

“Donde no hay (tantos) votantes”: *
**How an immigrant-based movement took a “do-it-ourselves” approach
to building political influence.**

No one at the State Capitol in Salem, Oregon had ever seen it before: 6,000 Latinos turning out over the course of five legislative hearings.. During January’s coldest, rainiest days in Oregon, they came to speak out, to witness or just to lend their presence to the struggle to preserve drivers’ license privileges for undocumented immigrants. That struggle was led by Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), Oregon’s farmworker union and CAUSA, Oregon’s immigrants’ rights coalition.

Who’s counting and what counts

By January 2008, huge crowds of Latinos on the Capitol steps were no longer. In the huge outpourings of spring 2006, masses estimated at 18,000 marched and rallied on April 9th and 12,000 on May 1st, the largest gatherings at the Capitol ever for any occasion. On May 1, 2007, a still-sizeable crowd of 5,000 spilled out from the Capitol’s front landing, filling the blocked-off street.

On those five weekdays in January, the presence of thousands inside the Capitol, overflowing the overflow rooms, drastically changed the atmosphere. The handfuls of drivers’ license ban proponents—mostly older white folks—weaved through a sea of brown-skinned people, many at the State Capitol for the first time. Veteran legislators and aides marveled. “How did you do this?” one whispered to a CAUSA organizer. “You’ve got our attention now.” We had their attention, but, in the end, not their votes. The ban passed the February 2008 special legislative session by a wide margin. Congress’ 2005 “REAL-ID” Act and the Governor’s surprise Executive Order in November, 2006, hardened key legislators’ sense that the die had been cast. Republican state Senators and Representatives backed the ban unanimously. Democrats—who controlled both Houses—split about evenly for and against it.

Though we can’t prove it, we’re pretty sure that if the 6,000 were citizens and voters, the legislative vote and quite possibly the outcome would have been different. Of course, some were voters, but most were immigrants, many with no path to citizenship—and to voting—despite years of contributions to Oregon’s vitality.

Plainly, our Movement’s power is only marginally electoral. Latinos comprise at least ten percent of Oregon’s 3,750,000 residents, but only about four percent of registered voters statewide. PCUN’s home base of Woodburn, population 23,000, officially has a Latino majority; just 6% of Woodburn’s Latino residents are voters.

Oregon’s Latino population has increased immensely since the early 1990s, fueled substantially by the arrival from Mexico of the families of immigrants who acquired legal status in 1987-88 under the “amnesty” programs. Every year, a growing percentage of Latino youth who turn 18 are citizens. The same cannot be said about Latinos in their 30’s or 40’s. The number of Latinos who qualify for and seek citizenship through “naturalization” (an odious term: were they previously “unnatural”?) goes steadily up, but so does undocumented immigration.

* “Where there are no[t too many] voters”, with apologies to the popular medical guide, “*Donde No Hay Doctor*”

Immigration is driven by economic desperation. “Illegal entry” is a fact of life because, for 95% of working class Mexican immigrants, there is no line to get in and no immigration application they are eligible to file.

Building with what we have

In Oregon, Latino electoral disenfranchisement is longstanding. From the beginnings of our Movement three decades ago, we understood that Latino power has resided principally in Latinos’ labor and, more recently, their consumer clout. That was a big factor in our decision to form a union and not a political party. First, we built a community base by organizing resistance against the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raids which terrorized immigrants—mostly farmworkers—in Oregon’s fertile Willamette Valley during the 1970s and well into the 1980s. We established the Willamette Valley Immigration Project which offered legal defense against deportation, “know your rights” education, and we helped some of the relatively few families who could qualify to gain legal status.

We formed PCUN in April 1985, just eighteen months before Congress enacted the Immigration Reform and Control Act and its “amnesty” programs. The huge demand for assistance with the “amnesty” application process coupled with our hard-earned credibility brought thousands to our office, a dilapidated five-room house. PCUN’s membership quickly swelled past 2,000.

In 1988, PCUN launched what has become a decades-long fight for collective bargaining rights for Oregon farmworkers. That struggle has taken us to the Legislature, the courts, the streets and fields, church and union halls, college campuses, and editorial boardrooms. Strikes, media scrutiny and our ten-year boycott brought the Western U.S.’s largest food-processor, grower-owned NORPAC Foods, to the bargaining table, something that the leaders of Oregon’s four-billion-dollar agribusiness industry swore would never occur.

We broadened our Movement by founding sister organizations such as Farmworker Housing Development Corporation (FHDC). Established in 1991, FHDC builds and manages housing with farmworker participation. A resident associations is the centerpiece in each of FHDC’s three main projects—a total of 188 units in Woodburn, Salem and Independence—and the foundation for community leadership.

In 1996, we responded to the resurgence of anti-immigrant backlash fueled by California Proposition 187 in 1994. We regenerated our immigrants’ rights community organizing and formed the CAUSA coalition. As we had in the 1980s, we mobilized the Latino community and allies to push for immigration reform which includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

The list of new initiatives, sister organizations, and issues grew: education reform, recognition of community heroes like César Chávez, farmworker women’s leadership, youth leadership, among others. By 1999, our Movement had expanded to nine organizations and we had found ways to build our capacity in good times and in bad.

Defining a Model

We consider it short-sighted to struggle for institutional change. Rather, we must build a movement which can sustain and defend that change. Therefore, we are guided by the notion that achieving deep, broad and lasting change requires building and reinforcing a broad base. To many observers, our evolution and our organizing “model” seem a unique blend of strategies and methods, but we owe much to the inspiration and example of the United Farm Workers of America and their affiliated entities.

One way to visualize our Movement’s organizing model is as a “pyramid of power”. The pyramid has three layers: our Movement’s community services, community organizing, and campaigns for fundamental institutional change, in that order, bottom to top. Qualitatively, the closer to the top of the pyramid, the more intense and focused the action is and the more it directly challenges institutional power. The farther from the top, the less we challenge power and the wider base participation tends to be.

The pyramid’s three strata might be summarized as follows:

- Service work’s strategic purpose is to establish trust and to demonstrate our commitment, honesty, and values in practice. Its humanitarian purpose is to reduce suffering and insecurity. Examples include providing housing or assisting families with immigration paperwork. The outcomes of service work can also remove or lower barriers to base participation in our work seeking institutional change.
- Community organizing engages powerful institutions directly, but usually in an ad hoc way that tends not to target the most fundamental power dynamics. Though community organizing can involve protracted campaigns, it more often consists of short-term campaigns seeking narrow or limited changes. Like service work, community organizing seeks to appeal to and involve broad segments of the community. Like service work, community organizing tends to be reactive, shaped by broad community concerns and driven by events and opportunities. Like institutional impact initiatives described below, community organizing agitates, seeks visibility, frequently enlists support from outside the community, and confronts the powerful. Perhaps our clearest example is organizing for comprehensive immigration reform.
- Institutional impact initiatives are concerted, protracted, and multi-level. Movements like ours typically embark on impact initiatives without an exact (or at times, even approximate) “road map” to our goal. Since these initiatives are far-sighted, they tend not to originate from demands that the community expressly articulates but rather from the proactive solutions we put forward to the community to solve entrenched problems, like workplace exploitation, that the community does want changed. Our “signature” institutional impact campaign seeks to establish collective bargaining on a major scale in Oregon agriculture. We believe that immigrants’ greatest single power is economic—their labor. Collective bargaining is the process that aggregates immigrants’ individual power as workers, maximizes workers’ leverage, and institutes a form of democracy among workers and more equitable power-sharing between employers and workers. Most immigrant workers have limited or no experience with collective bargaining.

What's voting got to do with it?

Like this narrative, we covered a lot of ground before we arrived at voter organizing—more than twenty years worth, in fact.

In the mid- and late-90s, Mexican immigrants in record numbers applied for U.S. citizenship. Millions granted lawful permanent status under the IRCA “amnesty” reached five years of residency then, a basic requirement for naturalization. Anger about the abrupt rise in anti-immigrant demagoguery spurred many of these immigrants to seek citizenship. A companion force was fear that anti-immigrant politics would lead to a wave of mass deportations (as in the 1930s and the 1950s). Lastly, by becoming citizens, immigrants could petition for immediate family members to get legal status or speed that process.

PCUN organized English language and citizenship classes, enrolling 600 lawful permanent residents between 1996 and 1999. Most obtained citizenship and then registered to vote. At election time, we heard an increasingly common refrain from these new citizens: “How does voting work and how should we vote?”

Meanwhile, we found ourselves fighting off legislative attacks on the minimum wage (increased by voter initiative in 1996), and on farmworker organizing rights. Many politicians seemed to assume that their support for such anti-immigrant proposals would have little political consequence. For our Movement, the intersection of the need and the opportunity for Latino voter organizing became ever clearer.

Latino voter organizing and the path to a “critical mass”

Led by one of our sister organizations, Voz Hispana Causa Chavista, we began a small pilot project in 1998, conducting small group meetings on voter education on ballot measures. We saw that voters who participated gained the confidence to actually cast their ballots. The 2000 presidential election boosted interest and legislative re-districting in 2001 raised the stakes. For the first time, Oregon had a legislative district where Latinos plausibly held the balance of power. It was our district, District 22, including Woodburn, Gervais (a smaller town but also majority Latino) and parts of Salem. Latinos made up 40% of District 22's population and about 15% of the voters.

Before re-districting, Woodburn had never had a progressive state legislator. The incumbent state representative in 2002, an arch-conservative, railed against bi-lingual education and denounced “illegals” having access to drivers' licenses. In November 2002, he won re-election by only 92 votes out of nearly 12,000 cast. In 2002, Voz Hispana increased its Latino voter network from 200 to 800. Latinos in the network who lived in District 22 turned out at a 61% rate. In 1998, the District's Latino turn-out rate was 29% and 48% in 2000.

By General Election Day 2004, the Voz Hispana network of Latino voters had grown to about 2,000. Amazingly, 85% of network voters in District 22 voted, higher than the overall turn-out rate of 75%. In a re-match of the 2002 state representative race, a progressive candidate beat the incumbent in 2004 by 1,500 votes, a margin of over ten percent. The Latino vote was not decisive but contributed substantially to the outcome.

Donde no hay polling places

In 1998, Oregon voters passed an initiative converting all elections to mail balloting. By the 2000 elections, polling places had disappeared, replaced by ballot collection boxes in a few locations in each county. Registered voters received their ballots about sixteen days before election day and had to mail or return them by then. “GOTV” no longer meant mobilizing voters on election day. By then, most voters had already sent or delivered their ballots.

Initially—and, on balance, still today—this change seems to have advantaged immigrant voters. Many worked long hours—the Christmas tree harvest traditionally begins in early November—and wouldn’t get to polling places on time. Even if the poll workers—invariably older white women—were perfectly nice, many immigrants found the polling place scene daunting, especially if lines formed. Oregon’s famously long and confusing ballots only compounded the pressure.

How long and confusing? In the 1990s, progressives and conservative—but increasingly conservatives—placed a dozen or more initiatives on the ballot every two years. At first, the reason was the political deadlock between a succession of Democratic governors and the then-Republican controlled Legislature. More recently, reactionary measures have dominated because conservative forces feel—and are—largely shut out of executive, legislative and judicial power. In 1988, a virulently homophobic group, the Oregon Citizens’ Alliance, began gathering signatures and qualifying outrageous anti-GBLT measures, pretty much every election cycle. Anti-union and anti-tax groups did likewise. A mind-boggling 26 measures appeared on the November 2000 ballot, each with a predictably inscrutable or misleading ballot title.

For many new voters, especially those with limited English fluency, one look at a 17 inch-long ballot crammed with small print elicits one response: toss it. With this in mind, Voz Hispana’s voter organizing prioritized two tactics: ballot forums (sometimes called ballot “parties”) and just-in-time voting guides. In every election cycle with significant ballot measures—and even some without—Voz Hispana mailed a letter or postcard whose headline reads: “your ballot will arrive soon: don’t throw it away!” The mailing, landing a day or two before the ballot, proceeds to lay out Voz Hispana’s recommendations. The mailing also includes a slate of candidate endorsements by a companion group, Voz Hispana PAC.

Some voters want to know more, be part of political discussion, or just don’t trust themselves to correctly fill out and send the ballot. The forums are designed precisely with and for them. In under two hours, Voz Hispana’s Study and Recommendations Committee and Voz Hispana PAC members managed to get through brief presentations and leave room for comment and discussion. Some issues, like restoration of the death penalty, sparked lively debate. Other measures quickly came into focus as the no-brainers they really were, thanks to the Committee’s explanations which cut through the tangle of legalese and the disingenuous messaging and which re-framed the issues in terms of community interests.

During the balloting “window,” Voz Hispana staff and volunteers offered ballot assistance to individuals in their homes or at the convenient locations in the community. During the final 48 hours, ballot pick up dominated the work plan, along with impromptu small group sessions with the stream of last-minute voters who sought out Voz Hispana’s help at PCUN’s headquarters.

Working on the cutting wedge

A few ballot measures have generated controversy in the community and called upon our Movement to put our credibility on the line to fulfill and defend our principles.

In 2004, an evangelical church-based coalition in Oregon gathered nearly a quarter million signatures in six weeks and qualified Measure 36, defining marriage as between a man and a woman. Woodburn is home to at least a dozen evangelical congregations catering entirely to Spanish-speaking immigrants. For the first time, some of these congregations got directly and visibly involved in electoral politics, distributing “YES on 36: One Man, One Woman” bumper stickers and sermonizing in support of M36.

Starting in 1992, PCUN had taken visible stands in solidarity with the GLBT community. We publicly opposed that year’s “Measure 9”, the Oregon Citizens’ Alliance’s most dramatic and draconian initiative, and we hosted anti-M9 walkers as their pilgrimage passed through Woodburn. In 1996, when clones of California’s anti-immigrant Proposition 187 started circulating in Oregon, we turned to leaders of the successful “No on 9” campaign for strategy advice.

While we persuaded many Latinos in our community to vote against the anti-GLBT ballot measures as discriminatory (arguing: “substitute ‘Latino’ for ‘gay’ and now how do you feel about it?”), we didn’t make much of a dent in the culturally- and religiously-entrenched homophobia. We knew that our stance prompted some to brand PCUN as “gay-lovers”. No one took us on directly, but some folks steered clear of PCUN. We had also made our share of enemies in the community by challenging exploitative practices of farm labor contractors who happened to be Latinos and by challenging the injustices committed by the growers and by other powers that be.

We recognized that visibly opposing Measure 36 could raise these tensions to a new level. The pro-M36 church groups could decide to directly attack PCUN from the pulpit. They could buy ads on Spanish-language radio or even on cable-TV, the dominant mass media in our community. The Voz Hispana Ballot Recommendations Committee discussed these very possibilities as we deliberated our position that fall. The decision was unanimous: we opposed discrimination and we weren’t about to stop, even if the church leaders and others undertook a campaign to completely de-legitimize our Movement. The message on the PCUN reader board summed up our stand: “*Abajo con Discriminación. Voten ‘NO’ en la 36. Viva la Igualdad*”.* Though we didn’t conduct a survey, we’re confident that the reader board attracted above average attention from occupants of the 6,000 cars which pass by daily.

The backlash we prepared for never materialized.

That’s why we call it “The Struggle”

Our Movement’s voter organizing has encountered our share of barriers and set-backs. One is a downside of vote-by-mail: list purge. State election rules require post offices to return ballots to the counties rather than forward them to voters. Many “occasional” voters wrongly assume that their address change notice overcomes this. Voters must re-register every time they

* “Down with Discrimination. Vote No on 36. Long Live Equality”

move. Some figure this out when they notice that their ballot hasn't arrived but they then learn that the registration deadline has passed. Others, generally those less in tune with voting, simply lose track until someone engages them. So far, our best strategy has been old-fashioned (but time consuming) organizing and community outreach.

Neither have we overcome cynicism about party politics, rooted in immigrants' experiences with and images of blatant corruption in their birth countries. Bitterness and demoralization well up anew with every street rumor or media story about immigrant-bashing and xenophobic laws. Add to that the widespread disappointment, triggered by the stall-out of immigration reform, which dashed expectations raised high by the Spring 2006 mobilizations of millions. "Today we march, tomorrow we vote"—the national immigrants' rights movement slogan—proved easier said than done.

In 2006, our voter organizing plateaued. Traditional voter registration at mass events or door-to-door yielded few new voters. We had only limited success engaging younger Latinos eligible to register and vote. For youth exhilarated by having led walk-outs and by massing at marches, the lack of prompt legislative action was especially deflating. The Republican candidate for Oregon Governor, challenging the incumbent Democrat, veered sharply anti-immigrant, re-igniting community anger and motivating some Latino voters. Overall, though, our base of Latino voters contracted some and turn out was mediocre.

New tools, new approaches, new hope

Just days after the 2006 election, our Movement brought to life a powerful new vehicle for reinvigorating and expanding our voter base: our own radio station. On November 20, 2006—the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, PCUN inaugurated full-time broadcast on KPCN-LP, "Radio Movimiento", our low-power non-commercial FM station. The creativity and local flavor of volunteer programmers, coupled with satellite feeds of Radio Bilingüe's extensive national/international public affairs programming, quickly attracted a sizeable and loyal audience. By March, 2007, Radio Movimiento was on the air around the clock, reaching thousands in its 300-square-mile broadcast area.

In the 2008 presidential election year, there was a lot of politics to talk about on Radio Movimiento and, since it's our station, we could devote as much time to the topic as we chose—and as our audience could bear. Regular listeners got a year-long course over many sessions, unraveling the intricacies, surfacing the unseen forces, and analyzing the campaigns' impacts on issues critical to this community. On May 20th, Oregon primary election day, Radio Bilingüe sent its top political team from San Francisco and conducted its popular daily live national call-in show, *Linea Abierta*, from the studios of KPCN-LP. Radio Movimiento's resident political analysts and Voz Hispana organizers spoke to a national audience.

In 2008, we modified our voter organizing strategy and our tactics. We de-coupled ourselves from the "numbers trump all" pressures which we have found underproductive and unsustainable. We opted instead to reach potential voters and to educate voters on the issues by forming and training *nucleos*, small teams of Latino voters tasked with working their social networks. *Nucleo* members also participated in one of our experimental tactics: registering voters at social events—weddings and Quinceañeras—when the hosts invited Voz Hispana.

This change meant that we grew our base more slowly, but, we believe, more solidly. Our goal was to unite and organize a force that remains cohesive between elections and moves to the forefront of our work to hold elected officials accountable. If, as we had seen in the drivers' license debate, the mass mobilizations of Latino immigrants couldn't sway lawmakers' votes, we'd try a new approach encapsulated by our slogan: "*Latino Votantes Al Frente!*" (Latino voter to the Front!).

With the Oregon Legislature convening in January, 2009, we'll promptly get to test this new strategy and our 2008 organizing achievements. We're optimistic that the four *nucleos* which helped register 1,500 Latino voters, carry out 35 forums and actions, and recruit 125 volunteers can sustain the momentum. A second round of *nucleo*-building classes are already slated for February 2009, this time held inside the State Capitol building as a way to foster a greater comfort level with proximity political power.

The excitement and momentum we take into 2009 also derives in no small measure from actually winning. PCUN and Voz Hispana PAC strongly backed Senator Obama in both the Primary and the General Election. On October 16th, two days before ballots arrived in Oregon voters' mailboxes, Voz Hispana PAC mailed its slate of endorsements to 8,000 Latino voters in Marion and Polk Counties. Obama's 300,000-vote victory in Oregon swamped any advantage that Voz Hispana PAC lent him, but Latino voter enthusiasm was palpable nonetheless. Obama won in Woodburn by about 600 votes out of 6,400 cast, with Latinos delivering about 75% of that margin.

In the Woodburn mayor's race, the Latino vote was equally significant. The nonpartisan race pitted an anti-immigrant challenger against the incumbent. The challenger was an ex-state representative, a conservative Republican, and an early and vocal champion of restricting undocumented immigrants' access to drivers' licenses. In 1990, when he owned a Woodburn AM radio station, he had personally removed PCUN's paid weekly radio show, blasting it as "controversial." PCUN brought suit and a judge enjoined his summary action but only temporarily. By contrast, the mayor he sought to unseat in 2008 had cheer-led the City Council's 2006 approval of a long-term, low-cost lease allowing PCUN to place the KPCN-LP antenna on the city water tower, maximizing Radio Movimiento's broadcast territory. Voz Hispana PAC volunteers campaigned actively for the mayor; she won by 750 votes.

Taking the long view

The day of real, lasting and decisive political power in the hands of Latinos draws closer. The consensus analysis of the Latino vote nationally on November 4th underscores this point. In the hotly-contested states of Nevada, New Mexico and Colorado, the Latino portion of the overall turn-out shot up by as much as 50% and went sharply for Obama; he won all three states going away. The "swing state" gravitational pull was not as intense in Oregon—accurately predicted early on to go strongly for Obama—and the Latino vote makes up a considerably smaller portion of the state's overall electorate.

Though the voter-age citizen "density" in Oregon's Latino community remains low, the number of families of "mixed citizenship" keeps increasing. The four high schools in District 22 have nearly 4,000 Latino students. Those among them who were born in the U.S. will soon comprise a majority, if they don't already. All of this means that voting—and immigration—is

steadily growing more relevant to Latino families and that the number of Latinos eligible to vote will increase faster than average. These trends coincide with and inform our broader vision of Movement building. We have set ourselves on the path of generational leadership shift. We remain optimistic that a legalization program will be enacted—sooner than later in Obama’s first term—putting thousands more in our community on the road to citizenship.

Our Movement does not yet possess political power but we do have political influence. “PCUN consistently plays above its weight class,” observed a key ally in organized labor. With this in mind, our training regimen in this, our fourth decade, calls for remaining nimble and adaptive, toning the voting muscle in our community base, keeping our credibility buff, and staying in the public eye.