

Hasta La Victoria...And Then Some!
Sustaining the political power we gain and the change we can make with it

By Larry Kleinman ¹

“*Hasta La Victoria*”—until victory!—has long struck me as a valiant but incomplete slogan. We gird and motivate ourselves to press on to the breakthrough...and then what?

Even as we savor a hard-won triumph, say in the electoral arena, our understanding of history and our gut feelings tell us that a whole new—and different—stage awaits us: the **struggles of governing**.

Simply put, **governing gives us the means to actually institute the change we advocate**. Naturally, we hope and intend that such changes will endure. Therefore, we must also prepare to defend them against likely, if not inevitable backlash, even as we expand and deepen the changes so that they are truly *transformational*.

To quote another saying—this one popularized in the Civil Rights Movement: *Forward Ever, Backward Never!*

Understandably, we often work so intensely to achieve a breakthrough that we may give short shrift to planning for what follows. When the breakthrough is sudden, hard-fought and narrowly decided, the pivot to governing mode can be jarring and intimidating.

Our leaders who move from contesting for power to wielding it tend to get the most attention when the shift occurs. Equally important, though, the active community have our own adjustments to make. This essay explores some of those, squarely in the “*and then some*” terrain.

Salem-Keizer School District Board power: from “none” to “won” in *one election*

In 2017 and 2019, progressive forces—with PCUN in the forefront—sought to achieve Latinx representation on the Salem-Keizer School District Board. Each of the three Latinx candidates over those two cycles lost by about five percent.

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With four of the Board's seven seats up in the May 2021 election, PCUN, Stand for Children and the Salem Educators' Association (the teachers' union) co-led the Community For Salem-Keizer Schools electoral campaign. **All four of the campaign's candidates prevailed, including three Latinx candidates.**

On July 13th, Osvaldo Ávila, Ashley Carson Cottingham, Karina Guzmán Ortiz, and María Cecilia Hinojos Pressey, each took the oath of office for a four-year term. The Board composition went from **no Latinx members ever to three**, on par with the proportion of Latinx student population. Equally historic, the **four new members instantly became a governing majority** on the Board, the first progressive control ever. As their first official acts, they elected Osvaldo as Board Chair and Ashley as Vice-chair.

By the numbers

A few numbers help set the context for appreciating the import of *La Victoria*. The Salem-Keizer School District:

- Is Oregon's second largest district with 42,000 students and 65 schools;
- Has slightly more Latinx students (44%) than white students (43%);
- Has an annual budget of almost \$1.5 Billion!

In the May 18th Board election:

- Nearly 44,000 votes were cast², about 28% of registered voters, but a dramatic increase over recent Board elections, including 12,000 voters had never voted in a school board election;
- The Latinx vote comprised 16% of the total, **more than double 2019 levels**;
- Across the four races, the largest margin of victory was 1,807 votes (4.6%), the closest was 72 votes (.15%) and another race was decided by only 285 votes;
- In two of the races, the winning candidate received well under 50% due to multiple challengers;
- Conservative candidates, heavily supported by Right To Life identified forces, collectively outspent the progressive slate by about two to one.

² The election was entirely by mail ballot, as all Oregon elections have been since 1999.

This data suggests that the new majority takes office with a **narrow popular mandate, an entrenched and outraged opposition, and a massive, complex operation to oversee.** The scrutiny will be immediate and high-stakes.

The marathon...

“Hasta La Victoria” often serves as shorthand for protracted struggle. The roots of sustained community organizing and advocacy for institutional change in Salem-Keizer reach back to the late 1990s.

In 1999, the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality (SKCE) formed and quickly came to focus primarily on closing the achievement gap affecting students of color and English Language Learners. Advancing this multi-faceted mission included countless mobilizations to School Board meetings.

A sister organization, Latinos Unidos Siempre (LUS), has long been a core collaborator, organizing youth on issues including education equity. Just weeks before the May 18th election, LUS’s relentless pressure to remove police officers from SKSD schools overcame Board and Administration resistance, a huge breakthrough in its own right.

SKCE and LUS were co-founders of what is now called Alianza Poder. The Alianza was initiated by PCUN in 2003 as the CAPACES network: nine community-serving and organizing entities with common values, complementary missions, and interwoven constituencies and leadership. The CAPACES Leadership Institute, founded in 2011³ by the nine organizations to recruit and train community leaders, established the “People’s Representatives” program with a two-prong vision: (1) identify and prepare community members for governance roles in public and non-profit governance and (2) build the ranks of other community folks to support them and actively engage with them once they are in office. Osvaldo, Karina and María were all recent graduates of People’s Representatives.

The sprint...

Amid the exhaustion and trauma of the pandemic and the wrenching 2020 General Election, PCUN and the Community coalition pivoted in early 2021 to mount the SKSD Board campaign.

The campaign built on and expanded the coalition and on the candidacies in 2017 and 2019. By 2021, the Community coalition had grown to include 40 key community

³ In an echo of historic resonance, the Institute was ceremonially launched and incorporated as a non-profit on July 13, 2011, a decade to the day before the SKSD Board majority took office.

organizations and individual leaders. In about four months, they raised over \$76,000, recruited 144 volunteers, lit-dropped at nearly 4,000 residences, and generated a combined 117,000 calls, texts and postcards.

On May 20th, the results in two of the four races reflected all-but-certain wins for Osvaldo and María. Karina led by 279 votes and Ashley by only 86! About a thousand ballots remained uncounted, most requiring envelope signatures or signature confirmation. The County Clerk notified voters who had to act within about a week. The Community coalition voter outreach went into overtime. About 600 ballots were ultimately confirmed and counted; the May 20th tallies changed only slightly.

Ashley's lead shrank to 73, well within the mandatory recount margin of .2%. The coalition endured a second overtime, awaiting that process. By the time the recount concluded (changing the tally by only one vote), the victorious four had less than six weeks to prepare to take power.

They barely had time for even a modest, though well-deserved celebration of years invested in barrier breaking.

...And now the triathlon: Govern, Defend, Build

In political change, governing, defense, and power building commonly overlap or occur simultaneously. By contrast, an actual triathlon seems simple: participants get to swim, run and bike one mode at a time.

The rallying call for a progressive governing wave could be: "*hold firm, hold together, hold more.*"

Governing

The SKSD experience seems particularly striking because the "none to won" route entirely bypassed the "representation" stage where progressives hold one or two seats on a board, but no outright power. Typically, representation involves being seen and heard, speaking truth to power, amplifying community voices and concerns, asking critical questions, being in "the room where it happens" and attempting to make enough common cause to actually impact decisions.

While the new progressive majority will, no doubt, engage in many of those activities (they are representatives after all), the institutional powers will fixate more "obey and implement our decisions" rather than "hear us out."

Like most official bodies, the SKSD Board has a dizzying array of rules and protocols and must follow federal and state statutes and regulations, including “open meetings” laws. For example, the progressive four can no longer meet privately to discuss anything potentially pertaining to Board business or policy. Now, they first would have to give notice and allow public observation. The learning curve of “do’s/don’ts” can be steep.

Swimming may serve as a fitting analogy for the transition. One may be generally familiar with a body of water, but is suddenly plunged into strong currents, greater depths, and navigating around submerged hazards. Dislodging and removing hazards that imperil or ill-serve the community may take time.

As the saying goes, “*ganaste la rifa del tigre.*” No one would blame the progressive majority if they felt right about now that they had “a tiger by the tail.”

Defending

The forces in Salem-Keizer long accustomed to exercising or steering governing power seem unlikely to quietly accept defeat or defer to the progressive majority. The more militant and entitled among them—the *contras*—will now regard themselves as the “resistance”. They might mimic the Trump playbook and claim that the election was fraudulent, e.g., “illegals” supposedly voted or ballots were “harvested” and falsified.

Even as we collectively must step up to support the progressive majority against personal attacks, disinformation, and all manner of lies, we should expect to have to counter delegitimization from a sector within the community.

I call them the “*can’t*”-*tras*.

They have a *No Se Puede* attitude and they criticize almost reflexively. They demand immediate action but don’t do the work to understand or consider the conditions or limitations. Their negativism can confuse and demoralize.

Still, righteous demands remain in order. *Victoria* raises aspirations. Our collective progress will depend mightily on how **we and our new “electeds” develop and unite around right-sized expectations about which changes and when.** That will entail a clear-eyed assessment of our collective power—not just the progressive majority’s four votes but the capacity we can devote to backing them up.⁴

⁴ Progressives’ control of the Salem City Council from 1997 to 2002 offers sobering lessons. They were ultimately swept out of office by counter-campaigns led by business and real estate interests, despite the passionate leadership of then Mayor Mike Swaim.

Four years of resisting Trump’s authoritarianism and unabashed White Supremacy, plus deeper and more militant reckonings around race have engendered in some a mindset of “accountability means punishment.”

We do not relinquish our right to criticize but we do well **to visualize accountability as a two-way street**, especially with electeds who come from our ranks. Some might term it “calling in” as distinct from “calling out.” We can work to practice a more holistic accountability, one where we all have a duty to weigh the benefits and risks of courses of action. And we should expect and prepare to answer the “call up” from our newly electeds. Their ability to continue to make change will depend on it.

After so long—decades and centuries—of exclusion from decision-making or under-representation in it, **we’re challenged to adopt a majoritarian outlook: the ownership of decisions.** People’s Representatives won election. With that comes the opportunity and necessity to expand the “people’s” dimension of “People’s Representatives.”

Building: the *People’s* Roles

Here are a few suggestions and ideas for helping People’s power to endure:

- Keep showing up, paying attention and increasing our understanding of the system, such as what kinds of information electeds can and can’t share with us, especially about internal and legal process;
- Think about pacing of change and trade offs embedded in “bold” and “steady”;
- Condemning the institution is insufficient; we must strive to be solutions-oriented;
- Set our default mode as “support before criticism;”
- Make our anthem “Let’s Stay Together”, starting with the Community for Salem-Keizer Schools as they prepare to contest the *other three Board seats in 2023!*

What we wished for

Moments such as this one—arriving at *La Victoria*—remind me of a saying I lift up often: “*If you think failure is hard, try success.*”

Harder, yes. But more impactful, hopeful, and gratifying.

Sí Se Pudo: we did it. Now on to *Así Se Puede!*: “*And Then Some*” this is how we do it.