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Voter Mobilization:

Voz Hispana Causa César Chávez

Voz Hispana was founded in 1997 in Woodburn, Oregon by parents, workers, students, small business owners and community activists who came together to demand that a new public school in Woodburn be named for César E. Chávez. While this objective wasn't achieved, Voz Hispana won two major victories: the school library was named for Chávez, and his birthday was permanently designated as César E. Chávez Day in all seven Woodburn schools, the only public recognition in the state of this kind to date.

The experience of dealing with school district politics led us to develop the Voter Organizing Project as a way to organize Latino voters (mostly new citizens) to understand and take part in the civic affairs of Woodburn. We estimate that Latinos are now the majority of Woodburn's 18,000 residents. In our schools, Latino children make up 65% of the students.


Through analysis of voter records, we found that Latino voters in Woodburn traditionally turn out at a rate one-fourth that of the general voter population. Among new citizens, only about 15% were correctly registered and expressed confidence about the voting process. Over half of the new citizen voters

worked with our members to conduct 166 house visits where we signed up 130 citizens as part of a Voter Network. In the Fall of 1999 and then again in May of 2000, we held education forums for the community and our Voter Network. For the November 2000 elections, we added house visits again to our forum education strategy.

Through these efforts, we increased the turnout rate among Network participants to 79%, four times the rate they were participating when the Network was formed.

In addition, Voz Hispana members formed a Ballot Study and Recommendations committee that discussed, analyzed and then made recommendations on 18 of the 26 ballot measures before the voters this past Fall. Our members did not shy away from the tough questions. At a forum in May we discussed a proposed initiative (still in the signature gathering stage) to abolish the death penalty. Another example was Measure 9, that would have barred public schools from "promoting" homosexuality. There are few if any out gays or lesbians in the Woodburn Latino community and the subject is rarely discussed in public. Undoubtedly some in our Network agree with the supposed objective of Measure 9. However, we took the opportunity to challenge homophobia within the community by asking, "What if the measure proposed to ban 'promotion' of Mexican culture or immigrants?" The Voz Hispana study committee recommended a "No" vote on Measure 9.

While we are not yet strong enough to fundamentally change the electoral process itself, we can and are breaking it down to a form and content that voters in our community can understand and debate.

With these tangible electoral results, Voz Hispana spent the month following the November election formalizing ourselves as a nonprofit community organization, and creating a new political action committee: LUCHA Política: Latinos United and pro-Chávez in Political Action. 

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Credit: Voz Hispana Causa César Chávez

Voz Hispana's Voter Network increased turnout to 79% among participants.

surveyed had never voted. This low participation rate had decisive results. In a March, 1999 school board race, a Latino candidate lost by 179 votes out of just over 2,600 cast. The Latino voter turnout in that election was only 9%!

So I was hired. During the summer of 1999, I