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IN THIS ISSUE

Systems Change in the Yakima Valley 1

BY GEORGE CHEUNG, EJ JUÁREZ
AND KRISTINA LOGSDON

How Integrated Voter Engagement Builds Power and Changes Policy 3

BY KRISTEE PASCHALL

Democracy Is the Best Theory of Change 7

BY STEVE PHILLIPS

Control, Disruption and Democracy: Philanthropy's Role in Inclusive Civic Engagement 11

BY GARA LAMARCHE

A Message from the Executive Director 2

Member Spotlight 15

Dulce Gutierrez learns of her election to the Yakima City Council on November 4, 2015. Photo by Gordon King/Yakima Herald-Republic.



Systems Change in the Yakima Valley

By George Cheung, EJ Juárez and Kristina Logsdon

The 2015 election of the first Latinas to the Yakima City Council was a historic moment in central Washington State. Though the most visible driver for this major breakthrough was an ACLU voting rights lawsuit that successfully challenged the city's at-large voting system, advocates and funders had worked together diligently to lay the groundwork for systems change. This long-term, mul-

tifaceted strategy can provide important lessons for grantmakers interested in civic engagement and promoting democracy.

BACKGROUND

The Yakima Valley lies in the heart of Washington State. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the local economy has been dominated by agriculture, which produces world-famous apples along with grapes and hops. This industry is largely fueled by the labor of Latino farmworkers, who increasingly call the region home. In fact, recent census estimates show that Latinos are the largest ethnic group in Yakima County, comprising almost 48 percent of the total population; they also make up more than 40 percent

of the City of Yakima, the region's only urban center and the county seat.

However, before 2015 these changing demographics did not translate into increased political representation. Historically, only one Latina had been elected to the state legislature (Mary Skinner) and one to the county commission (Jesse Palacios), both Republicans in the mid- to late-1990s. One Latina, Sonia Rodriguez, had been appointed to fill a Yakima City Council vacancy in 2008. When she ran for a full term, she was overwhelmingly defeated by David Ettl, a talk radio host.

A major reason for the disparity in representation lay in the structure of elections. The *(continued on page 13)*



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Systems Change in the Yakima Valley

(continued from page 1)

state's bipartisan redistricting commission, which has drawn legislative maps since 1990, routinely breaks up Latino neighborhoods into several districts, limiting the community's ability to elect its preferred candidates. For offices in Yakima, candidates ran in districts for the primary elections but at-large in the general. Thus, the system diluted the voting strength of Latinos, who were unable to advance their community's preferred candidates past the primary election.

A NEW APPROACH

In 2006, a group of individual donors came together to form the Washington Progress Alliance (WPA), a member of the Committee on States network. This pooled fund, in the form of both charitable (501(c)(3)) and political (501(c)(4)) vehicles, focused on building civic engagement and advocacy infrastructure in the Evergreen State. In 2007, WPA established the Win/Win Network (affiliated with State Voices) and Win/Win Action as collaboratives, or "tables," for nonpartisan civic engagement work and electoral organizing, respectively. Beyond its strategic coordination role, the Win/Win Network took the lead in identifying and leading organizing campaigns to increase representation for communities of color.

A major focus of this work was Latino political empowerment in central Washington. In 2008, Win/Win produced a landscape analysis of the region with a local researcher examining organizations, community leaders, current efforts around civic engagement and voter registration, and measuring the capacity of those efforts. Because of the long history of Seattle-based organizations conducting work with no local organizers or staff, Win/Win hired a full-time staff member to establish a local leadership team. This team then facilitated Central Washington Progress (CWP), a far-reaching program focused

on civic engagement, community building and campaign skill building.

One of CWP's highest-profile activities was leading the effort to pass a school bond measure in Yakima, through which the program trained allies in campaign mechanics, messaging and strategy. It passed with 70 percent after failing twice previously. CWP also served as a hub for large Seattle-based organizations to plug into central Washington, including a statewide immigrant rights group (OneAmerica), a campus organizing group (Washington Bus) and a candidate development program (Progressive Majority Washington). Additionally, CWP led a comprehensive census awareness program to prepare for future redistricting/voting rights advocacy, which included bilingual PSAs, a large block party and outreach to high schools.

The initial organizing success of Central Washington Progress led to significant support from a range of unusual funders, academics and legal advocates. Most central to this group was the Western States Center, a regional technical assistance provider for social movement building. With a \$3 million grant from the Ralph Smith Foundation in 2007, the Center set up the VOTE Project, which matched large, multi-year grants with training, mentoring and strategic planning.

As a grantee and part of a cohort of 14 VOTE Project organizations, Central Washington Progress was able to refine its long-term strategy and develop partnerships. This included the development of a parallel legal strategy with Joaquin Avila, former president and general counsel at Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the ACLU of Washington and Paul Apostolidis, political science professor at Whitman College, as well as a fundraising strategy that resulted in grants from a number of family foundations, labor unions and a giving project organized by Social Justice Fund Northwest.

This new strategy went beyond typical civic engagement activities and focused on electoral systems change in three parts. First, at the state legislative level, the objective was to create a majority Latino state legislative district in central Washington through advocacy and organizing around the state's bipartisan redistricting commission. To achieve significant change at the county level, the objective was to establish a county charter, which was necessary for any modification to the existing three-person commission elected at-large.

The last piece of the plan, focused on the City of Yakima, offered the best chance of success. The clear goal was to switch from at-large to district-based elections, and push for two majority Latino districts. Voting rights attorneys expressed interest in pursuing a case

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in consultation with Avila and the ACLU, but did not believe there was enough evidence of racially polarized voting patterns, a requirement under current voting rights jurisprudence. Central Washington Progress decided to run a charter amendment campaign to move from at-large to district-based elections. If the campaign, which required 501(c)(4) funding, was successful, then subsequent systems change, along with investments in candidate development and nonpartisan get out the vote campaigns, would likely lead to increased representation for Latinos. If the campaign was unsuccessful because of racially polarized voting patterns, the legal advocates would ideally pursue litigation to force a change in the system.

OUTCOMES

Though short-term outcomes were largely unsuccessful, the groundwork set the stage for dramatic longer-term social change. In terms of state legislative representation, a bipartisan redistricting commission held a series of public hearings around the state, which provided a clear organizing opportunity for Central Washington Progress. Not surprisingly, no other organized efforts were focused on achieving specific district boundaries, so advocates were able to shape the narrative through earned media. Behind closed doors, the commissioners agreed to create a majority people of color congressional district in western Washington, but split Latino voters into three legislative districts in central Washington.

Ultimately, while the county level effort failed, the effort to establish district-based elections in Yakima proved most fruitful. Central Washington Progress drafted legislation to shift to seven districts for the general election and gathered several hundred signatures from registered voters to force a vote on the city charter amendment. After

Success was largely based on seamlessly integrating public education, research, leadership development and ballot initiative organizing.

an intensive ballot initiative campaign, supported with 501(c)(4) funds, voters rejected the measure by a 16-point margin (42–58 percent). Though the result was disappointing to the local advocates, it provided the necessary evidence of racially polarized voting patterns for the ACLU to pursue voting rights litigation. On August 22, 2014, a federal judge ruled in favor of the ACLU and forced district-based elections with maps proposed by the civil rights attorneys. For the 2015 elections, six Latino candidates filed to run for City Council; three Latinas were ultimately elected, one of whom was selected as mayor.

LESSONS LEARNED

Yakima's story offers several important lessons for funders interested in civic engagement and equitable representation.

1. Focus on long-term systems change and be willing to fail. Though civic/voter engagement was a necessary element of this multifaceted strategy, it

alone was insufficient to reform a system that created barriers to representation for Latinos. Funders interested in using this strategy should ask, "Civic engagement to what end?" Even if their goals cannot be achieved in a typical one-to-three-year cycle of grantmaking, early funding can help solidify a game-changing strategy. In this story, the organizers failed to achieve their medium-term objectives, but succeeded in building momentum and capacity for a future win.

2. Co-develop strategies across tax statuses. For private foundations, proposals that include lobbying can certainly induce serious anxiety. Instead of running away to "safe" tactics, program officers should develop trusting relationships with grantees and other interested funders, particularly those with access to 501(c)(4) dollars, to co-develop strategies. In this story, success was largely based on seamlessly integrating public education, research, leadership development and ballot initiative organizing. Strive for a clear division of labor and funding.

3. Leadership development is not just a frill. A constant focus for this effort was the cultivation of local leaders. Hiring a local organizer, establishing a leadership team, and ultimately recruiting candidates to run under a new system all were investments in strong leadership that was not just the icing on the cake but the glue that held everything together. What good is systems change if no one is prepared to step up to be an elected leader and govern effectively? ■

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