

## Voter Mobilization

# Progressive Communities Around the Region Expand Base, Build Power

The 2000 elections sent a clear message to pundits, politicians and campaigners alike: those who mobilized their base of support and emphasized personal contact with voters ruled the day. Sure, hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on media messages. But it appears that when races are close — as is increasingly the case — the winners are winning through an active, hard-working field presence.

Florida's deadlocked presidential vote was only the tip of the iceberg. The closeness of contests all over the country emphasized the importance of activating a base and adding new voters from within that base to the rolls, working with them on issue education and analysis, keeping good track of them and then getting them to vote. These efforts by organizations of color, labor unions, conservation voters, and other single issue constituency groups provided the margin of victory in what appears to be a record number of legislative, statewide and federal races.

A closer examination of voter organizing efforts throughout Western States' region reveals their value — even when they fell short of electoral victory. In Utah, for example, an "English Only" ballot measure passed with 67% of the vote. Knowing months in advance that the odds were stacked against them, organizers with Utah Common Voices and the Salt Lake County Voter Registration Project refused to concede defeat. Instead they used the election as an organizing opportunity, enrolling over 80 community organizations into the campaign; registering and turning out over 1,000 new, predominantly Latino voters. Utah Common Voices developed relationships with religious, academic and government constituencies, rallying nearly 500 people on the steps of the state Capitol and recruiting dozens of new activists from high schools and college campuses.

Undaunted by their Election Day loss, these organizers emerged energized to continue the work of building the political capacity of their community organizations.

New progressive voters, the voices of the politically marginalized demanding to be heard, grassroots community organizations building power in the electoral arena — these are the goals of Western States Center's Western Progressive Leadership Network. Heading into the 2000 election cycle, we expanded our regional work with new constituencies, who we supported through a combination of training and small grants.



Credit: Utah Common Voices

We focused special attention on developing voter education and mobilization skills and experience among new immigrant communities (see *Voz Hispana Causa César Chávez*, page 4). In addition, we provided financial support for two voter registration and education projects in Montana: one carried out by Native Action, which saw a marked increase in Native turnout, and another developed jointly by groups organizing low-income voters (see *Montana Income Support Coalition*, page 5).

Their experiences illustrate the organizational and political rewards beginning to be won through voter mobilization efforts around the region.



Contact Utah Common Voices through Utah Progressive Network: (801) 466-0955.

By Len Norwitz  
Western Progressive  
Leadership Network Director,  
Western States Center

Despite passage of an "English Only" ballot measure, Utah Common Voices refuses to concede defeat.