

How to use the initiative process to build our movement

Organizing for electoral power

by Joselito Laudencia

If you were to stumble upon a group of organizers and activists gathered together to debate the importance of electoral organizing to the movement, you'd most likely hear a mixed set of concerns: "Why should progressives engage in an arena dominated by big money and TV ads? What kind of power do we gain by the pull of a lever or the punch of a hole in the ballot booth? Why should disenfranchised communities care about a system that traditionally and continually shuts out people of color, poor people and young people?"

The truth of the matter is, we don't have a choice but to engage in the electoral arena, and particularly, in the initiative process, because initiatives have become one of the main avenues used by the Right to advance its agenda and to wedge apart constituencies using divide-and-conquer tactics.

The Right's use of the initiative process

In California, the Right played explicitly on economic anxiety and racial fears to pass anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in 1994, anti-affirmative action Proposition 209 in 1996, and anti-bilingual education initiative Proposition 227 this spring. Washington now faces a citizen initiative that aims to eliminate state affirmative action programs. Several states will soon vote on paycheck protection measures, which directly and unfairly target organized labor's ability to participate in elections, but leave corporate contributions untouched. We've seen anti-lesbian and gay politics advance by Measure 9 and 13 campaigns in Oregon and Amendment 2 in Colorado.

Through these ballot measures, the Right has been able to push and hone its messages, recruit diverse constituencies, frame political debates and legitimize their causes to the larger public.

CA progressives fight back

These political times demand that progressive forces organize in this arena. However, our side doesn't need to play politics as usual. We can effectively engage in electoral campaigns that build the capacity, power and

movement to advance our own progressive agenda.

Californians for Justice is a case in point.

In May 1995, when it became clear that the anti-affirmative action Proposition 209 would probably appear on the November 1996

California ballot, community-based groups in California that sought to turn the tide of right-wing attacks coalesced to form Californians for Justice. With encouragement and assistance from the Center for Third World Organizing, the Applied Research Center, the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, AGENDA, and Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates, Californians for Justice emerged with three goals:

- Defeat current right-wing attacks like Propositions 187 and 209 which target California's emerging majority of people of color;
- Enable California's emerging majority to set and advance its own agenda, instead of always fighting defensive battles defined by the Right;
- Build a multi-racial organization that reflects the diversity of California's population, staffed and led primarily by people of color.



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Californians for Justice accomplished a great deal by the November 1996 elections, where our goal was to build a field campaign to defeat Proposition 209. Working in English, Spanish, Cantonese, Vietnamese and Korean, Californians for Justice:

- Collected the signatures of a million Californians willing to speak up in support of affirmative action, through the "Million Voices for Justice" campaign.
- Activated more than 10,000 volunteers around the state in various campaign activities, including petition-gathering, precinct walking, direct action, phone banking, door hanging, hosting and/or speaking at house parties, presentations and special events;
- Recruited more than 750 precinct captains, and worked in 1,350 precincts in the San Francisco Bay Area, LA County, and Orange County. We targeted precincts with demographic profiles of predominantly low-income people of color;
- Defeated Prop 209 in every one of the 1,350 precincts targeted, in some areas with a 90% "NO" vote;
- Trained over 2,000 volunteers through our

context, and built volunteer skills in organizing, public speaking, and media work;

- Brought out the real underlying issues to the public. Access to jobs and higher education has become more difficult as corporations downsize, automate, shift to part-time workers and move overseas, and as tuition costs rise and education and scholarships are defunded. The Right obscures these issues by scapegoating people of color and women as the cause of economic problems.

A post-election analysis revealed the following demographic profile of the close to 3,000 key volunteers who worked with CFJ in the last weeks of the campaign:

- 40% were under the age of 21;
- 70% were female;
- 45% were Latino, 20% Black, 15% Asian, and 18% White;
- More than 60% came from CFJ's targeted precincts, which were chosen based on the high percentage of residents of color and poor people; and
- About 30% consider themselves "activists,"

meaning this is not the first social change activity they've participated in. This last point is significant. CFJ became both a magnet for long-time activists, and a training ground for new activists and organizers.

Californians for Justice proved that an independent operation of people of color, and poor and young people of all colors — all ordinary, everyday people — can have a significant impact on elections. If people get organized, if they divide their city into small areas and get to know every voter in every target area and how they'll vote, and if they make sure each voter actually goes to the polls, then community groups can break through the money barrier and change the outcome of an election.

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Strategies and lessons

Although Prop 209 passed with 54% of the vote, Californians for Justice emerged from the elections as a strong organization. This was due to several factors:

- **Recruitment and Strategic Targeting:** Using multiple languages, CFJ continually recruited volunteers from a diverse set of constituencies who cared about the issue. CFJ also recruited non-citizens and people under 18 years old who, although they couldn't vote, could still participate by engaging those who could. Breaking away from traditional electoral organizing, these were strategies CFJ used to engage a multi-racial, multilingual and multicultural base.
- **Leadership Development and Political Analysis:** CFJ created roles with varying levels of skill and commitment for volunteers to engage in the campaign. This ranged from coordinating phonebanks, to public speaking, to being a trainer in our political education program. CFJ aimed to deepen the political analysis of volunteers by looking at who the funders of Prop 209 were, why they were pushing this initiative, and how ordinary people could impact elections.
- **Effective tools and vehicles for action:** CFJ developed mechanisms for people to engage at levels where they could effectively participate. The program was focused on identifying supportive voters in targeted areas and making sure they voted on election day.

Through our experience with the 209 campaign, we discovered that communities and community organizations also benefit from participating in elections in several ways:

- **Power:** Active, organized participation in an election can give community groups some power. When a community group gets organized enough to have a demonstrated effect on the outcome of an election, they become a force that politicians local and statewide have to pay attention to.
- **Legitimacy:** Working successfully in elec-

tions makes people with power treat your organization with respect. (This is especially true when you combine your electoral muscle with other kinds of organizing.) Ordinary people also will respect you for working for the good of the community through elections.

- **Organization and coalition building:** The kinds of discipline and skills people learn in an electoral campaign are very valuable and can be transferred to other kinds of campaigns. The experience of working successfully in coalition with other community groups on a concrete, time-limited project like an election can make it easier to cooperate on other joint projects.

Electoral power is not the only kind of power, but it is definitely a kind of power and is often overlooked by community organizations. As communities and organizations engage in this arena, we must remember that elections are a means, not an end. Keep your eyes on the prize, and look to the long-term goal: building movement and power for justice.



Joselito Laudencia is the Executive Director of Californians for Justice. After the November 1996 elections, CFJ launched a campaign for Economic Justice which is pushing for statewide livable wage public job creation in light of the devastating impact of welfare reform.

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