of it. As historians such as Elizabeth Catte have showcased, the tendency of political commentators and scholars to narrow in on nationwide election results has led to a misleading grasp of

⁷ “KFTC’s New Power PAC endorses Charles Booker in Democratic primary for U.S. Senate”, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, February 27, 2020, <https://archive.kftc.org/press/releases/kftc%E2%80%99s-new-power-pac-endorses-charles-booker-democratic-primary-us-senate>

politics in Kentucky.⁸ For instance, Donald Trump won 70-80 percent of the vote in most Eastern Kentucky counties in the 2016 Presidential General Election.⁹ What is not often discussed, however, is that these counties consistently have the lowest voter turnout, with Harlan, Martin, and Pike having 53.7 percent, 48.0 percent, and 51.4 percent, respectively, compared to the 59.1 percent statewide turnout in 2016.¹⁰ Utilizing election results as a form of analysis of politics in Kentucky provides a limited understanding and negates the work being done by grassroots organizers and organizations. When the political history of Kentucky is centered solely around voting results, a great deal of the work done on the ground is ignored because of the history of political disengagement and voter disenfranchisement within the state. This leads to candidates like Charles Booker appearing to be a single, lucky instance of potential progress in Kentucky instead of a candidate who benefited from decades of organizing by groups such as KFTC.

By extending into the late twentieth century, and exploring important new directions, my research also contributes to an existing scholarship on grassroots organizing in Kentucky. That historiography has focused largely on the period preceding KFTC, the 1930s-1970s, and has focused on either coal and labor organizing¹¹ or the Civil Rights Movement.¹² Historians Paul F. Taylor and John W. Hevener detail the experiences of coal miners and union organizers in Kentucky during the 1930s and

⁸ Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing, 2019).

⁹ "Kentucky Presidential Race Results," *New York Times*, Updated August 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/kentucky-president-clinton-trump>

¹⁰ "Voter Turnout Report For the 2016 General Election", Commonwealth of Kentucky State Board of Elections, <https://elect.ky.gov/Resources/Pages/Turnout.aspx>

¹¹ See for example, Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing, 2019); and Skye Moody, *Hillbilly Women: Struggle and Survival in Southern Appalachia*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Publishing, 1973).

¹² See for example, Catherine Fosl and Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Freedom on the Border: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky*, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

1940s, specifically focused on Bloody Harlan.¹³ Historians Jessica Wilkerson and Jefferson Cowie discuss the influence of organizing around coal mining and other related political issues during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ My paper brings to light the critical decade of the 1980s when KFTC was founded into focus, and also extends the historiography to consider broader questions about political engagement and organizing in Kentucky. While other works that discuss this period often center their analysis on theories behind why specific voters lean towards one party over the other, this paper instead reveals the political engagement of grassroots organizers and organizations that goes unnoticed when voting records are the focal point of political history.¹⁵

To understand how KFTC developed over time and adjusted to the changing needs of their membership, my research analyzes primary sources produced by KFTC, including steering committee meetings, operational records, and *Balancing the Scales*, a membership newsletter. These sources, predominantly written or influenced by KFTC staff and members, demonstrate the specific priorities and platforms of KFTC. Oral histories have also helped me to understand the thoughts of those who do not normally appear in the archive. Given that oral histories can become problematic due to issues with memory and recollection, I will approach them through the same analytical lens as

Alessandro Portelli does in, *They Say in Harlan County*. He notes, “What people believe

¹³ Paul F. Taylor, *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County, Kentucky, 1931-1941*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990). John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019). Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012).

¹⁵ See for example, Thomas Frank. *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2005) and Joan Williams. *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017). Although both works are not specifically focused on Kentucky, they analyze broader trends that have implications on discourse surrounding Kentucky politics.

and what they forget is as significant as what people recall accurately.”¹⁶ I do not utilize oral histories as a source of specific dates or timelines, but rather to understand how people remember their experiences and the meanings they assign to them. Regardless of whether every detail within an oral history is technically accurate, the memories Kentuckians have of coal companies and operators showcases their experiences, perceptions, and understandings of these groups.

This paper begins in Chapter One with a discussion of the political context of Eastern Kentucky in the late 1970s with an emphasis on the growing political disengagement stemming from decades of organizing against companies and government. Chapter Two includes an analysis of the 1988 Broad Form Deed Constitutional Amendment, KFTC’s first, and resoundingly successful, statewide campaign, which responded to an unfavorable state Supreme Court decision. Chapter Three then analyzes the subsequent transformation of KFTC into a “social justice organization” in order to adapt to their growing membership that extended across the state. I end with a discussion of KFTC’s involvement with Charles Booker’s U.S. Senate race and the importance of having established organizations like KFTC that provide infrastructure for political campaigns to organize within. Thus, by 2020, I argue, KFTC had successfully mobilized statewide grassroots organizing and voter turnout through local leadership development and adapting their platform alongside their growing membership, directly contradicting national perceptions of political mobilization and attitudes in Kentucky.

¹⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

CHAPTER ONE: THE GROWING POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT IN EASTERN KENTUCKY, 1930-1970

KFTC's formation in the 1980s came after decades of growing disengagement in politics, which was largely connected to corporate influence around labor and the environment. Historiography on grassroots organizing in Kentucky predominantly focuses on how individuals became part of movements for labor and environmental organizing. Those involved with this type of organizing were often forced into these roles due to personal stakes that prohibited complacency; most local organizers discussed in these works were coal miners or had family members in the coal mines, including women who were often forced to become active due to death of men in their life because of black lung or dangerous working conditions.

Kentucky is well known for labor organizing around coal issues, but what has been less visible is the toll of such struggles on broader political engagement. While the labor and coal strikes in Kentucky from the 1930s to the 1970s demonstrate the power of people to collectively enact change, they also point to a growing disengagement and distrust in politics due to the lack of aid and resources from the government, especially when the government spent time and money providing support to the companies bringing destruction to those communities.

While voting results are perhaps the most often used means of measuring political engagement, I argue that grassroots organizing should also be analyzed, especially in

areas with historically low voter turnout and voter engagement. Grassroots organizing involves mobilizing people within communities to build collective power and enact change at the local, state, and national level. Kentuckians disillusioned by the political process often took to building collective power through grassroots organizing efforts to take action against corruption and greed within the mines.

Eastern Kentucky was both a site of significant grassroots organizing in the 1930s-1970s *and*, subsequently, a region with some of the lowest voter turnout in the late twentieth and early twentieth century. It is essential to understand the political disengagement in Eastern Kentucky not only because of its importance in influencing the founding of Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, but also because Eastern Kentucky, despite high grassroots organizing, consistently has the lowest voter turnout across the state. In the 2020 general election, the state voter turnout was 60.3 percent, while counties like Harlan, Pike, and Martin had 53.4 percent, 51.7 percent, and 48.1 percent voter turnout, respectively.¹⁷

Although this history of low voter turnout in Eastern Kentucky has several potential causes, the connections between coal operators, politicians, and police has impacted the political engagement in Eastern Kentucky for decades. While historians such as Elizabeth Catts have showcased how coal operatives pit “workers against the environment in the battle for economic stability”, leaders in the industry also placed workers against local governments by providing monetary incentives to local authorities, encouraging them to terrorize union organizers and destroy union efforts. The relationship between coal, politics, and money heightened political disengagement as

¹⁷ “Voter Turnout Report For the 2020 General Election,” Commonwealth of Kentucky State Board of Elections, <https://elect.ky.gov/Resources/Pages/Turnout.aspx>

Eastern Kentuckians grew to associate politics with the greed and corruption they saw within the mines.

Bloody Harlan and the UMWA in the 1930s

KFTC was formed in Harlan County, an Eastern Kentucky county bordering Virginia, which has one of the most in-depth histories of collective organizing against powerful companies in the state. The coal wars in mid-twentieth-century Kentucky are perhaps its best-known story of labor struggle. What is often referred to as Bloody Harlan, or the Harlan County War, was a nine-year labor struggle to unionize Harlan County coal miners in the 1930s.¹⁸ Bloody Harlan was not the first attempt at unionizing in Harlan County. Almost 15 years prior, miners in Harlan County held an effective strike in August 1917 with the help of UMWA organizers that resulted in a settlement including wage increase and shorter workday.¹⁹ However, in 1931, the Harlan County Coal Operators' Association cut wages for miners by 10 percent,²⁰ igniting efforts to secure a union in the mines. This struggle included waves of success and failure for miners hoping to join the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) for increased wages and better working conditions, along with violence that would kill miners, deputies, and employers.

Community involvement became an important and necessary strategy for coal miners organizing against powerful and wealthy companies. To combat the political strength of coal operators, organizers turned to collective power generated within their

¹⁸ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 33.

¹⁹ George J. Titler, *Hell in Harlan*, (OH: Commonwealth Book Company, 2015).

²⁰ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 15.

families and communities. Organizers built coalitions among those impacted both directly and indirectly by the political and social power of coal companies. Consequently, women, through their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, became key supporters of strikes.

Whatever the lessons of solidarity in mining communities that emerged, Eastern Kentuckians also took away a harsher lesson about the political institutions at local, state, and national levels. In both 1917 and 1931, coal operators turned to governmental institutions to prevent the success of unions, utilizing the money they had profited off the backs of miners to do so. The power of coal companies in Eastern Kentucky provided operators the ability to corrupt the political process and have a heavy influence on local government and officials which heightened their political and social control over miners.²¹

Indeed, mining communities directly experienced the ways that the local mechanism for law enforcement served corporate, not citizen, interests. Police became an important tool for coal operators to take control of coal miners outside of the mines. Their work against efforts for unionization included “seizing radical literature, jailing several organizers, breaking up rallies, and raiding the homes of the union’s leaders.”²² A union campaign was forced to hold a rally in Pineville because of the threat of violence from Harlan County Sheriff John Blair. The fears seemed to be justified when three carloads

²¹ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 15.

²² Paul F. Taylor, *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County, Kentucky, 1931-1941*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 27.

were found headed toward the rally with guns and several deputy sheriffs were seen there taking notes of those present at the rally to report to their employers.²³

Sheriff Blair arguably became one of the coal operators most influential allies in Harlan County; Blair openly stated that he “did all in my power to aid the operators,”²⁴ which was especially harmful considering that of the 170 deputies under his control, 164 were provided economic incentives by coal operators.²⁵ Local officials were not the extent of political actors taking the side of coal companies; while many on strike expected the calling of the national guard to be helpful to their struggle, they were instead met with officials who were focused on protecting non-striking miners,²⁶ even further solidifying the relationship between coal operators, law enforcement, and political officials with the extensive corruption within the politics surrounding Eastern Kentucky.

Along with sheriffs, other local officials such as mayors and municipal councils became a key tool for coal operators to keep track of workers outside of the mines. The removal of resources, which often required assistance from local officials, was used against striking miners to weaken union efforts. Not only were these used during strikes, but local officials cut off water supply to prevent a May rally in 1931.²⁷ Such practices were not uncommon for those involved with union efforts or even possibly associated with them. Coal operators were fully aware of the economic implications of strikes on miners and often used poverty and hunger to their advantage.

²³ Ibid., 44.

²⁴ Louis Stark, "Harlan War Traced To Pay-Cut Revolt," *New York Times*, September 29, 1931. www.newspapers.com

²⁵ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 39.

²⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 224-225.

²⁷ Paul F. Taylor, *Bloody Harlan: The United Mine Workers of America in Harlan County, Kentucky, 1931-1941*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 11-12.

After years of strikes and turmoil, Harlan County coal miners finally unionized in a 1939 agreement between operator and union representatives.²⁸ This led to a comparatively calm period in the Harlan County mines through the 1950s, illustrated through the lack of labor-management conflict deaths from 1939 to 1959.²⁹ This is not to say that changes were not occurring across Kentucky. The Civil Rights Movement, War on Poverty, and Vietnam War generated political action during this period; however, organizing in relation to coal operators was relatively calm compared to the 1930s.

The Brookside Mine Strike and Jericole Coal Company Strike in the 1970s

Despite a 40-year gap from Bloody Harlan to the 1970s mine strikes in the Brookside and Glenbrook mines, a similar struggle between the political influence of coal operators and coal miners continued to corrupt Eastern Kentucky politics. The Brookside mine strike in 1973 began when workers at the mine voted to replace their membership in the Southern Labor Union (which they believed to be more on the side of the coal operators than workers) with the United Mine Workers of America.³⁰ As in the 1930s, police and other local officials were viewed as under the control of the coal operators.³¹ This specifically became an issue with coal mine owner, Harlan County Judge F. Byrd Hogg, who placed heavy restrictions on the number of miners who could strike at one time. Micky Messer shared his frustrations with the state police claiming that they were

²⁸ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 171.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁰ “Harlan County, KY, Coal Miners Win Affiliation with UMWA Union, United States, 1973-1974,” Global Nonviolent Action Database, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/harlan-county-ky-coal-miners-win-affiliation-umwa-union-united-states-1973-1974>.

³¹ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 8.

“keeping the road open”³² when Messer believed their true mission was to transport nonunion workers. These officials, who were supposed to be maintaining “law and order”³³ during the strikes, were instead perceived as being instigators who took the sides of coal operators over the citizens they were supposed to protect.

In his collection of oral histories, Alessandro Portelli highlights how Kentuckians viewed coal companies coming out of the mining strikes in the 1930s and 1970s. When asked why the 1973 strikes at the Brookside mine became so violent, Jack Wright explained, “I guess it’s just the companies making all that money, they won’t give us nothing. These big people want to make all the money and just let the poor man root hog or die.”³⁴ Eastern Kentuckians placed an emphasis on pointing out corruption within people and groups that owned coal mines, often depicting them with greedy language. Otis King describes his mom’s brother as being “crooked as a snake”³⁵ because he worked with a lawyer to take land from several different families living in the Black Mountain, the highest mountain peak in the state, which made it especially desirable for coal companies.

Disillusionment with coal companies and a sense they did not value human life is a persistent theme in accounts. In an interview, Becky Simpson shared a story of a coal company that bulldozed an elderly woman’s house down in Magoffin County and left her sitting outside with nothing. Simpson concluded that the only explanation for this was that coal companies, “see dollar signs and that was worth everything to them.”³⁶

³² Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 2012, 326.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 2012, 326.

³⁵ Ibid., 100.

³⁶ Ibid., 101.

Regardless of whether these details are true, this story highlights how driven by greed Kentuckians believed coal companies to be. Whenever those interviewed by Portelli described coal operators and employers, their language often always included connections to either money or corruption, if not both.

Although the goal of coal operators was to “defeat the union’s challenge to their economic position”, the lasting impact of their corruption did not just influence the success of unions, but generated a distrust in politics that is arguably still impacting politics in Eastern Kentucky today.³⁷ In an interview, Joan Robinett perfectly articulates this political disillusionment with, “The laws, they’re designed and created by attorneys and companies and people that don’t really give a shit about, about their regular American working-class person.”³⁸ This is not to say that coal operators were the sole reason for political disengagement in Eastern Kentucky, but rather that their use of financial corruption within local governments contributed to broader narratives surrounding money and politics.

This history, then, led to people like Robinett viewing the government and companies as *two connected groups* driven by greed and profit rather than by the best interests of ordinary people. Instead of Kentuckians viewing politicians as public servants, they viewed them as leaders who had aided coal companies for years. KFTC was founded less than 10 years after the Brookside mining strike, in response to the lasting implications of coal operators' relations with money and politics. Although the organization’s mission was originally centered on creating fair taxing practices in coal

³⁷ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 175.

³⁸ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

and lumber companies, it eventually grew to work on rectifying the damage done by these coal companies by empowering Kentuckians to become involved in the democratic process.

Thus, KFTC has its roots in Harlan County as an organization focused on the impacts of extractive industries (primarily coal, but also lumber), in the wake of decades of labor and environmental turmoil. In the years that followed, the group developed a broader focus on voting rights and social justice, while maintaining a central foundation on corporate abuse of power and government corruption. Eventually, KFTC organizers also started working to overcome the deep disillusionment about the political process and resulting voter disengagement which was the legacy of those decades.

CHAPTER TWO: KFTC'S FOUNDING AND FIRST SEVERAL YEARS, 1981-1989

This chapter analyzes the first several years of KFTC, highlighting how it began with a focus on fair taxing practices within extractive companies; however, by 1988, KFTC broadened to an emphasis on mobilizing voters during a key statewide campaign against a longstanding abuse of corporate power. On August 17, 1981, 26 people representing 12 counties across Kentucky formed the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition in Harlan County with an initial focus on creating fair taxing practices.³⁹ The story of KFTC, in some ways, began four years earlier in 1977 during severe flash floods that destroyed several communities across the state. In April, floods killed ten Kentuckians, with areas in Eastern Kentucky receiving between five to eight inches of rain within 24 hours,⁴⁰ leaving Harlan, Pike, and Martin County with heavy damage. The disastrous floods led to 15 Kentucky counties being declared disastrous areas.⁴¹ Eastern Kentucky was hit with flash floods again in October and November, forcing individuals within affected areas to take action to remedy the damage done to their communities because they did not anticipate their government helping.

³⁹ Melanie A. Zuercher, ed., *Making History: The First Ten Years of KFTC*, (Miamisburg, OH: Brown & Kroger Printing Company, 1991), 12.

⁴⁰ NOAA US Department of Commerce, "The East Kentucky Flood of April 1977," The East Kentucky Flood of April 1977, (NOAA's National Weather Service, February 1, 2017), <https://www.weather.gov/jkl/1977flood>.

⁴¹ Tom Latek, "Horrific 1977 Flood in Southeastern Ky. Remembered," Kentucky Today, October 6, 2021, https://www.kentuckytoday.com/downloads/horrific-1977-flood-in-southeastern-ky-remembered/article_83ea15bc-b28e-5302-b689-9e64c028c9d9.html.

For many in the region, the damage done by the record flooding was not simply a natural disaster that had no explanation or cause. As historian Andy Horowitz highlights in his book, *Katrina: A History 1915-2007*, natural disasters can be heightened by politicians and community leaders because “vulnerability is a social construct.”⁴² With several cities flooded, those in Eastern Kentucky were aware that the damage caused by floods had been heightened by exploitative practices of coal companies for decades, specifically relating to strip mining.⁴³ In the wake of the floods, several groups arose to tackle both the short-term damage done to their communities and the long-term consequences of decades of exploitative practices by coal and lumber companies. Two of these groups, the Concerned Citizens of Martin County and Clover Fork Organization to Protect the Environment (COPE), would later form the roots of KFTC.

Herb E. Smith, a founding member of KFTC, highlighted one of the most important functions of KFTC as being a connection between people interested in creating change across Eastern Kentucky. Organizations formed quite often in the area because of the constant need for organizing stemming from frequent crises. Smith expressed concerns for efforts by the Appalachian Volunteers, an organization created in the mid-1960s under President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration to combat poverty,⁴⁴ because

⁴² Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915–2015*, (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 13.

⁴³ Melanie A. Zuercher, ed., *Making History: The First Ten Years of KFTC*, (Miamisburg, OH: Brown & Kroger Printing Company, 1991), 23.

⁴⁴ The Appalachian Volunteers was an initiative under the Economic Opportunity Act coming out of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s efforts to address poverty in the mid-1960s. The program utilized students from Kentucky universities and colleges to work on community projects in poverty-stricken areas in Eastern Kentucky, with the hope that the students being from the state would decrease the likelihood of them being viewed as outsiders. The initial goal of the AV was to repair schools in these areas. The AV became a very complicated program once struggles began between volunteers and local politicians who were in control of how funds were to be disbursed. Along with the expansion of the program to include college students from over 30 states, tensions between the volunteers and local politicians began to decrease the effectiveness of the program, leading many volunteers to worry that their efforts were not actually aiding those in poverty. Those involved with the AV were placed into a tricky situation where maintaining the efforts they were instructed to do would complicate their relationship with people in the

of their tendency of “priming the pump”⁴⁵ where those involved would create organizations, stay for a few months, and then leave, which often caused the organizations to operate for a few weeks or months and eventually disband. Unlike the organizations formed by the Appalachian Volunteers, KFTC would be formed more as a coalition of existing groups to strengthen their collective power to enact change across Eastern Kentucky. During their first formal meeting in August of 1981, they wrote their first statement of purpose:

“The Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition is a group of community-based organizations and individuals promoting more effective and efficient community services, through a fair and equitable taxation system, throughout the state of Kentucky, with particular interest in the coal counties.”⁴⁶

In their first few years as an organization, KFTC focused on their first platform: fair taxing. Their early initiatives would include hosting property tax workshops, lobbying politicians, and growing their base across Eastern Kentucky. After KFTC’s first membership meeting in 1982, they had formed four chapters in Fayette, Floyd, Leslie, and Martin County. By the end of the year, KFTC had grown large enough to need staffing to support their organizing efforts. During a steering committee meeting, Kathy Hatfield reported that the Personnel Committee had presented a recommendation to hire an organizing coordinator whose responsibilities would be “the organizing and research

community; however, any expansion of their efforts would cause suspicion from local officials and further complicate their efforts. The same corruption that Eastern Kentuckians had been struggling with for decades even limited the amount of aid they were able to receive. See Thomas J. Kiffmeyer, “From Self-Help to Sedition: The Appalachian Volunteers in Eastern Kentucky, 1964-1970,” *The Journal of Southern History* 64, no.1 (February 1998): 65-94 and Thomas J. Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019).

⁴⁵ Herb E. Smith, “The Connection Between Us,” in Melanie A. Zuercher, ed., *Making History: The First Ten Years of KFTC*, (Miamisburg, OH: Brown & Kroger Printing Company, 1991), 10.

⁴⁶ Melanie A. Zuercher, ed., *Making History: The First Ten Years of KFTC*, (Miamisburg, OH: Brown & Kroger Printing Company, 1991), 30.

functions of KFTC and for further staff development,”⁴⁷ indicating their intentions to add more staff members as the organization grew. Despite their growth, KFTC remained focused on maintaining a grassroots organization that was accessible to all who wanted to join. When discussing the membership fee, the steering committee made a “provision that persons unemployed and unable to pay anything be allowed to join without costs,”⁴⁸ highlighting their commitment to creating an organization that was open and accessible to all Kentuckians.

One of the benefits of KFTC’s base being formed as a coalition between several groups, unlike the Appalachian Volunteers Program, was that their founding members had experience in local organizing. The Concerned Citizens of Martin County provided KFTC a model for creating local chapters, which would become an important component of the organization's growth.⁴⁹ As a coalition of several groups, KFTC prioritized supporting several local initiatives including the Concerned Citizens of Martin County and Lawrence County Concerned Citizens.⁵⁰ By working in partnership with already established local groups, KFTC’s first years as an organization were centered on providing resources to local efforts while beginning to coordinate and connect the groups to statewide legislations.

⁴⁷ Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition, “Steering Committee Meeting Minutes,” December 7, 1982, Folder 12, Box 2010ms005, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁴⁸ Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition, “Steering Committee Meeting Minutes,” December 7, 1982, Folder 12, Box 2010ms005, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁴⁹ Melanie A. Zuercher, ed., *Making History: The First Ten Years of KFTC*, (Miamisburg, OH: Brown & Kroger Printing Company, 1991), 30.

⁵⁰ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “Balancing the Scales”, 1987, Folder 1, Box 2010ms005-03, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

By the organization's five-year anniversary in 1986, their growing membership required an adjustment to their mission and platform. While their emphasis on working against corruption within the government and companies remained at the forefront, their 1986-1987 platform had been updated to include a focus on promoting “active citizen participation in the democratic process, government accountability, and the development of local community groups.”⁵¹ Through a unanimous vote from the Steering Committee in 1987, KFTC changed their name from the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition to Kentuckians For The Commonwealth,⁵² signifying the group's intention of broadening both their platform and membership to better represent their changing goal of connecting members to electoral politics. Their name change could not have come at a better time, considering that 1988 would bring about KFTC’s first successful statewide grassroots campaign, solidifying the organization’s focus on combining their grassroots strategies to engage ordinary Kentuckians to participate within the political process. This emphasis on encouraging participation within electoral politics would be key to the organization's first large-scale grassroots campaign, defining KFTC’s growth for decades to come.

KFTC members were propelled to action in July of 1987 when the Kentucky Supreme Court overturned a 1984 law designed to limit broad form deeds, a longstanding exploitative practice by coal companies that KFTC was against since their founding. Broad form deeds were an exploitative practice by coal companies that granted them

⁵¹ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “1986-1987 platform,” Folder 31, Box 2010ms005-37, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁵² Although the steering committee voted to change the name during their annual retreat in November of 1987, the name change would not go into effect until January 1st, 1988. See Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition, “Steering Committee Meeting Minutes”, November 14, 1987, Folder 16, Box 2010ms005, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

rights to the minerals underground regardless of who owned the land. As a result, coal companies were able to ignore the rights of landowners to obtain access to materials. Since their founding in 1981, the removal of broad form deeds had been an area of interest for KFTC, as it was a prime example of the connected corruption between the government and companies. Herb E. Smith pointed to “the failure of the judicial system to protect them from this broad form deed abuse”⁵³ as the central reason for KFTC’s work to create a constitutional amendment. To coordinate their response against the ruling, KFTC formed a Land Reform Committee to have an organized approach to removing broad form deeds. After a vote from the Kentucky House, KFTC’s efforts helped place the Broad Form Deed Constitutional Amendment on the statewide ballot in November of 1988.

KFTC’s strategy for winning the constitutional amendment relied heavily on using their established base to reach people across the state who were not directly affected by the outcomes of the amendment. KFTC paid for several ads to air concerning the Broad Form Deed Amendment during University of Kentucky basketball games.⁵⁴ Members Brenda Cornett, Brenda Reynolds, Bernadette Smith, and Jeanette Smith traveled 1,500 miles across the state to encourage support for the amendment.⁵⁵ Mary Jane Adams, the KFTC chairperson during 1988, argued that, “It took everyone to pass the broad form deed amendment, even though it didn’t affect everyone directly.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Herb E. Smith, “Kentucky Understories, Woods and Waters of the Commonwealth: KFTC Oral History Project,” Interview by Dana C. Johns. Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, November 15, 2019.

⁵⁴ Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition, “Steering Committee Meeting Minutes”, November 14, 1987, Folder 16, Box 2010ms005, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁵⁵ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “Balancing the scales,” August 22, 1991, Folder 5, Box 2010ms005-04, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Adams connected KFTC's work during the Broad Form Deed campaign to their name change. Pointing to growth in the organization's knowledge and issues, Adams believed that the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition was no longer an adequate description of KFTC's work that had expanded to tackle a statewide campaign.

KFTC's organizing was a complete success; the constitutional amendment passed with 82.5% support of record turnout. More Kentuckians had voted for the Broad Form Deed Amendment than had voted for president in the same year.⁵⁷ Republican Presidential candidate George Bush received 734,281 votes while Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis received 580,368 votes, highlighting how issue based campaigns transcended partisan politics.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it was the only constitutional amendment to ever pass in every single county in the state, meaning even in places that did not have direct contact with coal mines, support for the amendment was widespread. The success that KFTC experienced with the Broad Form Deed Amendment highlighted what the organization could accomplish when combining their grassroots strategies with electoral politics. In a 30th anniversary history booklet, KFTC members reflected that, "Still a young organization, KFTC had never taken on a campaign of this scale or been involved in an electoral campaign. But though lacking in experience and resources, KFTC did have hundreds of members with a strong thirst for justice and a willingness to go all-out to win in November."⁵⁹ By prioritizing an electoral issue that connected directly to their

⁵⁷ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, "30 Years of Action for Justice," Issuu, September 8, 2011, <https://issuu.com/kftc/docs/history-booklet?backgroundColor=%2523222222>, 30.

⁵⁸ "1988 Primary and General Election Results," Commonwealth of Kentucky State Board of Elections, <https://elect.ky.gov/results/1980-1989/Pages/1988.aspx>.

⁵⁹ "1988 Primary and General Election Results," Commonwealth of Kentucky State Board of Elections, <https://elect.ky.gov/results/1980-1989/Pages/1988.aspx>.

central mission of combating corruption, KFTC was able to expand their grassroots approach to influence voting.

The most important lesson from KFTC's first large-scale, statewide electoral campaign was how influential people-centered politics in places like Kentucky could be, specifically due to the history of distrust in politics. Issue-based organizing, specifically rooted within a grassroots focus, can unite people across both party and county lines. Organizing around an issue was an excellent way to not only gather support for KFTC's central mission across the state, but also showcased the agency that voting provided individuals to challenge injustice. Even if Kentuckians did not have trust in politicians, they did have trust in their communities and their ability to rally behind the issues that mattered most to enact bold change. KFTC's strategy of combining grassroots organizing with electoral politics proved to be an effective method for engaging those who felt disengaged from the political process. The strategies and structure utilized during the Broad Form Deed Amendment campaign would become a central component of KFTC's organizing for years to come.

CHAPTER THREE: KFTC'S GROWTH TO A SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATION, 1989-2020

Following their success with the Broad Form Deed Amendment campaign, KFTC began to define their group as a “social justice organization” in 1989 with five central goals including: promoting democratic values, changing unjust institutions, empowering people, building the organization, and winning issues that affect the common welfare.⁶⁰ By 1991, KFTC had grown to chapters in 13 different counties. Although the organization was still predominantly centered in Eastern Kentucky, it had expanded to chapters in Jefferson County and Greenup County.⁶¹ Their new platform prioritized the importance of membership recruitment, calling for members to share their involvement with KFTC to people in their community.⁶² In order to further strengthen and grow the organization, the Leadership Development Committee was utilized to promote and train leaders within local chapters.⁶³ By giving individuals confidence in their organizing skills through leadership positions, KFTC invested in local communities and developed leaders in counties throughout the state.

⁶⁰ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “Balancing the scales,” November 21, 1991, Folder 5, Box 2010ms005-04, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁶¹ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “Balancing the scales,” May 23, 1991, Folder 5, Box 2010ms005-04, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “Balancing the scales,” June 7, 1991, Folder 5, Box 2010ms005-04, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

As their membership began to expand across the state, KFTC's steering committee took advantage of several opportunities to grow alongside their changing membership. In 1991, the committee participated in a North Carolina-based program called Barriers and Bridges, which promoted discussions surrounding racial justice. Roger Savage, a member of the Jefferson County chapter, argued for the importance of incorporating work against racism into KFTC's platform. He noted, "it's to the advantage of the power structure to keep us apart."⁶⁴ Savage's thoughts around power structures would become an instrumental aspect of KFTC's understanding of their growing platform. By incorporating anti-racist work, KFTC was able to weaken the racial divides that often prevented collective power. Even though KFTC was founded in Eastern Kentucky and its concerns had focused predominantly on coal and lumber company's exploitation and political corruption, its grassroots mobilization of local leadership across the state led to an expansion of its lens on corruption across the state. The expansion of KFTC's platform highlights the results of encouraging local leaders and listening and being responsive to the needs of new members.

KFTC's Louisville chapter members organized to prevent the relocation of a neighborhood for an industrial plant in 1993, highlighting the group's growing influence across the state.⁶⁵ In 1994, KFTC began an expansion, diversification, and organizational transition which prioritized diversifying both their membership and platform to better

⁶⁴ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, "Balancing the scales," August 22, 1991, Folder 5, Box 2010ms005-04, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁶⁵ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, "1993 Annual Report," Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

represent issues across Kentucky.⁶⁶ Over the next four years, KFTC's chapters across the state prioritized membership recruitment in order to have a better representation of Kentuckians within their local and statewide membership. Focusing on diversifying their membership created space for new members to bring more issues to their platform by sharing their lived experiences. As a result, the group began addressing corruption within different areas of the state that struggled with different injustices. KFTC's central strategy during their expansion was to center their membership in the foundational connections among issues facing Kentuckians across the state. By focusing their platform around addressing corruption within the state, they were able to connect issues in Louisville with industrial plants to issues in Martin County with water pollution.

Coming out of the Louisville chapter's work, environmental racism would first appear in KFTC's platform only a few years later. By 1998, KFTC's platform included an emphasis on "work to overcome racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination,"⁶⁷ signifying the adaptations made to better represent the needs of their growing membership. In a 1999 edition of *Balancing the Scales*, KFTC Steering Committee members admitted to concerns about potentially angering and losing some members because of their priority in addressing racism within KFTC's staff and members; however, they were willing to take the risk of incorporating racial and environmental justice into their platform because their "main issue is to foster unity."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, "KFTC's Historical Timeline (1981-2002)," Folder 51, Box 2010ms005-47, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁶⁷ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, "1998 Annual Report," Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁶⁸ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, "Balancing the Scales," 1999, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

Despite diversifying their membership, KFTC remained focused on creating coalitions across the state to strengthen local efforts.

By 2000, KFTC had fully prioritized becoming a “social justice organization” to better meet the needs of their growing membership. In their 1999-2000 platform, KFTC committed to a belief that “all people must be treated with regardless of ability, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or any other defining characteristic.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, their platform included an opposition to “environmental racism and classism, or the practice of locating polluting industries and waste facilities near low-income and minority communities, and in neighborhoods where people are least likely to fight back.”⁷⁰ With the expansion of their membership, KFTC’s platform had adjusted to meet the needs of new members while also connecting their growing platform to the same fundamental problems within Kentucky politics: corruption, money, and power.

To make this work, KFTC prioritized local chapters working on issues facing their members. Organizational documents described KFTC as having a structure in which members in local chapters worked “on local issues and concerns, and then coming together across county lines to support each other’s efforts and work on statewide issues.”⁷¹ By centering the connection between issues facing Kentuckians in different

⁶⁹ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “KFTC for Platform 1999-2000,” Folder 44, Box 2010ms005-13, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁷⁰ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “KFTC for Platform 1999-2000,” Folder 44, Box 2010ms005-13, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁷¹ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “1998 Annual Report,” Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

areas with different backgrounds, KFTC staff were able to foster support among chapters, while attacking issues at the statewide level that further brought local chapters together.

The organization highlighted the ways in which all the issues it was working on were connected throughout their annual reports and annual meetings in the early 2000s.⁷² Prioritizing the connection among their issues was a critical step to contextualizing their shifts and changes to their membership. Not only did this explain why the organization was incorporating a more diverse platform, but it also connected the membership across county lines, encouraging coalitions between Kentuckians.

Growth became a fundamental priority for KFTC throughout the 2000s. In 2004, having over 2,000 members, KFTC established a three-year plan to increase both membership and funding. Through a focus on growing and strengthening local chapters, KFTC surpassed their three-year plan in 2007. According to the 2007 annual report, they “ended the year with 5,100 members, more than doubling membership over three years, and raised \$214,000 in grassroots fundraising”.⁷³ As KFTC membership expanded, so did their focus on voter engagement and empowerment. In their 2008 annual report, KFTC staff argued that their focus on voter empowerment “may have seen more quality groundwork in communities spread all across the state than anything KFTC has taken on since the successful Broad Form Deed Campaign in 1988.”⁷⁴ Registering voters, challenging skewed narratives about Kentucky’s political potential, and spreading information related to voting were key strategies of KFTC’s New Power Initiative.

⁷² Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “KFTC Annual Meeting 2000,” Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

⁷³ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “2007 Annual Report,” https://archive.kftc.org/sites/default/files/docs/press_releases/kftc_2007_annual_report.pdf

⁷⁴ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “2008 Annual Report,” https://archive.kftc.org/sites/default/files/docs/press_releases/kftc_2008_annual_report.pdf

KFTC's leadership development and voter engagement programs aided them in getting 710 new members in 2007. Between 2008 and 2010, KFTC centered their voter empowerment within the group's broader goal to change the inequity of power across the state. Fifty-four (54) KFTC members ran for offices in 2018,⁷⁵ highlighting how persuasive KFTC's grassroots organizing strategies were at creating local leaders who then became involved in serving their communities through electoral politics.

The creation of KFTC's Political Action Committee, the New Power PAC, in 2010 provided the organization with more opportunity to become involved with electoral politics by directly endorsing and engaging in outreach for candidates.⁷⁶ As a 501(c)(4), or social welfare organization, KFTC had the ability to be involved in political activity; however, it could not be their primary focus.⁷⁷ By establishing a PAC, KFTC solidified voter empowerment and engagement as one of their most important and prioritized issues. The New Power PAC provided KFTC with the ability to endorse candidates and provide each a certain level of outreach, including door-to-door canvassing, phone calls, and texts to voters. The next several years would be centered on expanding KFTC's focus on voter empowerment while working to elect specific candidates that supported the platforms of the group.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, "2010 Annual Report," https://archive.kftc.org/sites/default/files/docs/press_releases/kftc_2010_annual_report.pdf

⁷⁷ 501 (c)(3)s, 501 (c)(4)s, and Political Action Committees (PAC) are groups with different overall goals, tax exemptions, and involvement in political activities. 501(c)(3)s are most limited with their political involvement; while they can participate within political activities, they cannot be involved in any partisan activities. For example, the political involvement of 501(c)(3)s may look like voter drives and education campaigns. While they can encourage individuals to vote, they cannot give any opinion on specific candidates or parties. 501(c)(4)s, on the other hand, can endorse specific candidates and be involved in partisan politics; however, it cannot be one of the groups primary focuses. PACs have the most freedom in terms of political involvement. See "Social Welfare Organizations," Internal Revenue Service, <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/other-non-profits/social-welfare-organizations>.

After the creation of the New Power PAC, KFTC began focusing more heavily on electoral organizing. These efforts reflected their organizing during the 1988 Broad Form Deed Amendment victory, which demonstrated how voters across party affiliations could be mobilized around issues of common concern. In 2014, KFTC had developed hundreds of grassroots leaders through their focus on leadership development within local chapters.⁷⁸ Through this work, KFTC had strengthened local chapters by providing training and resources to build leaders within communities across the state, leading to their work in 2015 focused on statewide elections. KFTC received 46,000 views on www.kentuckyelection.org, a website where all but one statewide candidate responded to election surveys. “KFTC’s shared commitment to building grassroots power,”⁷⁹ creating alliances, and strong local chapters provided them the capacity to influence elections going on across the state. By 2018, 54 KFTC members ran for offices across the state, demonstrating the power of their leadership development strategies. That same year, 26 candidates endorsed by KFTC won their elections, bringing to light the power KFTC had generated within electoral politics.

In their 2020 annual report, KFTC addressed their staff and membership’s work on Charles Booker’s primary race by reinforcing the importance of the grassroots base of the organization. Cassia Heron, the KFTC chairperson at the time wrote,

“But when our elected leaders fail to take care of us, Kentuckians take care of each other. We made thousands of calls, texted thousands of Kentuckians, mailed postcards, created and boosted social media content that reached tens of thousands of folks, hosted a town hall for members, and supported a seventeen thousand-member-strong Hype Team group on

⁷⁸ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “2014 Annual Report,” https://issuu.com/kftc/docs/2014_kftc_annual_report_final

⁷⁹ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “2017 Annual Report,” https://issuu.com/kftc/docs/kftc_2017_annual_report

Facebook. And though he didn't win his bid for the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate, Booker changed the conversation. He stood up for a bold vision and showed up for Kentuckians in times of crisis. And he showed many of us that our vision for Kentucky is possible, if we're willing to work for it.”⁸⁰

Despite Booker's loss, KFTC remained grounded in the effectiveness of their grassroots approach to electoral politics while highlighting the value of the ways in which Booker's campaign challenged narratives surrounding politics in Kentucky.

In some ways, the fundamental goal of KFTC never actually changed, but rather adapted to meet the needs of both a changing political climate in Kentucky and a developing membership, while also remaining framed within a collective mindset for a Kentucky with less corruption and power imbalances. In 1981, the central goal of KFTC was eliminating the most apparent form of corruption in politics in Eastern Kentucky: the relationship between coal, environment, and policy. However, as the organization diversified in terms of both membership and geography, other forms of corruption in politics became more apparent. Members from across the state brought to light more forms of corruption impacting their daily lives: from voting rights to environmental justice to economic justice. The same politicians permitting coal miners to abuse and exploit land and water in Eastern Kentucky were the same politicians heightening restrictions on voting rights for people with felonies in their past.

KFTC has consistently showcased how the same corruption in politics harmed people of different identities and backgrounds across the state. By uniting members across county and demographic lines, KFTC created a broad and diverse coalition across

⁸⁰ Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, “2020 Annual Report,” https://archive.kftc.org/sites/default/files/media/2020_kftc_annual_report.pdf

the state that was united around connected issues. In other words, the “Hood to the Holler”⁸¹ strategy, made popular by Charles Booker’s U.S. Senate race, has been a central component of KFTC’s strategy for the past 20 years. Therefore, their involvement and alignment with Booker’s campaign came as no surprise since the organization had been utilizing a version of Booker’s central organizing strategy for decades. Not only does analyzing the history of grassroots organizing in Kentucky better explain Charles Booker’s success in 2020, but it also highlights why the “Hood to the Holler” strategy utilized by the Booker campaign was effective. Without incorporating the rich history of grassroots organizing into the discussion of Kentucky political history, the connections between KFTC’s and Booker’s organizing strategies and what they can share about politics in Kentucky are ignored.

KFTC’s shift to incorporating voter empowerment and political participation into their central platform was not necessarily a new strategy for the organization, but rather the most direct way to combat the organization’s central mission through voting the corruption out of politics. While remaining rooted within a grassroots mindset, KFTC adapted their platform to encompass issues stemming from corruption within the state. To justify their adaptation to existing members, they rooted their platform within a connective framework of addressing various forms of corruption in Kentucky, allowing the organization to continuously grow over the past forty years.

⁸¹ The “Hood to the Holler” strategy utilized by Charles Booker’s U.S. Senate campaign, and later the non-profit formed after the campaign ended, centered on growing coalitions among people of different backgrounds across the state. See “Hood to the Holler,” Hood to the Holler, <https://hoodtotheholler.org/>.

CONCLUSION

Although he entered the U.S. Senate Democratic primary race five months later than Amy McGrath and raised 50 million dollars less, Charles Booker won 43% of the vote.⁸² Nonetheless, the fact that he did not win was what dominated the national discussion. After the 2020 primary election, Jennifer Rubin, a political commentator for the Washington Post, wrote that “Kentucky Democrats voted with their heads, not their hearts”⁸³ when casting a vote for Amy McGrath over Charles Booker. This newspaper article is a perfect example of how the national perception of politics in Kentucky continuously ignores the efforts of organizers across the state. This analysis of the 2020 U.S. Senate primary election centers the narrative that Charles Booker was a lucky or puzzling instance of progress in Kentucky that would not be a realistic option for voters. Instead of viewing the Booker campaign as benefiting from work that has been done by KFTC for decades, not only to change politics in Kentucky, but also to promote voter engagement within the state, political commentators flatten the narrative of politics in Kentucky to only be explained by voting records. Based on the claims made by political commentators, since Charles Booker’s overall success in the primary election cannot be rationalized through past voting records, those voting for him were not making a logical decision.

⁸² “Live Results: 2020 Kentucky Senate Primaries,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/election-results/kentucky-senate-primary-live-results/>

⁸³ Jennifer Rubin, “Democrats Serious About Winning Chose Amy McGrath,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/01/democrats-serious-about-winning-chose-mcgrath/>.

Ignored by this narrative are KFTC's efforts over the past 40 years to challenge corruption within Kentucky politics and empower Kentuckians to become involved in the political process, despite being ignored by politicians for decades. KFTC hired over 40 voter engagement organizers to work in the 2020 elections, placing most of their emphasis on the primary election. Despite complications from the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, KFTC staff and members found ways to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances by switching from in-person canvassing to phone banking and texts as the main form of outreach to voters. During the primary election, KFTC staff and volunteers made 84,746 calls, left literature at the doors of 8,157 voters, and sent 19,151 initial texts to voters.⁸⁴ KFTC's work to adapt their platform alongside the changing political climate and to connect their members with creating change through electoral politics led them to become instrumental in organizing for Charles Booker's race.

In a 2008 annual report, the growth of KFTC was explained with, "Since 1981, when KFTC began in the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky, we have shifted and adjusted many times to respond to the changing landscape and the needs of our members, always retaining our commitment to grassroots organizing."⁸⁵ Growing from a meeting of 26 people to over 12,000 members across the state, KFTC's commitment to challenging corruption and imbalances of power within Kentucky politicians and companies has persisted and adapted over forty years to change the political engagement in Kentucky. The history of KFTC is a usable past not only for historians to better understand Kentucky's political history, but also for organizers across the state who want to learn

⁸⁴ Statistics of KFTC's involvement in Charles Booker's race were obtained from Erik Hungerbuhler, KFTC's Data and Digital Communications Manager.

⁸⁵ "2008 Annual Report," Kentuckians For The Commonwealth Records, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

from successful strategies and practices that connected people from different backgrounds and demographics across the state.

While this paper seeks to fill a gap within the historiography of grassroots organizing in Kentucky, its argument and analysis have much broader implications concerning organizing and politics. Changing understandings of politics in Kentucky opens the door for larger conversations concerning which candidates have the potential to be successful, what issues should be prioritized, and how organizing should be approached. Challenging the narratives surrounding which candidates can be successful in Kentucky can influence donations, endorsements, and votes. The historical analysis of politics in Kentucky must be expanded past voting records and party politics due to the history of voter disengagement stemming from corruption within politics and mines. By expanding to other methods of political engagement, including grassroots organizing, the decades of work by organizers across the state provides a more complete narrative of the political history of Kentucky.

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