

Learning the "Right" lessons

Taking the initiative

by Galen Nelson

"We're going to change American politics forever. We will hunt [these liberal groups] down one by one and extinguish their funding sources."

— Grover Norquist
Americans for Tax Reform

Ever wonder why the ballot initiative process seems dominated by right-wing and conservative measures? Why anti-labor, anti-gay, anti-affirmative action, revenue reduction, consumer-unfriendly, and other reactionary initiatives are the rule rather than the exception? Sure, in the 23 states and the District of Columbia where the initiative process exists, progressive groups use it, but right-wing initiatives maintain a higher profile, are better funded, and are coordinated with closely contested electoral races much more often than progressive measures. Judging from the record, you'd think right-wing initiative proponents had developed a national ballot measure strategy.

They have. Grover Norquist, president of Americans For Tax Reform (ATR) and confidant of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, is the chief architect of the Right's initiative strategy — a brilliant, flexible, multi-issue, devastatingly effective scheme to defund progressive groups. Norquist is well connected to both the Religious Right and the Republican Party. ATR's agenda includes destroying Medicare, public education, labor unions, and Social Security.

Simultaneously, Norquist labors mightily to unite the Right. He is seen as the leader of the "leave us alone" coalition — a loosely knit group of gun rights supporters, religious conservatives, anti-abortion activists, libertarians, and property rights and free market advocates.

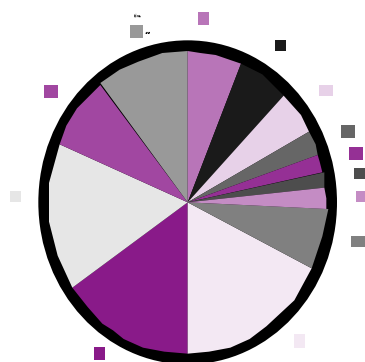
He understands the funding structure of the current progressive coalition. While large corporations appear to shower both major political parties with contributions — perhaps favoring the majority party — labor unions are the only significant player on the Left ideologically committed to funding progressive political activity. So it's not surprising that Norquist and his allies have devised an initiative strategy that targets labor unions specifically. In his own words, Norquist's vision is "to crush labor unions as a political entity." He goes on to say, "We're going to change American politics forever. We will hunt [these liberal groups] down one by one and extinguish their funding sources."

Simultaneously, Norquist is smart about maneuvering the electoral system to the financial benefit of the Right. Right-wing ballot measures have been known to drive up conservative voter turn-out, yet the soft money used to finance major initiative campaigns is often unreported. Norquist and company encourage candidates who exceed their spending limits or need an extra boost in a tight race to endorse an anti-gay or pro-gun ballot measure. Otherwise-absent right-wing voters motivated by these initiatives come out of the woodwork to cast their vote for the conservative candidate.

Progressives, perhaps content with Democratic control of Congress and many state legislatures before 1994, vastly underutilized the initiative process. Meanwhile, right-wing organizations continued to build their grassroots infrastructures, raise money, shift the political dialogue to the right, and highlight their public policy agenda with a deliberate, disciplined, forward-thinking national initiative strategy. Whether rolling back hard-fought civil rights, labor, or environmental protections or advancing their reactionary economic and social agenda, right-wing strategists recognized long ago the immense political and electoral power of carefully drafted, targeted ballot measures.

Along the way, conservatives also realized they could double the return on their initiative investment by launching wedge-issue ballot measures — anti-gay, anti-choice, and

In 1998, voters will encounter ballot measures in these broad areas:



Attacking progressive funding

But it is in his drive to divide the Left that Norquist is most successful, repeatedly outflanking his opponents, and forcing them to expend precious resources on multiple fronts in times of greatest

anti-affirmative action — in states with hotly contested electoral races. Those measures drive up conservative voter turn-out, divide the progressive electorate, and provide an additional plank for conservative candidates' platforms.

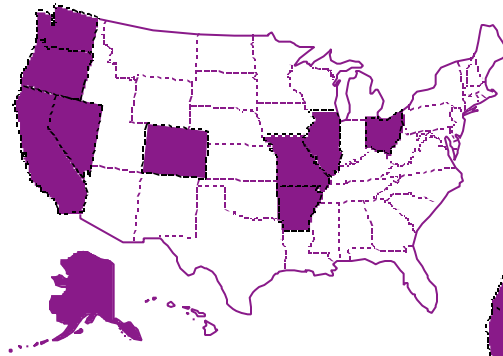
Progressives respond

So how are progressives responding to this threat? Back in 1996, a diverse group of progressive organizations, including Western States Center consultants, and funders met in Seattle, Washington to discuss this dilemma. Why were we being beaten so badly at the ballot box and how were right-wing groups so effectively supporting conservative candidates, raising money, dividing the Left, and shifting the political dialogue to the right? With a little digging, their methods became apparent — as did the need for an effective counter-strategy.

The Seattle conference was vital because it brought together, for the first time, different issue groups that had been fighting the same enemy. In fact, I remember learning that a conservative activist, Bruce Fein, had been helping to coordinate an anti-gay initiative in Maine while writing opinion-editorials for a radical property rights "takings" measure in Oregon. In a memorable moment, labor leaders met with gay activists to exchange war stories about successful initiative campaign tactics. We learned that we could be stronger, more effective, and more strategic if we shared information, resources and experience, and built an organization to manage the task. The Ballot Initiative Strategy Center (BISC) was born.

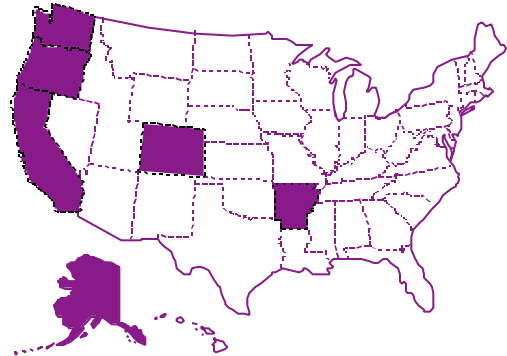
BISC coordinates strategic discussions among progressive organizations around the country and maintains a database of circulating ballot measures for progressives. We're connecting trained consultants with progressive campaigns, helping to develop a proactive progressive ballot measure strategy,

Target States



Right-Wing and conservative groups deliberately launch wedge-issue ballot measures in states with hotly contested senate and gubernatorial races (and states that are swing states in presidential election years) to drive up conservative voter turn-out and influence the political debate. Notice the intersection between electoral target states and state with wedge issue ballot measures:

Expected Wedge issues



and plan to launch a training program for initiative campaign managers in 1999.

BISC is also educating the political community about the significant impact ballot measures exact on electoral politics, public opinion, voter turnout, fundraising, and more, and it helped mobilize the progressive community in Washington to fight the "Paycheck protection" proposition in California.

We need to move fast. Just look at how much progressives have spent fighting defensive battles:

- Proposition 174 (CA. School Vouchers) \$15 million
- Amendment 17 (CO. "Parental Rights") \$500,000
- Question 1 (ME. Anti-Gay) \$1.3 million
- Issue 2 (OH. Workers Compensation Repeal) \$3.25 million
- Proposition 226 ("CA. paycheck protection") \$20-30 million

Millions of dollars later, progressives have made little headway in the initiative arena. We are losing the public relations war on our issues and have been forced to divert our scarce resources to defensive battles, while our political allies cry out for help. Isn't it about time we launched a counter strategy?



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