GET IN THE GAME:

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

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April 2008
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Introduction

Internal disputes within the Democratic party may render Florida's primary meaningless. While political pundits guess the implications of an empty contest in the sunshine state, Floridians went to the polls at record numbers to cast their votes for candidates and initiatives. Florida voters approved a tax cut for homeowners and in Miami-Dade County, we voted for slot machines at racetracks for revenue generation. Statewide, Florida had 29% voter turn out compared to 12% in 2000. Electoral participation more than doubled at a time when Democratic presidential candidates deliberately chose not to campaign in the state.

Miami Workers Center (MWC), in a concerted effort with our grassroots projects, Miami en Accion (MIA) and Low-Income Families Fighting Together (LIFFT), ran a voter mobilization program: Take Back the Vote. We studied voting patterns in our communities, mapped precincts, identified occasional voters, and walked precincts encouraging voters to participate and use their power. We monitored the closing of polls and watched the results on television, late into the night.

In the months following the primaries MWC is still fighting for housing, still fighting for jobs, still trying to change the world. We are still trying to win justice for working class people of color by building collective power and developing organic progressive leadership from the grassroots. We have been on this mission since 1999 with some hefty victories and rough defeats. Increasingly, though, we are committed to integrating civic participation with our community organizing.

We believe in Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE) or voter engagement work that is integral to our organizing strategies. Voter work can address ongoing issues we organize around and include the ideological work we do. We can integrate voter registration, education, mobilization, and protection into the toolkit we use to build social movements for justice.

Organizing and the Vote

Our entry point to voter work is our local experience. As organizers, we have spent years going door-to-door, building relationships, identifying leaders, organizing committees, activating campaigns, and mobilizing thousands towards action. However, our deep and incremental methods of creating long-term change are side-stepped every time a special-interest, big-money backed politician gains a mandate with only 12% of voters showing up to the polls. Time and again, we have seen paid off politicians bank on low voter turnout in order to get re-elected and maintain their power and abuse of government resources.

Through a basic voter turnout program, organizations like ours have the capacity to impact local elections. As organizers we can put real issues and interests, not just paid advertisements and payoffs, into play during elections.

As community organizers we get people in the streets, on the media, and to community meetings, but not into the voting booths. Imagine what it would look like if our communities could vote to stop displace-

ment, force developers to provide community benefits, push government to enforce rules around job creation, encourage black and minority contracting, and stop police from creating immigration policy. We need to use our creativity and experience for molding and visioning campaigns to make elections about the very issues we are tackling on the doors everyday. .

Elections become an opportunity for us to shift the debate by turning our organizing issues into campaign issues. We have seen this happen locally. Through a robust organizing and communications program in 2005, we injected gentrification into the city commission race. Through the efforts of our public education campaign RENT (Regional Equity for Neighborhoods and Tenants), candidates had to acknowledge gentrification and take positions on controversial development projects throughout their campaigns.

In Miami a shift in values and frameworks during elections can have regional and national impact. There are many issues that arise out of our neighborhoods which, through an electoral strategy, could make significant changes in regional policy and public debate. For example, as the poorest large city in the country, what if we were able to make poverty a regional issue? At the start of the housing boom, what if we built a voters' referendum on affordable housing? And when it began melting down, what if we banned developer bail outs and turned over vacant luxury condos to the poor?

When we start thinking about it, we could very well shift some power to favor anti-racist policies, show a majority against the war, or simply open more political space to move our grassroots campaigns and push for deeper, longer lasting, change.

Because we understand the potential impacts of electoral participation, we are taking steps to integrate it into our economic and racial justice work. We do popular education on the history of voter disenfranchisement of women, non-property owners, Native Americans, African-Americans, immigrants, and the successive social movement to attain voting rights. We have twice brought international independent election observers to Miami polling sites (we may need them again this year). We have mobilized our community and media relationships to reframe elections around issues that our communities care about and are directly impacted by: gentrification, multi-million dollar development projects, and the preservation of affordable housing. Finally, we are immersed with the very practical side of voter mobilization: training our staff, members, and allies to analyze precinct maps, manage voter databases, study voter turn out, and run efficient street teams to get out the vote.

Scale of Impact

Even at low turnout rates, election cycles still represent some of the most broad based civic participation in our

communities. For example, in a local 2006 county commission seat election only 16.7% of the registered voters went to the polls. However, this small percentage translated to over 10,000 people mobilizing to take political action..

We can look at voter turn out numbers in two ways: 1. a small minority of people activated by the democratic process or 2. consider the turnout numbers compared to how many people attend our membership meetings, campaign rallies, and direct action in the streets. Both of these takeaways are true. Voter turnout is appalling and many people are systematically disenfranchised based on nationality, citizenship rights, and a broken criminal justice system. This disenfranchisement is a reflection of the state of democracy and human rights in the U.S. But there are also barriers to joining a union, speaking out publicly, demonstrating on an issue, or standing up to the government or a corporation when things go awry. Our work is to fight hard against these barriers, expose why they exist, and as in any other struggle where our people are systematically excluded and discounted, reclaim and restructure the fabric of democracy.

Elections are also one of the few mediums of civic participation which we do not have to create ourselves. It is an established time and process where people are already thinking about their relationship to society and government and taking decisive action.

Because voting is the sanctioned space for political participation in our current form of democracy, it mobilizes people at a scale and size that we are hard pressed to achieve on our own. For instance, we organize in District 3 of Miami-Dade County. The district has 75,651 registered voters. 11,860 of them cast a vote in the last local elections.

In our limited amount of civic participation work, we have found most people are conscious that: 1) the system is corrupt, 2) they have to vote so thet they do not just give away power, money, and programs, and 3) they are seeking direction and strategy so their votes have greater impact.

Voting and the Politics of Ideas

The need for a deeper analysis and winning strategy around voting is highlighted by every proposition and referendum that hits the ballot. Increasingly, voting ballots are riddled with municipal, county, and state referendums that change the structure of government, operating budgets, and sometimes the constitution itself. Such wide-sweeping and dramatic changes in government are often achieved through vague and confusing legal language as well as extremely well funded petition campaigns. Ballot initiatives structure and restructure policy; they are fights over everyday democracy.

Ballot initiatives are often used as a strategic point for intervention by right-wing strategists. They are framed as voting on particular issues but in reality they are backed by deeper ideologies. Neoliberal policies, anti-abortion initiatives, and anti-gay marriage initiatives reflect a deeper ideological push towards the right in this country. These type of campaigns rely on unifying otherwise disparate groups of people (white middle class religious conservatives and inner city low income African Americans, for example) creating a majoritarian voice where one may not actually exist.

We must learn from this strategic thinking. Campaigns that defend against regressive ballot initiatives allow us an opportunity to expose some of these ideologies and their impacts on our constituency and the

broader community. These campaigns also allow us to demonstrate a majoritarian progressive front by utilizing new organizing tactics: broad-multi-sector coalitions, communications and public relations, mass outreach, targeted outreach, leadership development, job opportunities, etc. And, yes, we could also use good old fashioned organizing and relationship building. There are community organizations, labor unions, and policy organizations starting to experiment with these tactics and collaborations all over the country.

Increasingly, as we build both power and skill in this arena, we will be positioned to move similar campaigns based on a Left agenda and values of community, democratic governance, self-determination, affordable housing, a right to the city, living wages, the right to unionize and much more. Imagine simultaneous multi-state rent control legislation, local referenda for municipal citizenship, a civic bill of rights to insure civil and human rights for all regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender status, or immigration status, and more. Consider these initiatives as strategies to create opportunities for power and progressive values. If the Right can imagine a world based on their vision and move strategies to slowly get there, so must we.

The Bigger Picture

This election year we are finding ourselves in a particular historical moment. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are running a tight race for the nomination of the Democratic ticket. They are both heavily courting African-American and Latino voters while at the same time trying to maintain the support of white voters. Today, there is an amazing focus on race and the politics of racial solidarity. The Black and Latino vote are more important than they have been in the past thus elevating the power of a united voice of people of color.

Poverty, affordable housing, the falling housing market, the imminent recession, lack of jobs and immigration, and the war and the cost of imperialism are all being debated in the primaries. They have significant impact on the constituency we organize and are the core concerns of the social movements we are supporting.

Young people of color are leading record turnout at the polls this year. Momentum is being built on these pressing issues and by the possibility of electing the first woman or the first Black president. There is disapproval of current government policy and hope for real change. However, we know from history that political momentum will not be maintained after an election unless there is a movement to support it. We know that promises from the lips of politicians will be history come January when the elections are said and done. We must maintain pressure on politicians beyond the voting booth, and this is why we organize.

Conclusion

Civic participation needs to become a strong Left strategy for winning power. We have to use the few civic spaces available to us to leverage victories, galvanize values, create space, and demonstrate that the power of government is not just for corporations and developers to do whatever they wish. To accomplish this we will need to radically retool our organizations and strategies to be able to capture the scale and impact of our work in ways that are much more dramatic and far reaching than we do now.

All photos are from Miami Workers Center's Take Back the Vote Primary '08 mobilization. For more information about the Miami Workers Center please go to www.miamiworkerscenter.org or contact Joseph Phelan, Communications Coordinator at joseph@theworkerscenter.org or 305-759-8717 ext 1029.

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